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Michael Schmidt

Black Flame launch in Mexico

“¡Más vale morir de pie que vivir de rodillas!”

November 23, 2009

Retrieved on 5th August 2021 from anarkismo.net

Black Flame co-author Michael Schmidt held a mini-launch of the book at a colloquium with professors of journalism and international affairs at the Tecnológico de Monterrey in Guadalajara, Mexico, on October 26. Schmidt was invited to Mexico to train Tec students in covering conflict in transitional societies, especially given the drug war currently ravaging Mexican society. Extracts of his talk, “The Journalist as Activist,” in which he located activist journalism within the Mexican anarchist tradition, follow.

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This uncompromisingly defiant call, “It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees,” has been attributed to everyone from Ché Guevara and Dolores Ibarruri – La Pasionara of Spanish Revolution fame – although it was well known to have been adopted as a war-cry among Emiliano Zapata’s forces to rival “*Tierra y Libertad*” during the Mexican Revolution.

But the famous phrase appears to have originated instead with a Mexican journalist, Práxedes Guerrero, who, leading a fire-fight between 32 well-armed guerrillas of the anarchist *Partido Liberal Mexicano* and about 600 Federales in the Chihuahua town of Janos on the evening of 29 December 1910, literally died on his feet – and in doing so helped light the fuse on one of the most profound socio-political transformations of the 20th Century. He was 28 years old.

Guerrero also wrote for Ricardo Flores Magón’s famous newspaper *Regeneración*, and edited the El Paso, Texas, paper *Punto Rojo*, so it is clear that he straddled, or rather combined, two disciplines, that of the journalist and that of the activist, his writings – and his revolutionary activities – putting him directly in harm’s way. It is equally clear that it was his conviction that radical change was

necessary in Mexico that led him to take up both the pen and, as the song has it, “the 30–30 carbine”.

There is a long tradition of the journalist-activist in Mexico. Take for example the remarkable Juana Belém Gutiérrez de Mendoza who first published her feminist journal *Vesper* in 1901: she would become an important Mexican revolutionary figure and *Vesper*, re-located to Mexico City, would survive despite repeated government bans – and despite Gutiérrez spending many spells in prison for her writings and activism – remaining in circulation until 1936, a remarkable longevity given exceptionally dangerous conditions. She was also the editor of the feminist journal *Iconoclasta*, established in 1917 within the ranks of the FORM, the Casa’s syndicalist successor organisation.

You will all know that the *Plan de Ayala* was written by the Ayala town school-teacher Otilio Montaña Sánchez, with input from Zapata and the anarchist-communist *Regeneración* journalist-cum-trade-union-militant Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama (1880–1967) who had spent three spells in jail for his politics, who Zapata had met in Mexico City, and who had split from the Casa centre over its antagonism towards the Zapatistas.

The Plan de Ayala famously stated that “the lands, woods and waters which have been usurped by the hacienda owners, scientists, or caciques, through tyranny and venal justice, will be restored immediately to the pueblos or citizens who have the corresponding titles to such properties, of which they were despoiled through the bad faith of our oppressors. They shall maintain such possession through force of arms... The land, free for all, without overseers and masters. Seek justice from tyrannical governments, not with a hat in your hand but with a rifle in your fists.”

And that *Plan* had far-reaching consequences on the later development of the Constitution of Mexico and on subsequent land-reform programmes of the revolutionary state. In fact, as Jeffrey Lukas has argued, to understand the trajectory of Mexican politics from the *Porfiriato* through the Revolution, the rebellions of

1939, interrogating the movement's responses to key challenges, examining the linkages between metropole and periphery, north and south, urban and rural, and at examining the vectors of migrant labour and repression which made the movement a truly world-wide phenomenon, viewing it in its two main aspects, both with their own counter-power institutions: as a revolutionary labour movement; and as a revolutionary counter-culture.

the 1920s, the entrenchment of *el-PRI* and the Cold War era, one should pay close attention to the life of Soto y Gama.

In similar fashion, journalist-activists have shaped the South African social and political landscape. We need only look at the work of communists like Alan Lipman who wrote for newspapers such as *New Age*, who helped in the process of drafting the 1955 *Freedom Charter* that laid the foundations for our 1996 democratic Constitution (and who engaged in acts of sabotage alongside the liberal African Resistance Movement). *New Age* was later banned and Lipman forced into exile – but we can also examine the work of supposedly “apolitical” photographers like *Drum* magazine's Bob Gosani who took damning secret photographs in the 1950s of the ritual humiliation of naked black prisoners in the notorious Number 4 Prison in Johannesburg.

Journalism-as-activism has shaped much of our understanding of the world we live in. Where would we find the essentially human – and humane – insights into world-shaking events without the likes of journalist John Reed's gritty eyewitness accounts of the Russian Revolution as portrayed in his book *Ten Days that Shook the World?* How impoverished would our understanding of poverty and welfare be without the incisive writings of Martha Gellhorn – later to earn fame as a war correspondent – about the dustbowl dirt-farmers of Depression-era America, as reflected in her book *The View From The Ground?*

[CUT] ...

I grew up in the 1970s in a liberal-democratic family that, though it technically believed in racial equality, was hamstrung by its inability to see past the demands of Cold War anti-communism to the possibility of the end of apartheid. But I was drafted into the Army at the age of 18 and it was that experience – of seeing the emperor unclothed, of the naked power of the apartheid state in which even we, as white soldiers were disposable nonentities – that radicalised me. I became a conscientious objector, was forced to appear be-

fore a military-judicial tribunal, and from then on, stayed one step ahead of the military police.

My political progress was initially as slow, to be honest, as my journalism development, though I early on gravitated towards the resurgent anti-racist and anti-militarist anarchist movement. My growing experience in conflict reporting during those dramatic years of the Insurrection of 1985–1991 – our own “Second Intifadeh” if you will, following the famous Insurrection of 1976–1977 – politicised me further. In Gellhorn’s phrase, I was becoming ever more interested in “the view from the ground,” in reporting the experiences of the poor, oppressed and marginalised.

This in turn led to me joining a succession of anarchist resistance organisations, with ever-more defined politics, platforms and programmes of direct engagement in social struggles. Where journalism took me into the townships during my working hours, activism took me back there in the evenings and over weekends. I became a shop-steward in my union, the rather white-collar, craft-oriented South African Union of Journalists and learned the hard lessons of union organising. I became an investigative journalist specialising in covering everything from intelligence and conflict to history and culture, and also wrote for both the mainstream and “alternative” press – all the while organising township libraries and political meetings and helping to run working class organisations like the Workers’ Library & Museum.

I naturally had to try to ensure that I retained my sense of journalistic balance and fairness in the middle of all this, giving credit where it was due, and trying to put myself in the shoes of my interview subjects – especially those I strongly opposed: the nationalists, both black and white. The trick was to be partisan in favour of the truth, and the poor, and yet to be open to all points of view, all life experiences. The curious thing is that while journalism taught me research skills and a respect for ordinary people, activism taught me organisational skills, self-discipline and public speaking – all things I use in my work today.

And the sum of all those experiences in journalism and activism was a long-term project, named Counter-power, a two-volume work published by AK Press in Berkley, California. The first, volume, which covers anarchist theory and strategies as well as internal tactical debates within the movement, is titled *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism & Syndicalism*, and I will be donating a copy to your library.*

The project originated almost 10 years ago as an attempt to correct, from a global perspective, the usual North Atlantic bias of most anarchist histories by including both theoretical and organisational influences from Latin America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is primarily a synthesis by myself and co-author Lucien van der Walt, a doctor of sociology, of existing secondary research, but nothing of this scale has been attempted in any language. *Black Flame* aims to properly define anarchism and syndicalism, to restore their coherence, rescue them from impossibilism, egoism and terrorism, historicise their rise within the socialist trade unions of the 1870s, locate them within proletarian practice, and trace their global impact, contrasting their approaches to, for example, race and imperialism to competing schools of thought such as liberalism, nationalism and Marxism.

The second volume of Counter-power, has the working title *Global Fire: 150 Fighting Years of International Anarchism and Syndicalism*, and is currently undergoing lengthy rewrite and peer-review processes; we expect it to be published by AK Press in another two to three years.

The aims of *Global Fire* are to tell the story of the history of what we term the “broad anarchist movement” – which we divide into two main tendencies, of mass-based class organising and of catalytic insurgency – from a holistically global perspective, detailing, for example, their role in establishing the first trade unions in China in 1913, and the first trade unions for people of colour in South Africa in 1917–1919. It aims at tracing both ideological and organisational lineages *through and beyond* the defeat in Spain in