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Collective Action

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An Irish anarchist and migrant worker in Sydney, Sean M. reflects on the recent Sydney anarchist bookfair, the anarchist movement more broadly and the relevance of the platform in terms of building a popular movement. This is an edited version of a recent talk given at Black Rose on building an anarchist organisation by Sean in a personal capacity, who was one of the organisers of the Sydney anarchist bookfair and involved in Sydney solidarity network.

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The recent Sydney anarchist bookfair highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of the 'movement.' For the curious the event offered a rare opportunity to listen to Anarchists political analysis of how society is and how it could be and what struggles we are involved in. For the committed it provided a useful space to network, share ideas and experiences. As someone who has lived and worked in Australia for three years what struck me is that apart from the talk on the revolutionary impact of global anarchism there and the usual anti-capitalist rhetoric there was very little debate as to where the anarchist 'movement' is going in Sydney and across Australia.

We know that, in order to get there, it will be necessary to tear down capitalism and the state and all other forms of oppression. Our struggle for a self- managed free and equal society throws up many areas of controversy and debate. One of these has always been, and always will be, how do we get build a mass movement

that moves from the margins to a threat to the status quo and is not just about personal liberation but liberation in all its forms? How do we organise for change? What is our composition and support base? I believe the anarchist platform may open up some of these contradictions if we are ever to build a collective movement that provides a voice for the voiceless in our society.

Over Eighty years have passed since the publication in the pages of the Russian anarchist monthly *Delo Truda* of the Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft), but the question of anarchist organisation remains an open one even today, a question which sparks off ferocious debates with frightening ease.

Yet in reality it is a question which has long been solved: either we accept the need for anarchists to come together in their own specific organisations so as to allow greater unity and strength with which to face the struggles; or we don't accept it, and are happy to remain part of the world of "chaotic" anarchism which rejects such a need for one reason or another, considering it pointless or dangerous, or which accepts it, but chooses anarchist unity in name, where the various hues of anarchism come together under an umbrella organisation without any serious political unity or strategies. Although in the city there are many anarchists involved in a range of struggles from the workplace to tackling gender inequality to environmental campaigns to supporting refugees, I am struck as to how we seem to run from one action to the next without any serious consideration given to as to how we join the existing diverse jots together in terms building a serious political praxis and movement that can link all these struggles with a long term vision.

The Organisational Platform (often known in English-speaking circles as the "Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists") was the first attempt since the days of Bakunin to formulate a theoretical and practical platform of the positions and tasks of anarchists, which could provide anarchism with the necessary political and organisational unity to increase the influence of anarchist ideas within society in general and the workers' movements

What then can we do? If we are serious anarchists we must look at how we can grow our influence and numbers. As already cited there has been some useful local work in neighbourhoods and several interesting attempts to set up Solidarity Networks. There has been some work around workplace issues and strikes, and some valuable work around asylum seekers and environmental campaigns. This work is not enough, it needs to be multiplied. We need to develop a serious class struggle anarchist practice and theory. We need to move away from amateurism and lack of seriousness and locate antagonisms in our daily lives. Instead of going “out there” to “do actions” with fellow ‘activists’, we need to intervene in our schools, our workplaces, our neighbourhoods—places where we actually spend most of our daily lives. We have to develop a willingness and practice of coordinated activity wherever we can, and that includes coordinated blocs on demonstrations. We must turn away from the outlook of organisational patriotism and look for practical unity wherever possible. We have to reject populism, electoralism and anti-organisationalism.

At a time when the intensity of the ruling class attack on our living standards, on our wages and conditions, on free speech and assembly, are increasing at a frightening pace, Australian anarchism must heed the wake-up call. Either it undergoes a renaissance, with the possible emergence of grass roots struggle and relates to that struggle, or it consigns itself to continued irrelevance.

in particular, after the defeat of anarchism in the Russian Revolution made the grave faults of (what had by then become) “traditional” anarchism all too evident. The Platform not only deals with organisational questions. It tackles a whole range of problems: it clearly sets out the class nature of anarchism; it defines the role of anarchists in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary periods; it establishes the role of syndicalism as an instrument of struggle; it sets out the basic tenets of anarchist theory such as anti-capitalism, the rejection of bourgeois democracy, the State and authority, and more. Today there are anarchist organisations from Ireland, to South Africa. The *Especifismo* conception of anarchist organisation, coined by the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation or FAU, has many similarities with Platformism.

Like Bakunin, and the Platform itself, it advocates theoretical and tactical unity, collective responsibility, and federalism. In its opening paragraph it begins by pointing out that,

“It is very significant that, in spite of the strength and incontestably positive character of libertarian ideas, and in spite of the facing up to the social revolution, and finally the heroism and innumerable sacrifices borne by the anarchists in the struggle for anarchist communism, the anarchist movement remains weak despite everything, and has appeared, very often, in the history of working class struggles as a small event, an episode, and not an important factor.”

This contrast between the positive substance and incontestable validity of anarchist ideas and the miserable state of the anarchist movement can be explained by a number of factors, the chief one being the absence in the anarchist world of organisational principles and organisational relations. This is referred to in the platform as:

‘In every country the anarchist movement is represented by local organisations with contradictory theory and tactics with no forward planning or continuity in their work. They usually fold after a time, leaving little or no trace. Such a condition in revolutionary anarchism, if we take it as a whole, can only be described as chronic general disorganisation. This disease of disorganisation has invaded the organism of the anarchist movement like yellow fever and has plagued it for decades.’

So this is strong stuff for some, a wake up call for the anarchist movement. It is a call that we still seriously analyse in Australia. Despite the virtual collapse of almost all other left wing tendencies, anarchism is still not in a position of strength. In Sydney although there are many individuals involved in important struggles from Sydney uni strike to unions and environmental campaigns not to mention two important spaces we have here at Black Rose and Jura Books which provide some form of foundation we remain too much marginalised and isolated from one another and this is where in my opinion a class struggle anarchist group can fill the gap. Even though the Trotskyist organisations have shrunk drastically in size or moved to social democracy, it is a sad fact, that if there was a radical social upheaval tomorrow, they still would be in a better position to have their arguments heard and listened to than we would. As a migrant worker in the country who has been active in the anarchist movement from his teens, I am struck as how little we organise collectively for mass demonstrations in terms of a visible presence with leaflets etc. Instead we are individualised and isolated on the margins. This does mean we need to show up at every demo to swamp it as others on the left do but we need to identify based on our resources what struggles we can have an impact on because people will not come to us like a drop of the hat. This fact alone should give us pause for thought.

Often the experience of anarchists is that they are energetic and committed activists, but fail to publicize the link between the work they do and the ideas they believe in. One example of this is the successful anti-Poll Tax Campaign in England, Scotland and Wales in the early 1990s. Although many anarchists were extremely involved in the struggle against this unjust tax, when victory finally came, anarchists didn't come out of it, as might be expected, in a strengthened position. I'm sure you know relevant struggles you been involved in Sydney where you can relate to this. Again we need to ask ourselves why this is so.

Firstly we need to develop and prioritise a strategic direction, moving away from one action to the next towards long term work. Building counter-power will require militants to choose sectors and struggles of importance and to stay involved in them in ways which build capacity and confidence without reliance on 'activists' and politicians. What are our current realities both in terms of where our strengths are and that of the rest of the left and working class, as well as our opponents?

Returning to the question of efficiency and size, organisations in the 'Platform' tradition agree that size is important and they all seek to grow so that they are in a position of importance in society. However, they emphasise that all the positive attributes of belonging to a larger organisation, the increased work that can be undertaken, the increased human potential that can be drawn on, are undermined if such an organisation is directionless. The key point is that it is not a case of choosing between size or coherency, rather we should aim for both.

The importance of the Platform is that it clearly highlights the serious problems caused by the disorganised nature of loosely based anarchist organisations. It exposes a problem, it highlights how fatal this flaw in anarchism can be, it emphasises the urgency with which we must deal with it and compels us to come up with some answers.

This undermines the entire meaning of organisation, which is to maximise the strength of the individuals through co-operation with others. Where there is no agreement, there can be little co-operation. This absence of co-operation only becomes obvious when the group is forced to take a position on a particular issue, a particular event in the wider world.

At this point, two things happen. Either, the individuals within the group act on their own particular interpretation of events in isolation, which raises the question, what is the point of being in such an organisation? Alternatively the group can decide to ignore the event, thus preventing disagreement.

This has a number of unfortunate side effects for anarchist politics. Most seriously, it means that the anarchist interpretation of events still will not be heard. For no matter how large the organisation, if all within it are speaking with different voices, the resulting confusion will result in an unclear and weak anarchist message. Such an organisation can produce a weekly paper or bulletin, but each issue will argue a different point of view, as the authors producing it change. Our ideas will not be convincing, because we ourselves are not convinced by them. The second side effect is that our ideas will not develop and grow in depth and complexity because they will never be challenged by those within our own organisation. It is only by attempting to reach agreement, by exchanging competing conceptions of society, that we will be forced to consider all alternatives. Unchallenged our ideas will stagnate.

Without agreement on what should be done, the anarchist organisation remains no more than a collection of individuals. The members of that organisation don't see themselves as having any collective identity. Too often the lifetimes of such groups are the lifetimes of those most active individuals. There is no sense of building a body of work that will stretch into the future. Considering that in these times the revolution is a long term prospect, such short term planning is a tragic waste of energy and effort.

We cannot be complacent, and rely on the hope that the obvious strength and rightness of our ideas will shine through and win the day. The world we live in is the product of struggles between competing classes and ideas of how society should be organized. If the anarchist voice is weak and quiet, it won't be heard, and other arguments, other perspectives will win the day. Organisation is essential in explaining and building support for anarchism. We must recognise that the society we want can only be built by a politically conscious movement of the working class of all stripes and colours, unwaged and waged, using its power. This basically means getting active in day to day struggles in your workplace and communities. It means asking ourselves questions like what struggles are we involved in? What do we want to achieve? What is our objective beyond some vague public talk? There is no other way round it or else we might as well be banging our heads up against a brick wall.

It is not my intention to go through The Platform with a fine-tooth comb nor is it a bible without criticisms. It is merely intended to be an organisational tool than we need to apply to our own political context. It was never intended to provide all the answers, in the introduction they make this clear.

I have no doubts that there are gaps in the present platform. It has gaps, as do all new, practical steps of any importance. It is possible that certain important positions have been missed, or that others are inadequately treated, or that still others are too detailed or repetitive.

It was hoped, however, that it might form the beginning of a debate about how anarchists could escape from the doldrums they were in in countries such as Australia. Instead I will look at some of the document's underlying principles, in particular the problems which they identify in anarchist organisations, which they describe as follows.

In all countries, the anarchist movement is advocated by several local organisations advocating contradictory theories and practices, leaving no perspectives for the future, nor of continuity

in militant work, and habitually disappearing hardly leaving the slightest trace behind them. (my emphasis). This is as relevant in Australia and in Sydney as anywhere else.

Their solution of the platform is to create a certain type of anarchist organisation. Firstly the members of these organisations are in theoretical agreement with each other. Secondly they agree that if a certain type of work is prioritised, all should take part. Even today within the anarchist movement these are contentious ideas so it is worth exploring them in a little more detail.

The Platform's basic assumption is that there is a link between coherency and efficiency. Those who oppose the Platform argue that this link does not exist. To them efficiency has nothing to do with how coherent an organisation is, rather it is a function of size. This position argues that the Platform, in its search for theoretical agreement, excludes those not in absolute agreement, and thus will always be smaller than a looser organisation. As size is of more importance than theory, practically these organisations will not be as effective. In terms of my own personal experience of the anarchist movement from Ireland to Australia I would rather be in a room with 10 people with a common direction and purpose than 40 all over the place because it is a waste of everyone's time and effort.

This debate takes us to the centre of one of the most important debates within anarchism. How does a revolutionary change of society occur? What can anarchists do to assist in the process of bringing such change about? We have two anarchist social centres in the city. Are they merely a comfortable space for the converted? What role can they play in actually building a wider movement and not just a scene? Again these are the type of questions we need to debating and critically analysing.

Capitalism is an organized economic system based on violence and exploitation. Its authority is promoted by many voices, including the parliamentary political parties, the media and education system (to name but a few). A successful revolution depends on the

rejection of those voices by the majority of people in society. Not only do we have to reject capitalism, but we also need to have a vision of an alternative society. What is needed is an understanding both that capitalism should be defeated and that it can be replaced. For an anarchist revolution there has to be the recognition that we alone have the power and the ability to create that new world.

The role of an anarchist organisation is to spread these ideas and actively get involved in struggles around us. Not only do we need to highlight the negative and injurious aspects of capitalism (which is obvious to many anyway), we also need to develop explanations of how the system operates. This is what is meant by theory, simply it is the answer to the question 'why are things as they are?' We need to be able to put our theory into practice, our understanding of how things work will inform how we struggle.

Returning to the Platform, the key problem with anarchist organisations as they existed is that they were not only incapable of developing such an approach, but didn't even see it as necessary. Because there was no agreement on theoretical issues, they could not provide answers to the rest of the class. For example, They could agree that women's oppression was wrong, but not explain why women were oppressed. They could agree we need to smash the state and destruction, but how do we get from A-B. Such agreement is important because without it cooperation on activity, agreement on what to do, is unlikely. This is how the Platform's authors described such an organisation;

"Such an organisation having incorporated heterogeneous theoretical and practical elements, would only be a mechanical assembly of individuals each having a different conception of all the questions of the anarchist movement, an assembly which would inevitably disintegrate on encountering reality"

By a 'mechanical assembly of individuals' they mean a group of individuals meeting together, yet not united in mind or in action.