

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Karl Klien
Contemporary Platformism
A Critical Study
2010

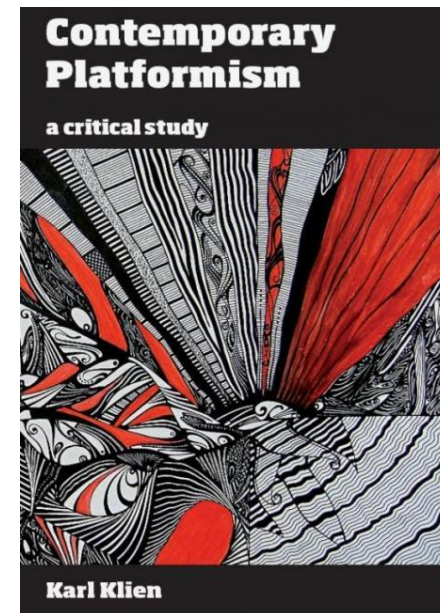
Retrieved on 10th December 2021 from libcom.org
A discussion document published by the Anarchist Federation in Sheffield. It analyses Platformism as both a valuable tradition within anarchist communism, along with looking critically at the practice of contemporary Platformist groups.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Contemporary Platformism

A Critical Study

Karl Klien



2010

Goldman, E. (1923) *My Disillusionment in Russia*. Dover Publications: New York, 2003.

Gordon, U. (2008). *Anarchy Alive! Anti-authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory*. Pluto Press: London.

Heath, N. (1989) Platform: Historical Introduction. [online] (Updated 7th April 2010) Available at: www.nestormakhno.info (Accessed 19th October 2010)

Heath, N. (1996) “Anarchist Communism in Britain, 1870–1991”, *Organise!* #42. Anarchist Communist Editions.

Heath, N. (2006) “Looking Back and Forward” Black Flag.

Malatesta, E. (1927) *A Project of Anarchist Organisation*. [online] (Updated 21st April 2010) Available at: anarchistplatform.wordpress.com [Accessed 19th October 2010]

North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (2002) *The Question of Revolutionary Organisation: A NEFAC Position Paper*. [online] (Updated 27th December 2002) Available at: nefac.net [Accessed 19th October 2010]

North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (2003) *Anarchism and the Platformist Tradition*. [online] (Updated 30th July 2003) Available at: nefac.net [Accessed 19th October 2010]

Thomas (2010) *Anarchist Accountability* [online] (Updated 16th March 2010) Available at: miamiautonomyandsolidarity.wordpress.com [Accessed 19th October 2010]

Voline, Sobol, Fleshin, Steimer, Roman and Ervantian (1927) “‘Reply’ by several Russian Anarchists to the ‘Platform’” Available in: Maximoff, G.P. (1930) *Constructive Anarchism – The Debate on the Platform*. Monty Miller Press: Sydney, 1988.

Wildcat (date unknown) “Good Old-Fashioned Trade Unionism”, Wildcat #16. Retrieved March 15th, 2010 from libcom.org

Contents

Introduction	5
Contemporary Platformism: Its basis and its aims	7
Contemporary Platformism: Criticisms	22
Anti-conclusion	32
References	33

our core libertarian communist principles for successful praxis. I guess writing this paper was an effort to find that middle-ground, to tease out the useful and interesting ideas from both sides of the Platformist/anti-Platformist divide. Along with this, it was also important, I believe, to explore the notion that we can learn something more valuable about our own traditions by looking to the values of others. That such a process leads to a re-affirming, modification or even outright rejection of our own ideals. This, I believe, is a very healthy activity for a movement that intends to stay true to its revolutionary mission. In this respect, and I hope that this sentiment has also been expressed through my analysis, it is the values and the ideas that are the most important things to me, not the labels that come attached to them.

References

- Arshinov, P. (1927) Reply to Anarchism's Confusionists: A Response to the 'Reply to the Platform' by Several Russian Anarchists. [online] (Updated 7th April 2010) Available at: www.nestormakhno.info (Accessed 19th October 2010)
- Aufheben (2001) Behind the 21st Century Intifada. [online] (Updated 5th January 2006) Available at: libcom.org (Accessed 19th October 2010)
- Dielo Truda (1926) Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft) [online] (Updated 20th April 2010) Available at: anarchistplatform.wordpress.com (Accessed 19th October 2010)
- Doyle, K. (1991) What Went Wrong with the AWG? [online] (Updated date unknown) Available at: flag.blackened.net (Accessed 19th October 2010)
- Franks, B. (2006) Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British anarchisms. AK Press and Dark Star: Edinburgh

Likewise, internal debates and discussions that aim to build tactical and theoretical unity should be conducted via collective deliberation. For this communication to occur requires efforts towards understanding and trust in other members and attempts to overcome misunderstandings and disagreements should they occur. There is no real “end-game” to this process. In fact, an organisation that does have such a static conception of its own identity is ultimately a stagnant one also. Plurality, difference and disagreement are ultimately features of all human life; as libertarian communists, as those who argue in favour of the best capacities of the human character we should be embracing this also.

Anti-conclusion

I always felt that there was something very un-libertarian about concluding arguments. As the Anarchist Federation state’s in our ‘Introduction to Anarchist Communism’, when it comes to anarchist communism, there is no real conclusion, it’s a necessarily open-ended practice. Accordingly, the arguments I have made here should not be taken to be definitive or final in any sense. Rather, as I stated at the beginning, they are intended to be part of a wider process, and I believe a great tradition within the anarchist movement also, of exercising self-criticism of the way we organise. I will “conclude” this paper, therefore, by instead looking to the reasons as to why I believe these debates are important.

I am a Platformist. I do, however, feel completely unrepresented by many of the organisations that claim to be acting in the spirit of the Organisational Platform. While I feel that many tenets of Platformism – particularly building tactical and theoretical unity and the centrality of class struggle – are the remedy to the localised, short-term and ghettoised activity of large portions of the anarchist movement today, I do also, however, feel a somewhat uncomfortable Platformist as one who greatly values the importance of

Introduction

The following should be considered a discussion document and not the collective position of either the Sheffield group or the national federation as a whole. The ideas presented here have been developed through much formal and informal internal debate and discussion within the federation. It is intended as a contribution to a wider debate concerning the current composition of the international anarchist movement. Many thanks to all those who assisted in its development.

There has perhaps never been such a controversial contribution to the theory and practice of the anarchist movement than those ideas forwarded by the Dielo Truda (“Workers’ Cause”) group in the ‘Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)’. The document has been both praised as a “valuable historical reference” for class-struggle anarchists seeking “greater effectiveness and a way out of political isolation, stagnation and confusion” (Heath, 1989), while also been denounced outright as an attempt to “Bolshevise” anarchism (Voline et al., 1927). Yet “Platformism”, as contemporary adherence to the principles of the Platform is generally referred to, continues to be a vibrant tradition within the global anarchist movement. The Anarkismo Statement, for example, which is widely considered to be the most contemporary expression of Platformist principles, has signatories spanning the globe. Especificismo, an organisational programme emerging out of Latin American anarchism, although not directly linked to the Platform, also shares many of the priorities of Platformist groups -theoretical and tactical unity, collective responsibility and federalism – and has gained greater influence in recent years within the global anarchist community. Platformism also continues to be a divisive issue for our movement. Anarchists will typically position themselves on either side of the divide, as against or in favour of the positions outlined by the Platform. Since its publication there has been a great deal of suspicion and sectarianism between the two parties. Platformists will be

denounced as “authoritarian” or “Leninist”, while Platformists will routinely accuse other anarchists of being “ineffective” or “disorganised”. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to cut across this divide and to reconcile these two images of Platformism. To, at the same time as appraising the theory and practice of contemporary Platformist groups, emphasise that which should be considered and valuable and useful within the perspectives of Platformism to all social anarchists. This, I hope, will be part of a broader, more constructive dialogue within our movement and instigate some open and honest appraisal of our own values regardless of the labels that we may attach to ourselves.

Notes on this enquiry: Unfortunately this paper is restricted to documents that exist in, or have been translated into, the English language only. I realise that some of the groups I will be discussing do not speak English as a first language and this may restrict my understanding of them. I have, given the materials available to me, endeavoured to represent them in the most accurate way possible. I welcome criticism and additional sources on any of these points. My analysis will also largely be framed by the British experience and the British and Irish anarchist movement, given that this is the context in which I am politically active as a member of the Anarchist Federation. The discussion will also be largely limited to contemporary Platformist groups only. This decision was made due to obvious limitations on space and time in terms of the scale of this work but also on the basis that there are already well researched histories of the Platform and Platformist groups available¹.

¹ Skirda, A. (2001) *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organisation from Proudhon to May 1968*. AK Press: Edinburgh; Maximoff, G.P. (1930) *Constructive Anarchism – The Debate on the Platform*. Monty Miller Press: Sydney, 1988; *Anarchism and the Platformist Tradition: An Archive of Writings on the Platformist Tradition Within Anarchism* – anarchistplatform.wordpress.com/

fusions of the AWG aside, I believe there may be some weight to the claim that the Platformist conception of “collective responsibility” is perhaps too thin. That an organisation ought to be as supportive and enabling as it is reliant on the acceptance of tasks and duties by the membership. Indeed that a concern for the support and well-being towards other members ought to form a part of this collective responsibility. Again, this is not something particularly exclusive to Platformism and good analysis on comradely behaviour is lacking in much anarchist communist literature.

Interestingly, it is Insurrectionalist authors who have tended to provide the most revealing writings on the subject of comradely behaviour. This may be due to the fact that Insurrectionalism, as a theory of praxis, depends almost entirely on informal, fraternal links between comrades in struggle. Links that should be present but that we also perhaps take for granted inside of a formal, membership organisation. As such, Insurrectionalists tend to have a much better understanding of what these informal relationships should practically entail. The bond that brings us together here, it is argued, is the process of building affinity. Affinity should not be confused with the idea of sentiment, although these things can co-exist as well. There could be comrades, for example, with whom we consider having affinity but whom we do not find sympathetic and vice versa. Rather, to have affinity with a comrade means to know them and to aim to deepen one’s knowledge of them. As the knowledge grows, the affinity can increase to the point of making an action together possible. Most importantly, this is understood to be an infinite process, a permanent negotiation between each other’s values and understanding of the circumstances present. This process can help cement more formal channels of organisational cohesion. If there are, for example, tasks which need doing in the organisation that may be tedious or boring (but are, nonetheless, useful) it is often not, in reality, the abstract relationship one has to the organisational collective that creates a sense of responsibility but a sense of obligation based on affinity with one’s comrades.

stitutions should not mean the adoption of representationalist practice.

Anarchist organisations will, and should, issue manifestos, political statements, theoretical analysis etc. However, these should also be done with the recognition of the real limitations, from a libertarian perspective, of this medium for spreading our ideas. The real struggle, the struggle that we should be engaging with, is not happening in the world of political ideas alone but amongst our friends, our families, in our workplaces and in our communities. To not just gain “support” for a political philosophy or a specific programme but to spread an idea and method that is ultimately self-empowering. It’s about communicating the ideas of direct action and self-organisation so it is possible for thousands, maybe even millions, of manifestos to emerge from popular, grassroots bodies. It’s also about acknowledging that the class-as-a-whole has as much to tell revolutionaries, perhaps even more, as we do it. Accordingly, our analysis should always be part of a dialogue – one that both speaks to and reflects the wider struggle within our class. The point is that anarchist organisation should be about both substance and form – a factor that Makhno and the Dielo Truda Group, appropriately, recognised by stressing the importance of both tactical and theoretical unity.

And finally, a note on camaraderie. For all the emphasis that Platformists have historically placed on building unity and common action, Platformists organisations have had an unfortunate habit of being either relatively small, in relation to the rest of the anarchist movement or periodically, and quite spectacularly, falling apart. There is no catch-all answer to the reasons behind this and obviously the internal culture of specific groups and the individuals within them will have their part to play. Doyle’s (1991) (of the WSM) account of the AWG’s disastrous adoption of the ‘Cadre Organisation Document’, which effectively formalised a privileged stratum of theoreticians and knowledge specialists within the organisation, is a particularly extreme illustration of this. The con-

Contemporary Platformism: Its basis and its aims

To understand contemporary Platformism it is important to first understand the context in which those ideas have developed as an independent tradition within the anarchist movement. Following counter-revolution in Russian in the wake of the October revolution, two strains of thought emerged from Russian and Ukrainian exiles on the perceived failures of the anarchist movement in those countries. For the Dielo Truda group it was the lack of organisational principles that had led to the general weakness and lack of influence of anarchist ideas. The seminal contribution of the Platform document was, therefore, to stress the importance of tactical and theoretical unity and a shared understanding of theory and goals across any future anarchist organisation. The Platform also argued for the primacy of class-struggle anarchism, indeed, that anarchism as a political philosophy owed its origins in the struggle of working people. Platformists, consequently, argue that anything other than this is a recipe for disunity and organisational paralysis as different tendencies struggle to reconcile their own values into the common practice of the organisation.

These ideas were in opposition to those ideas emerging from another group of Russian exiles around Voline and those of the “synthesist” position. For Voline and his comrades, the Dielo Truda group over-stated the influence of organisation in the failures of the anarchists and attributed the problems more to the difficulty of propagating anarchist ideas within the population and to Bolshevik-led, state repression (although they also did acknowledge a lack of theoretical coherence within the Russian movement at the time). They rejected the notion that anarchist communism was the only valid expression of anarchism and were keen to emphasise the holistic character of the philosophy as represented in its different traditions – communism, syndicalism,

mutualism, individualism etc. Voline, accordingly, advocated the development of synthesist federations which aimed to unite all self-identifying anarchists – individualist, syndicalist, mutualist, collectivist, religious etc. – under one banner on the basis of their shared opposition to the state and their desire for human freedom. The central idea was that unity and non-sectarian co-operation were the best means to strengthen the existing anarchist movement. Although it should also be noted that many synthesist groups were much more limited in scope, for example, advocating the unity of all “social” anarchists (-syndicalist, -communist, -collectivist), potentially providing greater common ground and space for co-operation than there would be with those activists simply opposed to the state.

Disputes over who, Voline and the syntheists or Makhno and the Dielo Truda Group, had taken the greater lesson from the Bolshevik experience were, and continue to be, a source of bitter division for anarchists in both continental Europe and the Americas over the greater part of the last Century. In this respect both Platformism and Synthesism are clearly identifiable and well-established traditions within these respective movements. In Britain, however, the situation has been slightly different. Synthesism, for example, is a school of anarchist thought that has traditionally developed within the context of great factional disputes within strong, established anarchist movements. The early contributions of the Cuban-born anarchists Fernando Tarrida del Mármol and Ricardo Mella, of *anarquismo sin adjetivos* (an “anarchism without adjectives”) to the Spanish anarchist movement were meant to repair the divide between the warring factions of collectivist and communist anarchists. Likewise, Malatesta would advocate a “wait and see” attitude to questions on post-revolutionary economic organisation as a means of advocating greater tolerance between the various strands of social anarchism he encountered throughout his lifetime. Voltairine de Cleyre would also emphasise post-revolutionary experimentation

National liberation and trade unionism, for example, derive from positions of representation, ideologies that attempt to manage the condition of the working class. It has been extensively documented how common culprits for Leftist support, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (see, for example, Aufheben, 2001) and the early Trade Unions (see, Wildcat) for example, were not only derived from the political machinations of the bourgeoisie but had working class defeat as their goal from the offset. These movements, and the ideas emerging from them, tell us little about neither the experience of class struggle nor our real potentialities as a class – not for greater workers “rights”, or independent nationhood, or a greater slice of the pie but for the creation of a free, international communist society. If sections of the class invested in these movements appear militant it is only a testament to the extent that these structures have been successful in co-opting genuine class struggle. All the more imperative, therefore, that those anarchists within them push a clear and unwavering internationalist, communist analysis.

There has often been an undue emphasis in Platformist literature on the final two-pages of the Platform (the Organisational Section) in a document that deals extensively with the principles of anarchist communism (what the Anarchist Workers Association appropriately called the “missing bits”). Effective anarchist praxis must be based on sound libertarian communist principles and this, in turn, has to arise from a self-educating and participatory process within the organisation itself (one that is simultaneously engaged with the class). Playing fast and loose with theoretical principles is a recipe for disaster. In the very worst cases it has led to the kind of analysis put forward by groups such as Liberty and Solidarity which have removed politics from the equation completely, looking to managerial theory (of all things!) as a guide to a more “effective” organisational praxis, completely ignoring the highly alienating capitalist practice that such theory embodies (and undoubtedly perpetuates). Engagement with representationalist in-

rience and clarified this very issue – the Dutch and German Left. Their analysis, emerging out of the practical experience of mass revolutionary engagement with the trade unions, is invaluable to any communist today. Such an unequivocal perspective, as if the the experience of the TUC in Britain was not enough, should put an end to all doubts concerning the mediating, and ultimately bourgeois, role of trade unions and the tasks of revolutionaries within them.

Undoubtedly related to this issue is the question of where revolutionary strategy, and from this ideological leadership, is being formulated. Platformist methods have, above all, to be framed by the experience of class struggle. An “ideological leadership” isolated from working class resistance will quickly degenerate into representationalism – an assumed, or de facto, position of leadership over the class. Theoretical debate and development must be rooted in the experience of the class, developing out of the actual needs and issues emerging from struggle. There is, of course, a responsibility to look beyond these struggles also, as well as a need to combat reformism, Leninism and the multitude of sins inflicted upon any workers movement. However, this should come in the form, not of dictat, but of a continuing and evolving dialogue existing between revolutionaries rooted in the class and the class as a whole. Most importantly, it should be acknowledged that, although combating Leftist and authoritarian ideas is important, the “war of ideas” with the Left should not supplant the class war between worker and boss. To shift the organisations focus too far in the direction of “ideological leadership”, is to move closer to the standard operating practice of the various Trotskyist grouplets. Aping them will only replicate their over-concentration on the current composition of the Left and neglect of the shop-floor. In practical terms, and over the long-term, as Doyle (1991) argues, such a singular focus will lead to an eventual, “drift away from a day-to-day understanding of where real class politics are at”.

with different forms of social organisation as a means of finding common ground between groups of individualist and communist anarchists in North America. Britain has, however, never really enjoyed a comparatively large or diverse anarchist movement. The individualist philosophy of Max Stirner, in particular, while gaining great influence in the early French, Spanish and German anarchist movements, was never as widely read or as influential in Britain, aside from in the writings of a few noteworthy artists and intellectuals². Similarly, despite a number of native socialist movements sharing similar goals to that of the anarchist traditions of collectivism and mutualism neither really enjoyed a sustained influence as a philosophy in its own right. Early proponents of anarchism in Britain – Charles Mowbray, Fred Charles, Guy Aldred – emerged largely out of the communist movement and were, therefore, largely drawn towards anarchist communism or anarcho-syndicalism as the best organisational expression of anarchist ideals. Where British groups have incorporated anarchists from a variety of traditions it was largely the result of geographical isolation as opposed to any formal ideological commitment³.

The key assertion of the Platform, therefore – that anarchism is a political philosophy foremost associated with the struggles of working people for free communism – has been a strong and last-

² The notable exception is a persistent, and particularly radical, interpretation of Stirnerite thought developed by anarchists in Glasgow who took Stirner’s “Union of Egoists” literally as the basis for their syndicalist and communist organising from the 1940s onwards.

³ The Anarchist Federation of Britain (1963–72), could technically be described as a structurally “synthesist” grouping, bringing together “members” (it had no formal membership list) from a variety of anarchist traditions. This, however, was more by virtue of its lack of commitment to any organisational principles as opposed to any theoretical commitment to synthesism. Christie in his *Edward Heath Made Me Angry* remarks that the Anarchist Federation of Britain “wasn’t really a federation at all, more an ad hoc body convened for a particular purpose then disbanded again”.

ing tradition within the organised British anarchist movement. Accordingly, in the British context, Platformism has not been foremost a critique of synthesism or other economic theories of post-revolutionary organisation (as it has been in Europe and in the Americas), but a reference point for the need for greater coherence and tactical unity to an already fairly ideologically coherent social anarchist movement. We can see this, for example, in Heath's (1996) account of the formation of Britain's first Platformist group – the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists (ORA);

ORA's objections to the traditional anarchist movement then, were more on the level of organisation than of theory. Their advocacy of collective responsibility, the use of a Chair and voting to take decisions at meetings, formal membership and a paper under the control of its "writers, sellers and readers" (Heath, 1996)

Likewise where oppositional currents have existed it has not been on points of principle, i.e. for non-sectarianism or anarchist unity, but over tactics, for example, local over national organisation or, more recently, the influence of insurrectionalist ideas. The question, therefore, has been largely one of tactics and organisation than theoretical commitment⁴. Accordingly, the rest of this enquiry will largely focus on the "Organisational Section" of the Platform, also the most commonly cited section, and the organisational principles of tactical and theoretical unity, collective responsibility and ideological leadership. While debates over Synthesism and non-sectarian practice are important, this is not an issue of particular relevance to the experience of the majority of British an-

⁴ Summarised by Doyle (1991) as the following;

- (1) A general lack of organisation in the anarchist movement.
- (2) Its poor quality where it does exist.
- (3) Confusion over the role of the anarchist organisation.

prioritisation when it comes to resources is a valuable exercise for any organisation. The drive for efficiency and expediency is, however, a double-edged sword. While there may be better ways of allocating one's resources there are, to put it simply, no short-cuts when it comes to revolutionary change. The Platform itself, despite having been written following a great period of revolutionary defeat (the Bolshevik consolidation of power in Russia and the defeat and dissolution of the Makhnovtchina in the Ukraine) is surprisingly optimistic, and as a result perhaps overly naive, in its recommendations for revolutionary activity. Becoming the "pioneer and theoretical mentor" of the trade unions, as the Platform advocates, was a drastically different task in revolutionary Ukraine or Russia, even in France in the 1920s, than it is in Britain in 2010. As a result, the type of expediency and efficiency that can be expected from revolutionary organisations now, especially in Britain where the working class has been ravaged from almost thirty years of Neo-Liberal economic policy, has changed.

It is tempting, therefore, but ultimately misguided, to be drawn to the lingering expressions of working class militancy, or maybe just the collective organisation of the working class full stop, that exist in the trade union movement or perhaps in the struggle of nationalities in search for real, meaningful influence. Unfortunately this has indeed been the practice of many, old and contemporary, Platformist groups. Although Platformists have successfully plugged the "gaps" in the original document when it comes to gender and race, they have largely failed to deal with its weaknesses and ambiguities when it comes to the trade unions. Alternative interpretations of "the 'anarchization' of the trade union movement", as is recommended in the original Platform, can be made; Whether that means arguing for participation or simply agitation within, transformation of the union structure or breaking away from the trade unions altogether. In this regard, it is unfortunate that Platformists have largely failed to engage with the other important tradition emerging out of the Bolshevik expe-

the vigilance of struggling workers as much as it does the correct position of revolutionaries (if, indeed, it is even possible to separate these two categories). There are simply no easy answers here. However, it would also be equally fair to say that the common perception of Platformism as a “Bolshevised” anarchist practice has, unfortunately, been bolstered by the fact that a disproportionate number of these groups have degenerated into representationalist and counter-revolutionary theory and activity. There are numerous examples to support this from the Anarchist Worker Group’s support for the Iraqi state during the first Gulf War, to Alternative Libertaire’s (France) statement in favour of Kosovan nationalism and United Nations military intervention, to even the highly manipulative internal practices of the French Platformists in vying for influential positions within their national Anarchist Federation. So, why Platformism? Why has this creep into Leftism been persistently the case with these groups?

As I have tried to make clear in the first section, I do not believe there is any validity to the claim that Platformism is an attempt to “Bolshevise” anarchism. I do believe, however, that there are a number of aspects of Platformist praxis that can, but don’t necessarily have to, lend themselves to representationalism and Leftism. However, that is also not to say that these are problems exclusive to Platformism but that all revolutionary organisations are potentially vulnerable in some way to these tendencies; all the more important, then, to have a clear-sight of one’s weaknesses to build upon one’s strengths.

One aspect of contemporary Platformist strategy that I have only lightly touched upon so far is the emphasis that is often placed on the need for “strategic thinking”. That is, it is assumed that when the organisation is attempting to form tactical unity on the best course of action, it will aim to take full account of its resources and aim to apply them most effectively. There are a number of potential problems leading from this proposition. First off, it is probably important to make clear that a stress on capabilities and

archists (having unlikely ever encountered a collectivist/individualist/mutualist anarchist).

It is all the more important then, in order to come to a true understanding of the existing Platformist tradition to also avoid the often quite crude, but quite frequent, divisions presented in many contemporary accounts of the British anarchist movement. Depending on the authors’ sympathies, all non-Platformist strains of anarchism will be presented as inherently disorganised and/or a failing to appreciate the necessity of organisational coherence and unity. Or Platformism will be presented as a rigidly enforced revolutionary doctrine and Platformists as needlessly preoccupied with questions of organisational form⁵. Both positions are not only over-simplifications but obvious misrepresentations. The picture of the “Bolshevised” Platformists on one hand and the disorganised “small-a anarchists” on the other in the end does justice to neither party. All anarchists will, to some degree, address the important issue of revolutionary organisation. Similarly, all strains of anarchism, even insurrectional ones, acknowledge the benefits and necessity of some principled unity in practice. To argue that the Platform stands alone on this point is to in fact sell it far short of its true value as a guide for organisational praxis. What Platformists do argue for, and what makes the tradition unique, is the necessity of a certain method of reaching this organisational coherence — namely the process of theoretical and tactical unity. That is, of course, also not to acknowledge how contentious this particular idea has been.

Franks (2006) in his history of the contemporary British anarchist movement disparagingly compares theoretical and tactical

⁵ See, for example, Graebar’s description of the US anarchist movement as split between,

“a minority tendency of ‘sectarian’ or ‘capital-A anarchist groups,’” which have developed, dogmatic, political programs, and “a majority tendency of ‘small-a anarchists’...who ‘are the real locus of historical dynamism right now’” and who are much looser programmatically. (quoted in Gordon, 2008: 23–4)

unity with Leninism arguing that it leads to “centralisation”, a “paternalistic attitude” and, ultimately, the “formation of revolutionary cadre”⁶. This is not a particularly new criticism, the process has also often been characterised as a desire for “mono-think”, a point that Malatesta first touches on in his exchange with Makhno;

the authors of the Platform say that it is the ‘Union’ that wills and disposes. But when mention is made of the will of the Union, does this perhaps mean the will of all its members? In that case, for the Union to be able to operate it would be necessary for everyone, always and on every subject, to have the same opinion. (Malatesta, 1927)

Clarity on this issue is not aided by the fact that the Organisational Section of the Platform, the bit which deals with theoretical and tactical unity, is quite short and not particularly detailed in its exposition of these key ideas; it was, after all, originally only intended as a discussion document. Contemporary groups, however, have been pretty unequivocal on this issue. The North American-based North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC), for example, state that;

⁶ He also states,

The Platform’s other shared characteristics with Leninism are a paternalistic attitude towards subjugated groups, which designates a universal vanguard, and the repressive character of this representative body, the centralised Anarchist union, which is to lead the social revolution. (Franks, 2006: 220)

Although it should also be noted that Franks’ quite hostile reading is likely to also be strongly influenced by the history of the “Anarchist Workers Group” (AWG) and their understanding of the Platform. The AWG was a small Platformist group that existed in Britain from 1988 to 1992, it led a controversial existence and eventually dissolved when a large proportion of its membership joined Trotskyist organisations. Franks acknowledges the criticisms the A(C)F levelled at the AWG at the time but (erroneously) assumes this to be a break with Platformism in favour of George Fontenis’ ‘Manifesto of Libertarian Communism’ (p.224).

The rationale runs close to the following; that given the frequent impossibility of organising an (anti)political alternative to, for example, an election or a union it makes more sense to critically intervene in these processes and push individuals towards anarchist ideas. The fact that a great number of people will already be invested in these institutions of capitalist democracy means it makes more sense to opt for engagement than elect to exclude oneself from them completely. Contemporary Platformists have commonly advocated this approach, especially given the emphasis in the original document on pushing ideological leadership within popular sections of the worker and peasant movement. A controversial, but obvious, contemporary example of this would be the Worker’s Solidarity Movement (WSM) campaign for a “No” vote in the Irish national referendum on the Lisbon treaty.

Suspending, for the moment, any judgement on what kind of “ideological leadership” a “No” vote in a national referendum represents, the justification behind this strategy — of the need for popular, political engagement — is in itself not completely out-of-touch with many other examples of anarchist practice outside of the Platformist tradition. Malatesta, for example, would argue along very similar lines in favour of anarchist participation in the reformist unions over building specifically (anti)political, anarchist ones. Similarly Aldred argued in favour of taking a platform during elections, but refusing to take office, as a vehicle to better spread libertarian ideals. There is nothing distinctly Platformist about this position. The success of past anarchist organisations has always depended on a commitment to a diversity of tactics. Moreover, the question as to whether an individual or a group begins the creep into representationalism and Leftism should not be judged by the use of these methods alone. Such questions are related to far deeper issues concerning a complex interplay of the content, form and level of social struggle; issues that cannot possibly be de-contextualised or so easily formed into clear-cut points of principle. The success of revolutionary struggle can depend as much upon

the authoritarian Left who will downplay or deny the constructive capacities of working class communities. Leftist groups attempt to appropriate this constructive potential by assuming the power to represent others, judging themselves to have abilities that “their” constituencies are supposed to lack. This is justified by varying means, for example, having a privileged, “scientific” understanding of objective forces, the “correct” formula for revolutionary struggle or even just a willingness “to go further” than the “docile” masses. Representatives, most importantly, cannot be social revolutionaries. Representationalism necessarily depends on a passive and institutionalised social mass that the representative can reflect (and hope to mediate in any ensuing conflicts). It denies the constructive part the working class has to play in forming its own future and as such is antithetical to self-organisation and the practice of social revolution.

Both representationalism and the (anti)political have been a constant concern for libertarians when debating the issue of revolutionary organisation and it is between these two poles that we often see political organisations oscillate – between revolutionary and reformist methods and goals. (Anti)political action is obviously the best embodiment of anarchist values, but holding oneself to all but the purest expression of “prefigurative” ideals clearly leads to very little in terms of available practical action that can be taken. Truly (anti)political actions only tend to develop at high-points of social struggle, in the meantime they will often be small and/or isolated from the condition of the majority of people, e.g. small communal experiments, minority groups of revolutionaries. This is while there is still a pressing need for propaganda and activism outside of these periods of social upheaval. Revolutionary upsurges owe as much of their origin to the diligent and long-standing work of revolutionaries as they do to periodic crises. This does imply that a degree of pragmatism, when it comes to decisions over engagement at least, is required.

Theoretical Unity meant simply that if you don’t agree with someone, don’t be in a political group with them! This doesn’t mean that everyone has to agree all the time (they won’t) but there does need to be a certain amount of ideological unity. Everyone being ‘anarchists’ or ‘libertarian’ isn’t enough. (NEFAC, 2003)

Moreover they also explicitly reject a “majoritarian” approach to the development of the theory and tactics of the organisation. A commitment which is designed to encourage criticism of established positions and, subsequently, avoid a stagnant and conservative political culture. In other words, they argue that dissident and minority positions are to be considered to be as valuable as, and not necessarily in conflict with, the overarching aims of an organisation that strives for unity;

Anarchists are fully aware that the presence of a minority and a majority does not mean at all that the majority is inherently right. That’s why any anarchist organization needs to have mechanisms that enable a minority, while still bound by the decisions taken by the organization, to defend it’s point of view inside the organization, even if it was beaten at a conference or in the federation council. In any case, an anarchist organization must be an environment where sectarianism is discouraged and dialogue promoted, and where an atmosphere of camaraderie reigns. (NEFAC, 2002)

In other words, a Platformist organisation needs to find an appropriate balance between both respecting the collective decision of the majority and the right to dissent of the minority.

Accusations of theoretical and tactical unity as “mono-think” generally derive from an understanding of theoretical and tactical unity as static, as a goal to be achieved and not, as should be the

case with healthy Platformist groups, a continuing process during the course of activity. It is also, as NEFAC argue, not necessary to reach unanimous agreement on every single issue. Rather the aim should be to always aim for common understanding and interpretation on those issues most central to organisational praxis. This has to happen within the context of a dialogue existing between all members on both the most valuable ideas that each holds and on the best common course of action for the future. This process should be participative and dissent actively encouraged as both a means to achieve better consensus and as a valuable personal capacity in itself. Even agreed positions should be open to renewed debate and re-evaluation. An organisation that attempts to set all of its analysis in stone is ultimately inflexible, out-of-touch and highly vulnerable to the entrenchment of hierarchies of experience.

Moreover, formal and established channels of decision-making should not be perceived as bureaucratic or lacking dynamism. They are actually a powerful tool to undermine the kind of informal hierarchies that frequently crop up in other activist groups where there aren't such clear-cut channels of accountability and communication. As Thomas (2010) argues;

Societal influences, from oppressive socialisation such as racism and sexism, to personality differences such as being shy or being talkative are likely to create informal hierarchies that reintroduce domination and hierarchy within the group if clear, explicit, collectively- established democratic practices are not established and followed. (Thomas, 2010)

Platformists encourage, or at least should encourage, deep and critical re-appraisal of the actions that their organisations take. An organisation should exist to enable those within it to carry out activity, share ideas and experience and inspire confidence within each member

out of the contemporary, global justice movement. These methods are also considered to be consistent with what is termed the anarchist “prefigurative ethic”, described by Goldman in the following terms;

All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical. (Goldman, 1923: 260)

The insistence on such an inseparability of ends and means, a “prefigurative” practice, is a key and defining characteristic of anarchist political thought and practice.

By representationalism, I refer to the many facets of capitalist democracy that bar active participation in the processes that govern our lives and reinforce social hierarchy. In capitalism this process is multi-faceted and can be anything from the election of representatives who will make decisions for us, to the strict social control of the prison and criminal justice system right through to the manipulation of the very language and information we use to interpret our social reality. It is experienced through our condition of alienation in capitalist society. It aims to foster in the social mass a psychological state that continually reinforces the dividing lines between the “governors” and the “governed”, “rulers” and “ruled”, “producer” and “consumer”, even “author” and “reader”. It serves to obscure the fundamentally communal and holistic qualities of human community and ensure that the working class is reduced to looking everywhere but to itself and its own capabilities for alleviation of our social condition. Representationalism has, unfortunately, its counterparts in “revolutionary” practice. The concern of anarchists has traditionally been with the vanguardist practice of

Marxism. They embrace an open-ended, libertarian practice that places far less importance on “heroic figures” and “great texts” and more on the lessons derived and developed from practical struggle. While it is always important to look back at historic debates and what they can tell us about our current practice it also important to acknowledge the “living” qualities of any anarchist tradition. Accordingly Platformism, like all anarchist traditions, will undoubtedly richen and shape itself anew as it is confronted with new struggles and new possibilities over the coming decades. This is not, however, to go so far as to say that the contemporary Platformist movement is in any way undeserving of criticism. There have been persistent problems and controversies surrounding this tradition that it would be equally remiss to ignore.

Contemporary Platformism: Criticisms

There has been, and continues to be, a tension within many contemporary Platformist groups between what I would call an (anti)political and a representationalist model of activity. I believe there are a number of potential causes for this, but before delving into this further it may be necessary to clarify what these terms mean.

By (anti)political, I mean practices that subvert, and eventually render unnecessary, the hierarchical and authoritarian means of communication and social organisation existing in statist, capitalist, patriarchal, racist and hetero-normative society. (Anti)political activity will, therefore, be typically constructed via direct, face-to-face communication, participatory decision-making structures and, of course, the organisation of tasks without the need for hierarchy. Expressions of (anti)political behaviour have been a continuing inspiration for the libertarian communist tradition from the soviets and factory councils of Russia, through the anarcho-syndicalist unions of Spain to the grassroots movements emerging

The importance of these principles is also underlined by the context (the British anarchist movement) in which they are being encouraged, where there is a general absence of sustained, critical reflection within the movement as a whole. Many anarchist initiatives are sporadic and dependent on the admirable efforts of dedicated individuals for their longevity. In the very worst instances this can and has led to ghettoising tendencies, of anarchists shrinking back into the comfort zones of organising inside small groups of like-minded and approving individuals. Platformism puts forward a credible alternative to the repertoire of localised activist “scenes” which too often exhibit a short-lived, under-theorised and, often uncritical, approach to political action — a practice that easily degenerates into an endless cycle of self-referential activity justified as an end unto itself.

Undoubtedly related to this, Platformists also take far more seriously the challenge that working class activists face in terms of the authoritarian and reformist tendencies faced in everyday organising. Often anarchists will retreat into a scene either out of a desire for organisational purity, in order to better embody the ideals and practices they advocate, or simply through lack of an alternative. In reality, until there is a revolutionary reconstruction of our current society, there can be no space untouched by the influence of capitalism, patriarchy, hetero-normativity and the State. These things permeate every aspect of our lives, at work, in the homes, even amongst partners and within friendship groups. The response should not be to retreat, but to strengthen our ideals through action towards the society we hope to create. The reality is that there is no perfect or pure struggle. Everywhere anarchists will face reformists and authoritarians (from the Left and Right) who will attempt to control or subdue struggles. Individuals involved in these struggles will also often exhibit contradictory ideas, or have ideas that may seem to conflict with those we wish to advocate (many people are nationalist, or religious, for example). Against this, Platformists argue that we need to be well organised, we need to have

confidence in our own ideas and we need to act on a common programme. Being an organised anarchist means having trust in your comrades, being able to put forward a coherent strategy and embodying a common set of ideals that inspires others to do the same.

The strategy by which this is achieved is, to bring in two more important concepts from the original document, is by principles of collective responsibility and through ideological leadership. These, again, have been controversial propositions. For example, to return to Franks' (2006) criticisms, collective responsibility is described as a "contractual obligation" that is "contrary to the aims of anarchism" (p.223). It is clear from the document, however, that this was far from the Dielo Truda group's interpretation. Instead, I would argue, the notion of collective responsibility develops from their understanding of "the areas of revolutionary life" as "above all profoundly collective by nature". That is, that while the organisation should recognise "each member's rights to independence, free opinion, individual liberty and initiative", it is also not merely an accumulation of individuals but, just like a revolutionary society, communal in nature. As such a degree of collective thinking, acting and, ultimately, responsibility is an important component of organisational praxis. As Thomas explains;

Holding each other accountable also means getting used to letting each other know — in a comradely way — when commitments and obligations aren't being fulfilled. This is a practice that must be built through an organisational culture where comradely honesty and constructive criticism replaces competitive and individualistic passive-aggressiveness or talking behind people's backs. The flip side of giving comradely feedback is learning how to receive it, using it to help you and your organisation grow and becoming more self-disciplined. This is difficult sometimes since the vast majority of the times we're being called to task

enrich the tradition and principles associated with it through practice. As is stated in the original document;

We have no doubts that there are gaps in the present platform. It has such gaps, as do all new, practical steps of any importance. It is possible that certain important positions have been missed, or that others are inadequately treated, or that still others are too detailed or repetitive. All this is possible, but not of vital importance. What is important is to lay the foundations of a general organisation, and it is this end which is attained, to a necessary degree, by the present platform. It is up to the entire collective, the General Union of Anarchists, to enlarge it, to later give it depth, to make of it a definite platform for the whole anarchist movement. (Dielo Truda, 1926)

And the "gaps" are all too obvious to a modern reader. Issues concerning race, gender and sexuality are absent from the document — a weakness that shouldn't be attributed to the document's age alone given the activity and analysis of anarchists present on these subjects at the time. Thankfully this is not an absence that has been replicated in the practice of contemporary groups, with many publishing theory and analysis on, and involving themselves in, the struggle of women, homosexuals, Trans and Genderqueer people and people of colour. In addition, it would also be fair to say that most existing groups would place greater emphasis than in the original document on building and strengthening localised struggle as much as national organisation, a point which Malatesta also makes. An example would be Zabalaza's involvement in the Landless and Shack dwellers movement.

The fact that the original document overlooks such important issues should not, however, be perceived as a weakness but embraced as a positive strength. Anarchists reject the rigid formulations and insistence on adherence to orthodoxy common within

this is a “leadership from within” or a “leadership from without”. In other words, whether these ideas emerge in the course and through dialogue with instances of social struggle or whether they develop from external and independent study and deliberation, a form of Marxian “proletarian science”. This is a key issue and one which I will explore in greater detail in the critical section.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that many contemporary Platformist groups do not hold to all the organisational prescriptions of the original document. For example, many contemporary Platformists have distanced themselves from the idea of “one” General Union, effectively conceding Malatesta’s point, out of practicality if anything, in his exchange with Makhno over the preference for many vs. one anarchist organisation. The Dielo Truda Group’s position is unclear in the original document as to what will become of the “unhealthy elements” (as Malatesta puts it) of the anarchist movement, i.e. those not convinced of the wisdom of the ideas of the Platform. The practice of the modern Platformist movement would suggest, however, that those “disorganised” and “chaotic” elements would continue to be just that. Rather than attempting to “excommunicate them from the anarchist movement”, as Malatesta suggested would be the case, the preferred outcome would be that these disparate elements would become eventually superseded in both size and reputation by the successes of a well organised libertarian communist organisation (or amalgamation of organisations).

An underlying idea here, and a point that all Platformists are keen to emphasise, is Platformism as a tradition embodying shared organisational goals, not simply the prescriptions of a single document. The “Friends of Durruti” Group are, for example, often cited by Platformists as an inspiration for the tradition in spite of making no reference to the Platform or the Dielo Truda Group in their revolutionary programme. After all, the Platform itself never claimed to be definitive and made clear that it was up to the movement to

for something, it is coming from top-down relations; but the practice of holding others accountable and being held accountable is fundamental to learn, practice and promote if we want to destroy and replace these top-down relations with horizontal and egalitarian relations. (Thomas, 2006)

Put more simply, and applied more practically, in essence this is the very basic idea that if a group of people come to an agreement that something should be done then they should do it! Accusations that this implies some form of contractual obligation ignores the emphasis on voluntarism and free association, not least the fact that in the Platform itself there is no mention of any kind of disciplinary mechanism or system of coercion. Of course, many of these disagreements may ultimately boil down to language and a matter of interpretation⁷. Malatesta, for example, was happy to concede comradeship as essential to anarchist organisation while

⁷ Language is an important thing. The use of the term “executive committee”, for example, in the original Platform has been a source of contention for many years. The phrase has obvious resonance with the highly vanguardist practice advocated by Lenin and has made it all too easy for detractors to denounce Platformism as an attempt to “Bolshevise” anarchism. The highly loaded nature of the language obscures the actual context in which the Dielo Truda group were writing. Makhno’s memoirs, for example, mention numerous “executive committees” within the Ukrainian peasant and workers movement -- Makhno, M. (1929) *The Russian Revolution in Ukraine*. Black Cat Press: Edmonton, 2007. These were, however, contrary to the Bolshevik way of organising, largely functional and always filled with recallable delegates directly accountable to the organisations that appointed them. Makhno even, in spite of this limited function, personally declined a place on the executive committee of a peasant soviet on the basis that the tasks should be fulfilled by the peasants themselves (only to relent and join after much lobbying on the part of the soviet). Arshinov, for his part, also attempts to lay rest any doubts that the “executive committee” is Bolshevik-inspired in his reply to the Russian anarchists;

Anybody in the least degree slightest conversant with politics knows well that an executive committee and a central committee are two quite different ideas. The executive committee may very well be an anarchist agency; indeed,

also feeling that “collective responsibility” was too vague a concept invoking anything from strict military discipline to voluntary association.

Anarchists have always considered “leadership” to some degree synonymous with the exercise of authority. Accordingly a “leadership of ideas” or ideological leadership needs to be carefully articulated. The Platform document, for its part, is pretty clear in its criticism of the “revolutionary leadership” of the Leninist organisations which considered the masses backward and incapable of social change alone;

While Bolshevism and its related tendencies consider that the masses possess only destructionary revolutionary instincts, being incapable of creative and constructive activity — the principle reason why the latter activity should be concentrated in the hands of the men forming the government of the State of the Central Committee of the party — anarchists on the contrary think that the labouring masses have inherent creative and constructive possibilities which are enormous, and anarchists aspire to suppress the obstacles impeding the manifestation of these possibilities. (Dielo Truda, 1926)

The need for “ideological leadership” derives from an understanding that social struggle does not represent a vacuum of ideas and the presence of a clear, revolutionary perspective is the anarchist’s responsibility. Likewise, the absence of such a perspective can be disastrous for social struggle, a position that Arshinov states more clearly in his ‘Reply to Anarchism’s Confusionists’;

Direction of the masses from the “ideas” point of view simply means the existence of a guiding idea in their

such an organ exists in many anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations. (Arshinov, 1927)

movement. In the world of socialist struggle and socialist demands, such ideas are not numerous. But it is natural that we anarchists wanted the toilers’ guiding idea to be the anarchist idea and not that of the social democrats for example, of those who have only recently betrayed the Viennese workers’ revolutionary movement. (Arshinov, 1927)

Looking at a more contemporary example within the British context, Heath (2006), when outlining the history of the movement throughout the 1960s, emphasises that anarchist failings, in terms of both organisation and ideological leadership, were quickly translated into the Left’s gains;

It was no surprise that many who had been initially attracted to anarchism were deterred by its chronic disorganisation and lack of effectiveness. Some of these turned to groups like International Socialism (precursor of the Socialist Workers Party) and the International Marxist Group. Digger Walsh, active in the Black Flag group of the period, was to be quoted in a national paper as lamenting the fact that 800 militants had gone over to the Trotskyists. (Heath, 2006)

This example also serves to neatly illustrate the inter-connected nature of all of the components of the Organisational Section. That without a combination of ideological leadership, tactical and theoretical responsibility and collective responsibility the anarchist organisation is rendered less effective than its competitors. That a revolutionary strategy and a unified tactical response go hand in hand with building credibility for anarchist ideas. Yet, regardless of these qualifications over the nature of “ideological leadership” there have been lingering and legitimate concerns over whether