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The St. Imier Anti-Authoritarian International Gathering

A Modern Get-Together With Roots Going Back
One Hundred and Fifty Years

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Two banners were hung on one of the designated buildings by anarchists from Turkey. They commemorated those who died in the Suruç Massacre on July 20, 2015 and the Ankara Massacre on October 10, 2015.

An initiative called Bla organized simultaneous translations during all gatherings. They contributed with their devices and interpreters.

Thousands of participants attended the gathering—some say around four to five thousand. The common areas generally had a peaceful atmosphere, with no reports of disturbances or incidents of racist or homophobic behavior, except for the unfortunate attack on Éditions du Monde Libertaires at the book fair.

However, there should have been workshops for learning about and discussing the history of anarchist struggles in St. Imier, including the history of the commune there, and the autonomous watchmakers union of Jura.

There also should have been room in the program for dealing with current labor struggles. The fact that Team Care, the backbone of the organization, declared a strike due to complaints about working conditions and lack of support from the organizing committee can also be evaluated in this context.

Currently this gathering is scheduled for every 10 years. But, holding the event only once a decade diminishes its political significance, transforming it into primarily a symbolic commemoration or festival. Given that a majority of participants are under the age of 30, most of them probably did not attend the 2012 gathering and had little knowledge of the history of the movement. Therefore there is merit in reconsidering the ten-year interval for the gathering.

Most of all, to make this gathering more relevant there is a need to redefine a robust contemporary framework to strengthen the anarchist ideals that gave rise to internationalism in St. Imier 150 years ago.

An international anarchist gathering was held in St. Imier, Switzerland, July 19-23, 2023. Over 150 years ago, the first such gathering was convened in the town to save the International Workingmen's Association (also known as the First International) from a takeover by authoritarians led by Karl Marx and his friends.

At the beginning of September 1872, Marx and his collaborators met in The Hague, Netherlands, to strengthen their power in the First International. As part of this move, they expelled Bakunin and his comrades from the organization, based on accusations that they were secretly planning to take over.

Once they were rid of the anarchists, the Marxists were able to become the central leadership over groups in the various countries, and pushed for forming political parties and working toward the conquest of state power under a dictatorship of the proletariat.

However, many individuals and organized federations opposed the Marxists' manipulations.

In response the anarchists convened a meeting in St. Imier, later in the month, where they established clearly articulated anti-authoritarian principles for the International Workingmen's Association to continue contributing to the working-class struggle.

The gathering convened at St. Imier declared opposition to all centralized power and to organizations aspiring to conquer political power, even those that claim to be for its ultimate destruction. They declared the importance of anarchist inspired syndicalist local workers' labor unions and self governance.

But by the end of the 1870s conditions made it difficult to hold regular international meetings, even though anarchist activities continued in various places throughout the world. Never the less, the anti-authoritarian international meetings were still held sporadically, and recently they have been called once a decade.

After a hundred and fifty years, the focus of concerns and anarchist practices have evolved. Contemporary anarchists no longer center their hopes on union and working class led movements. Despite this shift, the social dynamics of production relations and class conflict remain largely unchanged. However, contemporary challenges hinder unified social struggles under a singular definition of the working class.

Upon reviewing the program at the recent St. Imier gathering, it becomes evident that the axis of struggle is defined by themes such as gender, ecology, veganism, anti-militarism, and art.

There were two additional positive aspects. First, the participants in the recent gathering were not limited to people from Europe; there were participants from Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Peru, the Philippines, Iran, and Turkey. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the gathering provided an environment for the participants to experience the concepts discussed throughout the program as everyday life experiences. Anarchist utopias can only be realized in such meetings through prefigurative anarchistic organization.

Life in the Commune

An info center offered information and orientation to attendees. There was a map showing where specific gatherings were taking place in the town. The local government supported the event by designating many public buildings to be used by participants. Two to three thousand people were expected to attend. A sports hall was used as accommodation. Upstairs, there was a large room for mixed-gender lodgings, while another room was specifically designated for flinta/queer participants.

Camping was allowed in some garden spaces. The garden of St. George's Church, one of the event's activity spaces, was designated a children's garden. The ground floor of the building

was arranged as an area for families and their children to stay. During the event voluntary child care was provided for both children under 5 and those between 5-12 for a certain part of the day.

The event spaces were scattered, but in close proximity. Next to the ice-skating rink, where the book fair was located, a kitchen was set up, bustling with activity. This was like a soup/field kitchen. In front of the kitchen there was a table where volunteer signed up.

Everything was done by volunteers. The meals were free of charge, and donation boxes were circulated.

There was also an international book fair with numerous publications in French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Kurdish, Greek and various Balkan languages. In addition to books from publishing houses, the book fair offered a diverse selection of magazines, fanzines from various initiatives, research papers, brochures and current announcements published by collectives and unions.

Events

The program of events featured speeches, performances, discussions, and workshops, in various locations simultaneously.

One of the sessions covered the Zapatista movement's fight against a mega railway project planned in Mexico. The Tren Maya (Maya Train) project has been causing the displacement of indigenous peoples because of the destruction of a substantial portion of the Amazon Rainforest involved with the project. The presenters had a documentary film showing the resistance of the indigenous community, where women take the lead.

Another workshop conducted a collective mapping activity. This collective, Oranotango, works on visualizing knowledge through a tradition called critical mapping.