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Nestor Makhno: A Theoretician of Anarcho-Syndicalism?

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To this day many class struggle anarchists, syndicalists, and leftists of varying traditions gloss over, purposefully or naively Nestor Makhno's and the historical platformists' affinity for anarchist unionism or anarcho-syndicalism. Spurred on by recent news that comrades in the Chicago local of Black Rose Anarchist Federation are doing a study group on the Platform, my own recent studies of early 20th century Russian anarcho-syndicalism (the section entitled The Syndicalists in Paul Avrich's The Russian Anarchists is a must read), and recent interest in a practice of unitary political economic community-workers unionism, I thought it maybe opportune to reflect on the Platform's section entitled Anarchism and Syndicalism. Below you will find my notes on these matters.

“We consider the tendency to oppose libertarian communism to syndicalism and vice versa to be artificial, and devoid of all foundation and meaning.

The ideas of anarchism and syndicalism belong on two different planes. Whereas communism, that is to say a society of free workers, is the goal of the anarchist struggle – syndicalism, that is the movement of revolutionary workers in their occupations, is only one of the forms of revolutionary class struggle. In uniting workers on a basis of production, revolutionary syndicalism, like all groups based on professions, has no determining theory, it does not have a conception of the world which answers all the complicated social and political questions of contemporary reality. It always reflects the ideologies of diverse political groupings notably of those who work most intensely in its ranks.”

From the very birth of the mass anarchist workers’ movements in the late 19th century this has been a schism with false foundations. Many of the first anarchist inspired workers’ organizations in Spain that eventually inspired organizations like the FORA in Argentina adopted an anarchist communist program, but saw the need to agitate in general throughout the workers’ movement and win over workers’ early resistance societies to free communism.

The early Russian revolutionary anarchists in groups such as the anarchist communist Bread and Freedom close to Kropotkin and Novimirsky’s South Russian Group of Anarcho-syndicalists and later the Russian anarchist diaspora in the USA such as the Union of Russian Workers used the terms interchangeably. Bread and Freedom adopted and promoted social insertion within the trade union movement to create new revolutionary syndicalist and anarchist unions. Novimirsky who had written an early Anarchist Communist Manifesto was the main ideological force behind a similar orientation of working within the non-party dominated trade unions to create a revolutionary syndicalist current and winning them over to anarchist communism, or the creation outright of new

Groups of anarchists in companies, factories and workshops, preoccupied in creating anarchist unions, leading the struggle in revolutionary unions for the domination of libertarian ideas in unionism, groups organised in their action by a general anarchist organisation: these are the ways and means of anarchists’ attitudes vis à vis trade unionism.”

The last three paragraphs of this section of the platform clearly aim towards the creation of such a unitary mass anarchist workers’ organization uniting the struggle in the companies, factories and workshops with that in the community as now historically accounted for within anarcho-syndicalist/ mass anarchist theory. It also takes the clearly obvious pluralist strategic position that had existed since the early stages of the anarchist workers’ movement to both work towards anarchist unions, as well as working within all trade unions whether the IWW, or more limited trade unions for the spread of anarchist influence and adoption of anarchist goals and methods. Furthermore it should be clear today that we need to foster not just organizations for the battle of ideas, propaganda groups, but revolutionary social organizations (general and unitary), promoting syndicalist means tied to anarchist aims. We should strive to unite, tie together, and move coherently towards bridging workers’ and community struggles making clear our social revolutionary goals.

turn, whether we like it or not, to the ideology of a political statist party.”

Contemporary neo-platformists would do themselves a favor to re-read the above paragraph. Many today call for anarchists to simply build the unions or social movements. That such organizations and movements should be left to have a non-political character. This overlooks the historical context that much of this theory was developed in where there truly existed grassroots worker led non-party labor unions and social movements, that could be anarchized via a practice of social insertion. Makhno and the Platformists give grave warning that as such organizations and movements will never be an abstract political vacuum and that anarchists should struggle for their ideas and methods of struggle to become adopted, otherwise statist political trends will win such groups over, instead of them becoming spaces for a mass anarchist movement.

“The tasks of anarchists in the ranks of the revolutionary workers’ movement could only be fulfilled on conditions that their work was closely interwoven and linked with the activity of the anarchist organisation outside the union. In other words, we must enter into revolutionary trade unions as an organised force, responsible to accomplish work in the union before the general anarchist organisation and orientated by the latter.

Without restricting ourselves to the creation of anarchist unions, we must seek to exercise our theoretical influence on all trade unions, and in all its forms (the IWW, Russian TU’s). We can only achieve this end by working in rigorously organised anarchist collectives; but never in small empirical groups, having between them neither organisational liaison nor theoretical agreement.

anarchist unions. This historical movement later on kept the movement alive after the failed revolution of 1905 when the Russian immigrants of the Union of Russian Workers incubated such ideas and methods of struggle around syndicalist and anarchist communist lines until Voline and Maximoff returned to Russia in 1917 and formed the Union of Anarcho-Syndicalist Propaganda.

Before the writing of the Platform the International Workers’ Association formed on the basis of a revolutionary syndicalist and free communist program. Later on the CNT famously adopted libertarian communism as the historical mission of their revolutionary syndicalist union movement. Despite minor semantic quibbles it is clear that the revolutionary syndicalist movement and free socialist aims of what has been interchangeably labeled anarchist communism to libertarian socialism is not in contradiction. Through struggle the aims and methods of anarchism and syndicalism as a mass movement became complementary to one another, two sides of the same coin.

For mass anarchists today the argument that syndicalism only represents one of the methods of the class struggle to be used is laughable. Which revolutionary class struggle anarchist pro-organizational currents today uphold insurrectionist voluntarist putschism or alternativist communalism? None, individuals maybe, but such strains have long been superseded as credible alternatives by serious mass anarchists. As a contending force there are no Galleanists or Proudhonists in the ranks of such organizations. At least I do not see any from my vantage point. This leaves the mass self-organization and management of struggle, syndicalist methods, as the strategy of most serious anarchists seeking a revolutionary transformation to libertarian communism.

“Our attitude to revolutionary syndicalism derives from what is about to be said. Without trying here to resolve in advance the question of the role of the revolutionary syndicates after the revolution, whether

they will be the organisers of all new production, or whether they will leave this role to workers' soviets or factory committees – we judge that anarchists must take part in revolutionary syndicalism as one of the forms of the revolutionary workers' movement.

However, the question which is posed today is not whether anarchists should or should not participate in revolutionary syndicalism, but rather how and to what end they must take part.

We consider the period up to the present day, when anarchists entered the syndicalist movement as individuals and propagandists, as a period of artisan relationships towards the professional workers movement.”

Contrary to what many might say the Platformists clearly called for anarchists to partake in the revolutionary syndicalist movement. They stay away from debates like “building the new world in the shell of the old” or if society should be organized via workers' councils and committees, but they make perfectly clear their position that anarchists should not just relate like Monattists, as if being individuals and propagandists within the syndicalist movement was enough, but that anarchists should be an actual anarchizing force within the workers' movement. Not if participation is needed, but how and towards what ends. The platform does not merely call to build the syndicalist and workers' movement with apolitical aims but to win it over to anarchism. In fact the Nestor Makhno and the authors of the Platform praise anarcho-syndicalism for attempting to anarchize the workers' movement, and criticize it for not trying to go far enough by uniting the worker's unionism with the efforts of anarchists in community struggles around similar lines.

“Anarcho-syndicalism, trying to forcefully introduce libertarian ideas into the left wing of revolutionary syndicalism as a means of creating anarchist-type

unions, represents a step forward, but it does not, as yet, go beyond the empirical method, for anarcho-syndicalism does not necessarily interweave the ‘anarchisation’ of the trade union movement with that of the anarchists organised outside the movement. For it is only on this basis, of such a liaison, that revolutionary trade unionism could be ‘anarchised’ and prevented from moving towards opportunism and reformism.”

As we see here the Platformists actually praise the anarcho-syndicalist movement as a significant step forward, in introducing libertarian ideas into the syndicalist movement by creating anarchist unions. As mentioned earlier their critique is that this anarchization of the union movement should be united with the social movements outside the sphere of workplace struggles, into a unitary struggle, via a general organization of anarchist workers. Much contemporary anarcho-syndicalist theory has accounted for this deficiency. Syndicalist methods later were applied to struggles of tenants by the CNT and today around struggles for free education via student unionism. Modern day solidarity networks are a unique mix of community and workers' syndicalism.

“In regarding syndicalism only as a professional body of workers without a coherent social and political theory, and consequently, being powerless to resolve the social question on its own, we consider that the tasks of anarchists in the ranks of the movement consist of developing libertarian theory, and point it in a libertarian direction, in order to transform it into an active arm of the social revolution. It is necessary to never forget that if trade unionism does not find in anarchist theory a support in opportune times it will