

Reclaiming Our Global Past

**Why South Africa is Not “New Terrain” for Anarchism/Syndicalism, and How
it is Being Re-implemented Locally**

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INTRODUCTION

Red and black regards, comrades! Mass organisations of counter-power of the working class and poor based on revolutionary counter-culture and direct action are necessary for social revolution. To build these, anarchism needs to become the dominant ideology of the working class, peasantry and poor (the popular classes) again. The current South African (SA) context, given its history and the current balance of forces, dictates that it is amongst the black majority that anarchism needs to take hold. Black working class anarchists are best able to relate the ideas most effectively to local community and cultural landscapes. As anarchism competes with other ideologies, a militant black working class cadre can only emerge out of rigorous political education and activism centred on the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism (anarchist trade unionism). To achieve this outcome, we argue for a specific anarchist political organisation: a Bakuninist organisation of tendency based on a shared platform of theoretical and strategic unity and individual discipline, working with and in the organisations of the popular classes – trade unions and social movements.

This historical legacy of organisation has re-emerged within countries of the “developing world.” The *especificismo* model, influenced by the experiences of the comrades of the FAU of Uruguay and modelled on the Bakuninist “Platformist” tradition, has tremendous support in the anarchist resurgence in South America and has been adopted by the ZACF.

Anarchism’s core principles of direct democracy, mutual aid, free and voluntary association and its commitment to a revolutionary transformation of society from one based on oppression and domination, are again attractive to a global working class and poor seeking to remove the shackles of capitalism and the state. Its foremost strategy of mass anarchism (building popular class organisations of counter-power in workplaces and communities) is making steady progress, particularly in centres experiencing the harsh realities of capitalist crisis, state violence and renewed austerity attacks.

However, much still needs to be done if we are to accept the historical anarchist legacy – borne of the libertarian wing of the international workers’ movement of the late 1800s, of dedication and commitment to a global revolutionary cause for a truly free socialist, egalitarian world. We want an anarchist world where production and distribution are based on human need, not profit and where all are fundamentally free to live and work as they see fit as long as the same right for others is secured. Southern Africa had several willing and militant advocates some 100 years ago. Thus present day applications of anarchist strategy in SA are not new in seeking to win over the black working class majority to anarchism/ syndicalism.

ANARCHISM/ SYNDICALISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Acknowledging this legacy involves critically examining history and the influence of ideas on movement-building and revolutionary politics. In looking at the history of southern African workers’ movements, particularly among black workers, the huge impact of syndicalism on these historical formations is clearly evident. Locally, these ideas were transmitted by, particularly, Scottish migrant workers in the late 1800s. However, anarchists and syndicalists faced a context marred by deep racial divisions between black (African, Coloured/ mixed race and Indian) and white workers and the national oppression of the black working class. Local syndicalists thus

“maintained a principled opposition to racial discrimination and oppression, and a principled commitment to the creation of a multiracial anti-capitalist, anti-statist movement”.¹

This approach distinguished it from the Marxist “national-democratic approach” that had emerged during the early 20th century, which separated the struggle against national oppression from the class struggle into distinct stages. The syndicalist approach sought to mobilise black workers around both class and national issues. The formation of the first trade union for Africans, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) in 1917, modelled on the syndicalist multiracial One Big Union concept, meant that by 1921 a truly multiracial revolutionary syndicalist movement with a vast network of counter-cultural practice had been formed. However, the IWA was only the latest syndicalist formation of the time and was preceded by the Cape Town IWW of 1910, the Clothing Workers’ Industrial Union, the Indian Workers’ Industrial Union, the Horse Drivers’ Union and the Sweet and Jam Workers’ Industrial Union representing several thousands. These were some of the first unions for people of colour. Side-by-side with these syndicalist formations, syndicalist political organisations, such as the Social Democratic Federation, the International Socialist League, the Industrial Socialist League and the libertarian wing of the Socialist Labour Party (van der Walt, 2011), were formed.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION THEN AND NOW

The social similarities between then and now are striking. Neo-liberal economic globalisation and migration have meant the re-emergence of the national question in our anarchist politics. The challenge posed to us anarchists and other working class movements is to understand the role of national and racial identities in everyday life and struggle. If we ignore them, we risk alienating ourselves from working class contexts and people deeply scarred by the legacies of the past and present – colonial and imperial expansionism, slavery, racism, apartheid, etc. We also hand the initiative, both rhetorical and in practice, to proponents of nationalism and far right-wing ideologies, which offer attractive yet false solutions to working class frustration and discontent. These deepen xenophobia and often lead to vicious intra-class rivalries and violence, which divide the popular classes into political ghettos. They do nothing to build united revolutionary counter-power, securing ruling class domination. There are numerous global examples of this in the past and today, as the recent round of xenophobic pogroms in South Africa makes clear.

The SA working class and poor face desperation on a frightening scale. Many are confined to makeshift corrugated iron and wood shacks without running water nor electricity, poor educational facilities and the daily violence of life in poverty.

Constitutional rights since the end of apartheid have meant little without concomitant socio-economic liberation. Thus the ZACF argues that the 1994 democratic transition that installed Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) as the new ruling class in the state signalled an important, but incomplete national liberation for the black majority. Despite the thousands of community protests annually, many continue to see salvation in the ANC, political parties and the state. As such these protests are generally aimed at reconfiguring community-level ANC political relations so as to access local state power. The state and, thus, the ANC are seen as avenues to wealth, power and to escape poverty. People also compete for state power (at local,

¹ Hirsch & van der Walt. 2010. *Anarchism and Syndicalism*, p.33. An exemplary study of this period can be found in Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt’s *Anarchism and Syndicalism*.

provincial and national levels) so as to reward benefactors, family and friends with state tenders. This has meant increasingly violent competition for positions within the ANC.

The private economy continues to be dominated by local white and international elites. Claims of a white, racist conspiracy against black people usually fails to acknowledge that the SA state controls up to 35% of the economy, where some of the largest multinational companies operating on the African continent are SA parastatals, e.g. Eskom, Denel, Transnet, etc.

These conditions impact on the theoretical, strategic and tactical choices made by anarchists in South Africa today. This means working with and in a range of working class working class formations, but in the anarchist way: raising our critiques and analyses openly and honestly in all fora, much in the same way envisaged and practiced by Bakunin and the International Alliance.²

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE ZACF TODAY

From 1921, anarchism/syndicalism slowly disappeared from the political scene in southern Africa. The massive propaganda machine of the Russian Bolsheviks spreading their version of victory in 1917, the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921 and its purge of libertarian communists and syndicalists in 1928 (on Comintern orders) launched Marxism as the dominant left force in South Africa, a position it still holds today.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the largest trade union federation, emerged out of the struggles against apartheid and capitalism during the 1970s and 80s. Despite its recent expulsion of its largest affiliate in the metal section, NUMSA, it represents most of the labour force in South Africa (a country with a 35- 40% unemployment rate)³ and is predominantly black. It is in an alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP, renamed so in 1950) and the ruling ANC, which dominates this alliance. There are 3 smaller union federations, viz. the Federation of Democratic Unions of South Africa (historically made up of unions for white workers, but which has many black workers as dual members with Cosatu unions), the National Congress of Trade Unions (influenced by Black Consciousness and Marxism) and Solidarity (mainly of white Afrikaner membership).

Despite a heavy Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, the socio-economic policies of both Cosatu and the SACP are social-democratic/ Keynesianist, which in turn are subsumed by the neo-liberal policies of the ANC. This despite the fact that many SACP and Cosatu officials are members of and are elected to state office through the ANC.

The ravages of neo-liberal capitalism and state domination have meant sustained attacks on workers and the poor in SA. Cosatu's ties to the ANC, SACP and Marxism, as well as its highly authoritarian, bureaucratic structure, its inability to combat casualization which divides the organised from the unorganised, its refusal to link with community struggles for better living conditions and thus its inconsistent social and economic analyses, in most cases, means that for years it has alienated itself from the working class and poor society outside its unions.

² The International Alliance of Socialist Democracy was a political organisation founded by Mikhail Bakunin, a famous 19th century Russian anarchist revolutionary, and others in 1868 as an entity for anarchist agitation within the International Workingmen's Association (more commonly known as the 1st International).

³ By 2014, the South Institute of Race Relations set the employment rate (using the expanded definition) at 35.6%, youth unemployment at 51.8% with about 82% of those unemployed being African. See Dimant. 2014. "Employment".

As more and more people became and remained unemployed, became poorer and more destitute, new avenues for protest and contestation emerged in the struggle for a share of the wealth produced by SA (the continuing product of imperialist South African expansionism into Sub-Saharan Africa by both private and state-owned enterprises). Social movements located in SA's poor and predominantly black townships have emerged over the last 13 years, focusing their struggle against the neo-liberalisation of South African society.

It was within this social movement milieu that anarchists/syndicalists, many also from similar student protests, re-emerged as a small, but dedicated force. They sought to expose the SA poor to anarchism through workshops, solidarity work and campaigns. After a decade of organisational trial, error, success and self-critique, the ZACF was founded in 2007 and continues to work with and in the working class and their organisations.

We are engaged in a battle of ideas. The SA working class terrain is one of many competing ideologies, but is dominated by authoritarianism, male chauvinism and nationalism – on the Left and Right. Anarchism competes with Marxism (of the Leninist variety) and a black nationalism that incorporates a revolutionary Marxist rhetoric, for ideological influence in the class.

Recently, the ZACF, despite years of hard work and sacrifice, found that many people knew of the anarchists, but not many knew about anarchism and its analyses. Self-critique has therefore led to a much greater emphasis on intensive, regular programmes of political education amongst grassroots activists and students. We have seen slow and steady progress and remain cautiously optimistic, knowing that much hard work lies ahead.

CONCLUSION

A collective programme and strategy in which collective responsibility plays a central role, seems the best path of organisation to meet the demands of promoting anarchism. We argue that the tradition of "Platformism" / *Especifismo*, is a re-statement of the Bakuninist approach and not a "Bolshevised" form of anarchist politics as some have charged. Bakunin once wrote, our organisation aims "to awaken and foment all the dynamic passions of the people" to organise from below "spontaneously, without outside interference... [or]...official dictatorship."⁴ But he recognised that mass organisations do not, automatically generate a revolutionary consciousness. Thus we argue for engagement in the battle of ideas via a tight-knit collective and specific organisation. The fundamental task for anarchists is to win this battle, highlighting the way forward to a libertarian socialist direction of struggle and organisation. The masses constantly demand clear responses from anarchists and we need to respond in clear and precise ways to the contexts faced by the working poor.

Present-day anarchism in SA, however small, heeds the lessons of past struggles of anarchist/syndicalist organisation in southern Africa. Our practice locally is in no way new terrain for anarchism, but a re-emergence of what was once the world's dominant left ideological practice. Statist solutions have failed the world over. It is time anarchism reclaims this position of leadership – not of individuals, but of ideas. History shows that the desperation of the popular classes leads to all manner of reaction. We must make sure that it is anarchism that provides the light in the darkness.

⁴ From Mikhail Bakunin's letter to Albert Richard in 1870.

Forward to Anarchist Mass Counter-Power!
Forward to the Anarchist Social Revolution!

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A Presentation at the St. Imier International Anarchist Conference.⁵ Supplement to “*Zabalaza:*
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⁵ A conference of anarchists/syndicalists from around the world to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the founding of the Anarchist International in 1872 and to discuss ways forward for the global anarchist movement. The paper has been updated in mid-2015 to consider some recent developments.