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# Italy and the Platform

## Italian Involvement in the Debate on the 'Organisational Platform'

Nestor McNab

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The debate which surrounded the publication of the „Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists – Project“ between June and October 1926 was lively and widespread, involving a great number of anarchists both in France, where it had been published, and abroad. However, as Paris in those days was a sort of magnet for anarchists who had been forced to flee their countries of origin or who were drawn there by the great activity of others already present, a large part of the debate regarding the proposals of the Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad (GRAZ)<sup>1</sup> was centred on Paris.

Publication of the „Platform“ itself was preceded by a series of articles regarding anarchist organisation in Delo Truda, notably the GRAZ article „The Problem of Organisation and the Notion of Synthesis“ in March 1926. The notion of a synthesis of the three main strands of anarchism (anarchist communism, anarcho-syndicalism and individualism) had been proposed by Sébastien Faure and was

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<sup>1</sup> Gruppo Russkikh Anarkhistov Zagranitseii.

supported by figures such as Volin. Itself a controversial idea, „synthesis“ was to prove to be, in the years that followed, the counterpart to the „platformist“ idea of organisation and the organised movement was destined to be polarised over the years into federations based on a synthesis and those based on a tendency.

The debate accompanied the piecemeal publication of the Platform and took place in the pages of various anarchist journals, including the promoter group’s own Russian-language paper, *Delo Truda*, and the French paper *Le Libertaire*. Following comments by some comrades, the GRAZ published a „Supplement to the Organisational Platform“ in November 1926, which addressed certain points which had been raised by Maria Korn Isidine.

A series of meetings and conventions were also held. The meeting of February 12, 1927, presided over by the Italian anarchist Ugo Fedeli, who had worked with Makhno and who initially supported the project, reached a decision to appoint a Provisional Secretariat which would call an International Conference, leading to the foundation of a Revolutionary Anarchist Communist International.

The International Conference took place on March 20, 1927 in Paris and discussed the proposal presented by the Provisional Secretariat which succinctly summarised the debate of the previous months:

As a basis for the union of homogeneous forces and as the ideal logical and tactical minimum upon which comrades should agree, we propose the following points:

1. Recognition of the class struggle, being the most important factor in the anarchist system.
2. Recognition of Communist Anarchism as the basis of our movement.
3. Recognition of Syndicalism as one of the principal methods of struggle of communist anarchism.

4. The need for a General Union of Anarchists in every country basing itself on ideological and tactical unity and collective responsibility.
5. The need for a positive programme which can create the social revolution.

The conference, however was interrupted by the French police, who arrested the participants, later expelling many from the country. However, before the meeting was broken up, one of the two Italian groups present, the „Pensiero e Volontà“ Group (represented by Luigi Fabbri, Camillo Berneri and Ugo Fedeli), succeeded in having the first point changed into:

1. Recognition of the struggle of all the exploited and the oppressed against the authority of the State and capital, being the most important factor in the anarchist system.

This group had also prepared alternative versions of three of the other four points, which due to the police action were not decided upon:

3. Recognition of the workers' and union struggle as one of the important methods of anarchists' revolutionary action.
4. The need for the most General possible Union in every country of Anarchists having the same final goal and the same practical tactics, based also on collective responsibility.
5. The need for a positive programme of action with which anarchists can realize the social revolution.

In the months to follow, debate on the „Platform“ raged on. In April, Volin and a group of other Russian anarchist exiles including Mollie Steimer and her husband Senya Fleshin, published a fierce, lengthy attack on the Platform<sup>2</sup>. This elicited a stinging collec-

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<sup>2</sup> 'Reply to the Platform' by „some Russian anarchists“ (Sobol, Schwartz, Steimer, Volin, Lia, Roman, Ervantian, Fleshin), April 1927.

tive response in August of that year from the GRAZ<sup>3</sup>, who accused Volin and his group of deliberately misrepresenting the spirit of the draft Organisational Platform. In May 1927, the Provisional Secretariat, composed of Nestor Makhno, Maxim Ranko and Chen (Yen-Nian?) issued invitations to join the new Revolutionary Anarchist Communist International, or International Anarchist Communist Federation, based on the original five points above (but not including the counter-proposals of the Italians, a fact which would certainly not have been appreciated by Fabbri's group).

The meetings and articles continued, with contributions from Faure, Volin, Linsky, Ranko, Isidine, Grave and Chernyakov amongst others, not forgetting Arshinov and Makhno. In October that year, Errico Malatesta, the éminence grise of Italian anarchism who was living in enforced isolation in Italy, responded to the proposed „Platform“ in a letter<sup>4</sup> which was replied to several months later both by Pëtr Arshinov<sup>5</sup> and Makhno<sup>6</sup>. In the meantime, there had also been important interventions by Luigi Fabbri<sup>7</sup> and Maria Korn Isidine<sup>8</sup>, to whom Arshinov replied with another article<sup>9</sup>. It was not until a year later in late 1929 that Malatesta was able to reply to Makhno's letter<sup>10</sup> and it has to be said that many of his doubts about the project had by that time been cleared up, though there did remain serious problems

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<sup>3</sup> 'Reply to Anarchism's Confusionists: A Response to the „Reply to the Platform“ by Several Russian Anarchists', Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad, August 18, 1927.

<sup>4</sup> 'A Project Of Anarchist Organisation', in *Il Risveglio* (Geneva), October 1927.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Old And New In Anarchism', in *Delo Truda* N°30, May 1928.

<sup>6</sup> 'About The Organisational Platform', in *Il Risveglio*, December 1929.

<sup>7</sup> 'Su un progetto di organizzazione anarchica', in *Il Martello* (New York), 17/24 September 1927.

<sup>8</sup> 'Organisation And Party', in *Plus loin* N°s 36 – 37, March/April 1928.

<sup>9</sup> 'Elements Old & New In Anarchism', in *Delo Truda* N°30/31, November/December 1928.

<sup>10</sup> 'Reply to Nestor Makhno,' in *Il Risveglio*, December 1929.

Italiani<sup>19</sup> and in November 1935 completed the process of transformation into a federation based on synthesis, becoming the Comitato Anarchico d'Azione Rivoluzionaria<sup>20</sup>.

Things went somewhat better (for a while) for the „Platform“ in France and in Bulgaria, where the Bulgarian Anarchist Communist Federation actually adopted the „Platform“ as its constitution. The principles of the „Platform“ were accepted (albeit in an excessively rigorous way) by the French federation, the Union Anarchiste (founded in 1920 by Faure as a synthesist organisation) at its congress in November 1927 when it changed its name to the Union Anarchiste Communiste Révolutionnaire<sup>21</sup>, recalling the name of the proposed International. Those members who were against the change left to set up the Association des Fédéralistes Anarchistes<sup>22</sup>, whose theoretical and organisational ethos was summed up by Faure's „La Synthèse Anarchiste.“

By 1930, however, a group of syndicalists who had remained within the UACR on purpose had managed to gain a majority within the federation which resulted in the name being changed back to Union Anarchiste and a return to a more synthesist approach. Eventually, the Fédération Communiste Libertaire<sup>23</sup> was set up by supporters of the „Platform“ in 1935, but this too would disappear during the war years.

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<sup>19</sup> Anarchist Federation of Italian Refugees.

<sup>20</sup> Anarchist Revolutionary Action Committee.

<sup>21</sup> Revolutionary Anarchist Communist Union.

<sup>22</sup> Association of Anarchist Federalists.

<sup>23</sup> Libertarian Communist Federation.

regarding the concept of collective responsibility. Malatesta would, in fact, write once again on that subject in the pages of the French journal *Le Libertaire* as late as April 1930<sup>11</sup> stating, however, that he was quite prepared to believe that the difficulty could simply be a result of linguistic differences. (It should at this point be remembered that the version of the text used as a basis for consideration by non-Russians was Volin's French translation and, in fact, Alexandre Skirda has since drawn attention to the somewhat biased nature of this translation. Indeed, there was an exchange of articles around the question of the faithfulness of the translation in *Le Libertaire* in the spring of 1927.) By that stage, however, the impetus had evaporated and support for the „Platform“ was restricted to only a few groups such as the Union Anarchiste Communiste Révolutionnaire. Arshinov had been expelled to Belgium in January and one of Makhno's last public acts was his speech at the UACR Congress.

The two Italian groups present at the 1927 meetings went their separate ways. The group represented by Giuseppe Bifulchi, „had already begun their own process of criticism in the search for a new revolutionary strategy, [and] lent their support to the Platform's programme [...]. Believing that the concept of internationalism was the real basis for the existence of every anarchist organisation, they joined the International Anarchist Communist Federation as its First Italian Section“<sup>12</sup>. The Manifesto of this group has now been translated into English for the first time<sup>13</sup>. Bifulchi was forced to leave France in April 1928 and went to Belgium. There, he founded the monthly journal *Bandiera Nera* (Black Flag) before

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<sup>11</sup> 'A proposito della responsabilità collettiva', in *Le Libertaire* N°252, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1930. English translation under the title „On Collective Responsibility“ available on the Nestor Makhno Archive.

<sup>12</sup> A. Dadà, *L'anarchismo in Italia: fra movimento e partito*, Milan 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Manifesto of the First Section of the International Anarchist Communist Federation. The original Italian version of the manifesto is in IISG, Fondo U. Fedeli, b. 175, and now also in A. Dadà, *op.cit.*

moving on to Spain during the years of the Spanish Revolution, where he fought as a commander in the Italian Column. Fedeli had edited the Italian version of the trilingual *International Anarchist Review* from November 1924 to June 1925, when it merged with two other journals into *La Tempra*. He was expelled from France in 1929 and was repatriated to Italy in 1933 to face prison and confinement after spells in Belgium, Argentina and Uruguay.

Naturally, the strong anti-organisationalist element in Italian anarchism was not interested in the project of the Platform. Neither were the Italian comrades who had made the choice to remain in fascist Italy (with all the difficulties that entailed). Those held in confinement were fighting to stay alive, while the few remaining in liberty were engaged in anti-fascist activity and trying to keep anarchist ideas alive among the Italian workers.

If the short-lived First Italian Section of the Anarchist Communist International failed to amount to much, it was partly as a result of the Fascist repression in Italy but also due to the fact that both Malatesta and the prestigious „Pensiero e Volontà“ Group eventually distanced themselves from the „Platform“. Despite apparent differences within this latter group, they eventually sent a reply to the invitation of the Provisional Secretariat in which they politely refused the offer to join the initiative as they considered that for the time being „the best road to follow is the one which, in four years of public life, the UAI has laid out for itself“<sup>14</sup>.

It is interesting to note that while Malatesta's disinclination to endorse the Platform stems mostly from his doubts regarding „collective responsibility“, the letter from the „Pensiero e Volontà“ Group seems to indicate reservations regarding the principles of theoretical and tactical unity („exclusivism“), whereas their

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from the „Pensiero e Volontà“ Group to the Provisional Secretariat of the International Anarchist Communist Federation. Italian original in A. Dadà, Ugo Fedeli dalla Russia alla Francia: un anarchico italiano nel dibattito dell'anarchismo internazionale (1921–1927), Università di Firenze, Facoltà di Magistero, „Annali dell'Istituto di Storia“ vol.III, 1982/84, Florence, 1985.

proposals to the International Conference actually endorsed the need both for unity of tactics and for collective responsibility.

But the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*<sup>15</sup>, was already dead. The fascist regime in Italy, which had in preceding years forced anarchist groups, newspapers (such as *Umanità Nova*) and the anarchist-dominated revolutionary trade union USI<sup>16</sup> to disband, made public life so impossible for Italian anarchists that the UAI convention of January 1926 was to be its last.

The UAI, born in 1919 as the *Unione Comunista Anarchica Italiana (UCAI)*<sup>17</sup>, had been a somewhat inefficient organisation and in fact for several years before its demise there had been attempts to form a federation which did not include the individualist and anti-organisational elements which were seen by many, Malatesta and Fabbri included, to be responsible for much of the organisation's inability to achieve concrete results. In the years following the rise to power of the fascists, Italy's anarchists became sorely divided, some militants remaining in Italy (most of whom would be kept in confinement in remote parts of the country for over a decade), while many others were to emigrate, often first to other European countries, later on to the Americas. It was from this point on that the anti-organisationalist element was to become dominant among Italian anarchists, both in Italy and abroad (partly thanks to the influence and hegemony exercised by journals with a strongly anti-organisationalist line, such as *l'Adunata dei Refrattari*, published in New York).

In 1930, the *Unione Comunista Anarchica dei Profughi Italiani*<sup>18</sup>, an organisation of tendency, was created in Paris. However, three years later it was renamed the *Federazione Anarchica dei Profughi*

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<sup>15</sup> Italian Anarchist Union.

<sup>16</sup> *Unione Sindacale Italiana* [Italian Syndical Union].

<sup>17</sup> The UCAI Congress at Bologna in 1921 had decided to drop the term „Communist“ from the name so as to avoid confusion with the Bolsheviks.

<sup>18</sup> Anarchist Communist Union of Italian Refugees.