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Anarchism in Russia

Mikhail Tsovma

1993

The majority of anarchist groups remain at the margins of social and political life, unable to propose any significant alternatives. The groups that were created by dozens last year have tended to disintegrate, the number of participants in anarchist groups stabilized approximately at the level reached in 1989, when the first country-wide anarchist federation (KAS) was created. Today the movement is still split in spite of all the talk of cooperation between different tendencies. In major cities like Moscow, anarchists can enjoy the luxury of creating 5 groups of four people, but in the provinces the number of activists is usually not more than ten people.

This year has seen feverish activity by the Federation of Revolutionary Anarchists (FRAN) — numerous pickets, leftist meetings and organizational attempts. Created in 1992 as a federation of libertarian communist groups, FRAN now has activists in half a dozen towns in Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine. Its local groups usually cooperate with various Trotskyist and Communist sects (usually the most “revolutionary” ones). On Nov. 7, 1992, they even organized a demonstration to commemorate the anniversary of the Bolshevik coup d’etat (which they consider to have been an anti-capitalist

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revolution). The poster which advertised the demo was signed by IREAN (Moscow group of FRAN) and two Trotskyist groups (each one consisting of only one to two members). The flags of the Fourth International and CNT-AIT and wildcat symbols were put together at the demonstration. After their own march through the streets of Moscow they went to the Stalinist demonstration — odd place to try to recruit members for an anarchist group.

FRAN is also attempting to create a union which would become the Russian section of the International Workers Association. During last year's East-West syndicalist conference in Berlin, IREAN was made the publisher of the East European bulletin "of the friends of IWA." Two issues have been published (in Russian) and the tendency is quite clear — the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (KAS) is in fact cut off from this bulletin.

It is very characteristic that the decision to become an IWA section preceded the creation of the union — very few of the FRAN activists previously made syndicalist propaganda or tried to organize independent unions. Obviously, the attempt to become the Russian section of the International is a great motivation in itself as it gives those people seeking high esteem the requisite status.

At the same time, the oldest and still the biggest anarcho-syndicalist federation in Russia, KAS, declared (in May 1991) that it does not yet seek affiliation to any specific international tendency, but is open to cooperation with various anarchist and syndicalist groups. The results to date are not so great, but still they are much more real than the claims of FRAN.

Another field of activity which attracts activists from different anarchist groups is ecology. Every summer this or that source of pollution (nuclear power plant, chemical or other heavy industry enterprise) becomes the target of anarchists and radical ecologists. This year two campaigns will be organized — one against the storage of nuclear wastes

in Siberia, and the other against a metallurgical plant in Cherpovets. Though there's still a lot to be desired in the efficiency and organization of these actions, they at least have the potential to unite the libertarian viewpoint and popular protest movements.

Recently some groups revived their publications. Thus at the end of 1992, Moscow anarcho-syndicalists relaunched *Obshchina* magazine, and anarchists in Irkutsk and Kemerovo are also thinking about launching new papers. Small publications oriented mainly to other anarchists also seem to be developing. This is a good sign as for quite a long time the anarchist press was constantly collapsing.

It is necessary to mention that many groups declaring themselves "anarchist" do a good job of discrediting the anarchist movement in general. Thus at the end of last year, at the Congress of the Association of Anarchist Movements (ADA), a group was created called the "Association of Anarchist Movements (Marxist- Leninist). No comments about this group, but its worth mentioning that many people equate anarchist with various foreign Marxist- Leninist guerrillas. Anarchist news bulletins constantly inform that this or that "anarchist" group made a protest to support the RAF, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), the IRA, Basque terrorists or Red Brigades. Moscow IREAN is particularly notorious for this kind of action.

The liberal wing of the anarchist movement also seems to be quite confused about anarchist theory. Thus, at the end of last year the St. Petersburg Anarcho-Democratic Union declared its support for the government's economic "reform" policies. Two Moscow-based libertarian capitalist "anarchist" groups — the Moscow Union of Anarchists and the Union of Anarcho-Universalists — have degenerated into commercial distribution enterprises. The leader of the Moscow Union of Anarchists, Alexander Cheryakov, even started publishing an advertising

paper full of ads featuring “pretty girls for wealthy businessmen.”

The conclusion is obvious. The Russian anarchist movement is in a terrible state and a lot needs to be done before we can present a real alternative to the present destructive developments in Russia and the other former Soviet republics. One of the tasks will be a clearer definition of what anarchist ideas are and how they can be implemented here and now. Surely this process won't lead to the creation of the “united anarchism” that some people dream about, but it will help activists from different groups try out their ideas. At this point the anarchist press both here and abroad is filled with short sloganistic manifestos which stand in for serious analysis and careful programs. Today the KAS program, adopted in 1989 and devoted mainly to an analysis of the Soviet regime, remains the only such consistent attempt to put forward a libertarian socialist program. The realities of a “free market” Third World capitalism are still waiting to be considered by Russian anarchists.

For readers of anarchist publications from other countries Russian anarchists may seem rather weird, and so they are. It is quite doubtful that anarchists should try to copy all the ideas and actions of their comrades in the First World. But surely there is a difference between difference and idiocy.

There's a very long way to go, and we should start moving.

Wages and Living Standards

Inflation in February 1993 was 29 percent a month. A recent economics ministry study found that one-third of Russia's population was living below the officially defined subsistence level. While prices rose by 26 times last year, the average wage increased only 13.5 times.

Unemployment continues to grow, but at a slower pace than predicted. Russia's “official” unemployed, fewer than 1 percent of the workforce, account for only a fraction of the number who are chronically out of work. Starved of credits and raw

materials, factories shut down for as many as several weeks a month rather than carry out mass layoffs.

The Russian government's “solution” to unemployment is a familiar line — Women: back to the home.” More than 70 percent of Russia's officially unemployed workers are women. But Labor Minister Gennady Melikyan says he sees no need for special programs to help women return to the workforce. “Why should we try to find jobs for women when men are idle and on unemployment benefits?” Melikyan said. “Let men work and women take care of the homes and their children.”

A few years ago women made up 51 percent of the Russian workforce. But government cutbacks, aimed largely at middle-level administrative staff, have disproportionately hit women. The government's drive to turn women back into housekeepers and baby-minders is reflected in a new law on the family pending in the Supreme Soviet. The first draft would have nullified women's right to abortion and banned women with children from working more than 35 hours a week. Following protests from women's and human rights groups, the most controversial clauses were dropped, but the current draft eliminates the state's obligation to provide day care for the children of working women.