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The Beginnings Of Revolutionary Unionism In Romania

Interview with the I.A.S.R.

Matt Antosh

October 2011

Members of the IWW Facebook group may have noticed the always insightful comments from a Fellow Worker under the handle of *Initiativa Anarcho-Sindicalista Romania* (ASIR). FW Matt Antosh of the International Solidarity Commission (ISC) reached out to the ASIR and conducted this short interview with the ASIR international Committee Chair.

ISC: How and when was the ASIR founded?

ASIR: ASIR was founded on Nov. 19, 2010, by a group of anarchists in the city of Constanta. After being involved in other projects, we thought that Romania was lacking genuine class struggle anarchist and syndicalist perspectives, and the result was ASIR.

ASIR is a member of the International Workers Association/Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores (IWA-AIT). What is the history of the IWA-AIT and how did the ASIR first get involved?

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ASIR is a close collaborator with the IWA-AIT, but we are not yet the Romanian section of it. ASIR is trying to get there. We are waiting for approval in the next Congress. The IWA-AIT is an international anarcho-syndicalist federation of various labor unions from different countries. It was founded in 1922 at a Berlin congress of anarcho-syndicalist labor unions. It traces its lineage to the International Workingmen's Association or the First International. The IWA-AIT was famously known for its Spanish section, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo/Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores (CNT-AIT), which carried out a social revolution in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. Our adhesion is mostly due to the awareness and importance of international solidarity; we believe that joining such an organization should contribute to a better assimilation of ideas among members of ASIR that will find a source of inspiration from the long tradition and existence of this organization.

How is ASIR structured?

At the moment, ASIR is made up of autonomous local groups which are federated with each other. We may grow, and the structure might change, but for now this is the framework.

ISC: In what sectors are ASIR currently organizing?

We individually started penetrating [different sectors of] the labor movement; the construction sector was the main one, but when we started agitating and actually tried to organize, everything got shut down. The business unions here have a tight grip on the labor movement and not only are these unions undemocratic, but monopolist. They have different tactics in shutting down independent forces trying to unionize, from bureaucratic attacks to outright abuse and brute force. As for now, we are currently trying [to organize] in the retail sector, but [we are far from seeing] the results, so we must wait.

How does ASIR see itself within the larger Romanian labor movement? Does it organize within mainstream unions, and if so what role does it play within them?

I think ASIR is the only revolutionary unionist project in Romania, the only breath of fresh air in a labor movement suffocated by class collaborations, social partnerships, and undemocratic practices. As I mentioned, we are trying to penetrate industries and mainstream unions, but it's a harsh struggle. Almost everywhere the hammer of the "labor aristocracy" hits us, but we won't give up that easily.

What has been the effect of the transition from state socialism to a capitalist economy on Romania? How is the left in general, and anarchism in particular, perceived due to this transition?

The transition was vastly different in comparison with other Eastern European countries, because there were two unique things. For one, Romania was the only Warsaw Pact member, which forcibly overthrew the government and executed the country's head of state. Romania is also the only country where the actual revolution was considered a coup d'état, orchestrated by the Nomenklatura (the high officials in the Communist Party). So against this particular background, the transition was weird and very suspicious because the state's capital simply disappeared and was privatized overnight. The former secret police members/collaborators and [Communist] Party members landed in high positions in the government, and ironically many became the multimillionaire businessmen of Romania. So in reality, this once again proves the "new class" theory: the former ruling class is now the new ruling capitalist class. The left in a traditional sense is practically nonexistent; the parties are extremely similar due to the fact that the mainstream parties are the offshoots of the National Salvation Front, the governing body of Romania in the first weeks after the revolution, which was formed by the former Communist Party elites. So in mainstream political discourse the left wing is a thing of the past, every discourse is dominated by either pseudo-populist rhetoric coupled with a national Stalinist sentiment, or by traditional capitalist discourse. For anarchism

it was worse, because the movement was literally destroyed by two dictatorships: the fascist one during WWII and the Stalinist one after WWII, so people have no idea what anarchism is and what it represents. For some years now, anarchism was associated with only the “punk” scene, so it’s hard to present it as a legitimate socio-political point of view. Our recent work in discovering some old anarchist newspapers from the 1900s and a study about the anarcho-syndicalist movement up until WWII have given us hope in the quest to historically and politically legitimize it.

We see across Europe—in Greece, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom—the effect of austerity and the fight back it has provoked. How has austerity in the rest of Europe affected Romania? How has the Romanian government and the Romanian people responded to the global crisis?

It’s ironic because Romania is among those countries that were hit in the worst way by the crisis, and alongside Greece I think, here in Europe, Romania borrowed the biggest sums of money from the International Monetary Fund, so the international debt is staggering and they are thinking to privatize everything now. But the irony in this story is that the Romanian people are asleep and the only time they awake is when an opposition party bribes them. It’s ridiculous, most of them crave for authoritarian dictators to solve their problems, and it’s pathetic and sad.