

We Learn As We Walk

Looking Back on Five Years of NEFAC

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2005

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The late 1990s was a depressing time for anarchists in North America. Long time activists were leaving a declining movement en masse, while projects were disbanding or taking a hiatus. Anarchists of the 1990s had struggled hard to develop a working praxis, while simultaneously trying to predict what “the next big thing” would be in terms of social struggle. Some talked of ecology, while others built up infoshops and other counter-institutions. Many focused on radical/anarchist single-issue activism (ARA, Earth First, Food Not Bombs, Copwatch, ABC, etc.) and many more attempted to popularize anarchist ideas within various counter-cultures. However, an important minority attempted to build explicitly anarchist organizations and networks.

In 1998, the organization that everyone loved to hate (or emulate), the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, dissolved. At the same time many of the projects that largely defined themselves as being in opposition to this organization were also experiencing serious problems. It seemed that more than a decade of anarchist activism was evaporating in North America. By that time it was clear that the anarchist movement of the 1990s had largely failed. In fact, when ‘the next big thing’ did finally erupt in the streets of Seattle in 1999, not only did it take almost everyone by surprise, but there were very few serious anarchists left to comment on it. Seattle was a terrific boost for the anarchist movement. From a truly marginal politico-cultural scene, anarchism was immediately thrust to the forefront of this new mass movement based around the struggle against globalization. It was precisely around this time that NEFAC was formed.

Inspiration through Frustration

Our general frustration with the North American anarchist movement ran fairly deep. Most significantly, we felt the movement lacked solid politics and coordination. On the whole, anarchist politics were rather crude and offered little in the way of serious analysis or theoretical depth. More often than not, people were either isolated in mass, reformist organizations or grouped in marginalized radical projects. In both cases we felt anarchists were largely disconnected from the movements of oppressed peoples and lacked the leverage to affect social change. This disconnect also meant that the fate of anarchism was intimately linked with the fate of a subculture (punk rock, hippy dropout culture, etc.) to the point where the anarchist movement was becoming a by-product of these subcultures and completely alien from working class life. While many of the founding NEFAC members did indeed come from punk or skinhead backgrounds, we felt there was more to our politics than a DIY ethic or alternative lifestyle. We felt that anarchism was first and foremost a political philosophy and that it must be open to all people, not just marginalized subcultures. We also saw anarchism as a fighting ideology that must be rooted in the everyday struggles of the working class.

Discussion of forming a new anarchist organization had started just prior to Seattle (not long after Love & Rage disbanded). At the time it was the idea of a small handful of anarchists scattered across the Northeast. The fact that the connection between two small collectives in Quebec City and Boston was made through an article on North American anarchism in a British anarchist magazine (*Organise!*) speaks volumes about our level of alienation and isolation at the time! No wonder we felt isolated and alienated. The official narrative of the anarchist movement was practically in the sole possession of anti-organizationalists. To them the idea of forming an explicitly anarchist organization had been tried and it was a failure. End of story.

We had a different perspective. Some of us had the chance to travel to Europe and see the benefits of anarchist organization. Most of us were avid readers of the European anarchist press, which seemed much more advanced than its North American counterpart. In many European countries the movement is larger, stronger, and much more deeply rooted in social movements and class struggles. Frustrated with the North American anarchist movement of the time, we took direction and inspiration from our European comrades. We studied the histories and politics of these anarchist organizations and started discussing how we could best apply these models to the North American context.

Our experiences and frustrations with the North American anarchist movement led many of us to “platformist” conclusions. While we definitely had sympathy toward anarcho-syndicalism (the other large and coherent class struggle anarchist tradition), we felt the syndicalist organizations were going nowhere. Because of the way the labor movement has become institutionalized here – with the closed shop and the absence of minority unionism and pluralism – there was no room to realistically build such a movement in North America.

Enter NEFAC

NEFAC was founded during a conference held in Boston in April 2000. Our idea was to build an organization that would unite revolutionaries around a common tradition, and from here build a collective theory and practice. We wanted to take root in working class struggles and social movements in order to test our ideas and eventually kickstart a popular anarchism that would regain the past influence and strength of our movement at its height. As a first step, we set about creating the framework for the organization.

We discussed and adopted our ‘Aims & Principles’, our constitution, and our minimal strategic orientation. Our ‘aims & principles’ statement was directly inspired by a similar point-by-point political statement of the Anarchist Federation (UK). Our constitution was inspired by similar documents produced by the French libertarian movement since the 1970s. The ironic thing about our constitution is that it was modeled on an organization that had hundreds of members in dozens of groups when we, in comparison, could only count on two real groups and a dozen isolated individuals. It was more of a theoretical statement of how we believed a revolutionary organization should be organized than a practical document that reflected our real development at the time. Our strategic orientation was minimal and was summarized in this clichéd statement:

“NEFAC is an organization of revolutionary activists from different resistance movements who identify with the communist tradition in anarchism. The activity of the Federation is organized around theoretical development, anarchist propaganda, and intervention in the struggle of our class, be it autonomously or by way of direct involvement in social movements”.

During this first period, our federal ‘intervention’ was done in the anti-globalization movement. Despite some successes, notably in Washington and Quebec City, the limits of this type of intervention quickly appeared to us (and many other segments of the anti-capitalist movement). It is from a criticism of ‘summit hopping’ and the desire that our practices take root in everyday class struggles that we collectively decided to develop a new direction. In order to regain the past influence of anarchism within working class social movements we needed to leave ‘activism’ behind and begin to think in terms of a long-term strategy (as opposed to continually focussing on planning for the next militant bloc each time some large capitalist summit was taking place).

Toward a Strategy

After a period of following the general (and often vague) strategic orientation we came up with for NEFAC, we decided it was time better specify what it was we meant by “intervention in the struggles of our class”. Our understanding of the theoretical relationship between the anarchist organization and mass-based social movements was first expressed in our position paper ‘The Question of the Revolutionary Anarchist Organization’ where we wrote:

“a radical perspective can only emerge, in our opinion, from social movements. That’s why we advocate the radicalization of every struggle (from the Latin word “radix” which mean “roots” radicalizing means going the roots of problems). Through this radicalization and our involvement as anarcho-communists in various movements of resistance, we want to aid the development of an autonomous class conscientiousness, the only safe-guard against political recuperation from all sides (including an eventual recuperation by an anarchist current). The revolution we want will not be the work of an organization, even an anarchist one, but of a large class movement by which ordinary people will directly take back full control on the totality of their life and environment”.

Since we were (and continue to be) a fairly small organization, we also decided to prioritize a few specific areas of struggle to concentrate our long-term involvement in. It’s collectively that we decided to orient a majority of our activity on the labor, community, immigration, and anti-racist fronts. We chose these because we felt they represented important areas of class struggle where social power and a ‘culture of resistance’ can be developed, and because of their strategic importance from a social revolutionary perspective.

Labor was obvious for a class struggle anarchist-communist organization. We felt that the workplace is still the basic place where exploitation occurs and also the place where the radical transformation of society must begin. With the potential to disrupt (and eventually seize) the means of production, communication, and distribution, it’s also the place where ordinary people still have the most social power.

Community was less obvious. But we felt that while the workplace is still central, community-based struggles have taken on a new importance, particularly since the 1960s and the emergence of mass urban upheavals. As a social relationship, capitalism is a global phenomenon, and, as the restructuring of the economy continues (with the atomization of the work process as a result), the ‘community’ has a potential as great as the workplace in the emergence of a new class-consciousness. Anarchist-communists have a long and proud history of involvement in community struggles, and we continue that in tenant unions, anti-poverty groups, and neighborhood associations.

Lastly, given both the current attack on immigrants (post-9/11) and the history of institutionalized racism and its impact on the working class on this continent, we also chose to focus on immigration and anti-racist issues (which often overlap with labor and community issues).

Any revolutionary program should start with the needs and demands of the most oppressed, and anarchist militants should be struggling shoulder to shoulder with them. This is what we try to do, with varying degrees of success, in NEFAC. While we think there is a distinction between the specific role of political organizations and social movements, we don’t think the two are totally inseparable.

To us “the anarchist organization is [...] an assembly of like-minded activists, a place of confrontation and debate, a place of synthesis of ideas, social and political experiences”. We do not see ourselves as “colonizers” within social movements, but rather as fellow activists in search of

the best strategies for our movements to win. This is how we approach our work as a political organization, and that's why we say we don't want leadership positions for ourselves but rather a "leadership of ideas", which essentially means that we are going to fight democratically within these movements to develop influence for anarchist ideas.

Against the (Anarchist) Current

Although we feel our current path is in the right direction, in many ways it goes against "mainstream" anarchist orthodoxy in North America. It has often been an uphill battle to say the least. For the first few years of our existence, NEFAC's membership was growing at a steady pace. We were essentially "recruiting" from within the existing anarchist movement. Since then, despite some recent growth in Quebec and Ontario, our regional membership has stabilized. On the one hand our ability to attract new members from the existing anarchist movement has decreased greatly (we pretty much won over everyone who agrees with our politics and strategic orientation); and on the other hand, an organization that is essentially orienting itself toward labor, community groups and immigration movements is not necessarily going to be attracting young anarchist militants (sad, but true).

Since we've adopted our new "line" of intervention, we've been essentially testing strategies and tactics, and accumulating experiences. We've learned how to support (and sometimes initiate) social struggles without falling into the opportunist traps of the political left. We have made mistakes and sometimes our interventions are still disconnected and too propagandist. But, overall, we are now welcomed and our contributions are appreciated. Better still, some comrades have learned the basics of organizing unions in their workplaces or neighborhoods, and in leading "exemplary and experimental" struggles (in the sense that they go beyond the usual 'business union' or reformist methodology).

While we may have won a certain respect and legitimacy for ourselves, we have not yet succeeded in generating serious interest for anarchism among the people we have built relationships with. The link between our fighting orientations, our analysis, and our anarchism is not always clear. Given our general youth and lack of individual and collective experience, it is understandable that we have been so inward-looking up to this point. But it cannot continue, unless we want to stagnate. To move forward we need a second conscious evolution in NEFAC, similar to the one we began when we decided on specific organizational priorities.

Despite our denials, our strategic orientation continues to be largely geared toward the existing anarchist movement. A lot of our energies are spent trying to convince anarchists of the necessity of organization, and creating a legitimate anarchist-communist pole in the anarchist movement – which we have already done with considerable success (as shown by the number of new groups that now identify as "anarchist-communist" or "platformist" as compared to five years ago). Today, we are in an awkward position. Although we have made pretensions to move away from the existing anarchist movement in order to prioritize propaganda and outreach within larger working class social movements in our region, we have not fully done either. To put it bluntly: we are currently sitting on a fence.

Where we should be going: Out of our Comfort Zone

The North American anarchist movement is incredibly small. We should be asking ourselves how much effort it's worth to form an anarchist-communist pole inside it. In the future, revolutionaries should think in terms of creating a conscious anarchist pole within social movements. This implies that we reinvent both our practice and our propagandist interventions. Right now, we are at the end of a period of accumulating experiences. Without shifting our priorities in the class struggle, we should move to an accumulation of forces.

A first step in this direction might be to reach out to all those militants who, over the years, severed ties with the so-called "anarchist movement" in favor of a deeper involvement in social movements (on an individual basis). Merging with these veterans could be a first step in the transformation of class struggle anarchism into a legitimate pole in the social movements. The number of social activists who identify with class struggle anarchism, and less importantly with our own organization, should grow in order to directly have real social influence. To do this, we must have something to offer to social movements. This "something" can be a framework of analysis, effective tactics and strategy, and methods of organization. This in turn implies a change in our propaganda apparatus. NEFAC's newspapers, which are essentially filled with socio-political news and analysis, is a step in the right direction.

Popularizing anarchism within social movements implies making anarchism accessible to everyone, hence strengthening the political presence of anarchism in our cities. Our current cannot afford to stay confined to the activist ghettos. In addition, we cannot really count on the rest of the anarchist milieu to present anarchism in an adequate manner to the population in general.

Our deeper involvement within social movements means that our priorities have been shifting and that we are not as publicly visible as before. There is generic propaganda work that is not done a lot in NEFAC. This should change as we gain experience (and hopefully grow). After all, how do we want people who are developing a radical consciousness to embrace anarchism if we are not presenting anarchist politics in the public sphere? Popularizing a fighting line without strategic perspective and an explicit anarchist social project is not enough. Sooner or later, people will ask themselves political and strategic questions; if we are not able to give a minimum of answers, they'll go elsewhere (i.e. Leninists or reformists with more accessible political programs).

Another path of development that we've recently started to take should be deepened. To consolidate anarchism in our class, revolutionaries need to go where anarchism never went: in the small cities and towns of our region. A new propagandist orientation could be useful where the anarchist movement is weak or non-existent since it could help make it known. In our infancy, joining NEFAC demanded a lot of time and energy since everything was yet to be built. Today, we are probably at a stage where we could support and help the creation of new collectives, most notably by furnishing affordable propaganda, speakers, and financial resources. But to do this, we need to make the first steps.

The 'normal' relationship between anarchists in the big cities and smaller towns has usually been a one way street: they come to the big cities for the bookfairs, the demos, to visit the local infoshop, to come to speaking events, gatherings, etc; but anarchists from the big cities rarely ever visit the smaller towns, not even when there is a well-publicized event. This needs to change and the relationship needs to become a two way street. NEFAC groups throughout the region (most notably in Quebec) are starting to change this. We try to visit our comrades as often as

possible, and try to organize tours that stop in their cities and towns. This way, we hope to build a more equal relationship.

We've already started to gain new members outside of the huge urban centers of our region. Whether it's in Petersborough, Montpelier, York, or, more recently, Saint-Georges and Sherbrooke, NEFAC is starting to develop roots outside of the "big cities". However, it is still a fragile relationship and when we fail on following through with contacts and organizing activities with them, groups often fall apart and people quietly leave. We need to seriously increase our support for these comrades.

Unfortunately, outside of joint participation in large mobilizations and our press, one of the great weaknesses of NEFAC is it's incapacity to generate common projects and campaigns. Experience shows that sub-regional structures, where comrades are able to meet more often and build campaigns and projects around local issues, are a great way to put life into the organization and build confidence and strength. Comrades in Quebec and the Mid-Atlantic already have a NEFAC Regional Unions that meet regularly and we hope that somewhere down the road, we will be able to build similar structures in Ontario and New England. We feel this would be the ideal structure to enable people from outside of our big cities to get involved in NEFAC specifically, and the anarchist movement in the general.

The Shocking Truth about NEFAC: We are (in many ways) just a Network

There's an ambiguity with NEFAC at the organizational level. Most of our founding members had no real prior experience with political organizations, and because of this we tended to approach organizing rather mechanically in the beginning. Our understanding of organizing was more theoretical than practical. Despite our "platformist" pretensions, in many ways we are much more a network than a federation, or even an organization like Love & Rage was with 'locals' and so on. Our grassroots nodes (i.e. collectives) are truly autonomous and are in constant contact with all other nodes without having to go through a central filter. Our birth at the age of the internet is largely responsible for that. However, we must recognize that we have succeeded in creating an organization that is both very decentralized, and at the same time very united.

This has sometimes led to some ambiguities. For example, we have been unable to create central positions that are elected and controlled by the whole membership. There's no elected central structure in NEFAC; every task, even political tasks like producing the publications, are given with a vague mandate to various collectives. Up to this point there have been no serious difficulties with delegating responsibilities in this manner. But, it can lead to two types of problems. First, it is almost impossible for the federation to identify problems before a large crisis erupts; and second, people with mandates have a tendency to see the projects they are responsible for as their "babies" while the rest of the organization experiences alienation. One of our future challenges will be to increase transparency and the participation of everyone, while preserving the efficiency of the organization.

We must also recognize that NEFAC functions well only when people function well. We periodically have problems of collective responsibility at all levels. Since there's no one in charge of coordinating the whole federation, we still have problems following mandates (even if we're becoming increasingly better than when we first formed). Also, we collectively seem to have an

aversion to budgeting. Of course we have a treasury and we are all supposed to pay regular dues, but the general functioning of the organization depends on the good will and self-discipline of our membership. While good will is almost always there, self-discipline is sometimes lacking.

Of course, NEFAC being a voluntary association, it is always dependent on the involvement of its members. There are, however, a number of little things to correct. First, there's a question of attitude. People often talk (or rather chat) a lot, and talk tough, but are often doing little on a daily basis. This means that the work is always done in a rush, similar to the rest of the activist culture. We would probably gain from initiating an organizational routine that would enable us to integrate our political tasks to our daily life. By that I mean to say that we should systemize certain tasks like collecting dues, paying magazines and newspapers, distributing propaganda, organizing meetings and events, developing supporter networks, building contacts, etc. In short, it could only help if we could learn to take ourselves a little bit more seriously.

At the level of theoretical and tactical unity, there are many assets. First, the very existence of NEFAC itself and our vision of revolutionary organization is a theoretical and tactical asset. Our strategic orientation is another asset. When we finally adopt a labor position paper (it's on the way, really!), we will have made another big step. We should, however, note that there is still an ambiguity: Is our intervention on the various fronts to be done by the creation of new radical mass organizations which will radicalize "from outside" the existing social movements, or is it to be done by our direct involvement in already existing (reformist) mass organizations with the goal of radicalizing them? Our current experience hasn't led us to any final conclusions one way or the other, and it is not clear that one strategy necessarily excludes the other.

We are not scared of that ambiguity. After all, we are anarchists and not Marxist-Leninists. We have no leaders, no established theoretical model, and no "correct line" to fall back on. Furthermore, we feel that our conception of organization is entirely human: we learn as we walk. Many are currently walking down the same road we have taken. The questions we struggle with are the same questions anarchists from all over the world are currently struggling with. Whether they are called "especificista" or "platformist", our current is taking shape everywhere.

NEFAC does not have all the answers, nor would we claim otherwise. We continue to be faced with many tough questions and no easy answers: how political minorities can be a radicalizing force within mass-based struggles without compromising democracy and accountability; how to win short-term victories without falling outside of a long-term revolutionary framework; how to build truly transnational and multi-lingual organizations and movements; or how best to develop strategies for building social power and cultures of resistance within areas of struggle.

We are continually challenging ourselves, testing our theories with practice, and learning from our collective experiences... but in order to get to a level where we feel we need to be as a revolutionary organization, there is still a long and uncertain road ahead of us.

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Retrieved on 14th October 2021 from anarchistplatform.wordpress.com
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Originally published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* Issue #10, Spring/Summer 2005.

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