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The revolutionary struggle and social reform in Ecuador

An interview with a comrade from the Grupo
Anarco-Comunista “15 de Noviembre”

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

October 6, 2008

The following interview was made in July and August 2008 with a member of the “15th November” Anarchist Communist Group, a recently-formed libertarian group in Ecuador, which among other things publishes the magazine “Chasqui Anarquista” with other anarchists, of which two issues have so far come out. In this interview, we tried to find out a little about the origins of the libertarian movement in Ecuador and understand how anarchist communists feel about the social reforms being carried out by Rafael Correa’s government.

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To begin with, comrades, can you tell us about the 15th November Group and how it was formed?

Hi, comrades! The “15th November” Anarchist Communist Group is a specific organization which was set up about two years ago. It came about as a result of a process involving groups

like RxL (*Reincidiendo por la Libertad*), ACL (*Autonomía Cultural Libertaria*), the *Biblioteca Popular de la Casa del Obrero “Ateneo Libertario”*, and from a process of political maturity that went beyond the notion of a synthesis. We have been strongly influenced by the great work carried on by the comrades of the Platform of Russian Anarchists, Georges Fontenis’ Libertarian Communist Manifesto and also Mikhail Bakunin. Our vision was of Revolutionary, Class-Struggle, Materialist and Dialectic Anarchism. But we also believe that it is essential to study the values and practices of our ancestors, as much of this had an explicitly libertarian basis. We seek to bring Anarchism back to the people, who have forgotten it over the past 60 years or more. We involve ourselves among the working-class and on various fronts where we can make a difference, struggle, organize and bring new militants together in some way.

Why did you choose your name?

The name was chosen in honour of all those workers who were killed during the general strike on 15 November 1922 in the city of Guayaquil, due to the rise in the dollar and the drop in cacao prices, on which the country’s economy was based at the time. The strike was called by the FTRE (*Federación de Trabajadores Regional del Ecuador*)¹, an anarcho-syndicalist organization whose origins go back to the early years of the century, with a membership of about 30,000 workers in various sectors.

Our idea is to rescue this struggle from a large sector of the left, that denies or hides its revolutionary, anarchist origin. Also because it was one of the greatest demonstrations in history of what the Ecuadorian working people can do and the best demonstration of anarchist combativeness. And with that great example and the valour of so many workers, to continue this wonderful task, so that their lives will not have been in vain.

Can you tell us a little about anarchism in Ecuador?

¹ Ecuadorian Regional Federation of Workers.

Anarchism in Ecuador has a history much like that of most Latin American countries, where it arrived at the end of the 19th and early 20th century. The ideas mostly arrived together with European immigration to the continent and the seeds were fertilized in the country's ports, though were put into action in an original way, suited to the conditions of our people.

With the triumph of the Liberal Revolution the power of the church in the coastal areas was lessened, something that was not so evident in the mountainous regions, and this was an important factor in the appearance of socialist tendencies in our country. The first signs of a libertarian press were among the railway workers of Jamaican origin at the end of 19th century. In the early 20th century our history really begins. Various groups were founded: *Luz y Acción*², *Verbo y Acción*³, *Ricardo Flores Magón*, the *Centro de Estudios Sociales Libertarios* (linked to the IWA)⁴, and others. The newspapers at the time were "Alba Roja"⁵, "Bandera Roja"⁶, "El Proletario"⁷, "El Hambriento"⁸. And there were trade unions such as the FTRE, the AGA (*Asociación Gremial del Astillero*)⁹, the *Asociación de Cacahueros "Thomas Briones"*¹⁰, etc. After the massacre of 15th November 1922 the movement retreated, a widespread phenomenon throughout the continent as a result of rise of populist governments, the rise of Stalinism as the revolutionary model and the emergence of the fascist-style governments, up until the 1940s.

From then on, there were attempts at labour organization in 1970s and in the '80s it became mostly an artistic and literary wave. But by the '90s, it was another story. Several young people had be-

² Light & Action.

³ Words & Action.

⁴ Centre for Libertarian Social Studies.

⁵ Red Dawn.

⁶ The Red Flag.

⁷ The Proletarian.

⁸ The Hungry.

⁹ Shipyard Trades Association.

¹⁰ Association of Cacao Workers "Thomas Briones".

gun to identify with punk counter-culture, but by the start of the new century they understood that it was necessary to go beyond a type of politics detached from reality and the class problems in the country. That's how our history developed. It's a history that we will go on building, winning the hearts of the people and keeping our distance in no uncertain terms from the dominant structure.

In what way has the movement changed since the fall of Gutiérrez?

Since the last decade of the 20th century, the country has seen increasing diffidence among the people towards neo-liberal policies and the various governments that there have been. This diffidence led to the overthrow of Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, of Jamil Mahuad in 2000 and more recently in 2005 it manifested itself with the removal from power of Lucio Gutiérrez, leader of the Patriotic Society Party (PSP). The discontent was also obvious in the popular opposition to Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in our region, and also to the US presence at Manta Air Base.

The mobilizations against neo-liberalism and its representatives have been led by the indigenous movement, the workers, students and social movements. These sectors have often sought to go beyond the established framework but each time they have fallen into the same trap, that of accepting the crumbs thrown to them. To this should be added the absence of an autonomous, revolutionary political project that could enable the boundaries of protest to be overcome and generate a new way of conceiving society.

Some anarchists, either individually or collectively, have participated in these protests since 2002, but a basic problem with our activity has been the absence of an organization that could allow us to leave spontaneism behind us and also allow us to instigate proposals for change from within the people.

Nevertheless, the fall of Lucio Gutiérrez and the events that occurred at the time have served to enable us to see the necessity of an organization in order to go beyond spontaneism and draw up a strategy, because in the hurly-burly of the demands for the over-

private and State bodies. And one of our most basic weapons in this revolutionary task is to take advantage of this discontent.

Any last points you would like to make?

We'd like to thank comrade José Antonio for the very kind interview. We would also like to extend a warm, fraternal greeting to all those Organizations and militants around the world who work day in day out for this huge task. It is a task that depends on every single one of us if we are to achieve it. Unite, Convince, Win to the side of the people. Because that's where we come from!

One way or another.. we will win!

The hand of friendship to our comrade, the closed fist to the tyrant!

Revive the Class Struggle!

Long life and Revolt!

We must denounce the class character that hides behind this conflict and the demands of the Colombian government.

Do you believe there is some tangible threat on the part of the aggressive Colombian military forces, who are undoubtedly acting at the dictates of the USA?

Uribe's right-wing government is the expression of the imperialist re-composition of South America. This was seen in the plan to put "Plan Colombia" into operation at the start of this decade.

Behind the euphemism of combating drug trafficking, the United States is trying to set up geopolitical control over our lands. This behaviour, together with the growing arms funding and professionalization of the Colombian army, demonstrates the interests and influence of Yankee imperialism over the Colombian government.

The real danger is that the conflict will spread throughout the region, a policy that guides the Colombian government's relations with its neighbours, including Ecuador. There have of course been set-ups, like the cowardly murder of the FARC-EP commander "Raúl Reyes" in this country, or lies like Ecuador being the home of the guerrillas' rearguard.

We must be careful with the distortions that can easily be given to this problem, and at least for the moment prevent any direct intervention in "our America" by the imperialists.

Lastly, could I ask you what chances there are of building a revolutionary, libertarian alternative in Ecuador?

What possibilities there are, depend not only on the conditions for it. It would be ironic to say that, as they are already in place; we live in a class society.

It depends on the conviction and dedication of each member of the Organization in being a part of the class war, in the neighbourhoods, in schools and universities, in the workplace. It is interesting to see that in Ecuador, three consecutive presidents in a row have been swept away by the "Out, all of them!" movement – and not only these three parasites, but also the institutions and both

throw of this corrupt individual, there was no-one to provide guidelines in order to develop a new, horizontal and assembly-based political praxis with direct democracy. There wasn't even any analysis of the fact that the cause for the evils that afflicted – and still afflict – the Ecuadorian people lie in the practices handed down by the State and the exploitation with which Capital keeps us in submission. What we mean is that the people, as an autonomous and revolutionary body, lack any sort of political tool. Slogans such as "Que se vayan todos!"¹¹ were continuing to lose ground to variants like "Que se vayan todos, pero primero el dictador!"¹² or suchlike.

This experience has taught us two lessons:

- a. The need for an organization that can allow us to leave behind the spontaneism that is inherent in and necessary to the people, and
- b. the development of an economic, social and political programme from within the people, that can be applied at times of social crisis, so that we do not see a repetition of the opportunism that fills the void that the popular movement leaves behind itself.

Ecuador is currently in the process of re-writing its Constitution. What do you think about that?

Since the foundation of the republic in 1830, our country has been under a totally anti-popular dominant class. Over all this time there have been an endless stream of constitutions, none of which have reduced the power of the oligarchic bourgeoisie by an inch. On the contrary, they have enabled it to survive and adapt to the new difficulties that the world's economy presents.

The Constitutions drawn up by the Right and the Left have not diminished political power, or worse still, the economic power of

¹¹ "Let's get rid of them all!"

¹² "Let's get rid of them all, but first let's get rid of the dictator!"

the dominant classes. In this sense, the current government which declares itself to be the standard-bearer of 21st-century socialism, is trying in some way to reduce the political power of the powerful class in this country, but when it comes to breaking its economic power, it is doing little or nothing.

Let us be clear that the socialism referred to above is only camouflaged capitalist reformism of a type signalled over a hundred years ago by the Russian revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin, when he said:

“There is an infallible sign by which workers can recognize a phoney socialist, a bourgeois socialist; when talking to them about revolution or social transformation, if he says that the political must precede the social and economic transformation; if he denies that both must be made at the same time, or maintains that the political revolution must in a certain way be separate from a full, immediate and direct social liquidation, then the workers must turn their backs on him: because he who is speaking is either an idiot or a hypocritical exploiter.”

The constitutional process that the country is going through has been the product of some channelling of the popular mobilizations. We are aware that this is not the solution to the needs that the people aspire to solve, and in this sense the new “Magna Charta”, like any constitution, will be nothing special as it will not make significant improvements to the level of poverty and widespread exclusion.

Our position goes beyond the current situation and the traps that the current polarization could lead us into. And it in this sense that we are continuing to propagandize the people becoming organized and conscious, through our daily militant work, since we are sure that only this will allow us to work towards those fundamental changes that Ecuadorian society is incessantly searching for.

Some people are enthusiastic about the idea of a pluri-national State... Do you believe that these illusions have any basis?

In some indigenous sectors those who defend the need for a Pluri-National State are fond of the notion that the creation of such an institution will enable a high level of social participation, demonstrating at the same time that the State is open to the inclusion of sectors that historically have been dominated.

These notions are false insofar as participation cannot be measured by the levels of access to political power and its institutions, as many among the Indigenous leadership think.

On the other hand, the process of inclusion that is expected by the spheres of power and has been one of the demands of the indigenous, is a limited one since all debate and political practice revolves around acceptance of the ethnic aspects of the demand for pluri-nationality without any thought for the political and economic aspects. Consequently, we have the Ecuadorian State trying to proclaim itself pluri-national without losing its hierarchy, a fact which has been noticed by some indigenous sectors.

What it has been impossible to make people aware of it that one of the premises of the State is its centrality at all levels. Given what plurinationality implies, proclaiming a pluri-national State would mean the destruction of one of the basic principles of the State — centralism.

Can you tell us how you, as libertarians, saw the crisis with Colombia?

The constant border violations by the Colombian army demonstrate the Uribe's plans to expand the conflict to our region, due to the inability of these forces to defeat the Colombian guerrillas militarily.

We closely watch these and other practices that try to involve the Ecuadorian people in the civil war that has been causing so much bloodshed for our Colombian brothers for over forty years.