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Practical platformism: revolutionary cadre organisation

Black Wave Communist Collective

February 21, 2012

Common Struggle – Libertarian Communist Federation (LCF), formerly known as the North Eastern Federation of Anarchist-Communists (NEFAC), has been in existence for nearly eleven years now. From its inception it has billed itself as Platformist: that is to say, generally following the guidelines of the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists (or, General Union of Anarchists). Needless to say, any organisation grows and evolves over time and this is often healthy – but I'd like to take a moment to examine our relationship to Platformism and to determine if we have strayed from that model, and if this desirable. I wish to rehash elements of an old debate: the Bring the Ruckus (BTR) – NEFAC debate, specifically in regard to revolutionary cadre organisation and dual power. I wish to go back to the Platform, as well as the memoirs of Nestor Makhno himself, where he lays out numerous lessons we must heed.

Nestor Makhno, who was one of the main theoreticians of the Platformist tendency, was proponent of cadre organisation,

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which is typically associated with Marxism. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that many in the anarchist milieu have called the Platform “authoritarian” – though this is completely unfounded. This is a case of anarchists fetishising form over content, something unfortunately common within the anarchist milieu. That is to say, to consider the way things function organisationally or aesthetically as opposed to the libertarian content in their work. We see this in the incessant demand for things like infoshops, for instance, or other cultural projects that, while not bad in themselves (counterinstitutions are necessary), cannot substitute for organising and do not require the collective discipline that serious organising requires (ie, revolutionary libertarian cadres). Another example of this demand for form over content is those anarchists who reject Marxism so outright that they will not even read *Capital*, though their entire critique of capitalism was formulated mostly in the first volume of that book. It is for lack of critical analysis that this attitude is taken towards cadres.

To my dismay, during the BTR-NEFAC debate those arguing on behalf of NEFAC chose to attack BTR on the grounds that it is a cadre organisation (that is not the only thing their critique focused on, but it was a major aspect of it). I don’t believe the points raised, specifically in Nicolas Phebus’s article “Differences of Strategy and Organization”, were particularly helpful in critiquing cadres, because they did not address the type of organisation that BTR was hoping to create – libertarian cadres. Why? What is typical is the dismissal of the Leninist concept of cadre and vanguard that is hierarchical and patronising. I believe that from a Platformist point of view, which naturally gravitates towards cadre organisation, it is impossible to dismiss such cadres. Unlike the Leninists, Libertarian cadres “[do] not seek to control any organization or movement, nor does it pretend that it is the most advanced section of a struggle” and “it assumes that the masses are typi-

are libertarians and not Leninists – with proper political education and leadership building in our organisations that should never be a problem. Defining cadres as inherently substitutionist is incorrect, especially in this libertarian sense of them! It is important to reiterate Makhno’s words here – that revolutionary cadres are formed from masses themselves. If this is properly understood than there will be no confusion of so-called “substitutionism”.

So then, what do these so-called “revolutionary libertarian cadres” look like? It is simple: they are local unions of anarchist-communists committed to struggle, which “emphasizes not just the organizational positions, but also the capabilities and activity of militants.”⁸ They strive for the central tenants of platformism, and keeping intact their libertarian ideology at all times they seek to politically educate their members to build leadership that is worthy of being the vanguard of the class struggle. Not only are they an organisation of organisers, because we cannot simple fetishise one strength that not everyone has, but an organisation of propogandists capable of taking anarchism to the masses and building a revolutionary anarchist movement – backed by those toilers who the organisers build power with. This is not where Common Struggle is at, for now, but it is what we should be striving for if we are really Platformists.

It is with great interest we critically analyse the situations that occur in the struggle, to identify the most revolutionary aspects of the struggle and inoculate against reformism. In other words, the cadre seeks, at all times, to deepen and broaden the struggle to point of social revolution. The cadre is a serious organisation that requires discipline and commitment, because the task of creating an anarchist communist world is one of immense proportions.

⁸ We Are Not Platformists, We Strive To Be. Scott Nappalos. Recomposition Blog. Accessed 12/15/11. recompositionblog.wordpress.com

cally the most advanced section of a struggle.”¹ BTR concludes by stating, “the organization would not actively support any kind of activism but only those struggles that hold the potential of building a dual power.”² What is questionable is BTR’s strategy towards achieving dual power, which was rightfully critiqued by Wayne Price in his article “What, if anything, is a dual power strategy?”, not the idea of creating a dual power situation itself, and destroying the state and capital simultaneously through social-revolutionary action. Price argued that their race-reductionist politics are, in fact, not as strategic for building a desired situation than the solid class-based politics of (at the time) NEFAC.

Much of Phebus’s article was designed to point out supposed “contradictions” in cadre organisation, but it does not. Firstly, it begins by defining what BTR and libertarian cadres are based upon old definitions that are irrelevant to the reality of what is practiced – the article insists that they are a bourgeois, authoritarian leninist-appropriated method of organisation. It does not define BTR’s project on their own terms. The article claims that by having prefigurative politics that are then spread to the masses, it is authoritarian and believes the masses “dumb”. No, BTR is simply realistic about revolutionary organisation and building power. Because it is true what Platform said of anarchism, that “the outstanding anarchist thinkers, Bakunin, Kropotkin and others, did not invent the idea of anarchism, but, having discovered it in the masses, simply helped by the strength of their thought and knowledge to specify and spread it.”³ However, it is naive to believe that because anarchism was discovered in the masses that, in bourgeois society which does everything in its power to suppress it, the proletariat will

¹ Bring The Ruckus. Bring The Ruckus. Accessed 12/4/11. bringtheruckus.org

² Ibid.

³ The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists. Delo Truda. Accessed 12/4/11. www.nestormakhno.info

magically come to this idea. Some of them will, someone of them will not. We revolutionary anarchists are an example of those who did. Those at Occupy are an example of those who are close to it, but lack the clarity to articulate their true desire – libertarian communism. At work we find reactionary working class people: racists and sexists who reinforce the worst aspects of the capitalist system.

From reading the initial “Bring The Ruckus” statement, I have gathered that they fundamentally understood what a cadre is meant to uphold: collective responsibility, theoretical and tactical unity, and direct democracy. What differences are there, then, between the Federation and Bring the Ruckus organisationally? This is a difficult question to consider without insider knowledge of BTR, which I simply do not have. They do, however, have a common strategy and specific criteria that defines the work cadres are able to carry out under the banner of BTR. This not something that Common Struggle has, but it is something discussed at the 2011 Federal Conference and is being moved forward on in a committee. Phebus’s closing statement on cadres is this utterly confusing as he claims: “NEFAC has chosen a platformist federation model, BTR has chosen a cadre; they are not the same thing, whether we like it or not.”⁴ It is interesting, then, that the founder of the tendency of Platformism seemed to disagree with him. Makhno wrote in the first volume of his memoirs, *The Russian Revolution in Ukraine*: “Either we go to the masses and dissolve ourselves into them, creating from them revolutionary cadres, and make the Revolution; or we renounce our slogan about the necessity of social transformation, the necessity of carrying through to the end the workers’ struggle with the powers of Capital and the State.”⁵

⁴ Differences of Strategy and Organization. Nicolas Phebus. The North Eastern Anarchist. Accessed 12/4/11. commonstruggle.org

⁵ *The Russian Revolution in Ukraine*. Nestor Makhno. Black Cat Press. 2006.

There are legitimate issues with revolutionary cadre organisation, but I do not believe they are not critiqued in the BTR-NEFAC debate. Namely, while they are tight-knit and committed to revolutionary struggle, they tend to be insular and reject the building of revolutionary anarchist organisation. While acknowledging that we do not seek to dominate, but will lead when appropriate, we also believe in the validity of anarchist communism as the only system which can eliminate exploitation and domination. As such, it is not enough for us to have an “anarchistic movement” – such as the current Occupy movement, with elements of anarchism (albeit so-called “small anarchist”) like consensus decision making and general assemblies – but in fact to eventually have a revolutionary anarchist communist movement that enacts a social revolution to end exploitation and domination. Thus, the question of how we relate to the rest of the proletariat crops up. I do not have an exact scientific formula for solving this issue, but I do believe the answer lies in self-reflection and political education. It’s important to understand that “doesn’t automatically give us a method to bring up the level of the left to the unity and strategy we seek”⁶ but that this is something we are always striving for and challenging ourselves as revolutionaries to meet.

Cadres also tend to act as substitutionists, something which Phebus points out in saying, “of course, we must agitate for our idea and lead the battle of ideas, but as members of the class not as outside agitators.”⁷ I completely agree with this statement – I think Bring the Ruckus does as well, and Phebus here is merely misconstruing words, but the point is valid. If cadres think this way, that they are outside the class, instead of dissolving themselves into the class, than they are approaching revolutionary organisation in the wrong way. However, were

⁶ We Are Not Platformists, We Strive To Be. Scott Nappalos. Recomposition Blog. Accessed 12/15/11. recompositionblog.wordpress.com

⁷ Differences of Strategy and Organization. Nicolas Phebus. The North Eastern Anarchist. Accessed 12/4/11. commonstruggle.org