

Anarchist Organisation and the Organisation of Anarchists

Anarcho

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An article from the early 1990s on ideas how the **Glasgow Anarchist Group** should organise itself. Rejecting both synthesis and platformist organisation, it suggests what is often called a class struggle anarchist group in the UK. Hopefully this will be of interest to others.

“Organisation, far from creating authority, is the only cure for it and the only means whereby each of us will get used to taking an active and conscious part in collective work, and cease being passive instruments in the hands of leaders.”

Errico Malatesta, 1897

“Contemporary anarcho-communism cannot remain a mere mood or tendency, wafting in the air like a cultural ambience. It must be organised (indeed, well organised if it is to effectively articulate and spread [its ideas]); it must have a coherent theory and extensive literature; it must be capable of duelling with the authoritarian movements that try to denature the libertarian impulses of our time and channel social unrest into hierarchical forms of organisation.”

Murray Bookchin, 1973

Introduction

This wee handout is a contribution to the discussion on the future direction of the Glasgow Anarchist Group. In particular, it is concentrating on the topic of the structure/organisation of the group and the need (or lack of need) for “Aims and Principles”.

I make no apologies for quoting Malatesta, since I think what he has to say in this (and in almost all cases) is relevant and well said. Saying that, we are anarchists and should never blindly follow “(in)famous” people nor substitute quoting for thinking. We owe both ourselves and the comrades we are quoting more than that.

Anyway, I will make a few proposals which I wish to be discussed at the meeting on the 1st of November. Obviously, the topics raised will not all be decided upon after just one meeting. Hopefully, this meeting will have a positive outcome and lead to a structured development of the group in a communist anarchist direction.

In addition, I have not discussed what think should be in an aims and principles as this would, I think, preempt the discussion and not let it develop naturally. I have, however, included a few examples of class struggle anarchist aims and principles as examples.

Anarchism and organisation

Anarchism is based upon organisation. Without organisation, anarchism would remain a dream and social life would be impossible. Therefore, anarchists are only against authoritarian forms of organisation, not organisation as such. We will all be aware of this (or should be).

The aim of an anarchist (ie anti-authoritarian) organisation is to promote a sense of community, of confidence in ones own abilities, to enable all to be involved in the identification, initiation and management of group/communal needs and decisions and be in a position (both physically, as part of a group/community, and mentally, as an individual) to take direct action in the pursuit of y/our needs and desires.

Anarchist organisation is about empowering all, to develop “integral” or whole individuals and a community that encourages individuality (not “individualism”) and solidarity. It is about collective decision making from the bottom up, that empowers those at the “base” of the structure and only delegates the work of coordinating and implementing the peoples decisions (and not the power of making decisions for people). In this way the initiative and power of the few (government) is replaced by the initiative and empowerment of all (anarchy).

The aim of an anarchist organisation is to create the correct circumstances in which social freedom (and the social responsibility that goes with it) can develop. In a very real sense, it must create the ideas and forms of the new world in the shell of the old.

With these general points, we need to discuss the present situation.

The Local Group

The first step in this process is to discuss the organisation and needs of the local group. As far as I can see, there are two ways the group can develop:-

1. As it is now, with no programme, no defined structure and, therefore, no defined strategy or identity.
2. To consciously develop the group along (collectively) agreed lines, ie defining what we stand for in an aims and principles, defining our ideas (in more detail) and our strategy in a programme and creating an effective anarchist group.

As should be clear, the last option gets my “vote”. I think that most people would agree that the group, at present, does not meet all the aims of an anarchist organisation. Lack of direction, for example, can be very disempowering, and so demoralising.

Malatesta defined anarchist organisation as follows:-

“The anarchist organisation must, in their constitution and operation, be in harmony with the principles of anarchism, that is, they must in no way be polluted by the spirit of authoritarianism; they must be able to reconcile the free action of individuals with the need and pleasure of co-operation and help to develop the awareness and initiative of their members.”

At present, the group has not been able to reconcile free action with co-operation. In practice, this has resulted in inactivity and, to a certain degree, the domination of a few individuals who

know what they want (the “tyranny of structurelessness”). Due to this inactivity, in addition to people drifting away, an anarchist community cannot be truly formed (communities are always created by common struggle and action) and people can remain isolated and helpless feeling.

So how do we reconcile the two? I feel that having a set of “aims and principles”, agreed by the group, which sets down the basics of what the group is about is essential. This means that individuals in the group have something to base their actions on, which has been agreed collectively. Hence, they would be a common thread to activities and a guide to action (particularly in situations where a group meeting cannot be called). In addition, it would indicate to potential members where we are coming from.

There is little point in uniting with people who do not share a common idea. This only leads to talking shops and confusion. How can life-stylist “anarchists” combine with class-struggle anarchists? One sees the solution to the social problem in terms of individual actions, the other in terms of working class struggle and organisation. To unite with people just because they call themselves “anarchists” is more than pointless, it is counter-productive. Free association also means the freedom not to associate!

Having the Aims and Principles (A&P) would mean that individuals in the group could pursue whatever action/propaganda/etc they desired as long as it did not contradict the A&Ps. Hence, we would allow people to act for themselves (develop their own initiative), but in a co-ordinated manner.

As Malatesta said, *“the individual members can express any opinion or adopt any tactic which does not contradict the accepted principles and does not harm the activity of other people”*.

The next step would be to formalise the way the group works. All that is required is a simple constitution, indicating how decisions are made, the role of groups delegated to do certain things (eg the propaganda group), the role of and how to recall delegates and office bearers and so on.

This would inform all the members (and potential members) how, in practice, the group works. This is vital knowledge, as any one who has sat in any meeting where the structure is not defined knows (you really don’t know what is going on, who is responsible for what, where the decision making power lies, etc). It is very easy for individuals to abuse such a structure, never mind all the “informal” hierarchies which in practice dominate such a group.

And, no, I’m not saying this has happened to the anarchist group, but it could be a possibility in the future.

An Anarchist Programme

The need to make our politics relevant is an essential one. How do we increase our influence in the working class? In what ways can we help develop the class struggle into the struggle against class (and hierarchy), ie revolution?

Unless we define what we stand for, what we want, summarise and collate our own experiences and the experiences of others (living and dead) we will flounder about, hovering from the sidelines of history. The need to analyse struggles and the system we live under as well as apply our ideas is essential.

Hence the need for a programme.

In order to achieve this we should ensure:

1. all discussion meetings have some practical outcome (be it a resolution outlining future action or as education).
2. We regularly discuss anarchist ideas and how to apply them.
3. We discuss past anarchist and labour movement history (those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them).
4. We decide to produce a programme, outlining what anarchism is, who we are, how we operate and what we aim to do.

“Educate, organise and liberate” applies just as much to ourselves as to the class as a whole.

Policy Decisions and Minority rights

Any discussion or business meeting we have should, when relevant produce a policy statement indicating a line of action (that is, policy decisions/statements). These statements should be seen as things to be constantly updated as events and circumstances change (particularly if they do not work in practice!). This policy should represent the consensus option, or failing that, the majority opinion as decided by a show of hands. The minority must not be forced into things they do not want to do, having the right to secede in all issues, but neither should they interfere with the actions of the majority. The minority should never be excluded from group propaganda, having the right to put out what they want as long as it is stated clearly this is a minority position and is not group policy. In addition it should not contradict the group aims and principles.

There is no monopoly on the truth and just because the majority thinks something does not make it right. It would be strange if we, as anarchists, denied freedom of expression to fellow members of our group or were feirt of hearing ideas we did not totally agree with (or feirt that working class people might hear them as well!!!). Diversity is a strength, not a weakness. We are not Marxists or democrats, but anarchists and should act accordingly, not ape the ideas of our enemies.

Conclusion and Proposals

That is my opinions on the subject of anarchist organisation. I have not covered such ideas as how we co-ordinate with other groups in a federal structure, eg an Anarchist Federation of Scotland (which should be discussed after we get ourselves organised) nor how do anarchists influence the class struggle and mass organisations (this will be partly covered in the meeting on Spain).

So, here is a few proposals for the meeting:

1. Discuss the idea of aims and principles and what should be in them.
2. Discuss the organisation of the group and its aims.
3. Decide whether the idea of a written constitution and A&Ps are acceptable to the group.
4. If so, delegate a group of comrades to draft a copy of both, taking into account the discussions.

5. Organise a future meeting which will modify and finalise the finished copies (obviously, copies must be sent to all comrades before this meeting in a mailout).
6. That all meetings (starting with this one) be minuted and any decisions documented and included in the mailout.

This process should bind the group together and give a firm foundation to developing an anarchist programme and group for the 1990/2000's in Glasgow.

There are two formats for aims and principles, as points (like the DAM, ACF or IWA ones) or as a preamble (like the CWF and IWW). I have included some as an example. Personally, I prefer the preamble style.

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