

Organization and Party

Maria Isidine

April 1928

The problem of the organization of the anarchist forces is of the order of the day. Many comrades explain the fact that, in the Russian Revolution, the anarchists, despite being at all times in the forefront of the revolutionary battles, wielded only slight influence over the march of events, due in large part to the lack of solid organization. Thus they posit the creation of such an organization, an anarchist party, as the premier requirement for more fruitful efforts in the future. The word “party” of itself triggers controversy; can there be such a thing as an anarchist “party”? It all depends on the meaning which one invests the word.

The term “party” can be applied simply to the community of persons of **like minds, agreed with one and other on the aims to be achieved and the means to be employed**, even if they are bound by no formal link, even if they do not know each other. The more united their thinking, the more they devise a similar solution to the particular issues that arise, and the more apt the use of the term “party” in relation to them. It is in this sense that the International [International Workingmen’s Association] talks about the “great party of the toilers,” and also in that sense that Kropotkin, Malatesta, and other militants from our movement, especially from the older generation of its founding fathers, talk about the “anarchist party”. In that sense, the “anarchist party” has always been with us; furthermore, in the anarchist movement, we have always had organizations, well-defined organizations indeed, such as federations of groups, embracing all the groups in a town, region or country. Such federations have always been the customary form of anarchist organization across the world.

In this respect, neither the scheme spelled out in the “Platform” of our Russian comrades, nor the mode of organization adopted by the *Union Anarchiste* at its last congress imply anything novel. But there is one novelty and it is this. The “Platform” aims to amend the **essential character** of the bond which has hitherto bound anarchist groups together, and to change this unspoken “constitution” that has always obtained in our ranks and which, uncontroversially, like something self-evident, lay at the root of every anarchist organization. In their yearning to tighten the bonds between militants, the authors of the “Platform” propose to launch a new model of anarchist “party” along lines espoused by other parties, with binding decisions made by majority vote, a central leadership committee, etc. Such a party ought, as they see it, to cure the anarchist movement of most of the ills that beset it.

It is surprising to see that the experience of the Russian Revolution, which has demonstrated with spectacularity the inappropriateness of a party dictatorship as the pilot of social life, has not

just led these comrades to ask: what other organizations should have pride of place in the work of the revolution, but, on the other hand, has inspired in them an aspiration to a strong, centralized party. And the same goes for our French comrades. We know that the *Union Anarchiste* at its congress in Orléans has adopted a declaration of principles by which it plainly broke ranks with the anarchists of the individualist school and proclaimed a series of basic propositions regarding both anarchism's social ideal and its campaign methods. At the most recent congress, the declaration has been endorsed as the foundation character of the Union. That was not enough for the congress, and it saw fit to draw up **statutes**, and it is here that the centralizing tendency at odds not just with anarchist principles in general, but also with the text of the very "charter" that had just been adopted, showed itself.

From the outset, the Orléans declaration announces that the authority principle is the root of all social ills, that centralism has manifestly failed, politically and economically, and that the free commune and free federation of communes must form the basis of the society of the future; for its part, the commune should be simply the gamut of the various associations existing in the same area. All centralism is, as a matter of principle, stricken from social organization, which should be supple enough for each individual inside the association, and each association inside the federation to enjoy complete freedom. All of which is unanimously accepted by all anarchists, and, if the authors of the Orléans declaration have seen fit to enunciate these truths yet again, it was for propaganda purposes. And we were entitled to expect "statutes" consonant with these principles. But that was not the case. Thinking to create something new, our comrades have ventured on the beaten tracks of other parties.

For a start, in the Union, decisions are reached **by majority vote**. This question of majority is sometimes regarded as a mere detail, a handy way of resolving issues. Now, it is of capital importance, for it is inseparably bound up with the very notion of a society without power. In their critique of all forms of the State, even the most democratic, anarchists operate from the principle that **decisions taken by one group of individuals cannot be binding upon others, who have not reached them and who are not in agreement with them** — and it is of no matter whether they are reached by a majority or by a minority. It is of course pointless to enter here into a rehearsal of all the arguments, with which our literature is awash, against the majority principle; all comrades are conversant with these, especially as they make daily use of them to expose the fictitious character of popular representation under parliamentary regime. How come then, that this principle, whose absurdity and unfairness are so plain where the future society is concerned, turns beneficial and fair when it is to be applied to our own circles? Either the majority is always entitled to prevail, or we should drop this arithmetic of truthfulness and look around for another one.

In their infatuation with organization, our comrades overlook the fact that, instead of strengthening the union, the overruling of the minority will merely give rise to fresh intestinal struggles; instead of working productively, energies will be squandered on winning a majority in congresses, committees, etc. And understandably so. Life inside the party is, in these conditions, easy only for the members of the prevailing majority. The others are stymied when it comes to their action. Moreover, the resolution from the congress of the Union states this very bluntly, by proclaiming that, while entitled to criticize the resolutions tabled, the minority ought not, once these had been passed, to impede their implementation. That means that the minority has to hold its peace or quit the party, and then, instead of a single party, we have two, usually more venomous with each other than with the common enemy. Another resolution from the congress

states that there should be no criticism voiced outside of the organization and that nobody has the right to make use of the columns of *Le Libertaire* to criticize the decisions reached. Now, *Le Libertaire* is the official organ of the Union, and as such, should reflect the views existing within the latter. It occupies a quite different position from that of an organ founded by a group of comrades pretty well agreed upon propagation of **their** views; these comrades are perfectly entitled not to accommodate opposing voices in their organ, in that they claim to represent no one but themselves. That is how things were in the old *Le Libertaire*, in *Les Temps Nouveaux* and virtually all the organs of the anarchist press. But whenever a newspaper styles itself the organ of the Union of the anarchist federations of the whole of France, all the members of that Union have that entitlement. Now, the resolution passed plainly shows that such an entitlement is acknowledged only where the majority is concerned.

Although our anarchist movement may be open to reproach on several counts, we have to give it its due: it has always been free of congressional intrigues, electoral chicanery, the artificial cultivation of majorities, etc. And that thanks solely to the principle that has prevailed within it up to now, to wit, that **decisions are binding only upon those who have taken them**, and may not be imposed upon those unwilling to accept them. The force of such decisions and the commitment given are all the greater for that, in that each individual is more sensible of a decision taken by themselves than of some decision reached without their input and very often contrary to their wishes.

We may perhaps be told: “if comrades band together on a properly thought out and well-drafted program, accepted by **everybody**, differences of opinion will relate only to details and the sacrifice asked of the minority will be minimal.” This is far from always being the case. Everyday life poses fresh problems, sometimes very important ones, but which were not foreseeable at the time when the compact was entered into; differing replies may perhaps be forthcoming to such problems. Thus, in the days gone by, the anarchists of France were split over the trade union movement, more recently over the war, and the anarchists in Russia — over the Makhnovist movement, the attitude to be adopted regarding Bolshevism, etc. If, at those points, anarchists had been “banded together into a real party,” would a congress decision upon questions of that gravity have been accepted by everyone? These matters are for the individual conscience and its conception of the revolution; in which case, can a mechanical decision taken by a majority prevail?

Still another tendency is emerging, with regard to the introduction of the majority principle and the limitation of the autonomy of the groups: it would like to see all anarchist initiatives overseen by a single organization of the hierarchical type, headed by a single Executive Committee. The statuses adopted by the most recent Union congress contain a series of propositions that sound peculiar to our ears. Take, say, groups belonging to the minority, which is to say, not accepting some resolution passed by the congress. That minority’s right to criticize is indeed acknowledged (so far, at any rate) but its criticisms must be addressed exclusively to the Federation to which the group belongs (and to which it is obliged to belong if it wishes to be apart of the Union) or to the central steering commission “which alone has the competence to give them a hearing and satisfaction.” In other words, the minority is not entitled simply and openly to peddle its views among the comrades (not to mention the public); it has to address itself to the bodies named, following hierarchical procedure. Likewise, the unfettered initiative of groups tends everywhere to be replaced by the principles of election and delegation; no one must attempt anything at all unless they have the authorization from the competent organization. A newspaper,

a review, say, may not spring into life through the decision of a group or individual, they can only be published by Anarchist Federation delegates and must reflect only the thinking endorsed at its congresses. The same holds true for the publication of books or pamphlets, for lectures, clubs, even aid funds for imprisoned comrades. At first glance, this "organization" appears to certain minds to be a highly practical thing. But in point of fact such rules (if anarchist circles proved capable of abiding by them) would end up killing off the movement completely. Take a group of comrades intending to set up a propaganda newspaper and possessed of the wherewithal to do so. They have no right to do so; they must first seek the approval of the existing organization as a body and invite the latter to take charge of publication. Let us suppose that the latter agrees and appoints its delegates to that end. Fortunately the ideas of the instigators are in tune with those of the organization's majority; then they need only yield possession of the planned publication and pass it on to others' hands (which is not always a good move either). But what if those delegates, speaking for the majority, are not of the same mind as the instigating group? Then the latter has but one option: to disown the publication. And the newspaper never sees the light of day. Instead, whenever a group embarks upon a publication at its own risk and peril, those whose aspirations it meets rally around it, disseminate it, and magnify its scope for expansion. Others, of differing views, set up other organs, and such variety of the anarchist press, far from harming propaganda, simply works to its benefit.

Take a group of comrades who want to publish books or organize lectures. "On whose authority?" they are asked. "We first of all must find out if the existing agree to place you in charge of this and they endorse your program." Work grinds to a halt. Discussion begins inside the groups on the drafting of a number of programs. In the end, as there is no way to keep everybody happy, the venture is aborted and its instigators are for a long time rid of their appetite for launching anything at all.

Only utter ignorance of the history and life of the anarchist movement could explain the eruption of such schemes for "organization". Everything valuable and lasting ever created in our movement has been the handiwork of groups and individuals well endowed with the initiative to press on without waiting for authorization from anybody. That is the way the finest organs of the anarchist press have been created; the way that propaganda began in the trade unions that led on to the creation of revolutionary syndicalism; the way that the anarchist idea has survived, in its purity and its logic, inside certain groups of staunch convictions, in spite of all the desertions and betrayals. It does not lie within the power of any mechanical organization to replace this initiative. The role of an organization is to facilitate the work of individuals and not to hinder it; this is all the more true in the anarchist movement, which is not strong enough numerically to indulge in hindering the actions of its members and squander precious resources. Which is how the tendency that emerged at the latest Union Anarchiste congress will inevitably end up.

What the anarchist movement needs right now, is not so much new organizational formulas as a concrete, well-defined program of work to be undertaken, just as soon, in the wake of the successful revolution, there will be scope for every initiative in the endeavor to create the new society. Only familiarity with what they are to propose at that crucial point will guarantee anarchists the influence to which their ideas entitle them. For this, initiatives must not be stifled and minds snuffed out, but instead, a free and lively exchange of all views is to be encouraged. Otherwise, energies will be squandered on the pettiness of internal frictions and the movement will not be advanced by a single step.

It is always easy to criticize, some comrades may perhaps object; it is a lot harder — and more useful — to put forward a practical mode of organization that would help rid our movement of what keeps it weak. Certain comrades seek to do that by creating a more or less centralized party, based on the majority principle; others — and the writer of these lines is one of them — believe that such a party would be more harmful than useful¹. Of course, they do not deny either the need for anarchists to generally get organized, or the need to rid the movement of the flaws that stop it from acquiring the social influence to which its ideas entitle it. But what form of organization have they to offer in place of the one suggested by the “Platform,” and upon what principles are they going to found that organization, which they would argue is more free, in order to achieve the same outcomes: agreement on principles, a prescribed policy of practical action, and appreciation by each individual of their duties towards the movement?

The fundamental error of those of our comrades who are supporters of the “Platform” resides perhaps in the fact that they look to a union of groups and even to a directing centre for the rehabilitation of our movement, instead of looking to the **groups** themselves. It is not of the federation by rather of the groups which make it up that we can require such and such a policy line: the movement’s centre of gravity lies there, the federation will be whatever its component groups are. And whenever issues are broached and debated, not at the level of the federation, but at group level, solution of them will be greatly facilitated: a group can readily do what a huge organization cannot. The devising of a single policy line for a complete federation presents insuperable difficulties, for it presupposes decisions taken by a majority vote and thus, inevitably, involves internal frictions. Recruitment of members and the elimination of undesirables whose presence compromises the movement, is a task that the federation’s leadership body is incapable of carrying out with success. Any more than it is capable of ensuring that the action of all its members conforms to anarchist principles. But all of that can be easily and naturally accomplished by each group within its ranks. So the premier issue to be resolved is this one: what are the fundamental principles upon which an anarchist group can base its existence?

There is no way that a sweeping answer, good for all groups, can be given to that, for the answer might vary greatly according to the goals pursued by the group and the context in which it operates, depending whether the group was set up to tackle a particular practical task or general propaganda, whether it operates in a period of calm or a time of revolution, whether it operates openly or in clandestine fashion, etc. But, even so, a few general considerations can be framed.

Take this first question: is it desirable that the group should comprise of comrades with a common conception of the anarchist ideas, or can anarchists of varying persuasions (communists, individualists, etc.) really work in concert within it? This issue was raised at the most recent anarchist congress. Certain comrades reckon that, since each of the existing anarchist tendencies contains a kernel of truth, it would be better not to dwell upon their discrepancies but instead to “synthesize” everything that looks worthwhile, so as to arrive at a basis for joint activity. At first sight, this approach seems very logical and perfectly practical, but upon reflection, it transpires that unity taken in that sense would be merely formal. Of course, circumstances may arise in which anarchists of differing shades of opinion will act in concert, but the same goes for all revolutionaries in general: the anarchists in fact collaborated with the Bolsheviks in the fight against

¹ Events have borne this out even more quickly than might have been expected: scarcely a few weeks had elapsed after the last congress of the “Union” and the organization has split in two. And *Le Libertaire* now manages to appear only with the greatest of difficulty.

the White armies. Such instances will always be frequent in times of revolution; such arrangements, most often tacit, are thus quite natural and necessary, but when it comes down to lasting activity is a period of calm, agreement upon basic principles is not enough. Suppose that an individualist anarchist, and anarchist communist and an anarcho-syndicalist reach agreement upon declaring their opposition to the State and their approval of the communist form of property (assuming that the individualist agrees to it); of what practical significance would this be, since they immediately go their separate ways afterwards? The individualist is preoccupied with liberating the individual this very day, in the existing social context (colonies, living in nature, free love, etc.), contemptuous of the masses and their movements, they are not going to identify with them. So what could they undertake in common with their communist colleague? Then again, a pure syndicalist comrade will place store only by labour movement tasks and will collaborate only with certain of their communist colleagues; they may even find themselves at odds with them, on the issue of relations between the trade unions and the anarchist groups for instance. And so it all goes. In day to day action, the methods proper to such and such a tendency play such a significant role that agreement upon general principles acknowledged by all is far from sufficient. When disagreements inside a group are substantial and do not relate merely to the use of certain labels, they hinder the action of the group, for the members, being united neither in their propaganda nor in their chosen methods, expend a lot of energy upon internal wrangling. A truly united group, though, made up of comrades who have no need for further debate about the most essential points and who, come what may, are as one on propaganda and action, that sort of group can become highly influential, even if it may not be numerically large. By comparison, other groups of a different mentality will founder; not that there is any loss in that, for there is nothing useful about trying to enfold the largest possible number of comrades within the same organization.

Random recruitment of members is, perhaps, the prime cause of the defects of most groups. Very often, people become anarchists all too easily and all too quickly, without having familiarized themselves with other schools of socialism, nor indeed with anarchism in the essentials of its theories. That way, in the future, for oneself and for comrades, lie sore disappointments, for, as one's knowledge expands and one's horizon widens, it may perhaps be found that one has gone astray and that one professed to be an anarchist only out of ignorance of everything else. One day, a Russian Social Revolutionary was asked, in my presence, at what point in his life he had ceased to be a Marxist: "When I began to read something other than Marx" was the answer.

Things may be a lot more serious if it is not just a matter of some theory that one accepts or rejects, but at a cause to which one has devoted part of one's life and which one at some point feels incapable of championing because one had never given prior consideration to the criticisms of adversaries. Then again, the life of groups is often made difficult by an excess of practical mentality; one accepts such and such a comrade on account of the services he may render (as speaker, theoretician, administrator, etc.) without taking care to ensure that their overall moral or intellectual profile meets the groups requirements.

Plainly, such close scrutiny in the selection of members can be maintained only by the group and not by the federation, and no federal statute will ever be able to guarantee it. But, if it is implemented in the federation's component groups, the federation will find that many thorny questions resolve themselves.

In our conception, the bond between the various groupings is absolutely free and arises from their needs alone; there is no centre, no secretariat entitled to dictate to the groups with which,

in some shape and on some basis, they must unite. Links may be established for a wide variety of reasons: likemindedness, concerted action, territorial contiguity, etc. Generally, the rule is that groups from the same region are in touch with one and other, but it can happen (and we have seen examples of this) that a Paris group has closer bonds of solidarity with a London or Geneva group than with a group in the next district. Broadly speaking, set frameworks, where each group is obliged to belong to such and such a federation, and each federation to maintain links with its neighbor through the obligatory mediation of such and such a committee can be a very useful agency in the facilitation of communications, but it is merely a tool to be used when one feels it necessary.

The anarchist movement has always had congresses; they can be of very great importance if they arise from the activity of **pre-existing groups** which feel the need to share their work and their ideas. Certain especial features of our congresses relate to the very principle of anarchism. Thus, up to the present, comrades assembling for a congress did not necessarily have to be **delegated** by the groups; they could participate in an individual capacity.² Contrary to the practice in other parties, where delegates take away **from the congress** resolutions to which their mandataries have merely to submit, anarchist delegates bring **to the congress** the resolutions, opinions and tendencies of their respective groups. Congress is free to express an opinion of them — but that is all. The counting of the votes (should that be judged useful) is merely a statistical exercise; it may be interesting to know how many comrades, belonging to which grouping, come down on this side of the other. The importance of congresses is in no way diminished, and their work only grows more serious. Instead of furnishing an arena for gambits designed to win a majority, they can devote themselves to making known the movement's status in different localities, its successes and failures, its different tendencies, etc. The resolutions cannot be anything more than indications, expressions of opinion, for the delegates to impart to their groups, which may adopt or reject them.

In short, this schema merely rehearses that which is familiar, things that might even seem too self-evident to need mention; but the present confusion of minds is such that one sometimes feels compelled to reiterate old truths. The **formal** connection between organizations is extremely loose here, because all of the emphasis is upon the intellectual and moral **internal** bonds. Furthermore, in this schema, the individual or group is formally free; the less subordination to anything, the more extensive and grave the moral responsibility. Here each member of the group is answerable for the action of the entire group — all the more responsible in that the resolutions are reached by common accord and not mechanically by any majority vote. Moreover, the entire group is answerable for the deeds of each member of it, all the more so, also, in that it has recruited its members only discriminatingly, accepting only those who suited it. Then the federation as a body answers for the actions of each of its component groups — precisely because there is nothing to make the liaison engaged in anyway binding, and because the groups know in advance with whom and for what purpose to join forces. And each group is answerable for the whole federation — precisely because the latter cannot do a thing without its assent.

There is more. Every anarchist, whether they wish it or not, bears the **moral** responsibility for the actions of their comrades, even if no formal connections bind them; every act contrary to the anarchist idea, every contradictory posture, has repercussions for the movement as a body, and

² This state of affairs was amended at the latest *Union Anarchiste* congress in respect of the introduction of the majority principle.

this extends the responsibility beyond the individual, beyond even their immediate group. And it is this consciousness of their responsibility that should be the great spur capable of maintaining the solidarity in anarchist circles. Maybe this is not always properly understood, and maybe that is the source of many of our movements shortcomings, shortcomings that some would remedy by means of new forms of organization. We are not persuaded of the efficacy of these measures; our confidence is vested instead in other means, of quite different nature, only a few of which we have touched upon here.

March/April 1928

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Maria Isidine
Organization and Party
April 1928

Retrieved on 29th July 2020 from <http://www.nestormakhno.info/english/isidine.htm>
Maria Isidine [aka Maria Isidorovna Goldsmith] was an anarchist and scientist of Russian and French decent, born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1873; she was a close friend of Kropotkin, and a prolific contributor to the French and Russian anarchist press of her day. She committed suicide in Paris, January 1933. This article was published in issues 36 and 37 of the journal Plus Loin.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net