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Review: Facing The Enemy

Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist
Organization from Proudhon to May 1968 by
Alexandre Skirda; translated by Paul Sharkey (AK
Press)

Geert Dhondt

2002

“in the name of the principles of individual autonomy and freedom of initiative, every stable organizational tie was repudiated as being authoritarian and thus anti-anarchist.”

-Gaetano Manfredonia

“It will be readily appreciated that I cannot remain indifferent to the nonchalance and negligence currently obtaining in our circles. On the one hand, it prevents the creation of a coherent libertarian collective that would enable anarchists to take their proper place in the revolution, and on the other, it permits a making-do with fine phrases and grand notions, while shying away when action is called for. Responsibility and collective discipline should not cause alarm: they are the

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fellow travelers of the practice of social anarchism.”
-Nestor Makhno

“Anarchy! Organization! These are contradictory.” I heard these comments, with fellow comrades from the Valley Anarchist Organization (VAO), tabling in Western Massachusetts. These confused and misguided rantings did not come from an ISO initiate or Trotskyite prankster, but from an unsuspecting individual who came across VAO’s literature table. He seemed to possess little or no knowledge of anarchism, or other revolutionary traditions. He was however, echoing a common misunderstanding that anarchism has absolutely nothing to do with organization, that “anarchism and organization are opposites — how can you have a group with a name such as Anarchist Organization?” Unfortunately given the current trends in radical politics, there exists a general reluctance by anarchists to educate non-anarchist about what anarchism is, and a refusal among many anarchists to attempt to come to a consensus definition of anarchism. These comments do not only come from those unfamiliar with anarchism, this narrow and misinformed perspective is also to be readily found within the awkwardly emerging anarchist movement.

Recently, I’ve read and heard from people who take the labels of ‘individualist’, ‘insurrectionist,’ and ‘primitivist’ that they are highly suspicious of the new revolutionary organizational efforts of Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists and the Bring the Ruckus (BTR) draft proposal, specifically because of the strategic organizational structures that these groups advocate. Individualist anarchistic tendencies mistrust of anarchist organizing is nothing new. It has existed since the debates amongst the 19th century anarchists. The book, Facing the Enemy, is new ammunition for anarchists who want a greater understanding of the history, successes and failings in anarchist organizing, and the debates and controversies that plagued our 19th and 20th century radical predecessors. This book is for those who are interested in creat-

developed throughout the last 150 years. I sincerely hope that this important book will be widely read.

and at the same time differentiate themselves from anarchism's chaotic, petit-bourgeois (liberal) and rootless elements." (pg.128)

The creation of an organization of militants on the bases of a theoretical and practical program, differentiating themselves on the basis of ideology and strategy from other anarchists, is the core of the Platform. Similarly, the creation of the FAI in Spain in 1927 is the continuation of these ideas of organizational practice. The FAI was created to keep the CNT (National Confederation of Labor), a large union, anarchist. The FAI goal was to keep watch over the "CNT's doctrinal orthodoxy," a relatively small group of anarchists who worked to steer the CNT into an anarchist direction. The objective of the Platform, the formulation of the FAI, NEFAC and the BTR is to organize along the lines of a theoretical and practical program. It is not the purpose to take control of any movement but instead it is the strategy of the formation of such groups to influence and steer autonomous self-activity of oppressed people into a revolutionary and anti-authoritarian direction.

I have found this book extremely relevant if not invaluable to my understanding and approach to the issues we face in today's anarchist movement. But the book is much, much more than that. It is a complete and easy to read history of anarchist organizations in 19th and 20th century Europe. It covers the struggles our deceased and beloved comrades faced and how important anarchist figures related to organizations. Facing the Enemy also includes interesting details and anecdotes (such as a police-paid-for anarchist paper in Paris, police infiltration of anarchist "propaganda by the deed" groups or how Voline translated the platform to French from Russian to give certain important words different meanings in an attempt to undermine the platform). Skidra exhibits full control of the subjects he discusses and the book is full of quotes, interesting analysis and insights into the events that shaped 20th century anarchist theory. Skirda's invaluable historical account is written in a serious and sometimes witty style. Facing the Enemy also gives an accessible overview of how different trends within anarchism

ing truly revolutionary organizations. Organizations that are absolutely necessary for those not just interested in "fucking shit up," but for those who are fighting to win. What a timely book.

The focus of Facing the Enemy is on anarchist organizations in France, Russia and Spain. It is divided in 20 chapters plus an appendix of about 100 pages of original documents (such as The Organizational Platform) and a bibliographic list of names. The book starts off with Stirner and Proudhon, continues with chapters on Bakunin, Bakuninist Organization, The Alliance and the First International, propaganda by the deed, anti-organizationists and Bombers, the rise of syndicalism, international congresses, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and a large part on the Dyelo Truda group (a group of Russian anarchists in exile in France) their Organizational Platform of Libertarian Communists and the debates around the platform, the CNT-FAI and as well as some more recent anarchist organizations in France.

In 'Facing the Enemy', Alexandre Skirda historically and theoretically analyzes why it is that anarchism throughout history has failed to bring about a new and free society. "Torn between strident individual autonomy and a sometimes lumbering collective approach, libertarians have regularly failed to leave a definitive liberating imprint upon events and upon the movement of history." (pg.4) Skirda believes that a reason why anarchists have failed to make an imprint on these events is because anarchists have failed to build effective organizations. The main focus of the book is the organizational platform of the Dyelo Truda group. The book builds up the writing of the Platform as the highlight of anarchist organization, drawing on the lessons of the Makhnovists during the Russian Revolution and the following chapters discuss the influence of the platform on those organizations.

Skirda contends that the 'Organizational Platform' is directly in-line with Bakuninist organization. 'The Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists' was written in 1926 by the Dyelo Truda group, an assemblage of Russian Anarchists living in exile

in France in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution. Drawing upon their experiences in the anarchist movement for more than 20 years and analyzing the failures of the anarchist movement during WWI and the Russian Revolution, the platform was written as a proposal to form an organization, one that would be able to respond to crises, such as war or a revolutionary situation, and then take advantage of these crises to build a free society.

'Facing the Enemy' is an important tool to be used in the current debates in the anarchist movement around organization and synthesis vs. platformist and cadre organizations. The platform organization, as detailed and analyzed by Skirda, was subject to every sort of criticism and accusation of being anti-anarchist. In similar fashion to the attacks against the platformists in the 1920s, NEFAC, which seeks to federate anarcho-communist collectives, and the Bring the Ruckus proposal, which calls for the formation of a revolutionary cadre organization, are facing anti-anarchist criticisms by some of today's anti-organizational self-proclaimed anarchist factions. A whole chapter covers the debate around the Platform: attacks on tactical unity and collective responsibility by Malatesta, synthesis vs. platformist debate with Voline, as well as a debate that the platform was the "Bolshevization of anarchism". Interestingly, the strongest opposition to the Platform came from anarchists that stood by the synthesis position. This synthesis idea is not to differentiate your position from different anarchist tendencies but instead that those who hold contradictory positions can work together in a meaningful way. The aim of this process is to try to fuse the different anarchist tendencies and to be as inclusive as possible. This synthesis position is exemplified now by Social Ecologists working in the modern movement.

Taking the perspective put forth by Facing the Enemy, anarchists will find insight into the problems plaguing the success of NEFAC and the Bring the Ruckus document. I find that these groups are the current versions of the platformist (NEFAC) and cadre (BTR) traditions of anarchist organizations. These

two groups though utilizing different issues come forth from a tradition including Bakuninist organization, the Alliance, the Organizational Platform and the FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation). Bakunin thought that a revolutionary anarchist organization should be the grouping of a small group of well-disciplined revolutionaries that would act as a sort of "general staff" in the revolution, who "would take great care not to supplant the people in its struggle for emancipation". (pg.13) This organization was to guide the revolutionary masses in an anarchist direction. The aim of the revolutionary organization was, according to Bakunin, "to assist the people's self-determination on a basis of absolute equality, and full and multifarious human freedom". (pg.17) The Alliance was the Bakuninist organization within the context of the First International and while both these groups were pursuing the same ultimate goals, their strategies were different. The International had as its mission to organize the workers into one body while the alliance had as its mission, "the endowment of those masses with a genuinely revolutionary direction."

The 'Organizational Platform' picks up the tradition where Bakunin left off. As Skirda explains, "The chief reason for the anarchist movement's lack of success has been the 'absence of firm principles and consistent organizational practice.' Anarchism had to 'marshal its forces into an active general organization, as required by reality and the strategy of the social struggle of the classes,' which was in tune with the Bakuninist tradition and the wishes of Kropotkin. This organization would lay down a general tactical and political line for anarchism, leading on to an 'organized collective practice' (pg.124-125)".

This does not mean that they believed that all anarchists should unite under this one platform; from the very beginning the Dyelo Truda group stated that this would be impossible and undesirable. There exists a wide variety of tendencies within anarchism which are often contradictory. The platform was written to "make an ideological and political selection of anarchism's homogeneous forces