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Zabalaza: A Voice for Organised Anarchism in South Africa

Jonathan Payn

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The Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front, or ZACF – Zabalaza meaning ‘struggle’ in isiZulu and isiXhosa – is a specific anarchist political organisation based in Johannesburg, South Africa. It is a unitary organisation – or federation of individuals, as opposed to a federation of collectives – whereby membership is on an individual basis, by invitation only. This is because we have seen – through our own experience, as well as that of global anarchism historically – that we can accomplish more as an organisation, and be more effective, when our members share a certain level of theoretical and strategic unity, and collective responsibility.

The ZACF identifies with the anarchist communist, Platformist or *Especifista* traditions within anarchism and, as such, we subscribe to the idea of active minority. What this means is that, unlike our anarcho-syndicalist comrades for example, we do not seek to build mass anarchist movements, nor to turn existing social movements into anarchist movements, but

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to participate in existing movements – and assist in creating new ones where necessary – with the objective of spreading the influence of anarchist principles and practices, even when these mass organisations remain ideologically heterogeneous. In fact, it is our belief that – as the mass fighting organisations of the working class – we should not seek to homogenise mass movements and organisations ideologically, as the strength of these movements lies in their ability to unite and mobilise the largest possible number of workers, regardless of their religious, ideological or political affiliations. Rather, we hold that it is the role of the anarchist political organisation to fight for the leadership of anarchist ideas within mass movements, and for the implementation of anarchist principles therein (even if not recognised as such by the majority of members of the mass organisation), such as: direct democracy, mutual aid, horizontalism, class combativeness, direct action and class independence (independence of working class organisations/ movements from political parties and electoral politics).

Founded on May Day 2003 – at a time when political space was closing down in the trade unions, with them coming increasingly under the control of the African National Congress (ANC) government through the tripartite alliance, and it being increasingly difficult to criticise the ANC-led Alliance or raise alternatives within the trade union movement – a decision was taken by the ZACF to orient itself towards the emerging popular social movements that had been mushrooming around South Africa since the turn of the decade in response to the failure of the ANC government to fulfill its election promises.

Since then the ZACF has worked with social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and Landless People's Movement (LPM) in Gauteng, as well as doing solidarity work for social movements based outside of Gauteng that have come under state repression, such as Abahlali baseMjondolo in KwaZulu Natal and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) in the Western Cape. Within these social movements, a large part

In closing we can say that – as probably the world’s most unequal society, with the greatest disparity between the rich and the poor – South Africa is a social time-bomb, waiting to explode. This is evidenced in the thousands of so-called service delivery protests and community revolts that have characterised this country for over a decade; in the increasing levels of police brutality and state repression and the escalation workers strikes, notably in the public sector.

People are nearing the end of their patience. There are community revolts and so-called service delivery protests, very often spontaneous or organised independently of local political groupings, on an almost daily basis. Although it is unlikely to actually happen for some time to come, workers are increasingly calling for the trade union confederation, COSATU, to break with the ANC-led tripartite alliance, which includes the South African Communist Party – suggesting that a growing number of workers are becoming increasingly disillusioned and impatient with the ANC and its seeming inability to fulfill even some of the most basic of its election promises 17 years into the new dispensation. What is needed is for anarchist revolutionaries to provide a libertarian socialist vision of an alternative to the National Democratic Revolution, to help raise levels of class consciousness and militancy and to channel the potentially explosive frustration and anger of the exploited and oppressed classes into a movement conscious of the need to organise and struggle, independently and from below, to overthrow capitalism and the state and replace it with socialism and freedom. This is the task we have set ourselves.

Amandla awethu!
(“Power to the people” in isiZulu)

of our work is around popular political education and trying to raise and advance anarchist principles therein; advocating direct action, combatting reformist and authoritarian tendencies etc. and arguing for these social movements to remain independent from political parties and not to waste their time putting up or supporting independent candidates in elections. In fact, although we have contributed in the past to positions of class independence and anti-electoralism prevailing, the question of the role of the state and of using elections to get into local or national government as a strategy for social transformation is something we have to battle on an almost daily basis within these movements, due to the persistent influence of a number of Trotskyist and authoritarian socialist groups. In some cases, such as that of the LPM, the battle has been lost and the structure of what was once a combative working class organisation has been decimated by ongoing attempts by an opportunist leadership to drag this movement into elections and to support political parties in order to advance their own careers. Here we are working with activists from this former movement to investigate the possibilities of building another structure to replace it. This time one that functions along libertarian principles, in order to guard against what happened to the LPM happening again.

Because there is not really any already existing libertarian movement or tradition in South Africa (or at least not since about the 1920s), there are very few people who consciously identify as anarchists – or even know what that means – despite the fact that it is not uncommon for working class militants to have certain libertarian leanings and inclinations. Moreover, of those that do identify as anarchists, even fewer are from the black working class – which, we believe, absolutely *has to* be the driving force for any project of radical social transformation in the region – due to lack of access to information, the pervasive influence of bourgeois nationalism and loyalty to the ANC and liberation movement etc. This, of

course, makes it very difficult for us to recruit members and grow as an organisation, since we require that someone be a convinced anarchist communist, and be in general agreement with our position papers *before* they join the organisation (as opposed to admitting people to the organisation and only then trying to convince them of our positions and make anarchists out of them). As such, our focus is on spreading anarchist ideas and practices among, particularly, the black working class and, where possible, drawing working class militants closer to, and, it is hoped, into the organisation. This desire to draw new people into our organisation should not be seen as a contradiction of our previous statement that we do not wish to create anarchist social movements, but influence non-ideological mass movements with anarchist principles and practice. Subscribing to the concept of organisational dualism as we do, it is our goal to draw militants with a theoretical or practical affinity for anarchism into our orbit, working together and helping to clarify their understanding of anarchism and to spread the influence of anarchist principles and practices into the mass organisations from which they come. Some of these comrades might end up being members or supporters of the ZACF, others not. What is important is that the ZACF provides a pole of attraction for militants with a theoretical or practical affinity for anarchism, and that we work together, according to the varying levels of our agreement, to make anarchism the leading idea within the mass fighting organisations of the popular classes.

Although, as previously stated, our focus has generally been on social movements recent developments have begun to open up some space for us to work within or alongside the trade unions. For example, through the relationship developed with them through our work in the APF, the General Industries Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA) – an independent general union which works alongside social movements such as the APF – invited us to assist them in training a number of

their shop-stewards in order for them to be able to produce and launch a worker-run trade union newspaper. We have also presented workshops on anarchism to shop-stewards from the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), a COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) affiliate, and were involved on the Solidarity Committee established for the Metal, Electrical and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (MEWUSA) workers who occupied the Mine-Line factory on the West Rand of Johannesburg with the intention of turning it into a worker-run cooperative.

In addition to the above we have comrades involved in two university-based study circles on anarchism, which aim to draw students (be they activists or those with an intellectual interest in anarchism) closer to anarchism and the ZACF and, hopefully, into supporting the class struggle outside of the university as well. Other campus-based activities include supporting the struggles of workers outsourced to private service-provision companies (security, cleaning etc.) and running a week-long anarchist stall at the university's annual Orientation Week.

Other things worth noting are perhaps the rather important role we played in the Coalition Against Xenophobia (CAX) – established in 2008 after the xenophobic pogroms that shook this country, leaving over 60 people dead – which fizzled out after activities culminated in a 24 hour picket outside the infamous Lindela repatriation centre; co-organising a Reclaim June 16th demonstration in Soweto, where we marched along the route used by students in the 1976 Soweto Students Uprising; as well as our ongoing participation in the newly-established Democratic Left Front (DLF) – a national umbrella grouping of social movements, trade unions, civic and church organisations and left political groups – particularly around activities building up to mobilisations around COP17, set to take place in Durban in December.