

Meltzer, Albert, 1920–1996

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Obituaries of Albert Meltzer described him as a ‘torchbearer of international anarchism.’ What makes an anarchist torchbearer? His international links across his years of activism are clear in his autobiography *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels*: he worked with comrades from India, China, Sweden, Spain, Australia, the USA... But beyond that he fought, in theory and practice, for anarchism to be a living movement.

Politics: It doesn’t always do what it says on the tin!

Albert was often accused of ‘sectarianism’ because he opposed the idea of an ‘open door policy’ for anarchism: that anyone claiming to be an anarchist should be taken at their word. He was never prepared to let bad definitions drive out good without an argument.

He defended the anarchist heritage of resistance against the reworked liberalism which idealised ‘perpetual protest.’ In the relatively free sixties, some argued that revolutionary change was old hat, and that we should be content with ‘living as freely as possible’ in the here and now. Albert was very sarcastic about how emphasising anarchism as an abstract idea allowed authoritarian scum like Thatcher to pose as libertarians.

He also opposed what he called the ‘package-deal Left’, sadly still in evidence today, where having a ‘line’ which can be used to march the papersellers to the top of the hill, and the next and the next, takes the place of principles or the idea of human liberation.

A Class Act

As a trade union activist and working class militant, Albert was a firm believer in class struggle anarchism, not as a ghetto within a ghetto, but as the best bet for defending our current freedom and achieving long-term change. His faith in the potential of the working class was unshaken by the shocking revelation that some of them were not angels: his twofold response was that, having no need to exploit another class, they had the greatest libertarian potential and (more humorously) that the only place angels would have to be involved in workers control was in heaven!

One of his aims in the many books and hundreds of articles he wrote was to encourage a ‘Monday militancy’ – to struggle for freedom in every area of our lives, rather than just chanting about it on the weekend.

A quote from *The Floodgates of Anarchy* (co-written with Stuart Christie) shows that he was open-minded about the need for flexibility of tactics:

“We must accept reforms in the spirit in which they are offered, and, if, in order to get a political prisoner released after twenty years in jail, we were asked to appear in our shirts like the burghers of Calais, and march around a cathedral carrying a penitential candle, this would be an act of solidarity no less than attacking a Spanish bank or kidnapping an ambassador. [...]

“What would be the grossest superstition – and this is the analogy with reformism – is to believe that simply by appearing in sackcloth and ashes and traipsing around the cathedral, the dictator could be persuaded to release the prisoners. [...] Letters to

members of parliament, discussions of civil rights and the abstract rights of man, petitions to the United Nations, public statements for which one must angle for “names”, the collecting of thousands of ordinary signatures ... all these are secular, democratic versions of the sackcloth and ashes, required by the despot. We may need to engage in them, we may benefit from them, but we do not have to be fooled by them.”

The Anarchist Black Cross: Anarchy in Action

Spanish anarchists were the staunchest opponents of Franco’s fascist regime, yet in or out of jail received the least international support. This changed with the imprisonment of Stuart Christie, jailed in 1964 for his part in a plot to assassinate Franco. The spotlight illuminated not only him, but the fact of Anarchist resistance and the fate of other Anarchist prisoners. Albert helped behind the scenes efforts to ‘encourage’ Stuart’s release. Once freed in 1967 he joined with Albert to launch the Anarchist Black Cross, to call for solidarity with those left behind. This solidarity gave practical help (food and medicine) to the prisoners, and helped force the Spanish state to apply its own parole rules. Just as importantly, it introduced activists elsewhere to a revolutionary tradition very different from the murderous and authoritarian Russian one. One of the first prisoners the Anarchist Black Cross helped free was Miguel Garcia, a veteran of the Spanish anarchist resistance, as well as wartime resistance in France. After serving 20 years (to the hour!) in Spanish jails he moved to London to work with the ABC – and inspiring a new generation of activists.

The Anarchist Black Cross was always beset by people with bright plans for expansion (‘why not aid all victims of capitalism everywhere?’) regardless of the resources needed. Giving the chance for people to provide direct solidarity, it achieved more than many paper organisations and still shows the value of practical anarchist activism.

Keep the Black Flag flying here...

Speaking of paper, the ABC bulletin became Black Flag, at times weekly, and at others ‘excitingly irregular’, which has for 30 years pushed the idea and practice of revolutionary anarchism. In the early 1980s it reinvigorated yet another generation of anarchist politics in Britain. By connecting with young working class anarchists coming from the punk scene it helped spread new energy and attitude. These were the people who went on to spread Anarchist ideas more widely than they had been seen for years in the miners and other strikes, as well as the fight against the Poll Tax.

Legacy

Anarchists of today, if they ever wonder what one person can do, could learn a lot from the life of Albert Meltzer. Albert has left many legacies to the Anarchist movement, from a frank and justified scepticism of the value of academic ‘experts’ on or media exposes about Anarchism, to a supply of scathing anecdotes about most political ideologies.

Many of the projects he was involved with carry on: Black Flag is still promoting anarchist resistance and the Kate Sharpley Library continues uncovering the grassroots history of the move-

ment, which is, after all, where its strength has always lain. A publishing house (The Meltzer Press) set up in tribute to him has produced some important historical works including the first English translation of Peirats' classic account of The CNT in the Spanish Revolution.

A political appreciation like this inevitably leaves out much that could be said — especially of a life so full. To many people Albert truly was an Anarchist torchbearer (and not only to radicals: Special Branch called him 'the doyen of the British anarchist movement!'). To many others who worked or communicated with him, he carried other sparklers of humour and comradeship. He had no time for the cult of 'great men' or 'great women' in isolation from the movements that made them what they were, so perhaps the best tribute is to say that he was part of a long line of comrades who devoted their lives to spreading the idea of anarchism and proving the worth of its principles in the fight for human freedom.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
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