

Thoughts on Commitment, Responsibility and Self-discipline

Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro

“A subject who has a Libertarian Ethic knows why they are struggling and can explain the ideological reasons for the struggle, having the commitment and self-discipline to carry out the tasks assumed”
- Ideal Peres

One of the important characteristics of the organisation of the FARJ is its members' militant commitment. We believe that in order for our struggle to bear promising fruit it is essential that each one of the organisation's militants has a high level of commitment, responsibility and self-discipline.

When our dear Ideal Peres spoke the words above he expressed, in a single sentence, a series of opinions of paramount importance to our organisation. He emphasised, above all, the importance of the militant's consciousness with regards to the motives for struggle. This means that the anarchist militant should not simply obey those who determine a direction detached from the base or serve as “pawns” for an elite with personal interests in the domination of people and/or for other unethical interests, in our point of view. The anarchist militant is a subject that participates actively in all the discussions that take place within the Federation. They are expected to get involved in the discussions that take place, positioning themselves, discussing the best options for the questions posed and contributing to the tactical and strategic direction adopted by the organisation.

This is why all militants must be clear about why they struggle, against what they struggle and for what they struggle. Each one's commitment in relation to their self-education, independent of the political education tasks being performed by the organisation, is fundamental to this. It is the militant's obligation to seek to inform themselves, constantly, to educate themselves politically in order to be able to be fully conscious of the organisation's objectives, of the discussions that take place and of the activities that are being developed. In this way the militant gets to understand the direction of the organisation (in practical and theoretical terms) and is ready to talk, discuss and debate with others, or even put themselves in an assembly or speak publicly

in some circumstances, thus removing from the hands of a few the execution of such tasks. It is also expected that the organisation support the militants, helping those who may have some difficulty.

The anarchist militant is not alienated. They don't follow orders that come from above and are not the "base" for vanguards' (or elites') interests, as happens in political parties and other hierarchical organisations.

The anarchist militant's opinion within the organisation is not only consultative, but also deliberative. That is, it is the militants of the organisation that decide its direction and there are no vanguards (elites) whose opinions are worth more than that of the others. For us, the opinions of all of the organisation's full members have the same weight in any discussion.

When Ideal Peres spoke about *commitment* and *self-discipline*, he was speaking fundamentally about an individual commitment to collective decisions. But how does this work?

A large lack of commitment with respect to the issue of commitment and self-discipline is very common in organisations that claim to be horizontal and nonpartisan. An example of this is the large quantity of people that go to meetings (of groups that are relatively open), giving opinions on matters they don't know about or assuming responsibilities knowing that they will not be able to fulfil them. It is very common that these people don't come to the next meetings nor comply with what they promised, claiming that they could not, for one reason or another, nor satisfy the collective. Worst of all is that a lot of these people, on being called to order, feel themselves victims of some sort of authoritarianism.

There is a very illustrative example of the situation posed above: in a "free radio" in the south of Brazil (we'd prefer not to mention the name) that said it functioned under self-management, people that wanted to have their programmes would go to the radio's meetings and mark their programmes down on the grid, in collective agreement. After this, a lot of the people that had marked their programmes simply didn't pitch up, leaving the radio without working and taking the opportunity away from other people who could have used that time slot. On being called to order by other members of the radio collective the absentees would say that this was authoritarianism because they were within their rights, exercising their "freedom" not to pitch up to do the programme even though they had committed themselves to it from the beginning.

This is an isolated example but unfortunately situations like this are very common in the so-called libertarian milieu. For us, what happens is that *there is an inversion of values in judging a certain type of behaviour authoritarian*, i.e. they who committed to something before the collective and fail to fulfil it *consider themselves the victim of authoritarianism*.

The "commitment and self-discipline to carry out the tasks assumed" emphasised by Ideal Peres breaks radically with the model presented above. In this type of attitude of commitment and self-discipline we agree with Ideal that, within the organisation, there must be ample space for all the discussions and all points of view should be analysed carefully and, as we said above, have the same "weight" in the decision-making of the organisation. All the activities that the organisation is going to do, which means to say that its members will carry out, are deliberated at the meetings. *After all, the organisation doesn't do anything by itself*. It doesn't have a brain, arms or legs to be able to perform the activities that are deliberated inside it. That is why all the activities that are decided on and that are the organisation's responsibility will have, in one way or another, to be carried out by its members. It was on this that Bakunin positioned himself, already in the 19th century, in discussing the question of discipline:

“Hostile as I am to the authoritarian conception of discipline, I nevertheless recognize that a certain kind of discipline, not automatic but voluntary and intelligently understood, is, and will ever be, necessary whenever a greater number of individuals undertake any kind of collective work or action. This discipline is nothing more than the voluntary and considered agreement of individual efforts toward the common aim. At the moment of action, in the midst of the struggle, roles are assumed naturally according to the skills of each, considered and judged by the whole collective: some direct and order, others carry out orders. But no function petrifies, nor is it fixed and it does not remain irrevocably linked to any one person. Hierarchical order and promotion do not exist, so that the commander of yesterday can become a subordinate tomorrow. No one rises above the other, or if one does rise, it is only to fall back again a moment later, like the waves of the sea returning to the salutary level of equality. In this system, in fact, there is no power. The power is fused in the collective and results in the sincere expression of the freedom of each individual in the faithful and serious realisation of the will of all [...]”¹

It is appropriate to insert a parenthesis here to say that, in the same way as a “spirit of the organisation” that resolves problems and carries out the tasks does not exist, it is fundamental, at the time decisions are made, to divide the responsibilities; the members being formally responsible for their execution. This is important because another common problem in horizontal organisations is deciding to do one thing or another and then everyone going home without resolving who is going to be responsible for what activity. In this model one of two things happens: either nobody carries out the activities, or the activities fall on the shoulders of the organisation’s most active members. Therefore, we believe in the need to share the activities between the militants, always seeking a model that distributes these activities well and avoids the concentration of tasks on the most active and capable members.

From the moment in which a militant takes on one or more tasks for the organisation they have an obligation to carry them out and a big responsibility to the group in relation to these tasks. It is the committed relationship that the militant assumes with the organisation. As discussions within the organisation are amply democratic and nobody takes on tasks because they are required to, each commitment is a commitment undertaken by the initiative of the militant themselves, being their complete responsibility. If there is an unforeseen event and the militant notices that they may not be able to do that to which they committed themselves it is their responsibility to inform the organisation in advance and transfer their responsibility to another member.

We do not believe that the checking up, on the part of the organisation, on the responsibilities assumed by the militant is anything authoritarian. It has to exist, and if it happens that this responsibility or lack of commitment is constant the other militants should have a frank conversation with them in order to resolve the problem and not harm the organisation’s work.

Self-management is the engine of the self-managed organisation. As in an organisation of this type as is our case in the FARJ there are no leaders that “charge” the functionaries or base with the execution of tasks, *each one that takes on a responsibility must have enough discipline to execute it.* Likewise, when the organisation determines a line to follow or something to carry out, *it is individual discipline that will make what was decided collectively be carried out.* There should be no need for checking up, as it is expected that each one of the group charges themselves with

¹ Mikhail Bakunin. *The Knouto-Germanic Empire*. Taken from Frank Mintz. *Bakunin: crítica y acción*. Buenos Aires: Colección Utopía Libertaria pp. 74-75.

the realisation of the tasks decided on in the organisation, but *the individual has to satisfy the organisation*, having to inform it of the progress of the activities under their responsibility and when they are not carried out, explain to the collective the reason, possibly being sanctioned for it. When there are problems with the progress of one or other member's activities the organisation can "charge" those responsible for the activities' progress, also in order not to hinder the work and struggle. Obviously the form of checking up must be within the criteria of mutual respect and anarchist ethic.

In 1920, on discussing the question of discipline Errico Malatesta treated it in the following way:

*"Discipline: this is the grand word of which serves to paralyse the conscious workers' will. We also ask for discipline, because, without understanding, **without the coordination of each one's efforts for common and simultaneous action, victory is not materially possible. But discipline should not be a servile discipline, a blind devotion to leaders, an obedience to those who give the orders not to move. Revolutionary discipline is consistency with the ideas accepted, fidelity to commitments undertaken, it is to feel oneself obliged to share the work and risks with comrades of the struggle.**"*²

It is relevant for us to take note of Malatesta's comments, agreeing that *this discipline and this checking up should not follow an authoritarian model*, both in the oppression of the group's members and in the form of these penalties, which, as mentioned should also take respect and ethics between the members of the group into account. It is of great concern for us *to differentiate the self-discipline that we preach here from military discipline, exploitative and oppressive in its essence* and which, from our point of view, does not follow different paths to other well-known authoritarianisms.

On the question of discipline in the libertarian milieu, it is worth carefully observing the debate that took place around the Organisation Platform of the Libertarian Communists, published by the Dielo Trudo group when exiled in France. After its publication in 1926 different responses and a very rich debate arose, primarily on anarchism's organisational aspects and also on other important questions, among them the question of discipline, on which we will now focus.

Both the *Platform* itself, as well as the responses and discussions that took place later like the 1927 *Synthesis* and "Response" to the Platform written by Volin and other members of NABAT (Anarchist Confederation of the Ukraine), the more detailed critique of the *Platform* made by G.P. Maximov called *Constructive Anarchism*, the debate between Nestor Makhno and Errico Malatesta, an extremely rich exchange of letters from 1927 to 1929, Piotr Arshinov's reply to Malatesta, called *The Old and the New in Anarchism*, besides various other articles from this period are all important sources for this debate. We could cite important texts like *La Response aux Confusionistes de l'Anarchism* (Response to the Confusionists of Anarchists) by Piotr Arshinov, the series of articles published in *Solidariedad Obrera* by Alexandre Schapiro in 1932, other articles by Volin, as well as by thinkers like Sebastien Faure, Luigi Fabbri and Camilo Berneri. There are central articles by Makhno (*On the Defence of the Revolution* and *On Revolutionary Discipline*) and Malatesta (*On Collective Responsibility*) that also raise arguments relevant to the discussion on the *Platform*.

For the subject that we are discussing here, we believe that the richest source is the debate between Nestor Makhno and Errico Malatesta. It is not the case here for us to take up the defence of one side or the other, but to observe the pertinent contributions both on one side and the other,

² Errico Malatesta. *Anarquistas, Socialistas e Comunistas*. Sao Paulo: Cortes p. 24.) (our emphasis)

since we have great appreciation for both militants in question and believe there to be correct arguments on both sides.

We agree with what the Russian exiles pose in the *Platform* when they affirm that “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”. The Russians stressed that there is “a false interpretation of the principle of individuality in anarchism: this theory being too often confused with the absence of all responsibility”. We know that one of the big problems of the libertarian world is that the principles of freedom and of anti-authoritarianism are often understood as the lack of commitment, such a “lack of responsibility” pointed out by the Russian comrades. We must also agree that, as they said, “the individualist and chaotic elements understand by the title ‘anarchist principles’ political indifference, negligence and absence of all responsibility”.

We know that the critique of the individualist principle within anarchism makes sense and it is because of this that we also agree that “the federalist principle has been deformed in anarchist ranks: it has too often been understood as the right, above all, to manifest one’s “ego”, without obligation to account for duties as regards the organisation”. We believe the Russians correct when they claim that “all the participants in the agreement and the Union fulfil most completely the duties undertaken, and conform to communal decisions.” and that “the federalist type of anarchist organisation, while recognising each member’s rights to independence, free opinion, individual liberty and initiative, requires each member to undertake fixed organisation duties, and demands execution of communal decisions”.

We should also pay attention to Malatesta’s contributions in his response, titled *A Project of Anarchist Organisation*, in which he emphasised:

“Rather than arousing a greater desire for organisation in the anarchists, (the Platform) seems deliberately to reinforce the prejudice of a lot of comrades who believe that to organise oneself means to submit to leaders, adhere to an authoritarian and centralised organisation, that suffocates all free initiative”.

It is worth then reflecting on those issues that are not so clearly exposed in the *Platform*. Malatesta exaggerated, but it is worth noting his comments and taking care such that the need for responsibility that we defend does not mean hierarchy and authoritarianism. Malatesta’s comments imply exactly the means that we use to reach our objectives; so, he emphasised that “it is inconceivable that the same people who profess anarchist ideas and want to achieve anarchy, or at least prepare for its realisation today instead of tomorrow, renege on the basic principles of anarchism in the organisation with which they propose to fight for its victory”. Still on the subject, he emphasises that his project of anarchist organisation must have “full autonomy, full independence and, therefore, full individual and collective responsibility; free agreement between those that believe it useful to unite to cooperate in common work; moral obligation to keep commitments assumed and not to do anything contrary to the accepted programme”. Finally, and returning to the discussion on means, he states that “to live and to win, we must not abandon the reasons for our life and deform the character of eventual victory. *We want to struggle and to win; but like anarchists and for anarchy*” (our emphasis). Here too we agree with Malatesta because if we want to achieve our objectives with the utmost urgency, we mustn’t leave aside the principles involved in *how* we do this.

In his “Reply”, Makhno correctly states: “You yourself, dear Malatesta, admit to the anarchist revolutionary’s individual responsibility. Moreover, you have supported it throughout your life

as a militant”. Something that is confirmed if you look at Malatesta’s quote about discipline presented further above, which dates from 1920 and maintains the same arguments as Makhno. Quite rightly, and agreeing with Malatesta’s statements, Makhno says that “None of us has the right to avoid such responsibility. On the contrary, if it has until now been ignored in anarchist ranks it needs now to become, for us, anarchist communists, an element of our theoretical and practical programme”; moreover, “just the collective spirit and collective responsibility of its militants will enable modern anarchism to remove from its circles the idea, historically false, that anarchism cannot be a guide, be it ideologically or in practice, for the working masses in a revolutionary period, and therefore could not demand total responsibility”.

Malatesta responded again, already approaching a certain agreement with Makhno, when he wrote: “certainly, I accept and support the vision that anyone who associates and cooperates with others for a common cause must coordinate their actions with that of their comrades and not do anything that would undermine the others’ action and, therefore, the common cause; to respect the agreements made except when they intend to leave the association for differences of opinion, change of circumstance or conflict about the methods chosen makes cooperation impossible and inappropriate. Thus, I argue that those who do not feel or practice such duties must be expelled from the association. Perhaps, speaking of collective responsibility, you refer precisely to the agreement and solidarity that should exist between the members of an association. If so, your expression signifies, in my view, an incorrect use of language, but this would be but an irrelevant question of phraseology and soon we would reach agreement”.

We believe it still to be important to quote from a 1926 article by Makhno called *On Revolutionary Discipline*, when he says: “I take revolutionary discipline to mean the self-discipline of the individual, set in the context of a strictly-prescribed collective activity equally incumbent upon all, the responsible policy line of the members of that collective, leading to strict congruence between their practice and their theory”. Makhno closes the article with a very important phrase: “Responsibility and discipline must not frighten the revolutionary. They are the travelling companions of the practice of social anarchism”.

Malatesta, a year after the debate with Makhno, published an article called *On Collective Responsibility* in which he affirms: “Moral responsibility (and in our case we can talk of nothing but moral responsibility) is individual by its very nature”. He states then that “If a number of men agree to do something and one of them allows the initiative to fail through not carrying out what he had promised, everyone will say that it was his fault and that therefore it is he who is responsible, not those who did what they were supposed to right up to the last”.

We believe that all the passages quoted bring teachings to libertarians with regards to the questions discussed. The objective of our organisation is exactly to be conceived in a way to exalt the *elements of commitment, responsibility and self-discipline*, without this giving rise to authoritarian postures, which cross ethically accepted limits, as we have already said. Ethics is defined by us as one of the central axes of our organisation.

These elements, today and always, are fundamental to the realisation of the activities of any organisation that claims to be serious and has goals of social transformation.

Let’s look at the question using practical examples from our organisation. The FARJ, as you well know, works in two main fronts: the community front and the occupations front. In the one as in the other commitment, responsibility and self-discipline are indispensable.

For example, for the activities of the community front: the management of the Centro de Cultura Social do Rio de Janeiro (CCS-RJ, Social Cultural Centre) implies having a rotation so

that there are people from the organisation in the CCS on the agreed days, with the goal that the programmed activities take place and that the space doesn't become "dead". This management is about developing activities that point toward paths pursued by the organisation, ensure that the water, electricity bills etc. are paid on time (it's worth adding another parenthesis here to paraphrase a comrade from our organisation that used to remind us, saying that it is useless arriving at the end of the month to pay the supermarket bill and saying to the cashier, "but I'm an anarchist, I'm against capitalism"; this doesn't solve the problems of who still lives within capitalism).

Anyway, there is a whole demand of tasks that the organisation has to do and which, if it doesn't do, damages the path which it is intended to be achieved when programming these tasks. The commitment of a militant with a front functions the same way: if the front gives to one of the militants the task of opening the CCS, for example, it is expected that this militant will go to the location on the date and time planned and perform the task. The same applies to all the other projects that are carried out by the community front: so that the Fábio Luz Library opens on the planned days and times, that the books are catalogued, so that theory is produced in the Marques da Costa Research Group etc.

In the occupations front things work in the same way. There is an immense need for militants to go to the occupations' assemblies and that, for this, they are aware of the hours, days and topics to be addressed in the assemblies. After that, it is important that the militants participate in the assemblies in the way that was agreed with the front, respecting the due rotation and the objectives to be achieved. Militants must also work so that the occupations link themselves with others, in the forum that we today call the Internationalist Homeless Front (Frente Internacionalista dos Sem-Teto, FIST). Commitment in the case of the occupations is even more critical than in the community front, seeing as though in the community front, a large part of the time, *you act among comrades* who have similar ethical values to ours, which allows for the degree of organisation and commitment to be a little more flexible. In the environment of the urban occupations, as in that of other social movements, *there are a lot of disputes* and, at various times, we have to deal with *enemies* such as institutes of crime, of the church, political parties, exploitative left organisations, among others. In this context, we have to highlight the importance of organisation, of commitment and of discipline because there is a strong *dispute over political space (power)*, which means that *if the anarchists open space, or have commitment problems, etc., they will generate space so that the other organisations that are in the social movement gain hegemony. There is no vacuum of political space (or power), therefore, a lack of commitment and responsibility in the realisation of activities means that we are generating space for others to take.* If we want libertarians to have a dominant position and that they can influence a social movement more than the other forces involved it is essential to know that we must work with the utmost responsibility.

We conclude by stressing that our work cannot be something that takes place occasionally and that we can do some times, when we feel like it. *The commitment that we establish, as an organisation, demands that we are responsible for the consistency of our actions.* This is often hard because the battles are often lost. *It is militant will and commitment that will make us walk day after day, for the development of the organisation's activities and so that we can overcome the obstacles and prepare the ground for our long-term objectives. This is how we understand it possible to walk toward freedom.*

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(Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro – FARJ)

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Retrieved on March 24th, 2023 from <https://zabalazabooks.net/2014/03/05/thoughts-on-commitment-responsibility-and-self-discipline/>

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