Senda: A Militant Assessment of the Experience of the Libertarian Student Federation

Federación Estudiantil Libertaria — FEL

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> "Today, the radical critique of the modern world must target and encompass the 'totality.' It must inseparably contain its real past, what it effectively is, and the perspectives of its transformation. To tell the whole truth about the current world, and even more so, to formulate the project of its total subversion, we must be able to reveal its entire hidden history, that is, to view the entire history of the international revolutionary movement inaugurated over a century ago by the proletariat of Western countries in a fully demystified and fundamentally critical manner—its 'failures' and 'victories.' There are defeats that are victories and victories more shameful than defeats."
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> – Situationist International, On the Poverty of Student Life

In the summer of 2022, amid a climate of ideological and political debate about the end of the cycle of the Independence Process and the 15-M, the FEL found it necessary to engage in critique and self-critique of our past organizational activity. The FEL was founded in 2014, and this year marks its tenth anniversary. This critique has taken various forms and had several effects, but the one now in your hands is Senda.

Senda was the name of FEL's federal theoretical journal in 2017. By using this name again, we honor the intention and work of our comrades in creating a vehicle for discourse and theory. This newer version of Senda compiles the internal self-critique conducted through several internal articles that aimed to assess the organizational practice of the Libertarian Student Federation. These internal articles responded to each other, generating a climate of debate and perspective confrontation, similar to the exchanges between Troploin and Theorie Communiste in Endnotes 1. This article brings together all the assessments and experiences shared in those internal articles and seeks, through this synthesis, to express all the lessons learned over this decade to make them useful to our class. Let this be a small step toward the regeneration of the revolutionary process that must abolish our class.

The first point of assessment, from which all others depart, is that we are in a new political cycle, with the old one dead and its assumptions lacking current foundation. The cornerstone of this cycle's death certificate is the end of the Catalonia Independence Process as the local expression of the end of the cycle of effective socialist national liberation movements. In light of this, we must critique our actions during the previous cycle: our inability to articulate a coherent internationalism beyond the tropes forcibly applied to national liberation, as well as our failure to build a trench of struggle for our own class, i.e., to achieve and maintain class independence in relation to movements opposed to its interests.

A key criticism of the Independence Process cycle, and the reason for its demise, is the complete lack of strategic leadership by the working class. Revolutionary organizations were drawn into the struggle under the tempo, slogans, directions, and battlefields chosen by the local bourgeoisie. The most radical and skeptical field regarding national liberation often found itself grouped under the sub-leadership of the pseudo-radical wing of social democracy.

In our student reality, this manifested in the inability to prepare any action outside the framework of nationalist struggle. This was also due to the hegemony of SEPC, which positioned itself as the strategic direction of student struggles and the recipient of all their positive outputs. Forces that sought independence from the independence movement were either forced to take actions aligned with national self-determination or condemned to ostracism—"to be left out in the cold." Both paths legitimized nationalist struggle as the only possible form of student action. Until this

situation is overcome, it will be impossible to propose any kind of process for building revolutionary strength.

We must state that this situation is not the result of a Machiavellian conspiracy by nationalist militants, but rather the local and sectoral expression of the Independence Process context, determined by the historical defeat of revolutionary forces. Consequently, the overcoming of this situation has come through the discrediting of the Process and the nationalist path to revolution in Catalan society as a whole. History has caught up with nationalist aspirations.

The consequences of the separation between militant forces and their leadership are varied: victories and positive outcomes of struggles were redirected into parliamentary and reformist efforts far removed from the creation of autonomous class power, while defeats, weariness, and repression were socialized among the grassroots forces. This separation between base and leadership disables the destructive creativity that is the foundation of all revolutionary politics. We must repair this divide, building an organizational structure that democratizes strategy and empowers grassroots forces, overcoming the secrecy, conspiracy, and maneuvering that defined the leadership of the previous cycle.

These lessons are also applicable to the 15-M cycle. The assessment of that cycle calls us to maintain theoretical, strategic, and organizational independence as a class, to go beyond autonomy for autonomy's sake, and to construct structures and decision-making mechanisms that allow us to determine the best path forward for our class. We must protect ourselves from citizenist co-optation, as the final drift of Sumar and Podemos confirms that the 'electoral war-machine' has devoured all the radical-democratic potential of the early 15-M.

To ground these formulations in real foundations, and to resolve the problem of experience and knowledge transfer within the short student militant cycle, we must first build a mechanism for generating conclusions about our own activity and for socializing militant knowledge. The seed of this mechanism already exists and is in your hands: it is Senda.

The second point of assessment is the anarchist need to surpass the coordinator phase and the mindset of 'autonomy for autonomy's sake.' By this, we refer to the enshrinement of each assembly's, nucleus's, or chapter's freedom to decide on theory, strategy, discourse, positions, etc. This is currently evident in anarchism in the dispersion of our assemblies, the absence of a nationwide project—in Catalonia, specifically, in the evolution of the Anarchist Federation of Catalonia (FAC)—and more generally in ongoing debates around positional struggles and the hegemonization of political lines within grassroots movements (most notably in the housing struggle).

Autonomy for autonomy's sake has been the most common inter-organizational relational form in anarchist organizations over the last two decades. Anarchist (non-syndicalist) organizations have maintained general agreements on broad lines like anti-colonialism or ecology, but when it comes to specific stances or responses to concrete situations, they have shown great variation in discourse and analysis. This has divided us and limited our ability to act and influence social reality. When a coordinator has existed—nominally the FAC in Catalonia—autonomy for autonomy's sake and a lack of organizational culture have prevented the creation of the mechanisms necessary to develop theoretical and practical unity. Collectives reject being part of coordinators for fear of losing autonomy; there's a vast disparity of strength and fields of action among members, and trivial debates create tension within groups.

These effects generate an organization incapable of fulfilling its mandate: to multiply the anarchist forces that compose it, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Willingness

alone is not enough to be a general organization: mechanisms are needed to unify positions, conduct proper analysis, and resolve conflicts. We must be able to talk about delegation of power, organization and training commissions, bodies for theory, strategy, and tactics development—without accusing each other of being Bolshevik-Stalinists. We need to understand that debate alone serves no purpose unless it leads to action; we debate to determine the best position. We must be able to formulate organizational models with positions of responsibility, decision-making methods, and a division of functions that allows us to overcome autonomy for autonomy's sake and the cult of horizontality—especially considering these forms have existed, proven effective, and have been validated as useful and necessary by the merciless social laboratory of history.

With this assessment as a weapon, we must initiate a process from which the organizational form that resolves these contradictions can emerge. The exact shape this organization will take will be determined during its formation, but the foundation from which it will begin already exists, as these obstacles have been previously overcome in history: we are referring to especifismo.

The third point of assessment summarizes the FEL's need to be an agent within a larger, organized, and unified movement—an embodiment of the historical and cyclical balance realized by our class. This is what we refer to as the Especifist Framework. The FEL has been the only non-syndicalist organization with nationwide reach in Spain, and often the only anarchist organization in the areas where it operated. The FEL functioned simultaneously as a specific anarchist organization and a mass organization. This contradiction, coupled with a lack of means to theorize it, has hindered its progress. Additionally, its organizational activity ended up being materialized as "bringing anarchism to the universities," a line shared with previous Anarchist Student Federations before its founding, instead of steering the anarchist forces of the student movement toward the broader objectives of the revolutionary movement. Thus, the FEL operated as just another anarchist organization—even though in many places, it was the only one.

The FEL has suffered from starting from common sense. Anarchists in the FEL organize because organizing is necessary, and the FEL is the best medium to do so in their context. But without a general program, consolidated theory, and a constructed discourse, efforts often fall short. The FEL, as a reflection of its isolation in universities, has felt lonely and out of place within the broader movement. As a student organization, the FEL has a specific role within the wider anarchist movement—a role it has failed to occupy due to the lack of an overarching anarchist organization that could provide this background.

The FEL must take its place as a tendency organization within the Especifist framework—specifically, as the student/front sector—integrating and generating a mass student movement. We must find the formula to generate strength in universities and high schools and make it available to the broader movement, breaking their isolation. We must overcome the blackmail of praxis and doing for the sake of doing, linking activities to a program or campaign, giving them tactical and strategic meaning, and knowing how to respond to the attacks of capital and the demands of student workers.

Part (but not all) of this convergence between the student movement and the broader movement involves coordination between student action and the struggles of workers in schools and universities. Beyond all the lessons and experiences since May '68 regarding student-worker relations, what's necessary now is coordination from both sides of this divide within educational spaces. The student movement, under the dominant nationalist-social-democratic leadership, has been entirely separated from these struggles—likely due to the near-total lack of influence of the Esquerra Independentista in labor unions. In high schools, uniting these sectors also involves

raising student strikes to real strikes—that is, winning recognition of high school students as politically capable individuals who can make decisions beyond their guardians.

The fourth point of assessment is overcoming the eternal restarting that anarchism in general—and the student movement in particular—suffers from, and using experience accumulation and theoretical creation as tools to address this issue. The FEL has played a formative role wherever it has existed, often serving as the first political experience for many people. But the student cycle is short compared to the lifelong revolutionary activism of our class's agents, which has resulted in constant turnover and made it difficult to sustain the project. Integration into the Especifist framework would resolve the fleeting nature of this militancy and allow experience to be preserved within anarchist organizations and begin to accumulate within them. This accumulation of experience and break with the constant restarting must be done by solidifying militant experience into our own theory—embedding the balance of our times within the greater historical balance of our class, adding our grain of sand to the revolutionary theory of the working class.

The fifth point of assessment is the need to have our own spaces as a base from which to develop struggle and generate a gravitational center for articulation. Our experience shows that as models of struggle, both "bringing anarchism to the universities" and trailing behind social-democratic strike calls are not effective paths for generating revolutionary power. Properly won autonomous spaces serve as platforms from which to generate forces, combat reformism, and develop our own line. They also compel us to position ourselves in relation to other political options and sharpen our analyses to ensure we are the correct class alternative to other inadequate or insufficient discourses and historical assessments.

The sixth point of assessment is the need to overcome anarchist identitarianism in order to align with anarchism's underlying identity: the abolition of class society. In recent decades of retreat, anarchism has become its own identity, detached from the broader framework of class struggle—even within the most veteran anarchist organizations. A critique of this identitarianism must go beyond the critique of "experientialism" that has circulated within anarchism in recent years. This critique must be grounded in the idea that it is not anarchists who make revolutions, but the working class—and that revolution is made with a working-class organization that aspires to organize the entirety of the class and encompass all its struggles. We must organize a revolutionary process that ultimately aims to abolish the differences between revolutionary ideologies, formulating a theoretical and combative structure forged by the class as a whole: this is the revolutionary core of our proposal. By our own analysis, unifying under difference in the immediate term is a strategy that enables reformism, sterile programs, and the surrender of strategic and organizational class independence.

To combat the influence of social-democratic and nationalist discourses, to provide the class with a force that does not renounce unity between means and ends, to attain the most effective analysis of our class using the engine of historical balance from past generations, and to regenerate an anarchism that has lost its strength and vision—we must begin constructing this new revolutionary process today. For this reason, we will overcome dogmatism and baseless accusations and establish the historical balance of our class and its internal debates (regardless of tendency). As a first step in this mandate, we will build a powerful discourse that enables us to enter the arena of class struggle.

The Need for a Powerful, Coherent, Total, Self-Assured, Referable, and Implementable Discourse

At FEL, we have been conducting a series of internal organizational actions aimed at creating a powerful, real, and effective theory to analyze our past actions and advance toward stronger revolutionary positions. The reason for these actions is our recognition that the anarchist movement lacks a theory capable of explaining the capitalist system in its entirety, is not unified, and suffers from a certain inability disguised as humility. This lack does not explain the current defeat of anarchism, obviously, but we believe addressing it is essential to overcoming that defeat. We do not think it's controversial to say this: as far as we know, other anarchist organizations have identified the same lack and are undergoing a similar process.

Thus, and taking this assessment text as part of the culmination of that process, we have sought to create a foundational theory from which to build a powerful, coherent, total, self-assured, referable, and implementable discourse. This process is ongoing, and we are currently seeking the participation of other like-minded organizations to continue building this theory and turning it into public discourse.

That said, what should this discourse be like?

- **Powerful:** Deep, serious, and incisive enough to match the level of contemporary radical political theory. It must contain the theoretical debates of the entire revolutionary spectrum of the last century, make referenced and constructive claims, and be of sufficient quality to surpass other discourses. Here we mean using 'complex' terms like 'real subsumption of labor' or 'immanent' with the knowledge that these terms can be explained and understood by absolutely everyone.
- **Coherent:** It must reference itself, avoid contradiction, and build upon its assumptions. It should draw conclusions from the real world and not force us to deny or hinder current struggles just to be right.
- **Total:** It must explain the capitalist system in its entirety, as it is a totality, not a separate entity that affects us only in the workplace. It must not treat the segments of life under capitalism as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole. It must be usable by all struggles under capitalism.
- **Self-assured:** It must believe that its claims are true and remain confident in them until theoretical analysis proves otherwise.
- **Referable:** It must be a tool for militants in all struggles. It must not remain confined to a 'ghetto' or just our own circles.
- **Implementable:** It must be assumable and transformable by the combative class toward more advanced positions.

Conclusions

A long time has passed since the drafting process of the Senda texts began. Since the summer of 2022, the defeat of social democracy in the quagmire of electoralism has deepened, whether

driven by the Independence Process or by 15-M. The governments that rely on it have intensified their anti-proletarian policies in all aspects, while anti-squatting and anti-crime rhetoric has permeated all spheres of power, exacerbating the attack on our class's conditions of subsistence. In the militant sphere, a certain rupture has taken place, but there still needs to be a qualitative leap forward between the practices and discourses of the previous cycle and those that must propel us in the face of the current situation. The assessment of prior activity and critique/self-critique are the duties of revolutionary militants—those who believe in the project they push forward and its latent and unwavering goal: the abolition of class society. Assessment is not a trivial object, a memory exercise, or pedantic positioning in a struggle of egos. It is what ensures that the forces invested in a struggle—the losses, casualties, constant effort to sustain an organization—arrive at a good port, become functional, and contribute to the combat thread woven by our class over its centuries of existence.

The concept of a "cycle" provides a necessary distinction in the periodization of recent class struggle. It is necessary to perceive the qualitative difference posed by the struggles of our class once the context of the Independence Process and 15-M has been buried. Without this distinction, we act falsely, on unstable ground, with an incorrect view of the terrain that prefigures the forms of struggle. Any attempt—often masked as historical balance or based on methods we "know" to "work"—to restart the citizenist processes of the previous cycle and endow them with leftist or revolutionary content, any attempt to repeat the past cycle's steps, will suffer a resounding defeat—probably even before it starts. The symptom of this new defeat will be ahistoricism, the inability to formulate a deep and total critique of previous practices.

This is our call to militants everywhere: the balance of one's own experience is the hallmark of a revolutionary movement. We must shed reverence for the past, analyze past practices to see where they have led organizations, and, ultimately, overcome the past cycle. And from this work, we will make the leap—from the balance of experiences in class struggle—to confront the attacks of capital that we already know in our own flesh.

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