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Anarchist organisation

... the next step

Joe White

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Three corrections pointed out in Issue 3 have been made to the text, these are the sections towards the end between [...] Spellings have also been corrected although additional mistakes may have crept in due to scanning errors.

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Capitalism today can no more satisfy human needs than it could in Bakunin's day. We appeal to all those who are serious about consigning capitalism to history: join us in building an anarchist movement which can arm the working class with the politics necessary to accomplish this task.

ity that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity engaged in revolutionary activity ...”
(Peking edition p. 54)²²

Our use of the term cadre is quite different and has an explicitly anti elitist trajectory. We advocate an internal education programme to ensure maximum internal democracy. Only an active critical membership can prevent the emergence off a division between leaders and led which is a feature of Leninist organisations. Our ‘cadre’ is not a core of ‘readers’ within a chain of command but of skilled activists. An anarchist cadre is not an embryonic bureaucracy or commissariat, it is an instrument for building a qualitatively different political movement where everyone is a leader and no-one has any privileges or political rights over anyone else.

TOWARDS AN ANARCHIST WORKERS MOVEMENT

In Britain today there is no anarchist organisation which meets the criteria we have outlined. Nor does the AWG claim to be such an organisation. We are, however, unapologetic in declaring this to be our objective. We want a movement of revolutionaries who can win the arguments in all working class forums, who can think and act without being told what to do by a central committee, who know how democracy works and who can democratise struggles accordingly. We want anarchists to be able to decisively influence the course of the class struggle in a libertarian and anti capitalist direction. Ultimately such an organised anarchist must be able to play its part in the working class destruction of the capitalist state, and in preventing opportunists from hijacking a successful workers revolution.

²² Lenin: What is to be done Peking edition p 154

One of the most abused words in the political dictionary is “spontaneity”. It is used to justify disorganisation and mystify the historical process of revolution. Starting from descriptions of mass struggle, “spontaneity” has too often been elevated to a general theory of social change.

“For some time to come the results of all types of resistance and struggle will be described as spontaneous occurrences, though they are nothing but the planned actions or accepted activities of men. Spontaneity is a manner of speech, attesting to our inability to treat the social phenomena of capitalism In a scientific, empirical way.”¹

THE LIMITS OF SPONTANEITY.

The worst thing about ‘spontaneism’ is that it has become identified as a definitive tenet of anarchism. Anarchists, however, have never rejected organisation itself, only specific types of organisation. The problem for anarchism has been the scarcity of any systematic attempts to develop a theory of political organisation. Today’s received ideas about anarchist organisation are largely derived from historical accounts of anarchist movements in the past. This ‘theoretical gap’ is not confined to anarchism. All contemporary Leninist parties model themselves primarily on the practice of the Bolsheviks. Marx never elaborated a clear conception of how the revolutionary minority should organise, whilst Lenin’s “What Is To Be Done. only argues the need for a centralised party but never details its precise form. Key concepts identified with Leninism such as ‘the vanguard’ and ‘democratic centralism. were never systematised by Lenin. Indeed the tendency to view organisational

¹ Paul Matlich: Spontaneity and Organisation 1949 from Anti- Bolshevik Communism 1978

forms as neutral and the failure to acknowledge any danger of substitution or bureaucratisation are fundamental inadequacies of Leninism. Anarchists by contrast have always been accused of being only capable of negative criticism of bolshevism and failing to provide a constructive alternative. If anarchists are to become more than the “conscience of the revolution” it is vital that we develop a theory of political organisation that guides our practise as revolutionaries between today and the revolution.

Whilst we must take as our starting point the immense creativity of the working class in action, we must also recognise the limits of spontaneity. History has painfully taught us that whilst workers can create new forms of organisation suited to their needs, and can become politicised rapidly, it is also true that all manner of political ideas can gain mass influence. Social democracy, Stalinism and nationalism are powerful ideological forces which can and have derailed revolutionary movements in the past and, as such, they cannot merely be wished away. They must be fought, exposed and defeated by argument and example.

In Britain the main obstacle to working class independence is the Labour Party, an organisation put to the “test of office” time and again and consistently proven to be a bosses organisation. Despite it’s anti working class record the left in Britain continue to function as recruiting-sergeants for Labourism. It is crucial therefore that an anti-labourist force is built in Britain today: one that can conduct an unrelenting battle with the ideas of labourism and its left apologists. The current resurgence of interest in anarchist ideas creates the potential for building such an organisation. The Anarchist Workers Group was set up with this specific objective. We have agreed on a number of key organisational concepts: the leadership of ideas, the need for a programme, interventionism and cadre organisation. We will flesh out these ideas in the second part of the article, but first we will trace the tradition from which these ideas originate.

Schools however are only one part of the equation, experience is the other. The class struggle itself is the best form of education, and for acquiring activist skills. Thus membership of a cadre organisation must entail active involvement in all spheres of political life: as trade unionists, in student unions, unwaged groups and in all political campaigns which concern our class. The organisation must therefore encourage, facilitate and co-ordinate the activities of its members in order to make the most of the experience of struggle. Obviously a new and fledgling organisation must carefully select and prioritise its activities in order to make the best of its limited resources. The important point nonetheless is that the activism of the membership takes on an organised character.

A cadre organisation is not an organisation of the whole class like trade unions, but of a political minority of anarchists. We reject the concept of recruitment on the basis of minimal agreement with the ‘idea’ of anarchism. Such an ‘open door’ policy inevitably leads to major political differences arising at some point with the consequence of splits and constant instability. Recruitment to a cadre organisation must be based on higher criteria. It must depend on broad agreement with, understanding of, and commitment to the programme of the organisation. Recruits must be aware of the responsibilities to the membership: regular attendance of branch meetings, payment of dues, execution of collective decisions. While the level of activity is democratically determined by the whole membership, it would equally be unacceptable to reproduce the active minority / passive majority duality which characterises non — cadre organisations like the Labour Party.

There will inevitably be those anarchists who don’t like the sound of the word ‘cadre’, likening it to the Leninist concept of the ‘professional revolutionary’. In ‘What Is To Be Done’ Lenin asserted:

“that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders that maintains continu-

velop step by step. The first task is to develop and clarify its political ideas, to elaborate its programme and to build an educated cadre. Thus the initial phase is characterised by 'qualitative' development rather than quantitative growth.

Political development requires self education which in turn is a vital precondition of internal democracy . We want to build an organisation which can conduct the ' battle of ideas ' against all rival ideologies whether sophisticated or crude. Thus in order to prevent the dominance of a few ' experts' there should be a comprehensive internal education programme. Such a programme is necessary to facilitate informed decision making and participation in the policy making process. There will inevitably exist a contradiction between experienced and inexperienced members. What is important is that this contradiction is consciously minimised by the political organisation taking responsibility for the education of its membership. Political [education] is not a formal scholastic exercise but a continuous process which requires that the organisation is geared towards political debate at all levels. A sure way of guaranteeing stagnation is through meetings being dominated by business i.e. organising jumble sales and fly posting rotas or allocating the tasks of buying stamps and licking envelopes. Political understanding is not simply gained by ploughing through academic texts but by dynamic internal discussion, by engaging in debate with our political rivals and through interventionist dialogue with the rest of our class.

Another aspect of cadre-building involves equipping members with [organisational and educational skills] no one is born with these skills which is why the political organisation must be responsible for developing them. In order to influence the class struggle an anarchist organisation needs public speakers, workplace organisers, political journalists etc. Therefore it needs to organise schools for public speaking, organising at work, leaflet and article writing, etc.

Anarchism as a political philosophy of working class revolution found its first real voice in Bakunin. Although extracting a coherent analysis of political organisation from Bakunin's scattered works is a politically hazardous task, it is clear from what he has written and from his activities that he did understand the necessity and potential influence of an organised revolutionary minority. Firstly through the International Brotherhood and subsequently through the Alliance of Social Democracy, Bakunin attempted to win ideological hegemony for his anarchist collectivist views within the nascent workers movement and the First International.

"For it is indeed enough that one worker out of ten, seriously and with full knowledge of the cause, join the International, while the nine remaining outside of this organisation become subject to its invisible influence, and, when a critical moment arrives they will follow, without even suspecting it, its directions, in so far as this is necessary for the salvation of the proletariat".²

Those who object to the concept of an 'invisible dictatorship' as authoritarian misunderstand Bakunin. What he was attempting to express was that the influence of organised revolutionaries can extend through 'ideas' rather than 'orders'. Again, in an address to Italian revolutionaries, Bakunin clearly makes a case for this conscious minority to play a "leadership role".

"Three men united in an organisation already form, in my opinion, a serious beginning of power... what will happen when you succeed in organising several hundred of your followers throughout the country?... several hundred well intentioned young men, when organised apart from the people, of course do not constitute an adequate revolutionary force... but those sev-

² Bakunin The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, Macmillan 1953 p 317

eral hundreds are sufficient to organise the revolutionary power of the people.”³

We need not agree on Bakunin’s numerical estimate to appreciate the point: revolutionaries are many times more effective if they organise themselves. Bakunin clearly dismisses the authoritarian idea that revolutionaries act “apart from” or instead of the class.

SYNDICALISM.

Following the collapse of the First International and Bakunin’s death in 1876 anarchism turned to the terrorist methods of ‘propaganda-by-deed’ and simultaneously became separated from the workers movement. It was involvement in the syndicalist union movement at the turn of the century which won anarchism a mass working class base. Syndicalism was an attempt to bridge the gap between day to day economic struggles and the political goal of socialism by means of a revolutionary union. The problem with syndicalism is that in order to be effective unions need to organise all workers at the point of production regardless of their political allegiances. Unions are only as revolutionary as the workers within them and if the mass of workers are not revolutionary, unions will tend inevitably towards accommodation with the system rather than revolution. It is consciousness which defines workers as revolutionary, not whether they carry a union card, however radical the union constitution may be. The problem of consciousness is not resolved purely by organisational means (industrial unions, direct democracy, limited tenure of office etc.) but by way of political struggle, a struggle of ideas.

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union, the CNT was formally committed to the principles of libertarian communism, which was due to the strength of the conscious anarchist minority within its

³ Ibid p 380.

CADRE ORGANISATION.

As we have argued, the political organisation requires that its members are politically conscious and independently minded, that they are not simply academics or shop stewards but anarchist workers capable of winning influence for anarchist ideas. We use the term ‘cadre organisation’ to define this concept. This is because it specifies the way in which such an organisation must be built. The term ‘cadre’ means the core or nucleus of an organisation. In the context of a political organisation the cadre is the layer of skilled agitators on which the growth of the organisation depends. It is undeniable that an anarchist cadre was the decisive determinant in ensuring the mass influence of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism.

“ Militants and agitators form all parts of Spain... carried on their teaching continuously... They stayed in the villages for long periods of time, teaching the rebels and strengthening their convictions. The agitator made few personal demands. When he reached a village he stayed at the house of a worker and lived as the worker did. He held conferences and addressed meetings, generally without compensation. The workers federation paid the expenses of the propaganda trip...” [22]

Likewise the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) relied upon ‘soapboxers’ and travelling agitators to unionise new sectors of the American labour force. Every trade union today recognises the need for a cadre of stewards and accordingly arranges ‘stewards schools’ and education courses. Our advocacy of a ‘cadre organisation’ is based on the understanding that a mass anarchist organisation can only be built on a solid foundation of activists who have the skills necessary to ‘educate, agitate and organise’. We also recognise that a serious political organisation needs to de-

opposed to the purely theoretical or purely activist organisation, an interventionist organisation puts its ideas to the test by seeking to influence the course of the class struggle. This consequently requires that the political organisation creates industrial groupings, develops policies for each industry and thereby starts to develop the basis of an anarchist workers movement. Furthermore the political organisation must intervene in all struggles which affect the working class not just those arising in the workplace and break down the sectionalism of the traditional labour movement. It must take the fight against oppression into the workplace and open strike committees to tenants, unwaged workers etc.

An interventionist organisation can not just be declared, it must be forged by developing a clear understanding of 'how' we intervene. If we are to intervene as anarchists as opposed to good militants we must seek out and unearth the 'libertarian content' implicit in all struggles.

What does this mean in concrete terms?

Firstly we should advocate libertarian forms of struggle: direct action, rank and file control, elected and recallable strike committees, refusal to use the courts or arbitration bodies and so on.

Secondly we should advocate that the political content or goals of struggle be based on the needs of the working class as a whole, independently of the requirements of capitalism (profitability, cost efficiency, productivity, national interest etc.). By fighting for what our class needs as opposed to what capitalism can afford we can begin to demonstrate in a concrete way the desirability of a society which can satisfy those needs i.e. communism. In each struggle we need to look for the 'points of politicisation' by asking ourselves 'what do we as anarchists have to say?' Only by constantly asking and finding answers to this question can we develop an anarchist practice and re-establish anarchism's influence in the working class movement.

ranks. It did not happen naturally or spontaneously but was the product of:

“tenacious propaganda... carried out for long years in some of the peasant villages and the constancy and strong conviction of the agitators.”⁴

In France the syndicalist union, the CGT fell under the influence of social democracy and Stalinism, while in Spain the anarchists found it necessary to organise on an independent political basis within the CNT to ensure the dominance of anarchist ideas.

Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists knew that reformism was gestating within the organisation. This together with the government pressure and the resulting disorganisation and demoralisation of the unions, and the never ending manoeuvres of the tiny communist organisation gradually led to the historic birth of the FAI in July 1927.⁵

The primary purpose of the Federation of Iberian Anarchists (FAI) was to keep the CNT free from non-anarchist influences. The form it adopted was the free federation of 'autonomous affinity groups'. Each group was "free to carry on whatever activities they wished" (Cases p109) and while it succeeded in keeping anarchism dominant in the CNT, it proved itself unequal to the historic questions which confronted it in July 1936. The most important attempt to answer these questions and develop a theory of political organisation which unified theory and practice was the Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists. This document drawn up by exiled veterans of the Russian Revolution in 1926 had already become the centre of international anarchist controversy in most countries, except it appears Spain. The founding conference of the FAI had the 'Platform' as an agenda item, but remitted discussion

⁴ Juan Gomez Casas: Anarchist organisation: the History of the FAI, Black Rose 1986 p 53

⁵ Ibid p.100.

because it was not available in a Spanish translation. Apart from this technical reason there were more important political reasons for the platform's lack of impression in Spain. It was written in the aftermath of the failed Russian Revolution and addressed to an anarchist movement which had largely lost its working class influence and which was as the platform described, in a state of "chronic general disorganisation". This was not the case in Spain. The anarchists enjoyed primary influence within a mass syndicalist movement, and obviously felt in no need of lessons in political organisation. The case which the platform made for strong organisation was, nonetheless, to prove particularly relevant to Spain when anarcho-syndicalism was put to the test of revolution in 1936.

THE PLATFORM EXAMINED.

The Platform recognised the need for the anarchist minority to organise independently from the economic organisations of the class (trade unions, factory committees etc.). It pointed to the need for an organisation which worked both inside and outside the labour movement to win the hegemony of anarchist ideas.

"Without restricting ourselves to the creation of anarchist unions, we must seek to exercise our theoretical influence on all trade unions, and in all its forms."⁶

The Platform analysed the failure of the Russian Revolution in a far more scientific way than other anarchist authors such as Voline, Maximov and Berkman who tended on the whole to rhetorical denunciations of the 'power crazed' Bolsheviks. The authors of the Platform such as Makhno, the Ukrainian insurgent leader who had narrowly escaped Trotsky's assassination squads, had just as much reason to detest the Bolsheviks. Yet they also lay some of the blame

⁶ The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, WSM edition

Firstly the programme must be as fully developed and detailed as possible addressing itself to all issues of concern to the working class and giving a clear and unambiguous guide to action in all foreseeable circumstances, before, during, and after a revolutionary situation. The programme can not simply be a series of vague statements but must unite the most advanced understanding of social dynamics with the most effective daily practice. Such a programme, which is itself the product of accumulated practice, is not immutable but must be constantly tested and modified through its practical application.

Secondly, the 'executive committee' must be constrained by full libertarian democracy. The delegates to this committee must be fully accountable and subject to immediate recall. This requires free access to information within the organisation through a regular internal bulletin. The greatest possible discussion must be prioritised in the daily internal life of the organisation so as to allow for informed decision making. The membership must be consulted immediately any emergency decisions are made through an obligatory ratification system. Finally, and most crucially the only way to ensure that formal rights of recall will be exercised is to have a politically conscious, critically minded membership.

INTERVENTION.

The political organisation should not be a purely propagandist body. If it were to spend its time abstractly counterpoising the desirability of anarchism to the immediate concerns of workers then it will remain a sect. The organisation must actually take part in the day to day struggles of the class in order to make its ideas relevant. In doing so it should not simply participate in a 'supportive' or purely 'trade unionist' role but participate as anarchists and attempt to politicise these struggles. Therefore we would define such an organisation as 'interventionist'. As

from national conference decisions but would clearly have a political function. It was this aspect of the Platform which classical anarchists have found most difficult to swallow. Malatesta denounced the idea as “a government and a church” declared:

“the Executive Committee, must supervise the activities of individual members and order them what and what not to do;... no one would be able to do anything before obtaining the approval and consent of the committee.”²¹

Such rhetoric is not only a spurious caricature but does not remove the necessity of urgent decision-making. Spain is good example of how, in the absence of a mechanism for emergency decision-making, such decisions will be inevitably be made informally by elites. The various higher bodies of the CNT were supposed to have been purely administrative bodies. However the evidence we have suggests that the crucial decisions made in the name of the CNT during the Spanish Revolution (collaboration, war before revolution, entry into the government) were made without consulting the rank and file at all. It would appear that all these decisions were made on behalf of the movement by ‘influential militants’ on the higher committees.

For example, according to Vernon Richards, the decision to have four CNT ministers in the government was the result of negotiations between the Prime Minister Caballero and CNT national secretary Horacio Prieto. The four anarchists accepted their ministries without consulting the CNT at any level whatsoever. In the light of Spain the proposal for an executive committee within the constraints of national conference decisions is not as sinister and Machiavellian as Malatesta would wish to make out. In order to ensure maximum democratic control over such a committee a number of conditions must be satisfied;

²¹ Ibid 22 as 4

at the feet of the anarchist movement for failing to have been sufficiently well organised to counter the Bolsheviks politically.

“The absence of a general organisation led many active anarchist militants into the ranks of the Bolsheviks.”⁷

The most controversial section of the Platform, however concerned the proposals for a General Union of Anarchists. The “Organisational Section’ proposed four core organisational principles:

1. Theoretical Unity.
2. Tactical Unity.
3. Collective Responsibility.
4. Federalism.

The first two principles express the need for an agreed political programme based on a shared understanding of both the goal and the method of revolutionary anarchism. The requirement of collective responsibility was simply a recognition that democratic membership rights carried with them the responsibility of abiding by collective decisions: “there can be no decisions without their execution”. The Italian anarchist Malatesta was sharply critical of the ‘democratic’ standpoint of the Platform.

“It is known that the anarchists do not accept majority government (democracy) just as they do not accept government by a few... The anarchists have made innumerable criticisms of so-called majority government, which moreover, in practice always leads to the domination of a small minority”.⁸

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Malatesta: Reply to the Platform, reprinted in Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review 5

It is a remarkable leap of logic to say that democracy automatically leads to autocracy. It is also politically incorrect to say that anarchists oppose democracy. Anarchists are against parliamentary democracy because it is a sham which masks the real domination of capital over labour which lies outside parliament. Anarchists have always, in its place, counterpoised the real democracy of worker's councils to the circus of parliament. Malatesta's criticisms, furthermore, demonstrate a serious lack of faith in the possibility of a society where mass decision making IS necessary to organise production on a world wide scale. Democracy is the only way that production can be 'consciously' regulated such that it meets human needs. Malatesta's position is therefore not communist, but 'collectivist'. The only way society's labour time can be regulated through the free inter-action of collectives without democratic planning, is the mechanism of a market.

Some of Malatesta's criticisms do, however, need to be answered. Although the Platform rejects a 'false interpretation' of federalism which "has to often been understood as the right, above all, to manifest one's ego", it does not clearly explain how disagreement and dissent can be resolved. When Bakunin outlined the federal principles for his proposed United States of Europe, he said:

"Because a certain country constitutes a part of some state, even if it joined that state of its own free will, it does not follow that it is under obligation to remain forever attached to that state... The right of free reunion as well as the right of secession, is the first and foremost of all political rights."

The Platform effectively defines federalism 'one-sidedly' as simply 'free association', whereas federalism has always meant the 'right to secede' as well. It is this aspect that the Platform fails to explicitly accept or reject. In this article we are not going to deal with the principles governing the revolutionary re-organisation of

organisation etc. The only real test of whether theoretical differences are fundamental or not is when the ideas are put to the test of practice, for theory and practice are integral to one another. If the theoretical disagreements are too great, then unity of action will largely be impossible and the organisation will disintegrate or exist purely as a debating society. Why then is unified or collective practice of any importance?

"it removes the disastrous effect of several tactics in opposition to one another, it concentrates all the forces of the movement, gives them a common direction leading to a fixed objective."¹⁹

The actual implementation of tactical unity is more problematic. General tactical positions must of course be decided by the whole membership through national conferences. However, general positions can not anticipate all the questions that the class struggle throws up. Such questions will often require swift answers and decisive action which precludes full membership consultation. An organisation may decide to, for example, agree on the necessity for an insurrection but national conference cannot possibly predict the optimum time to launch such an insurrection. The authors of the Platform recognised this problem and therefore proposed the creation of an 'executive committee of the union which was to be charged with a number of functions which included:

"the theoretical and organisational orientation of the activity of isolated organisations consistent with the theoretical positions and general tactical line of the Union"²⁰

Thus the executive committee would not simply serve an administrative role but would be delegated with responsibility of deciding tactics in between conferences. It would not be able to depart

¹⁹ The Platform.

²⁰ Ibid.

THEORETICAL AND TACTICAL UNITY: THE NEED FOR A PROGRAMME.

“The only method leading to the solution of the problem of general organisation is, in our view, to rally active anarchist militants to a base of precise positions: theoretical, tactical and organisational, i.e. the more or less perfect base of a homogenous programme.”¹⁷

As we have seen the advocates of an anarchist programme have been a minority within the movement. Accusations of bolshevism usually greet any such proposals. Thus it is necessary, in the interests of critical enquiry as opposed to prejudice, to examine what is meant by theoretical and tactical unity.

The most common objection is that this two concepts amount to conformity to a monolithic party line. This however is a wilful misunderstanding. Let us look at theoretical unity first. Unity of different currents with a different world view is not really unity at all. As the French libertarian, Fontenis, said of this ‘synthesis’ form of organisation:

“the ‘synthesis’, or rather the conglomeration of ill matched ideas which only agree on what isn’t of any importance, can only cause confusion and can’t stop itself being destroyed by the differences that are crucial...”¹⁸

Theoretical unity does not preclude differences of opinion within the anarchist organisation. Where unity at the level of ideas must be forged is over fundamental tenets: analysis of capitalism, the working class as revolutionary subject, the role of trade unions, the nature of oppression, the role of the political

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Manifiesto of Libertarian Communism, ACF translation.

society, we will concentrate on the constitution of a specifically political organisation. The AWG has clarified its position on the question of federal rights within such a political organisation. Strictly speaking the right to secede within a political group can only mean the right to ignore majority decisions. We therefore reject the unconditional right to secede whilst still retaining membership. A political organisation is a voluntary association and, as such individuals who strongly disagree with majority decisions are free to resign.

The AWG instead employs a conception of the ‘right to dissent’ or, in other words ‘faction rights’. Dissent can either be dealt with bureaucratically by suppression or expulsion, or else by allowing the ‘dissenting minority’ the right to continue to argue its case as a faction within the organisation. As libertarians we allow factions guaranteed access to our internal bulletin and to our journal but they are bound by the requirement of tactical unity to carry out majority decisions. Unless both tactical unity and the right to dissent are guaranteed within a political organisation then there is inevitable tendency to lapse into chaos on the one hand, or authoritarianism on the other.

Despite the Platform’s lack of attention to the mechanics of libertarian democracy, its value lies in its clear understanding of the need for an anarchist political organisation, based on an agreed programme, which can provide answers to all the problems and concerns of the masses.

“from the moment when anarchists declare a conception of the revolution and the structure of society, they are obliged to give all these questions a clear response.”

THE SPANISH REVOLUTION.

Ten years after the Platform was published the Spanish anarchist movement failed to meet the requirement outlined in the Platform

the requirement of leadership. This failure contributed to the defeat of the Spanish Revolution. When dual power existed in Catalonia the anarcho syndicalists refused to destroy the bourgeois state. This first fatal flaw led the anarchist movement on a path of compromise which ended in the ultimate fiasco of anarchists entering a popular front government. Solidaridad Obrero, the CNT paper, announced the entry of CNT members into the Government by declaring that:

“the government in this hour, as a regulating instrument, has ceased to be an oppressive force against the working class, just as the state no longer represents the organism which divides society into classes.”⁹

The state of course, does not divide society into classes. Capitalism creates the division between owners and producers, whilst the state is the instrument which protects class rule. Thus not only had the anarchist movement lost its faith in the working class as agency of social change, but at the most vital moment their analysis of the state collapsed into confused apologetics for collaboration. The Friends of Durruti, a small grouping of CNT militants opposed to collaboration were, in contrast, quite clear that this failure was due to lack of theory and programme.

“The CNT was utterly devoid of revolutionary theory. We did not have a concrete programme. We did not know where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty; but when all is said and done we did not know what to do with our masses of workers”¹⁰

Not only was the CNT in disarray but the specific anarchist organisation, the FAI, reflected the deep rooted confusion. As far

⁹ V Richards: Lessons of the Spanish Revolution, Freedom Press.

¹⁰ Friends of Durruti: Towards a Fresh Revolution, Drowned Rat publications.

the vanguard. The party, in Lenin's conception was the most advanced expression of proletarian interests. In other words it was the organisational embodiment of the vanguard. Herein lies the theoretical substitution of party for class which consequently sees all rival ideas as either backward (an infantile disorder) or non-proletarian (petit-bourgeois). The actual substitution of party rule for class power in the Soviet Union was the logical outcome.

For us as anarchists, the only consistently socialist method of resolving the inevitable differences of opinion within the revolutionary working class is through the fullest and most rigorous worker's democracy. Thus we always put class before 'party' and insist that the vanguard has no political rights over and above the rest of the working class. We recognise that the 'vanguard' can act as a fetter on struggle, just as much as it can lead, and can be outflanked by the working class in action. Throughout much of 1917 the leaders of the Bolshevik party tail ended the activity of the class. In May 1937 the rank and file of the CNT fought the Stalinists on the streets of Barcelona whilst the CNT leaders appealed through radio broadcasts for them to lay down their arms.

The conclusion we can draw from this is that there is a qualitative difference between the 'leadership of ideas' and 'vanguardism'. It is the substitution of the Leninist schema which constitutes the difference between the anarchist and Leninist conceptions of leadership. Anarchists are aware of the contradiction between the advanced minority and the rest of the class, and therefore of the attendant danger of substitution. This gives us a theoretical advantage over the Leninists who either choose to ignore or fail to see the problem.

reason we want our ideas to lead is quite simple. As far as we are concerned our ideas are better than all rival schools of thought. Decades of Stalinist counter-revolution are testimony to the fact that working class power must be based on the most far reaching workers' democracy and liberty in order for the revolutionary project to survive.

The most common accusation levelled against the 'leadership of ideas' is that it is, in fact the same as the Leninist concept of the vanguard party. The final line of the Platform is usually cited as proof of latent bolshevism because it states that the anarchist organisation "can become the organised vanguard of their emancipating process". Rejection of the term 'vanguard' as a political concept must, however be based on more than just the 'guilt by association' method whereby anyone who shares the same vocabulary as the Leninists is, ipso facto, a Leninist. We recognise, as a fact, that different levels of consciousness exist within the working class, ranging from revolutionary to reformist and through to downright reactionary. It is therefore possible to say that a 'vanguard' or 'advanced' section of workers does exist. A minority of workers do have a clearer understanding about the role of the state and the nature of capitalism, and by virtue of this fact these workers are in the forefront of class struggle and play a leading role in that struggle. This minority constitutes a vanguard.

We have no hesitation in identifying anarchists as part of the 'vanguard'. Our anti-capitalist ideas are better than reformist ideas, our opposition to oppression is better than bigotry, and our libertarian methods are better than bureaucratic ones. The recognition that we are in ideological advance of the class does not however imply that anarchists actually constitute or are capable of constituting the vanguard as a whole.

This is where we differ from bolshevism. We understand that different revolutionary currents will inevitably exist within the working class and thus the vanguard. It is clear from the writings of Lenin that he saw no significant difference between the party and

as they were concerned the only two alternatives were a 'libertarian dictatorship' or collaboration. Ricardo Sanz, a member of the Nosostros group of the FAI expressed the dilemma thus:

"From the moment the movement took over responsibility for everything, everyone would have to do as we ordered. What is that if not dictatorship?"¹¹

The decision to collaborate was far more than 'historic stage fright'. It was a theoretical failure to distinguish between leadership and dictatorship. Collaboration was never an alternative to the establishment of working class power. In fact the Friends of Durutti drew out the counter-revolutionary implications of the CNT's actions.

"It collaborated with the bourgeoisie in the affairs of the state when the state was crumbling on all sides... it breathed a lungful of oxygen into an anaemic, terror stricken bourgeoisie"¹²

Understanding the need for a programme which the Friends of Durutti speak of, is not to deny that both the CNT and FAI did have agreed policies and principles which in effect constituted programmes. Nor was it simply a case of anarchists ignoring their own programmes. What is crucial is that those 'programmes' failed to address the problems of dual power, civil war, foreign intervention; and certainly did not inform and guide the actual practice of local branches of the movement both before and during the revolution.

In 1933 an FAI national plenum had agreed to draught a 'report' on libertarian communism which was to cover basic anarchist principles, analysis of capitalism, re-organisation of production, defence of the revolution amongst its questions. After the discussion and amendment the report would be voted on and,

¹¹ quoted in R Fraser: Blood oft Soaln 1979.

¹² as 10.

“was to be printed and distributed to every community in Iberia so that the goals become understood and discussed.”¹³

However according to Casas:

“The report was never written. The atmosphere warned of grave and foreboding developments, and men of action concerned themselves more with revolutionary strategy than the goals.”¹⁴

The opposition of theory to practice is a false one. The subordination of theory to the immediate tasks of the movement are symptomatic of the weakness of the FAI. Strategy can only be effective if it is based on a clear understanding of how society works in order to change it. Because the syndicalist movement was primarily concerned with economic and trade union issues, it was clear that the consciously anarchist section of that movement should have a clear idea of what to do in a revolutionary situation. It is tragically clear that a general understanding of these tasks and problems was lacking throughout the ranks of the FAI. The lesson of the Spanish experience is that an organisation comprised of brave street fighters and militant trade unionists is not necessarily a good revolutionary organisation.

ORGANISATIONAL PRINCIPLES.

As we have seen, anarchism’s most advanced theoretical expressions were based on the experience of the class struggle and in particular the revolutionary upheavals in Russia and Spain. For anarchists today it is essential to advance our understanding further given half a century’s accumulated experience since the Spanish

¹³ as 4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Revolution. At the same time we need to give anarchism a contemporary application which can start to have a resonance in the working class movement. The AWG has identified a number of concepts which we believe must serve as cornerstones in the building of a mass anarchist organisation. We will now look at these concepts systematically.

THE LEADERSHIP OF IDEAS.

Leadership is a term which tends to elicit a knee-jerk response from many anarchists. However as we have seen, [anarchists have, historically, employed] a concept of leadership, and have played a leadership role in workers struggles. As the authors of the Platform acknowledged;

“More than any other concept, anarchism should become the leading concept of the revolution, for it is only on the theoretical base of anarchism that the social revolution can succeed in the complete emancipation of labour.”¹⁵

In doing so they recognised the crucial role that ideas play in the revolutionary process. The Platform is equally lucid in explaining that their conception of leadership is entirely confined to the sphere of ideas, and is not a call for political specialisation.

“This theoretical driving force should not be confused with the political leadership of the statist parties which leads finally to State power.”¹⁶

It is more precise therefore to talk about a “leadership of ideas” to avoid confusion with the Leninist conception of leadership. The

¹⁵ The Platform.

¹⁶ Ibid