

# **Libertarian socialism in Latin America**

*A roundtable interview*

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## INTRODUCTION

*In the United States, growing segments of the population are undergoing a period of profound politicization and polarization. Political elites are struggling to maintain control as increasing numbers of people seek out alternatives on the left and the right. In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, political organizations on the left have grown significantly, most notably expressed in the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Meanwhile, the Trump administration has joined other far-right governments emerging around the globe, emboldening fascist forces in the streets. These developments have sparked widespread debate on the nature of socialism and its distinct flavors within and outside the US.*

*Among the various branches within the broad socialist tradition, libertarian socialism is possibly the least understood. For many people in the US, libertarian socialism sounds like a contradiction in terms. The corrosive influence of the Cold War has distorted our understanding of socialism, while the explicit hijacking of the term “libertarian” by right-wing forces has stripped it of its roots within the socialist-communist camp. Outside the exceptional case of the US, libertarianism is widely understood to be synonymous with anarchism or anti-state socialism. In Latin America in particular, libertarian socialists have played a critical role in popular struggles across the region, from mass student movements to the recent wave of feminist struggles. To expand and enrich the current debate on socialism in the US, we spoke with several militants from political organizations in the tradition of libertarian socialism in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, exploring the history, theory and practice of libertarian socialism.*

*Due to the length of responses, we have published this roundtable interview in installments (Part 1, Chile: Spanish and English; Part 2, Argentina: Spanish and English). For Part 3, we spoke with Fábio from the Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro (FARJ) / Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.*

*We also wanted to thank everyone who contributed to our Building Bridges of International Solidarity Fundraiser which made this interview series possible.*

*— Enrique Guerrero-López*

## PART I – CHILE

**Enrique Guerrero-López (EGL): Can you introduce yourself, tell us the name of your organization, and give a short summary of its origins and your main work?**

**Juan & Pablo, Solidaridad (J/P):** Solidarity, formerly called “Solidarity, Libertarian Communist Federation,” was born from a political process called “Libertarian Communist Congress,” which took place between the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2016. This process consisted of a regrouping of libertarian communist currents in Chile after a deep political crisis that we experienced between 2011 and 2013. It was an extremely rich period of experiences—a moment in which the working class carried out intense activity through different social movements, in student conflicts, socio-environmental conflicts, and, to a certain extent, trade unions.

Although in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anarchism was the main political current within the working class in Chile and across much of the world, this influence was already lost by the 1930s, remaining a marginal current throughout half of the twentieth century,

except for some exceptional moments such as the general strike of 1956. Despite its decline, some of its tactical and strategic elements persisted in the militant unionism of the twentieth century.

Libertarian communism began to reemerge in Chile at the end of the 1990s, and in 1999 the Anarchist Communist Unification Congress (CUAC) was founded, which would be the first political organization of this resurgence. From that moment on, a long and rich experience of political work has been generated in different sectors and social movements: territorial, union, and with a strong growth in student struggles. The CUAC as an organization lasted a few years, but after its break it created new organizations that were subdivided and grouped in the following years. These breaks were the expression of different tendencies that were forming within this common branch. At the beginning of 2010, a first congress was held in which several of these organizations were called to evaluate everything that had been advanced ten years before. Participants included the Libertarian Students Front (FEL) and three organizations that would converge in the Libertarian Communist Federation (FCL). The absence of the Libertarian Communist Organization (OCL), direct heir of the CUAC, is notable. Part of the conclusions of that meeting was the success of the idea of “social insertion,”<sup>1</sup> which meant returning anarchism to the class struggle, participating from within the different conflicts in which the working class was participating. By 2011, the influence of this political current reached one of its highest points. In the period between 2011 and 2013, we gained public visibility—a real presence within different social movements—and we began to be considered a current to be taken into account within the political spectrum. We represented hundreds of militants present in different social conflicts; we had murals, magazines, social media, and more. Just to give an example, in 2013, we won the presidency of the country’s main student federation (the Student Federation of the University of Chile) and filled the headlines with notes about anarchism and feminism. But that was the zenith. We were forced to update our politics, to assume new challenges, and we found that there were many issues for which we were not prepared.

In the following period, we found ourselves with a strategy deficit. A product of the social mobilizations of that time and the delegitimization of the main political parties was that, the entire political spectrum was reconfiguring; that is to say, it was not something that only affected us within the libertarian communist tradition, but all the organizations, both on the right and on the left. In our case, it strongly impacted the resurgence of feminism, which questions inequalities and gender oppression in society as a whole as well as within the organizations on the left.

Faced with this lack of strategy in the face of new challenges, the different organizations of libertarian communism in Chile began to choose different paths. An important part, which is now represented by the organizations Socialism and Freedom (SOL) and the Libertarian Left (IL), developed a strategy called “democratic rupture,” which put at its center social insertion and struggle over the institutionality of the State. These organizations are today within the Broad Front (FA), a conglomerate of social democratic, liberal, and also leftist organizations that aim to be a new progressive pole in Chile and that have had great electoral success. We believe that it expresses a political phenomenon similar to that of the DSA in the US.

On the other hand, we were left with an important number of militants, coming from different libertarian organizations and also from other tendencies (critical and libertarian Marxists; anti-capitalist feminists) that were distancing themselves from those bets, but without being able

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<sup>1</sup> “Social insertion” is the process of influencing the practice of social movements in a more militant direction through active engagement at a rank-and-file level.

to present an alternative project. Faced with this need, we started the Libertarian Communist Congress, which lasted two years and gave birth to Solidarity as an organization. However, it was not until 2017 that this process could materialize into unitary political action with deployment in different political and social conflicts.

Currently, our participation is taking place in different multi-sectoral social movements: in the feminist movement through the March 8 coordinator, in the Health for All movement (MSPT), in the No + AFP movement that fights for a new pension system, and, with lower participation, among teachers and students. In all these movements, our militancy occupies, without false humility, a prominent place, influencing the political perspectives assumed by these movements. Our current militancy is not very numerous, but we have opted for a qualitative growth that has subsequently been expressed in quantitative growth. As a result of a positive evaluation of that deployment, we have decided to take new steps and to begin to articulate an anti-capitalist political reference point with other organizations with which we have found ourselves, in practice, in those movements. This coalition will maintain the independence of each organization, but will add efforts to be an alternative to a much broader spectrum of the working class, trying to orient from an anti-capitalist critique the political and social opposition to the government.

**EGL: What are the roots of libertarian socialism in South America?**

**J/P:** We could say that capitalism expanded throughout the whole world with its own contradictions. From the beginning of colonization, going through the republican periods, there were always great social conflicts that have included resistance and emancipation from the oppressed sectors. But it was not until the late nineteenth century that immigrants arrived on our continent who had participated in processes of class struggle in Europe (and had experienced their respective defeats). These immigrants brought with them more clearly anarchist perspectives along with other socialist currents that also arrived. They did not only bring ideas, but also real, historical experiences of those processes, which could perfectly connect with the working class' own experience of struggle on the American continent. For that reason, in the case of Chile, initially the main anarchist nuclei were constituted in the cities near the ports.

Like much of the world, anarchism was established in the early twentieth century as the main political current among the working class of Chile. However, it coexisted with other currents in workers' and student circles. The libertarian current was particularly important in the establishment of resistance societies, proto-unions that would return to the organization of the working class a class struggle perspective, compared to other types of groups at the time such as mutualists. Some of the great landmarks of workers' struggle of that time, such as the mining strike that culminated in the massacre of Santa María de Iquique (where around 3600 Chilean, Bolivian, and Peruvian workers died, among other nationalities), were led by anarchists.

**EGL: What differentiates libertarian socialism from other branches of socialism?**

**J/P:** We understand that the different currents of socialism represent different lessons learned by the working class through their experience of struggle throughout history. Anarchism represents a libertarian tendency within the great political-ideological complex of socialism, which is distinguished from other socialist currents mainly by three elements: the strategic emphasis placed on the political protagonism of the masses in revolutionary processes, through the direct action of their organizations in the expropriation of the economic and political power of the bourgeoisie through a process of self-management and liberation of the creative forces of humanity; a historically situated critique of the nation-state as the political form of capitalism, and therefore the need to create organs of popular power in the process of class struggle; and its dual organiza-

tional strategy, in which the political organizations of the working class fulfill a facilitating and organizing role together with the organized masses. It is also worth noting their early interest in a complex vision of the working class and the peasantry, recognizing the racial and gender differences and inequalities within them, leading anarchism to the forefront of the unionization of women and Afro-descendants in the Americas, where we have had strong popular roots.

In negative terms, libertarian socialism has had difficulties in articulating a realistic political critique of the class struggle, sometimes bogged down in dogmatic forms of analysis and in a sectarianism that has kept it in positions of tactical and strategic weakness at key moments in the revolutionary processes of the twentieth century. Their disputes with Marxism have become oversized and extrapolated beyond their specific conjunctures, which has led segments of anarchism to comfortable, identitarian,<sup>2</sup> and marginal positions.

**EGL: What role does political organization play within social movements and how does that fit into your vision of libertarian socialist politics?**

**J/P:** The political organization, as we conceive of it, must be a catalyst and a facilitator of the struggles of the working class. Social movements are one form of acquiring those struggles, although not the only one. We believe that the role of orientation is constant, as we are part of the working class, and we function as a possible synthesis of its experiences as an emancipating project. In this sense, our project for society is that of a stateless socialism, of the self-organization of the class, and of the socialization of productive and reproductive tasks, not only because it seems to us a more beautiful ideal, but because it is consistent with our own history of the struggle of the working class, with self-management and popular power as strategic components to achieve.

The organization of the working class can take many directions, as many as its own internal tendencies, which include potential conservative or fascist orientations. Our role is to assume that there is a dispute over that orientation and to present a project more consistent with the aspirations of the class. We believe, moreover, that this is a responsibility. To be abstracted from the task of influencing is to give way to reformism or, even worse, to fascism. It is a responsibility of our times to constitute viable alternatives for a new society that overcomes capitalist relations. And that is achieved by fighting, organized, with clear objectives and strategies. That is why we propose that it is a necessity that libertarian socialism as a project be incarnated in political organizations that are willing to ‘get their hands dirty’ being part of those processes.

We also think that the political organization should encourage the most important organizations in the class to develop programs for the transformation of society, advocating its internal diversity. That is why a revolutionary anti-capitalist project that is not at once feminist, that poses the overcoming of the privileges of gender or race, is impossible. We believe that overcoming capitalism requires the broadest unity of the class and that this can only be obtained by considering all its internal differences.

**EGL: In the U.S., there is widespread debate over electoral politics on the left. How do libertarian socialists in South America relate to electoral politics?**

**J/P:** As there are different political currents within the working class, electoral strategies will remain an option, even if we do not want it. As Solidarity, we start from that recognition: there will always be an electoral left, which internally may have many differences (on elections in

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<sup>2</sup> In recent US political discourse, the word “identitarian” has been used both to connote liberal identity politics and, euphemistically, white nationalism. Here, the former definition is in use.

a ‘tactical’ sense, to use it as a tribune, or, in a ‘strategic’ sense, to win positions and point to changes within the State’s institutional framework). That is not and has not been our decision, but neither do we intend to make a moral or “principled” criticism of those options. We do not encourage it because it does not correspond to our objectives or our strategy, which requires the role of working-class organizations and not their delegation to political representatives, and because it requires fighting against the State and not taking refuge in it.

The libertarian socialist organizations have struggled to relate efficiently to politics and electoral times. In general, we have observed that most of the libertarian socialist organizations have ignored or abstracted from the electoral conjunctures, criticizing the electoral form, but not the content of those projects. This has caused them to be in a position of marginality in the face of the main political debates of those moments.

We believe that today the emphasis should be placed both on the development of an anti-capitalist program with a feminist perspective and on the development of the political capacity of the working-class organizations that allows them to challenge the way in which the production and the reproduction of social life are organized. Both elements, programmatic and strategic, are fundamental for social movements and political organizations to direct their action in a defensive period against the conservative reaction of the international bourgeoisie, beyond electoral times, but without abstaining from the political debate that opens at those moments.

**EGL: Recently, there has been a wave of feminist struggles in South America, particularly in Argentina and Chile, including the taking of schools and mass demonstrations on reproductive rights. How have the libertarian socialists participated in these struggles and how does feminism spread its theory and its practice at a general level?**

**J/P:** Libertarian socialist organizations have been an integral part of the feminist movements in Latin America and in Chile in particular. In fact, feminist militancy has come to exert, in certain moments—like the present one—a role as spokesperson and an articulation of the main social currents in the feminist movement.

However, it is difficult to talk about feminism because, as you know, there are many currents, which sometimes pose contradictory strategies. For Solidarity, there have been highly relevant lessons in recent years, which have been nourished by the mobilization experiences of what was NiUnaMenos (“Not one [woman] less”) and its process of political purification, in which the militant feminists of different organizations were questioned, and of the debates that arose in later formations. This allowed us to refine our own theoretical and political views, which have been transforming our organization into its fundamental strategic guidelines, from the very way in which we understand reality. Specifically, we have opted for the view of a unitary theory, which raises the basic premise that reality is a single thing and that there are not several systems of oppression (by gender, race, or class), but rather it is about different facets of the same social reality and that, therefore, must be confronted and overcome unitarily. Solidarity is committed to the unity of the working class and recognizes in feminism a potential articulator of the class that is tremendous. This potential is given by proposing a political project that recognizes internal differences within the class and that aims to overcome the logic of competition and privilege that occurs in it.

The participation of Chilean libertarian socialists in feminist struggles began to get stronger during the mobilizations of 2011, and that same development ended up leading to a questioning of the reality of the organizations themselves. From that moment until now, in every feminist movement, there has been libertarian presence and participation.

Today, no leftist organization would dare to set aside or ignore feminist struggles. But it often happens that their way of approaching it is to leave those tasks to individuals within organizations, delegating them that role as “proper to women” and establishing specific organic spaces as feminist fronts or tables. The commitment, still incomplete, of Solidarity is to take the challenges posed by feminism to its ultimate consequences, which means transforming our readings of reality, our strategy and tactics, and the programmatic development that we see in different struggles, whether they are called feminist or not. In all of this, it is the compañeras (women-identified comrades) who have taken the lead, and we believe that it is fine that they should, but we also believe that the struggle should involve all of us.

**EGL: In Latin America, many libertarian socialists have proposed a theory and practice of building “popular power.” What is popular power and what forms has it adopted in practice?**

**J/P:** In Latin America, popular power has been a strategic slogan that has crossed the visions of broad sectors of the anti-capitalist left. There are at least two ideas of popular power. One is popular power understood as the process of radical democratization of state institutions in the hands of a socialist government, as was proposed by Popular Unity (Unidad Popular) in Chile between 1970–1973 or the Bolivarian Revolution under the leadership of Hugo Chávez. It is a process of linking the bases of the people to a transformative political process through a transfer of power “from above.”

But in those same and other processes, and throughout the experiences of struggle of the peoples of Latin America, it is possible to find a conception of popular power “from below,” in those moments in which the political and economic crisis pose to the working class a more radical task: to develop processes of political and economic self-organization in which self-management and self-representation appear as short-term objectives. This is how forms of popular power are developed “from below,” such as the Industrial Cordons in Chile in 1972–1973, which, from the left, aimed to deepen the socialist transformations of the Allende government and to prepare a major offensive against the bourgeoisie. This self-managed current of popular power emerges in the revolutionary processes from the Paris Commune (1871) onwards, passing the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and the Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939, including the forms of Zapatista self-organization promoted by the EZLN and the wave of popular assemblies in Argentina in 2001.

For libertarian socialists, popular power is a central strategic hypothesis, insofar as it guides us with respect to ways of organizing ourselves, the source of a truly socialist democracy and the way in which a communist program is constructed and conquered. In Latin America, popular power has been a contemporary way of understanding the ancient anarchist project of self-management, integrating the historical lessons of the peasant and worker struggles of our peoples. It is important to note that the idea of popular power can lead to problematic positions that ignore the need for a political confrontation with the power of the State, ending in the creation of social bubbles that abandon the construction of a social and political power capable of carrying out a revolution. The challenge, then, is to frame the construction of forms of popular power in a revolutionary strategy aimed at victory over the enemy.



## PART II – ARGENTINA

**Enrique Guerrero-López (EGL): Can you introduce yourself, tell us the name of your organization, and give a short summary of its origins and your main work?**

**ASL:** We are ASL (Acción Socialista Libertaria/Libertarian Socialist Action). We have militant nuclei in La Plata (Buenos Aires), Greater Buenos Aires Sur, Greater Buenos Aires West, Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, and Cordoba.

Our formal introduction to the public was in November 2015, although we had been meeting, debating, and planning shared militancy since at least 2012. We could say that the original nucleus of ASL was the confluence of comrades with prior political and social militancy.<sup>3</sup> Some of that came from the political experience of OSL (Organización Socialista Libertaria/Libertarian Socialist Organization) during the ‘90s and until 2009. [It also came from:]

Other anarchists with *piquetera militancy* in the MTD (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados/Movement of Unemployed Workers) May 1<sup>st</sup> and the Movement of Workers Norberto Salto, which, together with other movements, make up the FOL (Frente de Organizaciones en Lucha/Front of Organizations in Struggle) in 2006.<sup>4</sup>

A nucleus of comrades with militancy in the Colectivo Desde el Pié/From the Foot Collective (a radical interdisciplinary research collective based in the physical and natural sciences). Others who worked in the Red Libertario (Libertarian Network) in Buenos Aires as well as in feminist spaces. With this primary nucleus, we combined the different experiences and trajectories to build common agreements and politics.

We think that the construction of a Libertarian Political Organization with roots in, and development of its militancy within, the class struggle should be something permanent and continuous, which is a patient task of developing organizations, programs, strategies, and novel tactics, but with a strong sense of belonging to the central nuclei of anarchism. In this sense, we perceive ourselves as an Organization still under construction and with varying degrees of popular insertion.<sup>5</sup>

We have militants active in various popular struggles—in territorial, environmental, feminist, union, student, and human rights—in addition to developing propaganda, dissemination, and training activities.

**EGL: What are the roots of libertarian socialism in South America?**

**ASL:** In South America, anarchism established itself as a current in the labor and popular movements early and solidly. Especially in the large cities with access to the ports, the great arrival of European immigrants brought in their saddlebags an experience of organization and

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<sup>3</sup> In Latin American politics, “militancy” refers to being a militant, or dedicated member, of a group or movement. “Political militancy” refers to being a militant in a left political organization while “social militancy” refers to being an active member in a social movement organization. For more on this, see “The Problems Posed by the Concrete Class Struggle and Popular Organization.”

<sup>4</sup> The piquetera or “picketers” movement is a movement of the unemployed in Argentina that emerged out of the economic crisis of the 1990s and 2000s and often uses road and highway blockades to press their demands. The MTD (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados/Movement of Unemployed Workers) is the organized form of the piquetera movement while FOL (Frente de Organizaciones en Lucha/Front of Organizations in Struggle) is a coalition of neighborhood based piquetera groups in Buenos Aires that anarchist political forces are active within.

<sup>5</sup> Popular insertion, equivalent to the term “social insertion,” refers to a strategic and organized presence by anarchists within social movements.

struggle. They arrived as protagonists of the revolts of 1848, persecuted communards of Paris, and members of sections of the First International.

In Argentina, the arrival of anarchist militancy is particularly important. We already see around 1858 the formation of the first mutual aid societies and, by the end of 1870, the first unions, newspapers, and libertarian groups were established.

They found a very unequal, unjust, and conflict-ridden society. “Success,” then, was not so much based on the capacity of those “coming,” but on what was already here. A libertarian socialist current would become, in Argentina, broadly majoritarian, in the left and in the bosom of the labor movement until 1930, with emblematic organizations such as FORA (Federación Obrera Regional Argentina/Federation of Argentine Regional Workers). Until then, anarchist and worker militancy were fused in the same organizations.

Repression and economic changes on the one hand—and the lack of actual political-theoretical updating and the appearance of new political actors (the Communist Party, Peronism, etc.) on the other—led libertarian socialism to a crisis of great proportions. In this context, specifically political organizations emerge within anarchism. The ALA (Alianza Libertaria Argentina) between 1923 and 1932; the Spartacus Labor Alliance between 1935 and 1940; the FACA/FLA (Anarcho-Communist Federation of Argentina) between 1932 and the 1950s; and then, under the name of the Libertarian Federation of Argentina, surviving to the present; and the Libertarian Resistance between 1969 and 1978 are examples that we see as antecedents in our country.

They theorized as political organizations with different spaces of social insertion—worker, student, peasant, and neighborhood—assuming the loss of libertarian hegemony from the past and trying to adjust their tactics and their propaganda to re-develop a solid libertarian current within the field of popular struggle.

In that sense, we take three central and transversal axes of our current as distinctive elements: classist, feminist, and libertarian practice.

**EGL: What differentiates libertarian socialism from other branches of socialism?**

**ASL:** We like to define ourselves as part of the revolutionary left, as a libertarian current within it with its particularities and similarities.

Our hypothesis on the development of the experience of libertarian socialism in the field of popular struggle is to be able to construct a mass political alternative that challenges the delegative, authoritarian, vertical, and patriarchal representative forms.

In that sense, we take three central and transversal axes of our current as distinctive elements: classist, feminist, and libertarian practice.<sup>67</sup> Our base-building tries to develop disruptive and democratic elements, tries to prioritize consciousness instead of disputes over the mere formal direction of popular organizations. Another important element is the pedagogical notion of direct action on the path of building a Direct Power of the People, enhancing the political practice of our class.

A third vector is to develop an integral anti-patriarchal politics that cuts across all the experiences of the masses, beyond the specific tasks of the women’s and queer movement itself—the

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<sup>6</sup> For a substantive elaboration on transversal politics, see Bree Busk’s “A Feminist Movement to End Capitalism, Pt. 1.”

<sup>7</sup> In US liberal discourse, the words “classism” and “classist” have typically been associated with discrimination against individual working-class people. Here, these terms refer to class-struggle anarchist politics. For a thorough critique of US liberal “classism” discourse, we recommend Gayge Operaista’s piece “Radical Queers and Class Struggle.”

struggle for legal abortion, self-defense against femicide, etc. In addition, the questioning of the notion of bourgeois democracy as a space for resolution or improvement of the living conditions of our class seems central to us—and instead trying to develop experiences of direct, democratic, and bottom-up management. In that sense, we try to develop a questioning of the notions of the State as a site of struggle and of the electoral route as a “unique” space of specifically political action.

**EGL: What role does political organization play within social movements and how does that fit into your vision of libertarian socialist politics?**

**ASL:** There are different visions on the left regarding the intervention of political organizations in social movements.

Even within militant anarchism (setting aside individualists, or those who espouse more “countercultural” aspects), we could say that there are at least three positions on the issue: those who see the “libertarian political group” as a space solely for propaganda or diffusion and where agreements are lax and there is almost no intervention in social movements; those who do not see the need to develop a strictly political space and combine common political-social aspects in grassroots militancy; and, finally, a current like ours that sees dual organizationalism as central: the political and the social.

Our vision of the Libertarian Political Organization tries to take lessons from the historical experiences that we pointed out previously, also incorporating the experience of diverse organizations within so-called “Latin American especificismo,” such as the FAU (Uruguayan Anarchist Federation) since the ‘60s or the OSL (Socialist Organization Libertaria) in Argentina in the ‘90s and 2000s. Also, the experience of the [platformist] Russian exiles of Dielo Truda, with Makhno and Archinoff as visible heads, who proposed a General Union of the Anarchists and an Organizational Platform.

Considering our relationship with social organizations, we consider our political organization as an application of the *coordination of our popular militancy, of the development of libertarian militants, and of the strategic debate of our specific tasks*, considering ourselves as just a nucleus of a broader construction in development:

- **Coordination of popular militancy** as a pedagogical and dynamic space of our popular insertion—advocating political independence of grassroots organizations, but working to enhance all that is classist, feminist, and libertarian in its midst. Promoting the defense of popular rights and freedoms and, at the same time, prefiguring in concrete and tangible practices the society for which we are fighting. Defining common tactics and strategies of the different militancies and coordinating our militancy in the sense of developing People’s Direct Power as a tool of rupture with the current capitalist, patriarchal, and state order.

- **Development of libertarian militants:** We understand this as something dynamic and with diverse angles—political practice with certain values and feelings; theoretical training through debates, readings, and workshops; the range of our responsibilities in political and social organizations; debates with other political currents; the production of propaganda and the dissemination of materials, etc.

- **Strategic debate of our specific tasks:** We don’t see this as separate from the characteristic levels of development within the social organizations where we participate or where we build. Objectives such as the self-activity of the masses, self-government of the workers, or class independence are not formal or rhetorical questions. We must link them to the work of social movements today.

In that sense, we see Political Organization as a push, an encouragement, a support for the autonomous development of popular movements—with more responsibilities and no privileges—and acting, in certain moments of withdrawal, as a rearguard that safeguards the objectives of radical transformation.

**EGL: In the US, there is widespread debate over electoral politics on the left. How do libertarian socialists in South America relate to electoral politics?**

**ASL:** Historically, the most important organizations and political currents of the left in Argentina have participated electorally, from the old Socialist Party since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Communist Party since the '30s of the last century. Perhaps the exception has been the PRT (Workers' Revolutionary Party) in the '70s, an important formation from Trotskyism and Guevarism that developed the armed struggle and did not participate electorally in its boom moment.

Since the return of democracy in 1983, the most important anti-capitalist left organizations in Argentina have been those of Trotskyism. All of them have developed, during more than thirty years, a sustained policy of electoral intervention. Sometimes as a forum for debate, at other times as propaganda, and, since the formation of the FIT (Left and Workers' Front), an alliance between various leftist groups, they have had small "electoral successes," amounting to around 3–5% of the national electorate, winning national and provincial deputies and references to certain "tribunes of the people."

Anarchism and its organizations in Argentina have never developed sectors that have participated electorally in bourgeois democracy, although, in recent years, there has been a paradox with respect to our framework of alliances. Sectors with which we share social militancy, tactical agreements of intervention, or even areas of political coordination have progressively chosen to start participating in different electoral campaigns. These include some in the aforementioned FIT and others in center-left or allied formations of sectors of Kirchnerism. We even find bands of organizations that adopt these tactics with sustained sympathies toward our current or even coming from anarchism.

This forced us to debate with them, more from the tactical and political conjuncture, without falling into closed positions and abstract abstentionism.

We can see three central debates here. On the one hand, the electoral issue is seen as a possible "leap to politics," an outgrowth and a response to overcome corporatism and trade unionism from social militancy. Given this, our position is that the need for that "leap" is correct, but that circumscribing political intervention to electoral intervention discounts politics, puts it in the enemy's arena, with the tactics of the class enemy and its instruments. We continue to maintain that bourgeois democracy is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, an instrument of consensus for capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. We are interested in developing political campaigns for local and national intervention, popular proposals, etc., even with the presentation of bills, as was the case of the Law of Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy, where broad sectors developed from below, and democratically and nationally, a great mass campaign.

The other aspect is our questioning of bourgeois democracy and the need to articulate an Extra-Parliamentary Political Alternative that serves as a reference point for social movements in struggle, the women's movement and dissidence, the classist currents among the workers' and students' movement, etc., and a political coordination with an agenda of intervention within

different currents of the revolutionary, libertarian, and autonomous left.<sup>8</sup> We cannot develop a radical and political critique of the instruments of consensus of the bourgeoisie if we accept their game outright.

Finally, our tactical criticism of electoral intervention is analyzed in light of the political, militant, and economic resources that are destined for electoral campaigns by sister organizations. What will result, sooner rather than later, will be carelessness or an instrumentalist appreciation of grassroots militancy and social organization—a conservativization of bold or disruptive methods of political intervention, especially by those that use direct action as a method of intervention.

**EGL: Recently there’s been a wave of feminist struggles in South America, particularly in Argentina and Chile, including school occupations and mass demonstrations for reproductive rights. How have libertarian socialists participated in these struggles and how does feminism inform your overall theory and practice?**

**ASL:** It’s interesting to trace the historical background of the feminist movement in the region to analyze the fundamental libertarian influence, from the experience of the newspaper *La voz de la Mujer*, initiated by the anarcho-feminist Virginia Bolten, to the formation of Free Women in the ‘80s in Buenos Aires or the first “Women’s Commissions” with a strong intervention by our anarchist comrades in the piqueteros movements in the late ‘90s to the present.

Throughout this stage we have actively participated, even with our modest forces. We have done it in the day-to-day and, of course, in the streets, in those multitudinous and historic days of struggle: in the demonstrations of Ni Una Menos, and in the work stoppages of women, on March 8<sup>th</sup> and November 25<sup>th</sup>, as well as in the days of encampment and direct action in the National Congress to approve the law for voluntary interruption of pregnancy.

But also, daily intervening in several specific organizations: in pre- and post-abortion popular councils, in the National Campaign against Violence against Women; in the Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion; in the National Meetings of Women, now renamed Pluri-national Encounter of Women, Lesbians, Transvestites, and Trans [People]; in specific feminist organizations and in the various commissions and areas of popular organizations where we are active.

From the point of particular political intervention, we’re initiating a Libertarian Feminist Assembly together with comrades from other libertarian organizations and anarchist militants in unions, social movements, and feminist struggles, as well as intellectuals and students. The idea is to think about our practice, to come to an agreement on transversal policies of intervention, and to draw up a line to act from our point of view in the current conjuncture.

In that sense, as ASL, we have edited a document to contribute to a Strategic Definition of Libertarian Feminism. In it, we characterize the women’s movement and dissidence as clearly the most politically dynamic sector of the working class these days, as it questions not only the patriarchal and capitalist oppressions within personal and daily relationships, but also the institutions of the State, and even within social organizations.

**EGL: In South America, many libertarian socialists have put forward a theory and practice of building “popular power.” What is popular power and what forms has it taken in practice?**

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<sup>8</sup> Romina Akemi and Bree Busk have defined “sexual dissidence” in “Breaking the Waves: Challenging the Liberal Tendency within Anarchist Feminism” and “A Feminist Movement to End Capitalism, Pt. 1.”

**ASL:** Like the majority of left militants with social insertion in Latin America, libertarian socialism also deals with the construction of Popular Power. We have tried to polemicize the term in a booklet that tries to systematize our positions on the matter since, within that wide concept, you can see traces of the most varied currents and politics. Some of them enrich and others, in our humble understanding, confuse.

For ASL, the construction of Popular Power is a complex, permanent, and contested strategy. Given the multiplicity of meanings that have been given, for a while now, we began to define this strategy as “Direct Power of the People,” since it seems to us that it is much closer to a libertarian vision of its construction.

We say that the construction of Direct Power of the People (DPP) is complex, because it tries to find the tools and seeds of liberating practices in the objective conditions in which we develop our militancy; permanent, because we don’t think of development in stagnant stages or that every political moment is the same for the development of the DPP; and contested, because it tries to fight against the vertical, patriarchal, and liberal senses in political and mass construction.

We think that the development of the DPP must go hand-in-hand with experience, with a reading of the moment and of the forces that we, as a class, have. Disagreeing as much with the “escape from power” as with the “taking of power,” we consider the DPP strategy as building a power from the oppressed sectors and from the working people with which to materially prefigure that libertarian socialism, from below and without the State or Patriarchy, that we want to build.

In the current conjuncture throughout the region, we are going through a stage of DPP that relies more on Resistance and Organization than on significant advances.

The need to defend the historical gains of our class and the movement of women and sexual dissidents becomes central at this stage. Therefore, we promote unitary organization from below, in the trade unions and political-union organizations that the masses recognize as legitimate for their defense: unions, social and protest organizations, student centers, neighborhood associations, and feminist associations and councils.

On the other hand, the debate about the questioning of bourgeois democracy as the “natural” political space for our interventions seems central to us; trying to develop and promote local instances of democracy and direct action: campaigns, multisectoral coordinators, breaking with corporatism, etc.

Here, we see experimentation in the management of resources wrested from the struggle in the territorial sphere as fundamental, the possibility of anti-bureaucratic efforts in certain Delegate Bodies or internal union boards to defend conquests, and class solidarity. Believing in the practice of our forces, we are demonstrating that no crisis can be resolved by those who generated it: the State and the bosses.

## **PART III – BRAZIL**

**Enrique Guerrero-López (EGL): Can you introduce yourself, tell us the name of your organization, and give a short summary of its origins and your main work?**

**Fábio:** My name is Fábio and I’m a member of the Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro (FARJ), which is a member of the Brazilian Anarchist Coordination (CAB). I’m a professor of

Mechanical Engineering, and I'm active in the professors' union in my workplace as well as in the Campaign for the Freedom of Rafael Braga.

**EGL: What are the roots of libertarian socialism in South America?**

**Fábio:** The roots of libertarian socialism in South America are connected to a long tradition of struggles and revolts of the Black working class, indigenous people, and popular sectors in general against colonial domination. Although libertarian socialism (anarchism) is an experience typical of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is a continuity between the popular struggles, the strikes, the insurrections spread over Brazilian territory and the moment of consolidation of the first socialist experiences. For us, especially here in Brazil, the working class doesn't arise with the arrival of white Italian and Portuguese immigrants. It's been in action since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with struggles of the quilombos, the strikes in the middle of the slave and imperial Brazilian structure, and the actions of the poor and Black workers against oppression and domination. In continental terms, we can point out as important markers the founding of the Federación Regional de la República Oriental del Uruguay (FRROU)<sup>9</sup> in 1875 and of the Centro de Propaganda Obrera (CPO) in 1876 in Argentina. The first countries in South America to shape and promote anarchism, in chronological order, were Uruguay and Argentina. In Brazil, dominant elites spread the myth that anarchism was an "exotic flower" and that it was restricted only to the Italian and Portuguese immigrants, when actually anarchism was equally rooted in the native working class. During the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a period of insertion and maturing of anarchism in Brazil that contributed to the formation of the Confederação Operária Brasileira (COB) in 1908 in Rio de Janeiro. It is also important to emphasize different experiences of anarchist political organization in the '20s and '40s. We are the fruit of this historical work which connects generations of anarchist militants over decades.

**EGL: What differentiates libertarian socialism from other branches of socialism?**

**Fábio:** Libertarian socialism, or anarchism, differentiates itself from other branches of socialism by its characterization of the State and by its strategic propositions, which aim to overcome the capitalist system. Anarchism is an ideology, a socialist and revolutionary doctrine, which is founded on certain principles that can be traced through its 150 years of history. Its roots are defined by a critique of domination and a defense of self-organization. Regarding domination, anarchism emphasizes a critique of class oppression along with other types of oppression—for example, imperialism, gender, and race or ethnicity. For anarchists, the State is responsible for domination and exploitation together with the capitalist system. The State isn't just a reflection of the economic relations. It is a political organism of the ruling class and, because of that, it is our job to build another power through the direct action of the masses in urban and rural popular movements.

Anarchism also supports self-organization in general and conceives of revolutionary subjects as sectors of the oppressed classes, constituted in struggle through actions of the dominated classes—peasants, poor people, and workers in general—rather than seeking out a revolutionary subject in advance. Throughout history, anarchists have diverged over strategy. Our especificista current, part of a long-standing tradition inside anarchism which advocates a mass-oriented strategy and the need for political organization, believes that it is through class struggle and struggles

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<sup>9</sup> The first labor group with the intention of organizing workers nationally and based its founding principles on the resolutions of the First International.

against all forms of domination that we can create a social force capable of building the basis of anti-state and anti-capitalist popular power.

**EGL: What role does political organization play within social movements and how does that fit into your vision of libertarian socialist politics?**

**Fábio:** Especificismo has contributed a lot of energy to this topic, with the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU) being a fundamental reference point. Modestly, we have also dedicated ourselves to this issue, together with our sister organizations from the CAB. Throughout the history of anarchism, important contributions—mainly from Bakunin, Malatesta, the Platform, FAU, and the experiences of anarchist political organizations in Brazil from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—have fueled our perspectives.

Summarizing our position, we can say that an especificista organization defends some clear points: the political organization as active minority, emphasis on the necessity of organizing, theoretical and tactical unity, the production of theory, the importance of social work and social insertion, the understanding of anarchism as a tool for the class struggle in search of a libertarian socialist project, the differentiation between political (anarchist organization) and social (social movements) levels of organization, and the defense of a militancy carried out with strategy. Obviously, our organization wasn't born working with all these concepts, but we have been improving our work in this sense over the years and have made some advancements.

We understand the social and political levels as complementary. We don't intend to establish a hierarchical relationship between these levels (as would the typical Leninist vanguard) nor let the specific anarchist organization (SAO) simply react to things as they happen. However, we understand that the anarchist organization, by means of its active minority, must build shoulder-to-shoulder a political and social program that deals with the needs of the people. The organization also works with objective criteria for integrating militants and gathers anarchists not by an "abstract" or "philosophical" identity, but by ideological coherence and agreement with the organization's program, principles, and strategies.

We understand that the political organization must influence and be influenced by the social movements, but also work within them to promote direct democracy, autonomy, combativeness, and self-organization. Inside the political organization, we expect a high level of commitment and discipline—a self-discipline that is collectively built, but that doesn't provoke harmful practices of only doing what we want or of not carrying out what was previously planned by the collective (unfortunately common in libertarian socialist groups).

This model of organization argues that the role of the specific anarchist organization is to coordinate and converge the forces that have emerged from militant activities, building a solid and consistent tool of struggle which aims for a final objective: social revolution and libertarian socialism. We believe that struggle without, or with little, organization—where people do what they want, poorly articulated or isolated—is inefficient. The model of organizing that we support aims to multiply the results and the effectiveness of militant forces. We also develop "conjunctural analysis," or an analysis of the political, social, and economic conditions of the current moment, to inform our strategy. For that to be done with coherence, it is developed strategically inside the political organization: this is where we deal with local, national, and international contexts, where the movements and popular forces are analyzed: their influences and potentialities. Strategy must answer the question, "How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?" It's the macro-level analysis—diagnostic and short, medium, and long term objectives—that we call strategy. Then, it is detailed in a micro-analysis—the tactics—which will determine the ac-



tions that will be put into practice by militants, or group of militants, in order to reach our goals. The organization also works with a federalist perspective and has fully direct democracy, where things are organized from the bottom up with sections, fronts, and secretaries, and where the whole organization decides, participates, and develops the broader strategic lines.

**EGL: In the U.S., there is widespread debate over electoral politics on the left. How do libertarian socialists in South America relate to electoral politics?**

**Fábio:** On this topic, it's important to affirm that for us as anarchists, drawing on the words of Errico Malatesta, our means must be consistent with our ends.<sup>10</sup> Tactics must always be subordinated to strategy. If we have the strategy of building popular power and a self-organized society, it is inconceivable to be subordinated to any type of electoral politics or to defend voting inside bourgeois democracy. We look at elections as a farce built to massacre and to dominate. We vote inside our class entities: inside the unions, in student centers, in neighborhood assemblies, where the embryo of popular power is practiced day by day. We don't believe in electoral politics, even the ones that claim to be socialist. We maintain fraternal relations with other branches of socialism inside social struggles, but we disagree with maintaining any type of action inside the bourgeois parliament or, worse, to link the popular struggle to the elections. It's important to make explicit that recent history shows that every time socialists have attempted to revitalize this issue, they ended up embracing the worst of bourgeois politics. In Brazil, we have a huge historic example: a political party, the Workers Party, which was born in the midst of popular struggle in the '70s and early '80s with unions, social movements, and peasant support. This party decided to take the electoral path, and rapidly, all the buildup of more than thirty years of social force in class entities was emptied in the name of bourgeois politics. Thirteen years of governance and more than thirty years of buildup, and today, we're watching the popular conquests be destroyed one by one.

As pointed out by FAU in a text from the '70s, "To talk about elections is to make allusion to a part of a power structure which is much wider," and "The rules of the game of the bourgeoisie are strong and involved; they sew with steel thread." Elections are part of this mechanism, and we, especificista anarchists, reject any type of subordination to this mechanism.

However, this doesn't prevent us from analyzing the different scenarios, including the electoral, and trying to predict the specificities of our class enemies. The movements, strategies, blocks of power, all this must be analyzed with seriousness. People talk a lot about how the State is a form of domination—and we agree—but less about how it's exercised. The system of domination operates in short and long terms. It is indispensable that anarchist political organizations be able to analyze these changes and to predict political scenarios so that they can act efficiently.

**EGL: In South America, many libertarian socialists have put forward a theory and practice of building "popular power." What is popular power and what forms has it taken in practice?**

**Fábio:** The Brazilian Anarchist Coordination has some theoretical materials on this topic. Especificismo has been engaging with the concept of popular power for more than a half-century. Our concept of popular power constitutes, simultaneously, an objective and a strategy, both of which give the basis for a political practice anchored in our historical and geographical context

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<sup>10</sup> The reference is to Malatesta's essay "A Little Theory": "The end justifies the means: we have spoken much ill of that maxim. In reality, it is the universal guide of conduct. One could say better: each end contains its means. It is necessary to seek morality in the end; the means is fatally determined."

in a manner that strengthens our intervention in the set of forces in actuation. Hence, it's not merely a theoretical or philosophical discussion that aims only to know or to think abstractly about popular power. We conceive of power as an established social relation arisen from the confrontation between several social forces, when one or more forces impose themselves over the other.

Every society has a dynamic and permanent relation between social forces. Because of that, any society has a relation of forces. Individuals, groups, and social classes have the capacity for realization, which may or may not become social forces. Therefore, social force is constituted when the possibility becomes reality. When we organize, we multiply our social force and we always put our hopes in popular movements. We conceive of popular power as a generalized model of power—rooted in self-organization and established by oppressed classes in relation to the ruling classes—which provides the basis for a new society. So popular power aims at the suppression of capitalism, the State, and relations of domination in general, substituting for these with a new power structure, established through the workplace, through the neighborhood. It can only be consolidated through a revolutionary process.

Therefore, we argue that popular power has to be built inside popular struggles, organized and led by the various sectors of the oppressed classes, around more immediate questions, but also aiming for more profound processes of rupture. Building popular power and creating a strong people implies, besides carrying out short-term struggles, advancing for medium- and long-term struggles, and, therefore, we have been supporting popular organization in a formation of the oppressed classes which can permanently strengthen the social force of the dominated classes, putting them in direct opposition to the forces mobilized by the ruling classes. This process of popular organizing must be built as “a result of a convergence process of different social organizations and different popular movements, which are the fruit of class war” (Social Anarchism and Organization, FARJ). It's about organizing the oppressed around a common project of social transformation. In this sense, the embryo of popular power is being built in combative strikes with direct action, in urban occupations, in rural settlements, in student assemblies and occupations, and in every experience from the oppressed that can create stable bottom-up organizing and challenge the domination of patriarchal-racist-capitalism. Building popular power means to build social relations that put the economic, political, judiciary, military, ideological, and cultural institutions of the ruling class at risk. It's about daring to beat the system of domination and accomplishing, through solidarity in popular struggle, the accumulation of social forces necessary to disrupt the social relations imposed by the ruling classes and, by means of social conflict, to advance, accumulate, and break up the actual systemic structure. Popular power also needs to accumulate and develop militants and to create stable structures for popular organization. These structures can only be made with the creation and maintenance of popular movements. Popular power is not about a big insurrectionist night, even though insurrection is a step toward this kind of power.

Our anarchism, a motor capable of impelling popular struggles at national and continental levels, is intimately connected to this project of popular power that we continue to support: a strategy and objective that we consider to be consistent with our time and place.

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Enrique Guerrero-López  
Libertarian socialism in Latin America  
A roundtable interview  
2019

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