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How Anarchist is the Platform?

2005

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The rest of the zine, which are just excerpts of the *Platform* and Malatesta's commentary, are excluded.

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Now, if this [revolutionary] tendency wants to be definitively liberatory, and doesn't want to deceive itself with the replacement of an old power with a new power, it must start from the self-organization of the struggles of the exploited. This self-organization is already under way, and, in itself, forms the most interesting theoretical proposal that the last few years of struggle have furnished. It is up to the anarchist revolutionary minority not to attempt – once again – to impose upon this process of self-organized structuring organizational forms that are foreign to it.

[...]

The new anarchist "party" would certainly not be the thing that would solve the problems of social revolution, but rather the self-organized exploited, with the presence of anarchists as carriers, in the specific sense, of the clearest concrete conception of the methods and possibilities of self-organization. This anarchist presence can only be useful on the condition that it does not expect to impose,

from the outside, a preordained model for the interpretation of reality, a model that, as such, could only call itself liberatory by verbal definition.

—Alfredo M. Bonanno

One could legitimately ask me why I am printing a pamphlet consisting of texts from a debate nearly eighty years old. The reason is simple. In recent years, for reasons that I do not understand, some anarchists have begun again to promote “The Organizational Platform of General Union of Anarchists (Project)” (also known as “The Organizational Platform of Libertarian Communists”) published by the Dielo Trouda group as a basis for current anarchist practice. Although texts and letters were slow in getting to him in fascist Italy, Malatesta nonetheless attempted a comradely critical debate with Nestor Makhno about the Platform, and Malatesta’s critique of this document and the organizational structure it proposes remains among the best.

There can be no doubt that one of the most pressing questions for anarchists at any time is that of how to act effectively in the world in a way consistent with our aims. Just as the original proposers of the Platform were sincere anarchists trying to wrestle with this question, I assume that the same is true for most contemporary “platformists”. But there is something a bit nostalgic in turning to a nearly eighty-year-old document that comes from a specific context to try and find answers to that question now.

The Platform was written in 1926 by five anarchists who had been involved in the Russian revolution. The question they were trying to deal with was the lack of effectiveness of anarchists in that revolution and more generally. Reading the full document, one finds that a great deal of their analysis relates to the specific context of Russia at the time of the revolution – a time in which 85% of the population of the country still consisted of peasants. This in itself would limit the relevance of the document to our present situation. In addition, the adherence to a productivist ideology fur-

ther calls any relevance for the present into question. The idea that social revolution centers around seizing the current means of production and operating them in a communist manner simply seems absurd today. Revolution can no longer be conceived of as centering around the means of production, but must rather be seen as a transformation of the totality of life, a transformation in which work as a definable separate sphere of life ceases to exist. Thus, the work ethic that permeates the Platform is also antiquated. This morality of work is made evident in their choice to define class divisions in terms of “the working class” and “the non-working class”. It seems to me that it would make much more sense from an anarchist perspective to speak of the ruling class and the exploited and dispossessed class or classes.

But a contemporary platformist might argue that the relevance of the Platform lies elsewhere, not in its specific suggestions about workers’ and peasants’ struggles of that time, but in its general principles. Fine, but then, what are those general principles? They are stated explicitly in the “Organizational Section” below, but in order to better understand these principles I think it is relevant as well to consider how the original platformists saw the problem of the failure of anarchist effectiveness and relevance.

In reading the introduction to the Platform, it is quite evident that the writers saw the failure of anarchists on essentially political terms. The problem, as they saw it, was that anarchists lacked a unified program to offer the proletarian struggle, a unified theory and practice for guiding the class struggle in the direction of libertarian communism. What the original platformists did not seem to realize is that by proposing the question in these terms, they do not escape the logic of authoritarian and statist revolutionaries. They are still posing the question of revolutionary effectiveness in terms of a power/counter-power dynamic of struggle, rather than in terms of the destruction of all institutional power. For all practical intents and purposes the “General Union of Anarchists” that they call for has the function of a revolutionary *party*, with all that

demands. It is the source of the revolutionary consciousness of the workers and peasants. It is to prepare them for the social revolution. It is to educate them and to provide a sort of leadership. By considering the problem in essentially political terms, the comrades of Dielo Trouda drift into a leninist logic, not necessarily in terms of authoritarianism, but certainly in terms of the idea of the special organization as a consciousness outside of the class.

It is this *political* way of viewing the problem that explains the first three principles of organization proposed in the platform: 1) theoretical unity; 2) tactical unity; and 3) collective responsibility. Indeed, for anarchists to function as a kind of political party, these would be absolutely necessary. But, of course, these three principles would apply to any political party, anarchist or not. So a fourth principle is included as well: federalism, i.e., the necessity for the Union and revolutionary society to operate in a non-hierarchical, decentralized, horizontal manner. But the “description” of this point is in fact a myriad of reservations and conditions along with proposals for “secretariats”, a coordinating “executive committee” and “fixed organizational duties”. The smell of bureaucracy is in the air. And that may explain why most contemporary “platformists” also deny a strict adherence to these principles – of course, then begging the question of what is useful in the Platform.

As I see it, the error of the writers of the Platform is precisely in perceiving the problem as an essentially political problem that can be solved through a specific organizational form coming from outside the struggles of the exploited themselves. The self-organization that insurgent exploited and dispossessed people develop in the course of their struggles is always *anti-political*, and this should be an indication to anarchists who have no desire to seize political power. If we intervene as just another political organization with its pre-conceived program, that is how we will be perceived and judged. And the best anyone who desires the real liberation of the exploited classes could hope for in this case would be for the anarchists to be laughed off the stage along

with the leninists, syndicalists and other wannabe “leaders of the proletarian masses”. The real question for us must go beyond any political question. It centers around a very real tension. We, ourselves, are among the exploited and dispossessed. Our participation in the class struggle against the ruling order is in our own interest. But we also have certain specific analyses and theoretical conceptions of what we are contending with, and certain desires and dreams about how we wish to live. So the question becomes one of how to carry on our own struggles in which these ideas, desires and dreams play a significant part in such a way that they intertwine with the struggles of other exploited and dispossessed people, encouraging the spread of self-organized revolt. Self-organization has its own principles: 1) autonomy from all representative organizations (including parties, unions and the like); 2) direct action; 3) non-hierarchical, horizontal relationships; 4) the individual as the basic unit of organization; and 5) practicality (it is the organization of tasks and activities necessary to the struggle). Anarchist intervention in self-organized struggle would be precisely to encourage all of these traits, to expose and actively discourage all recuperators – party and union hacks and other politicians regardless of their ideology – , to encourage the movement toward permanent conflictuality with the enemy and a practice of attack (which means the refusal of negotiations and compromise with the rulers); in other words, to encourage the spread of self-organized revolt not just quantitatively, but more essentially *qualitatively*, towards the total reappropriation of every aspect of life. And this is a fundamentally *anti-political* project, one in which as the exploited class annuls itself as a class, so also we annul ourselves as anarchists, in the sense that we find ourselves as self-determined individuals developing our lives together in free association with other self-determined individuals.