

Why I Am An Anarchist

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*Lorenzo Komboa Ervin is a former member of the Black Panther Party and wrote the seminal text "Anarchism and the Black Revolution" while incarcerated as a political prisoner. This is an excerpt from the sections "Why I Became an Anarchist" and "What I Believe" and the full text can be found in **Black Anarchism: A Reader** published by Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation.*

In the 1960s I was part of a number of Black revolutionary movements, including the Black Panther Party, which I feel partially failed because of the authoritarian leadership style of Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and others on the Central Committee. This is not a recrimination against those individuals, but many errors were made because the national leadership was too divorced from the chapters in cities all over the country, and therefore engaged in "commandism" or forced work dictated by leaders. But many contradictions were also set up because of the structure of the organization as a Marxist-Leninist group. There was not a lot of inner-party democracy, and when contradictions came up, it was the leaders who decided on their resolution, not the members. Purges became commonplace, and many good people were expelled from the group simply because they disagreed with the leadership.

Because of the over-importance of central leadership, the national organisation was ultimately liquidated entirely, packed up and shipped back to Oakland, California. Of course, many errors were made because the BPP was a young organisation and was under intense attack by the state. I do not want to imply that the internal errors were the primary contradictions that destroyed the BPP. The police attacks on it did that, but, if it were better and more democratically organized, it may have weathered the storm. So this is no mindless criticism or backstabbing attack. I loved the party. And, anyway, not myself or anyone else who critique the party with hindsight, will ever take away from the tremendous role that the BPP played in the Black Liberation movement of the 1960s. But we must look at a full picture of our organizations from that period, so that we do not repeat the same errors.

I think my brief period in the Panthers was very important because it taught me about the limits of – and even the bankruptcy of – leadership in a revolutionary movement. It was not a question of a personality defect on behalf of particular leader, but rather a realization that many times leaders have one agenda, followers have another.

Black Prisoner Organizing

I also learned this lesson during my association with the African People's Socialist Party during the 1980s. When I had gotten out of the joint I had met Omali Yeshitela while I was confined in Leavenworth (KS) federal pen, when he was invited to our annual Black Solidarity Bay festivities in 1979. This association continued when they formed the Black prisoners' organization, the African National Prison Organization shortly thereafter. ANPO was definitely a good support organization, and along with News and Letters Committees, the Kentucky branch of the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression, and the Social revolutionary Anarchist Federation (now defunct), they wrote letters and made phone calls to have me hospitalized after I had been infected with Tuberculosis, which saved my life. But the group folded when the proposed coalition of founding organizations collapsed due to sectarianism.

After I got out of prison, I lost contact with them as they had moved from Louisville to the West Coast. It was not until 1987 that I once again contacted them when we were having a mass demonstration against police brutality in my hometown. They were invited and came to the demo, along with ANPO and several left-wing forces, and for two years off and on, I had an association with them. But I felt APSP politically was always an authoritarian organization, and even though was never a member, I became more and more uncomfortable with their organizational policies. In the Summer Of 1988, I went to Oakland, California to attend an “organizer’s school,” but I also wanted to satisfy myself about the internal workings of the group. For six weeks, I worked with them out of their national headquarters in the local community. I was able to determine for myself about internal matters and also about the politics of the group itself. I found out that about a whole history of purges, factional fights, and the “one man” dictatorial leadership style of the Party. While in Oakland, I was asked to attend a meeting in Philadelphia that Fall to re-establish ANPO.

I attended the Philly meeting, but was very concerned when I was automatically placed as part of a “slate” to be officers of the ANPO group, without any real democratic discussion among the proposed membership, or allowing others to put themselves forward as potential candidates. I was in fact made the highest-ranking officer in the group. Although I still believe that there should be a mass political prisoners’ movement and especially a Black prisoners’ movement, I became convinced that this was not it. I believe that it will take a true coalition of forces in the Black and progressive movements to build a mass base of support. I got to feeling that these folks just wanted to push the party and its politics, rather than free prisoners, and so I just dropped out and haven’t dealt with them since. I was very disillusioned and depressed when I learned the truth. I won’t be used by anybody – not for long.

The early stages of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was a contrast in many ways to any Black freedom group to come before or after. Part of the SNCC activists were middle class college intellectuals, with a small number of working class grassroots activists, but they developed a working style that was very anti-authoritarian and was unique to the Civil rights movement. Instead of bringing in a national leader to lead local struggles, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his group, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, was wont to do, SNCC sent in field organizers to work with the local people and develop indigenous leadership and help organised, but not take over local struggles. They placed their faith in the ability of the people to determine an agenda which would best serve them and lead themselves to obtain their goals rather than being inspired or told what to do by a leader SNCC itself had no strong leaders, even though it had persons in decision-making authority, but they were accountable to membership boards and the community in a way no other group in the civil rights movement was.

SNCC and the Soviet Bloc

SNCC was also a secular organization, in contrast to SCLC, which was formed by Black preachers and had co-opted their style of organizing from the Black church, with a religious authority figure who gave orders to the troops. Today most political commentators or historians still do not want to give full credit to the effectiveness of SNCC, but many of the most powerful and successful struggles of the Civil rights movement were initiated and won by SNCC, including most of the voting rights struggles and the Mississippi phase of the freedom movement. I learned a lot about

internal democracy by being a part of SNCC, how it could make or break an organization, and how it had so much to do with the morale of the members. Everyone was given an opportunity to participate in decision-making, and felt part of a great historical mission, which would change their lives forever. They were right. Even though SNCC gave some lifelong lessons to all of us involved, even if it was destroyed by the rich and their own, who resorted to an authoritarian style in later years.

I also began to have a rethinking process after I was forced to leave the U.S. and go to Cuba, Czechoslovakia and other countries in the “Socialist bloc,” as it was called then. It was clear that these countries were essentially police states, even though they had brought many significant reforms and material advances to their peoples over what had existed before. I observed also that racism existed in those countries, along with the denial of basic democratic rights and poverty on a scale I would not have thought possible. I also saw a great deal of corruption by the Communist Party leaders and State administrators, who were well off, while the workers were mere wage slaves. I thought to myself, “there has to be a better way!” There is. It is Anarchism, which I started to read about when I was captured in East Germany and had heard more about when I was eventually thrown into prison in the United States.

Prison and Anarchism

Prison is a place where one continually thinks about his other past life, including the examination of new or contrary ideas, I began to think about what I had seen in the Black movement, along with my mistreatment in Cuba, my capture and escape in Czechoslovakia, and my final capture in East Germany. I replayed all this over and over in my head. I was first introduced to Anarchism in 1969, immediately after I was brought back to the U.S. and was placed in the federal lockup in New York City, where I met Martin Sostre who told me about how to survive in prison, the importance of fighting for prisoners’ democratic rights, and about Anarchism. This short course in Anarchism did not stick however, even though I greatly respected Sostre personally, because I did not understand the theoretical concepts.

Finally around 1973, after I had been locked up for about three years, I started receiving Anarchist literature and correspondence from Anarchists who had heard about my case. This began my slow metamorphosis to a confirmed Anarchist, and in fact it was not until a few years later that I came over. During the late 1970s, I was adopted by Anarchist Black Cross-England and also by a Dutch Anarchist group called HAPOTOC (Help A Prisoner Oppose Torture Organizing Committee) which organised an instrumental defense campaign. This proved crucial in ultimately getting people all over the world to write the U. S. government to demand my release.

I wrote a succession of articles for the Anarchist press, and was a member of the Social Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, the IWW, and a number of other Anarchist groups in the U.S. and around the world. But I became disheartened by the Anarchist movement’s failure to fight white supremacy and its lack of class struggle politics. So, in 1979, I wrote a pamphlet called “Anarchism and the Black Revolution,” to act as a guide to the discussion of these matters by our movement. Finally, in 1983, I was released from prison, after having served almost 15 years.

For all these years, the pamphlet influenced a number of Anarchists who were opposed to racism and also wanted a more class struggle-oriented approach than the movement then afforded. Meanwhile I had fallen away from the Anarchist movement in disgust, and it was not

until 1992 when I was working in my hometown of Chattanooga, Tennessee, as an anti-racist community organizer, that I ran into an Anarchist named John Johnson and once again made contact. He gave me an issue of Love and Rage newspaper, and as a result, I contacted Chris Day of Love and Rage, and comrades in WSA in New York. The rest, as they say, is history. I have been back with a vengeance ever since.

All of a sudden, I see there are now others in the movement who understand the workings of white supremacy and they have encouraged me to rewrite this pamphlet I have gratefully done so. Why am I an Anarchist? I have an alternative vision for the revolutionary process. There is a better way. Let us get on with it!

What I Believe

All anarchists do not believe in the same things. There are differences and the field is broad enough that those differences can coexist and be respected. So I don't know what others believe, I just know what I believe in and I will spell out it simply, but thoroughly.

I believe in Black liberation, so I am a Black revolutionary. I believe that Black people are oppressed both as workers and a distinct nationality, and will only be freed by a Black revolution, which is an intrinsic part of a Social revolution. I believe that Blacks and other oppressed nationalities must have their own agenda, distinct world-view, and organizations of struggle, even though they may decide to work with white workers.

I believe in the destruction of the world Capitalist System, so I am an anti-imperialist. As long as Capitalism is alive on the planet, there will be exploitation, oppression and nation-states. Capitalism is responsible for the major world wars, numerous brush wars, and millions of people starving for the profit motive of the rich countries in the West.

I believe in racial justice, so I am an anti-racist. The Capitalist system was and is maintained by enslavement and colonial oppression of the African people, and before there will be a social revolution white supremacy must be defeated. I also believe that Africans in America are colonized and exist as an internal colonial of the U.S, white mother country. I believe that white workers must give up their privileged status, their "white identity," and must support racially oppressed workers in their fights for equality and national liberation. Freedom cannot be bought by enslaving and exploiting others.

I believe in social justice and economic equality, so I am a Libertarian Socialist. I believe that society and all parties responsible for its production should share the economic products of labor. I do not believe in Capitalism or the state, and believe they both should be overthrown and abolished I accept the economic critique of Marxism, but not its model for political organizing. I accept the anti-authoritarian critique of Anarchism, but not its rejection of the class struggle.

I believe in workers control of society and industry, so I am an Anarcho-Syndicalist. Anarchist Syndicalism is revolutionary labor unionism, where direct action tactics are used to fight Capitalism and take over industry I believe that the factory committees, workers' councils and other labor organizations should be the workplaces, and should take control from the Capitalists after a direct action campaign of sabotage, strikes, sit-downs, factory occupations and other actions.

I do not believe in government, and so I am an Anarchist. I believe that government is one of the worst forms of modern oppression, is the source of war and economic oppression, and must be overthrown. Anarchism means that we will have more democracy, social equality, and

economic prosperity. I oppose all forms of oppression found in modern society: patriarchy, white supremacy, Capitalism, State Communism, religious dictates, gay discrimination, etc.

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