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Anarchy and its Allies

The United Front and Groupings of Tendency

Tommy Lawson

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November 3, 2021

Retrieved on 4th November 2021 from libcom.org
An article introducing the concepts anarchists have used to
frame collaboration with other tendencies during struggle.
Including the United Front, Popular Front, Workers Alliance
and the Combative Tendency.

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November 3, 2021

Contents

Why Collaborative Struggle?	6
The Popular and United Fronts	7
The Workers Alliance	11
The Combative Tendency and Las Dos Patos . .	14
The Grouping of Tendency	16
When to March Separate, When to Strike To- gether	17
References	19

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Anarchism in the Oceanic region is entering a new stage of development. The birth of several new organisations in Australia and the increasing co-operation between them speaks to the need for theoretical clarity. The functional basis of efficient work is theoretical clarity, and as such understanding how and why anarchists engage in work in social movements, who they make alliances with and how they struggle is fundamental.

As we know, revolutionary movements do not make up the mass of society. If they did, there would be socialism already. Therefore, every revolutionary tendency must address questions related to its isolation and potential alliances, its minimum and maximum goals, and the strategic and tactical means to achieve them. Relations between revolutionaries and reformists, conjunctural analysis of material conditions, the prospects of defensive and offensive work, and the political level at which alliances are to be made are all further considerations. Finally a realistic appraisal of relations with the mass of the working class further informs conceptualisation. Theoretical frameworks, fleshed out with the benefit of past experience, help us to clarify what works and where.

A common framework for collaborative struggle employed by socialist revolutionaries was the *United Front*. The United Front was theorised in the early 1920's by the Marxist Comintern and further developed by Leon Trotsky. At almost the same time, a similar model was articulated by the Italian anarchists Armando Borghi and Errico Malatesta. Any understanding of the United Front must be contrasted to the *Popular Front*, advocated by the Stalinist parties and the Comintern in the 1930s.

But the United Front, still employed by Marxist and Anarchist groups as a strategy today, does not stand as a solution for all times and places. The space of intervention, the intermediacy of goals and political context require different frameworks to articulate correct approaches towards political work. In response to various contexts, anarchists of different tenden-

cies have articulated other approaches; the UAI's *United Proletarian Front* and *Singular Revolutionary Front* respectively, the CNT's syndicalist *Workers Alliance*, the Anarquista Federación Uruguaya's *Combative Tendency* and the modern especificista *Grouping of Tendency*. Each of these have contributed to frameworks of how anarchists can, and should, approach collaborative work with other social forces.

Why Collaborative Struggle?

Social struggle mobilises not only people of various classes, but evidently also those of different political ideologies. In any concrete situation there will be a variety of forces working to achieve sometimes different, sometimes similar goals. For example, those opposed to a monarchy might be everyone from the progressive bourgeois republicans, through to socialists and anarchists. Against a conservative government in a liberal democratic state might be everyone from social democrats to anarchists. Furthermore, in a moment of social revolution there will be various factions willing to 'go all the way', even if they differ somewhat in their visions for a post-revolutionary society.¹ Within social movements and trade union struggles the questions posed are different yet again.

To organise in any situation requires theory that can provide a framework for assessing a concrete situation, what can be achieved and how the movement can be pushed further forwards. A balance of forces must be analysed and a path forwards developed. That is, a theoretical framework should provide a strategy. Historically there have been several conceptual frameworks and subsequent strategies adopted by the far-left in regards to guiding work not only during a revolution, but also during day to day campaigns and struggles. It is worth briefly addressing each of these most common strategies in or-

¹ Ie, Trotskyists, Maoists, Autonomists, Syndicalists etc.

However it is not a substitute for politics, the ability to think critically and collectively analyse a situation.

There are countless factors that must be analysed in any situation. Correct understanding requires not only concrete involvement in the mass struggle, but theoretical unity and a sense of direction. This is the strength of the specific anarchist-communist organisation, avoiding the mistakes of other anarchist tendencies and some former movements. In the end, what matters is that our actions contribute to the development of working class power.

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the interests of bourgeois politics. The lesson that proletarian organisations must maintain their independence is written in the blood of Spanish revolutionaries.

The United Front, undoubtedly rich in history both amongst anarchists and Marxists, is a concept that can be refined and drawn upon in important situations. From potentially revolutionary moments, to the harrowing work of anti-fascism. The mistakes of the Italian and German Marxists in rejecting the defensive United Front are stamped in history as great proletarian tragedies. But that does not mean it is a model to be applied to all manner of social work. As we can see, even in the Australian context, it can be mistakenly applied when an organisation does not have a theoretical framework for social work at various political levels. Engaging with other organisations with a framework also helps avoid the pitfalls of unprincipled sectarianism. Knowing when, where and why to argue against another organisation is a standard of an organisation or tendency that is serious about its goals and how to achieve them.

The Grouping of Tendency, developed from the experiences of the FAU and further refined by the experience of esepicist organisations can be a useful framework for engagement. Again, this depends on the tasks at hand and the means of achieving them. Revolutionaries should ask themselves: what approach best serves both the movement and the growth of the ideology? With what means can we achieve the ends we seek in a particular moment? What are the balance of forces? Are we working in unions, social movements or facing the prospect of revolutionary transformation? Will betrayal or repression smash us, our allies, or the movement? How does the international situation inform prospects?

The situation faced today is immensely different to those faced by the organisations discussed in this article. Ultimately, a framework is a useful guide based on previous experience.

der to clarify strengths and weaknesses and then to propose an alternative framework.

The Popular and United Fronts

The first framework we will look at is the Popular Front. The Popular Front was the name of the electoral coalition of socialists and left-wing Republicans during the 1936 Spanish elections. In France, a similar coalition adopted exactly the same name. (Cooper, 2021) The strategy of nominally proletarian, revolutionary organisations entering and subordinating themselves to coalitions with progressive bourgeois forces was articulated by the Comintern in the face of the international threat of fascism. The logic was that the revolutionary goals of the working class were for the moment unachievable, thus its organisations must form an alliance with progressive bourgeois forces. Workers, it was argued, could not defeat fascism alone.

The Comintern by 1936 however also had the ulterior motive of supporting Soviet national interests over the international revolution. The turn to the Popular Front was a sharp about-face for the Comintern affiliated parties, following a period of ‘ultra-leftism’ that had begun in 1928. (Hallas, 1972) During the so-called “Third Period” leading to the Popular Front, Communist Parties had refused to work with even other left-wing proletarian forces. The zig-zag of Comintern politics over the decade reflected the immediate needs of what had already developed as Soviet imperialism.

As such, when revolution began in Spain it was brought under the thumb of the Soviet Union. Support, in the form of weapons, was conditional to rolling back revolutionary aspirations. Collectivisation was abandoned in order to ‘win the war’ by attracting support from foreign, non-fascist bourgeois states. But the Popular Front was an utter disaster. Not only did foreign ‘democratic’ nations not support the

Republic against the fascists, bourgeois forces took advantage of the alliance to smash working class forces. The result was a severely constrained revolutionary impetus that could have possibly emerged from such a severe crisis of capitalism. The rolling back of collectivisation had a secondary effect, the crippling of both morale and the economy.² for a post-revolutionary soci At the same time, France and Belgium experienced massive waves of strikes and factory occupations. The potential for international proletarian struggle to aid the Spanish revolutionaries was then betrayed by the French Communist Party under the logic of the Popular Front.

As the Italian Left-Communist journal *Bilan* noted at the time, the Spanish Revolution was ultimately defeated under the slogan of Anti-Fascism. (Communist Workers Organisation, 2011) Since the defeat of the Spanish Revolution, the Popular Front strategy has since been employed to largely disastrous results during the Second World War, the sequence of National Liberation Struggles and even Salvador Allende's government in 1973 Chile. (Cooper, 2021)

The Popular Front must of course be contrasted to the United Front. The United Front, as it is popularly understood, was a strategy developed by the Bolshevik Party and implemented via the Comintern in various other national contexts. It was a strategy for the defensive period following the Russian Revolution. International revolutionary movements, particularly those in Italy and Germany, had failed and the likelihood of international revolution had seriously declined. (Choonara, 2007)

² In particular, the so called 'Bread Wars' of Barcelona, orchestrated by a Stalinist minister returned the working class population of the city to near starvation levels. Socialised production and distribution was smashed and returned to speculators and private ownership, decimating the ability of many families to feed themselves. When the priority becomes food, there is also less time for politics.

to the aforementioned Popular and United Fronts, as it operates at the levels of both social movements and political struggle. The clear distinction between the social and political levels in especificist theory allows for a concrete analysis of what alliances can be made and where across society.

For the grouping of tendencies, in any situation where a coalition of forces is gathered to achieve a particular aim, anarchists attempt to establish an intermediate form of organisation based on a set of coherent definitions of practice and ideological affinities. (Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro, 2008) This model can be seen to be inspired by the work of the FAU via the *Resistencia Obrero Estudiantil*. It is practical in a situation where both the anarchist organisation and the social movement may be better served by participating through a broader organisation. Before establishing a Grouping of Tendency, organisations involved study the material conditions and prospects of achieving the end goals to assure it is the right strategic choice. It is quite possible that direct participation in a social movement as an anarchist organisation is the correct strategy, and the Grouping of Tendency risks the similar mistake that certain Marxists groups use in employing the United Front. However, the distinction of having a theoretical framework for social movement and union work as opposed to revolutionary situations is not to be underestimated.

When to March Separate, When to Strike Together

As we have seen from only a few examples, the history of anarchism has been rich with practical struggles. There are lessons from countless contexts to draw upon when informing our analysis of potential outcomes at any juncture. That the Popular Front was a disaster cannot be disputed, with the subsumption of revolutionary movements and organisations to

(Sharkley, 2009) This is perhaps related to the close basis the OPR militants had in the concerned workplaces.

Such actions occurred in the context of a continental wide surge of armed struggle inspired by the Cuban Revolution. The OPR however differed sharply on the strategies and reasons for employing armed struggle, with the FAU offering scathing critiques of vanguardist Marxist groups in the region. (Federación Anarquista Uruguaya, 1972) This did not however, stop them from engaging in joint action with groups like the MLN-Tupamaros at crucial times in the national struggle.⁸

Unlike the prior examples of Italy, Russia and Spain, Uruguayan revolutionaries faced a uniquely difficult task. Not only were they building capacity for revolution, but also confronting a situation of popular struggle dominated by the hegemony of a Communist Party that was revolutionary in name but reformist in practice. As we can see, the FAU navigated the dynamics of a turbulent social period with unique insight. This was made possible by the high level of political clarity, based around unitary theory and a programme, which the former anarchist organisations discussed often lacked. The methodology of performing concrete analysis of where practical alliances can be made and to achieve what ends feeds into the next conception further developed by South American especificist groups.

The Grouping of Tendency

A model that some especificist anarchists have developed in order to frame and direct their own intervention into movements and struggles is the Grouping of Tendency. It is different

⁸ For a brilliant critique of terroristic armed struggle see the Brisbane Self-Management Groups pamphlet “You Can’t Blow Up A Social Relationship,” alternative published by the Australian Libertarian Socialist Organisation.

In Italy, at the beginning of the 1921 fascist reaction, the famous anarchist Errico Malatesta proposed the Fronte Unico Rivoluzionario. (Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici, 2003) The intention was to form a defensive, Anti-Fascist United Front. Italian workers had initially formed Workers Defence Committees, uniting proletarians at the rank and file to meet fascist onslaught. These Defence Committees soon joined with left-wing ex-servicemen, establishing the anti-fascist militia, the Artidi del Popolo. (Fighting Talk, 1996) Tragically, in Italy the Socialist Party and the Communist Party both withdrew from the Artidi, leaving the anarchists, syndicalists and republicans to fight fascism alone. (Price, 2012) Leon Trotsky further articulated the Anti-Fascist form of the United Front in the 1930s, arguing that German workers’ organisations must unite on a practical level for mass action to confront the fascist threat.³ (Trotsky, 1931)

In basic terms, the United Front suggests revolutionary proletarian organisations should form tactical and strategic alliances with reformist proletarian organisations, such as social democrats. Firstly, in the defensive form it is a strategy to be applied when radical forces are in a minority. (Trotsky, 1922) It is imperative in these alliances the revolutionary organisation maintains its right to independence. In the fight to achieve concrete, shared political aims, the social democrats will do what they inevitably do. They will falter, stop short of the goal, or betray the class. The other side of this, is that during a period of struggle workers develop a taste of their own power.

³ The long history of betrayal between German Social Democrats and Communists fed into a hostile relationship, further damaged by the Cominterns ‘ultra-left’ opposition to United Fronts at the time. This had dire consequences. Similarly in Argentina, anti-fascist work was marred by hostile relations between anarchists and Marxists. Anarchists would not work with Marxists who would not speak up for their imprisoned comrades in Russia. Sometimes in anti-fascist work, it can be more important to swallow our pride.

They may wish to put even more radical demands forward, which reformists will not wish to pursue. In either of these situations, revolutionary communist organisations can point out the failings of reformist politics. This can potentially result in winning over the rank and file, and sometimes even the leaders, of reformist organisations with whom revolutionaries have been working side by side. All of this can accumulate towards a period when revolutionaries may return to the offensive.

A slightly different form of United Front had also been proposed by Italian anarcho-syndicalist Armando Borghi in 1920 during the height of the factory occupations. Known as the Proletarian United Front, this was an offensive position. (Malatesta, 2014) Borghi hoped to bring workers organisations, all nominally committed to revolution, into a shared front to make socialist revolution.⁴ This included a number of trade union bodies and socialist parties. While the anarchists realised with the proposal they may not win over the leadership of the less revolutionary organisations, they hoped on the shop floor they could win over the workers. This offensive version of the United Front failed. The Socialists, despite their affiliation to the Third International, and the reformist trade union body, the CGIL, voted not to pursue social revolution. (Lawson, 2021)

There can be no doubt that overall, the United Front has solid strategic logic as a defensive concept. But of course, it also has its shortcomings. They are not however nearly as dire as the Popular Front. The United Front model can be confusedly applied by some Trotskyist groups to all manner of situations and levels of political struggle. For example, to Choonara of the International Socialists the United Front can include campaign

⁴ For more on the Proletarian United Front and the limits of collaborative action, see Vernon Richards “*Life and Ideas: The Anarchist Writings of Errico Malatesta*”, PM Press.

fight. Eventually these also gave in, and the military assumed control of the country.

In exile, former members of the Frente Ampilío broke away from the Communist Party, and instead formed a *Frente Nacional de Resistencia* which included the FAU. This finally smashed Communist Party hegemony, but only in exile. (Kokinis, Forthcoming) The FAU and Tendencia had found a way to encourage class struggle and channel it towards transformative direct action methods outside the control of a much larger, institutionalised Communist Party. They believed the labour movement was the only thing capable of overcoming the looming military coup, but were left too isolated to achieve victory when the moment came.

The secondary aspect of the period is known as the *Las Dos Patos*, or “Two Feet” strategy. This included a mass organisation, *Resistencia Obrero Estudiantil*, or Workers Student Resistance (ROE) which aimed to bring together the emerging struggles both in the workplace and social movements. The ROE effectively integrated over ten thousand people broadly on the far left, including radical Marxist groups. (Kokinis, Forthcoming) The ROE was used to caucus along joint lines of action within the unions during the period the FAU was illegal and hence underground. This secondary level of organisation allowed for the FAU to find a functional apparatus above ground, united broader social groups behind labour conflicts, and allowed different radical groups the ability to ‘strike together.’

The other side of the *Las Dos Patos* was the People’s Revolutionary Organisation (OPR-33), an armed wing of the FAU. Subordinated to political organisation, its primary tasks were the undertaking of missions that supported the mass workers’ struggle. This included kidnappings only when the labour struggle had reached its maximum potential during strikes. Industry moguls like Molaguera, a baron in the rubber industry, was taken but not harmed. Somewhat surprisingly, this tactic usually led to successful conclusions for labour struggles.

The Combative Tendency and Las Dos Patos

The third example we will turn to is that of the unique experience of the Federación Anarquista Uruguay (FAU) during the 1960's and 70's. The FAU's insight of coalitions of struggle on three levels marks a unique moment in proletarian history and a break from the political realities which produced the first United Fronts.

Firstly, the *Combativa Tendencia*. During the end of the 1960's the FAU helped precipitate the forming of a new national union body in Uruguay that would compose over 90% of unionised workers. The majority of these workers who were members of political parties belong to the Uruguayan Communist Party, a reformist organisation obedient to Soviet interests. Within the CNT, the FAU set about organising with more militant Marxist groups, such as the MLN-Tupamaros. Together, these groupings made up the Combative Tendency voting block. (Kokinis, Forthcoming)

While the CP attempted to push progressive movements and organisations toward their electoral project, the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front), the FAU and the Tendencia grew in the vacuum left by CP leadership in the labour movement. While the Frente Apilio proved an abysmal failure, by 1973 even unions that were traditional Communist Party strongholds were breaking party policy, striking and occupying factories. As an internal FAU document from the period notes, "in the end.. what matters... is who organises and practically leads the struggle. Not who has the majority at congresses." (Federación Anarquista Uruguay, 2021) Amid the escalating tension of class war, the military launched a coup in June 1973. The CNT launched a nationwide general strike and factory occupations in response. The CP returned its unions to work within a week, leaving more militant Tendencia unions isolated to

work, where progressive alliances actually include bourgeois and petty-bourgeois organisations. (Choonara, 2007) This can result in socialist organisations tailing or subsuming their politics to Social Democratic and liberal forces who vastly outnumber them. The International Socialists in Australia were an organisation that fell victim to such mistaken analysis. Debates around the United Front formed part of the basis of the Socialist Alternative and Solidarity split. (Armstrong, 2010)

The mistaken employment of the United Front in campaigns can function as cover for liberal politics. Furthermore, in more serious political alliances the United Front can risk being interpreted by workers as a betrayal of revolutionary principles. Especially if at crucial moments reformist forces do not live up to their agreed task in action to achieve particular goals, or if Social Democratic forces turn on revolutionaries. In both situations this risks leaving revolutionary forces isolated and appearing as adventurists. Finally, the agreement by leadership of organisations to a United Front does not guarantee co-operation at a rank and file level. Ultimately, what makes a United Front effective is both the trust built by working together at base levels of the constituent organisations, the political and social level⁵ at which the United Front is to operate, and a correct analysis of the conjuncture.

The Workers Alliance

As discussed before, there can be no denying that the Popular Front was the beginning of the end of the Spanish Revolution. With hindsight the failures of the Spanish proletariat to complete its tasks in making revolution are apparent. However

⁵ For example, during revolutionary action, anti-fascist organising, and social movements. All these situations can require different alliances, strategies and tactics and should not be confused. Hence the importance of the correct conjunctural analysis.

in the years preceding '36, the anarcho-syndicalist movement faced other moments that were potentially revolutionary.

In particular, in 1934, the mining region of Asturias erupted in a revolt coined by history as the 'Asturian Commune.'⁶ The revolt was a planned uprising in response to a fascist organisation, CEDA, joining the newly elected Government. (Samblas, 2005) It was precipitated by a revolutionary coalition known as the *Alianza Obrera*, or (Revolutionary) Workers Alliance. Initially formed by the anarcho-syndicalist trade union CNT, the socialist dominated UGT, it was later joined by the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Party), the BOC (Worker-Peasant Bloc, left wing Marxists), the Communist Left and the Communist Party. (Hernandez, 1994) In Asturias the rank and file of the socialist movement were far more left-wing than the rest of the country, and the local federation of the CNT sought to unite with fellow workers for revolutionary aspirations. (Palomo, 2017) In the mind of the majority of the Asturian CNT, unity could be formed on the basis of the workers' economic basis and around a basic program of workers' democracy. (Fernández, 1934) That is, their existence as producers was enough to unite workers in revolutionary aspirations, rather than 'political' loyalties. This anti-political⁷ attitude was typical of anarcho-syndicalists more broadly.

Outside of Asturias however, national tensions between the political forces undermined efforts at forming a country-wide Workers Alliance. The top down approach of other political forces, combined with a history of PSOE repression and UGT

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the events of 1934 in Asturias, see Matthew Kerry, "Unite, Proletarian Brothers! Radicalism and Revolution in the Spanish Second Republic", University of London Press.

⁷ It is a common myth that anarchist 'anti-politics' means to completely ignore politics. It actually means to abstain from parliamentary politics, and fight for political gains using economic methods, i.e. trade unionism, strikes, boycotts and workplace sabotage. While syndicalists may refuse 'politics' at times, the flipside of this abstentionism can be opportunistic alliances.

scabbing against anarchist workers fed into an untimely sectarianism. The FAI in particular was hostile to the Workers Alliance. When the revolt erupted, the alliance failed for various reasons in every other region. Though a majority of the country went on general strike, it left Asturias to fight alone. The workers held out for a fortnight, establishing a form of proletarian self-governance until crushed by the military. (Hernandez, 1994)

There is an incredibly complicated history to the relations between the UGT and CNT which is not the task of this article to delve into. However we can draw a number of lessons on the anarcho-syndicalist conception of the Workers Alliance. Firstly, the Asturian syndicalists were correct in their analysis of the potentially productive relationship with socialist workers. However, the national movement lacked the capacity to make appropriate analysis of the conjuncture they were situated in. (Palomo, 2017) Part of the flaw in their thinking was the naive belief that workers could be united purely on the basis of their proletarian existence. This reflects the anarcho-syndicalist mistake of collapsing of the social and political levels.

During the Spanish Revolution, this mistake would again rear its head. CNT members would join revolutionary committees at various levels with UGT members on the basis of their 'proletarian unity.' However Stalinist members of the PSUC would use their UGT cards to enter these committees and argue against revolutionary ends.

Where the Workers Alliance was correct was the understanding of the need to fight together. There was a correct analysis that a positive relationship with the rank and file of the UGT in action could win workers over to increasingly revolutionary perspectives. This was made more difficult by the confused anarcho-syndicalist approach to politics, and the split basis of the labour movement in Spain.