

Fire-ants and flower

Revolutionary anarchism in Latin America and the lessons for South Africa

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THE SOCIAL QUESTION

The most crucial issue facing the global anarchist movement today is not only how to win the battle for the leadership of ideas among the anti-capitalist movement, but how to ensure that direct action, mutual aid, collective decision-making, horizontal networks, and other principles of anarchist organising become the living practices of the social movements. We will examine the examples of Latin American anarchist organisations to see how they ensured what they call “social insertion” – that they as militants and revolutionaries are at the heart of the social struggles and not mere (cheer-)leaders in the margins.

This is a core question not only because it demands a definition of the role of the revolutionary organisation, but also because it focuses on how revolutionary anarchists define their relationship with non-anarchist forces originating in the struggles of the working class, peasantry and the poor.

To put it another way, the key is how we approach the oppressed classes and how we contribute towards the advancement of their autonomy from political opportunism, towards the strengthening of their libertarian instincts and towards their revolutionary advance.

Globally, the working class has changed dramatically since 1917, an international revolutionary high-water mark, when South African anarcho-syndicalists (anarchist unionists) of all “races” like Thomas Thibedi, Bernard Sigamoney, Fred Pienaar and Andrew Dunbar founded the first black, coloured and Indian trade unions in South Africa. Today, trade unions, the old “shock battalions” of the working class are decimated, compromised or bogged down in red tape. The once-militant affiliates of Cosatu have been silenced, restructured, bought off with investment deals and enslaved to their “patriotic” duty to support the ANC elite.

The inevitable resistance to the ruling class’ neo-liberal war on the poor has provoked resistance. But although the new phase of struggle began with the SA Municipal Workers Union fighting a water privatisation pilot project in Nelspruit, it swiftly moved beyond the unions.

Today, most observers agree that together, the progressive United Social Movements (Landless People’s Movement and Social Movements Indaba) embrace about 200,000 supporters – compared to the SACP’s 16,000 seldom-mobilised membership.

Which is why the regional anarchist movement, in founding the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation on May Day 2003, has oriented itself towards anarcho-communism that goes beyond the factory gates. Anarcho-communism has its ideological origins in the Pan-European Revolt of 1848 and the writings of house-painter Joseph Dejacque, who opposed the authoritarian communism of his contemporary Karl Marx. But it only really became a genuine mass working class movement within the First International. Essentially, it is the practice of social revolution from below rather than political socialist revolution from above, and it calls for a movement located in the heart of working class society.

Of course there are conservative, right wing and even proto-fascist forces within the majority-black oppressed classes, which hobble their ability to challenge the elite. Which is why anarchists, autonomists and other anti-authoritarian socialists are directly involved in the progressive social movements.

ANARCHIST DAYS 2: BRAZIL

Since the dark period of opposition to apartheid in the 1980s, the southern African anarchist movement has, because of language barriers, largely drawn inspiration from the North American and Western European movements and far less from our comrades in the rest of Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, Austral-Oceania and Latin America. But social, economic and political conditions in the global North are very different to those in the South and our orientation has consequently shifted southwards.

Countries like Brazil not only suffer US imperialism, but also act as regional policemen towards less powerful neighbouring states. This is similar to South Africa's subservient position to British imperialist interests, and its role as regional enforcer: remember the 1998 invasion of Lesotho to crush a pro-democratic mutiny?

Other similarities between SA and Brazil are that both countries have recently come out from long periods of military dictatorship (Brazil's ended in 1985), both have militant social movements (the MST landless movement in Brazil for example, which has occupied some 2-million hectares) and both now have left-talking, right-acting governments (the Workers' Party came to power in Brazil in 2002) that push anti-working class neo-liberalism.

Which is why I was sent as a delegate of the Bikisha Media Collective (BMC) — a founder organisation of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and a member collective of the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation (ZACF) — to the Anarchist Days 2 congresses in Porto Alegre in Brazil in January 2003. Run in parallel to the mostly reformist and authoritarian-socialist World Social Forum 3, the event was a follow-up to the first Anarchist Days meeting organised in 2002 by the Gaucha Anarchist Federation (FAG) of the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU) and Libertarian Struggle (LL), an anarchist collective based in the city of São Paulo that has since transformed itself into the Insurreccional Anarchist Federation (FAI). The first Anarchist Days was a truly international event, with participation from the hosts, plus 15 autonomous organisations of the base from across Brazil, the Central Workers Organisation (SAC) of Sweden, the Anarchist Communist Unity Congress (CUAC) of Chile, Anti-Capitalist Struggle Convergence (CLAC) of Canada, the Libertarian Socialist Organisation (OSL) of Switzerland, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of the United States.

The follow-up was more of a Latin American continental affair, with delegates from the hosts, 22 Brazilian autonomous social organisations of the base, Black Flag (BN, Chile), Tinku Youth (TJ, Bolivia), the Workers' General Confederation (CGT, Spain) and myself. Considering that Brazil is the size of the USA excluding Alaska, with Africa-like difficulties in communication and travel, the Brazilian representation was itself a coup for the organisers. Other groups present, but not as delegates, were the ex-Workers Solidarity Alliance (ex-IWA, United States), the Central Workers Organisation (SAC, Sweden), and the No Pasaran Network (RNP, France).

The events comprised two mass marches of social movements through Porto Alegre, the second one being a demo against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA, the Latin American version of NEPAD); two public workshops on revolutionary anarchism at the Workers' Museum (a similar facility to the Workers Library & Museum in Johannesburg); a meeting of the Brazil-wide Forum on Organised Anarchism (FOA); a meeting of International Libertarian Solidarity (ILS) affiliates (including BMC); and the First Meeting of Autonomous Latin-American Organisations of the Base (ELAOPA)

BRAZILIAN & ARGENTINE ANARCHISTS & THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The FAG of Brazil was founded in 1995 with the help and inspiration of the FAU of Uruguay. Since 2002, the FAG and other “specific” anarchist movements from Brazil such as the Cabocla Anarchist Federation (FAC) of the Amazon have worked together in the Forum on Organised Anarchism. In Latin countries, “specific” anarchist organisations adhere to the lessons of the “Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists” (drawn up by veteran Ukrainian guerrillas in 1927): federalism, tactical and ideological unity, and collective responsibility, principles that the ZACF is also based on.

On the ground, the FAG mobilises among the garbage-collectors (catadores), pushes for the opening of universities to the poor, networks together a number of autonomous “Popular Resistance Committees” in working class communities and works with the Independent Media Centre and with community radio stations. Its position regarding the social movements, in its “FAG Declaration of Principles”, is that “[o]n the political-ideological level, political groups including the FAG, should enhance the social and popular movements, to make them more militant, without trying to make them ‘anarchist’. The social movement should not have a political ideology, but its role should be to unite, and not to belong to a political party. In the social movements, it is possible to unite militants and build a unified base, which is not possible at an ideological level.”

The FAG then takes its non-sectarian stance further: “Because we know that we are not going to make the revolution by ourselves, we need to be aware that we need to unite with other political forces without losing our identity. This identity is the anarchist organisation and is the avenue by which we want to build unity with other political forces in the social movement.”

Through the FAG’s policy of “social weaving”, it reunites community organisations of the oppressed classes, whether unions, soccer clubs, community radio stations or neighbourhood associations. “This way we try to form a solidarity group between all the organisations in the community, increasing strength mutually in direction of the struggle.”

In Argentina, a country with a proud tradition of mass anarchist organising (and anarchist trade union dominance) in the first three decades of the last century, neo-liberal policies pushed through by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank provoked the collapse of what was once one of the strongest Latin American economies. This led to a popular uprising in 2001 that saw five state presidents ousted in rapid succession, the occupation of factories and the establishment of Popular Autoconvened Assemblies across the country.

Auca (Rebel), an Argentine anarchist organisation based in the city of La Plata to the south-east of the capital Buenos Aires, was founded in 1998. Having deeply involved itself in the United Popular Movement (MUP), Auca takes a similar position to the FAG on what in Latin America is termed “social insertion”: “Our organisation is not the only one inside the popular organisations that is struggling for revolutionary change, and surely in the future it will also not be the only one. Historical examples have shown us that different political models of the working class and the people have converged in the different revolutionary processes throughout history...”

“Within revolutionary efforts, it should be understood that the model of the Single Revolutionary Party is exhausted. It has demonstrated its lack of flexibility against the different political manifestations of our class.

“As anarchists, we believe that our proposal embodies the true interests of the proletariat, and it is in anarchy where we find the final goal of human aspirations, but we are aware that the comrades of other organisations believe the same thing regarding their ideologies.”

FOR A FRONT OF OPPRESSED CLASSES

Auca’s position is that they “are not rejecting the imperative need for the unity of revolutionary forces under a strategic project. Rather, we believe that the main body for the gathering together of popular power is the Front of Oppressed Classes where syndicalist, social and political models which, in general, struggle for revolutionary change will converge.

“It is there, in the heart of the FOC, where a healthy debate of political tendencies and positions should be engaged in, so that the course the FOC takes is representative of the existing correlation of popular forces. The FOC should not become a struggle of apparatuses.”

Calling the FOC “a strategic tool”, Auca states: “Obtaining a victory over a more powerful opponent is only possible by tensing all the forces and obligatorily applying them with meticulous wisdom and ability against the smallest ‘crack’ amongst the enemies, and in all contradictions of interests amongst the bourgeoisie of the different countries, between the different bourgeois factions and groups inside each country. It is necessary to take advantage of the smallest possibilities to obtain an ally of masses, even when they are temporary, hesitant, unstable and uncertain.

“The backbone of the Front of Oppressed Classes is based on the (strategic) alliance of the peasant workforce where the majority and leading force is the proletariat...”

The concept of a Front of Oppressed Classes as an idea is totally different to the authoritarian communist concept of a Popular Front, which communist parties around the world have used as a Trojan horse means of first welding together popular opposition into a hierarchical umbrella organisation, then inserting themselves into the leadership of the organisation.

This is what happened with the organisations within the United Democratic Front (UDF) during the final struggle against apartheid, which suddenly found themselves being dominated by a grafted-on ANC-SACP “leadership”, even though UDF members were drawn from a variety of political traditions. Their final fate was the illegitimate and unilateral disbanding of the UDF by the ANC-SACP after the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, and the subsequent bloody political ascendancy of the conservative nationalist agenda over the very community and workplace structures that had defeated apartheid in the first place.

Instead, the Front that Auca supports is a revival of the proud, militant traditions of progressive and radical class organisations, wiser this time and divorced from opportunistic political parties, being focused instead on working class autonomy and self-management. Only a horizontally linked, community co-ordinated network of class organisations is diverse enough and resilient enough to not only bear the assaults of the neo-liberal elites, but launch its own raids on the bases of capital.

A truly egalitarian FOC with every active member equally empowered with the ability to make policy decisions at a collective level is a very tough organism because it has no centre for reactionaries to destroy or for opportunists to seize.

This, and not the tried-and-failed approach of trying to hammer the United Social Movements in South Africa into some kind of shabby and marginal “Workers Party” (a contradiction in terms) that will pathetically try to contest bourgeois power within the halls of bourgeois power itself.

Instead, the FOC would establish an increasingly strong “dual-power” situation to first undermine the authority of bourgeois power, and then assume many of its functions, devolved to community level (as we did in the 1980s with popular civics, for instance).

SOCIALIST “GOVERNMENT” FROM BELOW

Auca’s position statement goes on to state that the creation of revolutionary change means achieving precisely this type of popular power: “We will call the tool that allows us to make an initial bid for power the Government from Below. This will basically consist of directly building power through solid criteria of unity and strategic alliances.

“To guarantee the efficiency of this, it is crucial to increase grassroots participation, focusing the different sectors around specific programmatical questions. This tool will be set up and consolidated through three organisational stages that will gradually go forward and overlap one another.”

Auca’s three-stage approach is:

- 1) a greater co-ordination of popular organisations around a consolidated joint plan of struggle, based on joint class interests;
- 2) the regionalisation of the struggle so that municipalities can be controlled at grassroots level and so that joint demands can be drawn up at regional plenaries and be presented to bourgeois power;
- 3) consolidate regional grassroots power, not through elections, but by a dual-power “Government from Below”.

Auca state that “we are not in a revolutionary situation” — although Argentina is closer to it than South Africa — “but are rather creating the foundations of socialism and that the Government from Below will operate within the general framework of the bourgeois state.”

The general idea would be to use dual-power to train the class to assume both the running of collapsed social services at local level and to counter-act state repression of the social movements. The ZACF may well adopt a similar strategic approach, with its township food gardens and community libraries — and its Anti-Repression Network, respectively.

Auca states its aims as “giving more power of decision to the grassroots groups that are born in the heat of the struggles, and are the current incipient bodies of dual-power — mainly the popular organisations with territorial power and popular assemblies. The democracy will be structured starting from a new approach that involves the shape of political representation.

“After economic exploitation, this point is the second in importance in relation to the struggles that are currently going on. We must break definitively with bi-partisanship, but also, and fundamentally, we must give shape to the development of a new form of DIRECT AND POPULAR democracy [capitals in the original text].

“This means that decisions will no longer pass through the hands of a few enlightened politicians, but rather through the hands of all the people struggling in the streets. It is essential to struggle for a federalist character of democracy that means that the decisions that affect the social body are made by one and all, through an operation that expresses the thought of the social base of the country. Guiding this practice will be one of the maximum requirements of the Government from Below, a first taste of the society in which this is the official organisational approach.”

FIGHTING DIFFERENTLY TO ACHIEVE DIFFERENT ENDS

The CIPO-RFM of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, which borders on Chiapas, was founded in 1997. Today it is an organisation of about 1,000 indigenous American members, named after Mexican revolutionary anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon and now boasting its own radio station. Where the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas used arms, initially, to create space for social dialogue, CIPO-RFM is an unarmed movement. Instead it relies on innovative non-violent tactics that have proven successful even though they face state-backed death-squad attacks on their members. Importantly, these tactics have allowed the CIPO-RFM to make nonsense of the state's claims that they are a dangerous or terrorist faction.

One of the tactics is that when they are confronted with riot police on horseback, instead of pelting the cops with stones, they throw bags of tiny ants at the horses. The ants have a vicious fiery bite and drive the horses wild, sowing confusion in police ranks and defeating attempts to suppress the organisation.

Another tactic involves moving entire communities that have been cut off from their neighbours by police / army roadblocks through the roadblocks peacefully. The women approach the cops and soldiers armed with flowers that they present to their oppressors. Delighted, embarrassed and confused, the armed forces allow the flower-givers and their children to pass them by, trailing men from the community in their wake.

Of course the state forces learn and adapt to these fire-ants & flowers tactics, but the point is that non-violent tactics have achieved far more than a frontal armed attack ever would – and it builds up a grudging respect for the anarchist forces among foot soldiers and cops who are largely drawn from very similar social backgrounds to those they are forced to go up against.

A fundamental anarchist ethic is that “means are ends-in-the-making”, which is to say that the means that we as revolutionaries adopt in our struggles at all levels and in all phases will directly determine the nature and quality of the lives we build for ourselves and our class. It stands to reason that one cannot repress in order to create freedom or resort to terror in order to lift the clouds of fear off our horizons.

Probably the best expression during the Anarchist Days 2 meetings of how anarchists should engage with the social movements was given by CIPO-RFM delegate Raul Gattica, who said that that anarchists “do not come like an illuminating god” to the social movements, but rather as comrades who live humbly alongside and within the movements, assisting the autonomy of the movements to the best of their abilities.

This non-vanguardist, non-sectarian attitude will be the ZACF's guiding principle in relating to our own social movements.

POST-SCRIPT: ILS MEETING

At Porto Alegre, there was also a meeting of the International Libertarian Solidarity (ILS) network of which most ZACF groups are members. The ILS was established in Madrid in 2001 to link the largest and most active sectors of the global anarchist movement together.

The meeting was attended by ILS delegates from BMC, FAG, FAU, LL, LEL, CIPO-RFM and CGT, with delegates from BN, the ex-WSA and BN as observers (Auca was accepted into the ILS in February). The meeting felt that the lack of presence of the Libertarian Mutual Aid Network

(RLAM) of Spain, the OSL of Switzerland, Libertarian Alternative (AL, France/Belgium), RNP and the Libertarian Communist Organisation (OCL, France) – together with the then up-coming ILS meeting prior to the G8 Summit in Evian, France, in June 2003 – meant the meeting should be brief. As a result, all organisations present simply gave a description of the challenges facing them, particularly in terms of money and resources.

Of interest to Africans was the presentation by LEL, which operates within the favelas (squatter camps) of Rio de Janeiro, in conditions of grinding poverty and gangsterism – not dissimilar to the conditions ZACF members know in the townships of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town – yet which has built community meeting centres and a vibrant press.

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