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Zabalaza Books' AgitProp Series #8

Insurrection & Organisation

by Karl Blythe

"Knowledge is the key to be free!"

The following loosely-organised notes attempt to analyze the role of insurrection in the class struggle, in relation to the problem of revolutionary organisation. In the course of that analysis, I have attempted to identify the both the strengths and weakness of the anarchist movement while pointing out the different aspects of our revolutionary task, with regard to specific anarchist organisation as well as different forms of popular organisation. The theme running through both questions of organisation and insurrection is a notion of popular power at the root of anarchist ideas. My hope is that these notes may help to clarify and re-examine old anarchist themes of organisation and struggle, providing an analytical framework for organised practice and perhaps a foundation for a long-term revolutionary program.

Historically speaking, anarchism is rooted in popular and proletarian insurrectional movements that came to a head in the French Revolution. It was in the context of the struggle against feudalism – the struggle of both the peasants and the bourgeoisie against the aristocracy – that a few advanced proletarians, grasping the real significance of the Revolution, organised the popular movement that overthrew the monarchy, incited the people to class war against the bourgeoisie, and called for a system of free communism, meanwhile being dubbed "anarchists../../" by their opponents.[1] That name was taken up and proudly worn by later revolutionists, recognizing in it the essence of their revolutionary ideals.

In the century following the French Revolution, that ideal was elaborated and systematized, first by Proudhon, then more fully by Bakunin, Kropotkin, and numerous others of note (and many not so well known). Most of these anarchists (notably Malatesta, as part of a long Italian tradition), following in their predecessors' footsteps, adopted an insurrectionist approach, organising and inciting the popular masses to attack the old regime and pursue the revolution to its utmost conclusion. (That idea was also espoused by Marx and Engels – it is summed up quite well by the slogan "revolution in permanence,../../" later appropriated by Trotsky.) It was these same anarchists (Bakunin first and foremost), recognizing the need to adapt their methods to the real conditions of the class struggle, who laid the practical basis for revolutionary syndicalism.[2] Thus the 19th century anarchist movement mirrors the course of the proletarian class struggle, by and large marking its own modes of action, its defeats and its successes beside those of the working class.

It is in the aftermath of the Paris Commune and the demise of the First International that we trace the beginnings of the organisational controversy among the anarchists, with regard to the movement's strategy and tactics. The main current for a time favoured the insurrectionist method of "propaganda by deed../../" as most suitable for anarchists. Regarding this particular occurrence, José Antonio Gutiérrez explains it well as part of a larger phenomenon within revolutionary circles:

Notes:

1. Kropotkin, in particular, understood and explained this in *The Great French Revolution*. Despite some weaknesses and factual errors, it remains nonetheless a fundamental work of historical interpretation. The insurrectionist publisher Elephant Editions has produced an edition of this book with a fine introduction by Alfredo Bonanno.

2. Although the term "syndicalism../../" was not expressly used by Bakunin, his activities in the First International and certain later writings clearly contain its essential elements. For instance, in "The Red Association../../" (1870) he spells out the idea of the general strike, without naming it as such, by way of rejecting the classic insurrection:

   On the day when the great proportion of the world's workers have associated themselves … and so firmly organised through their divisions into one common solidarity of movement, no revolution, in the sense of violent insurrection, will be necessary.

   Even so, not long after we find him reverting back to insurrection in the context of the Paris Commune, as in his "Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis../../" (1870), not to mention his part in the Lyons uprising.

3. José Antonio Gutiérrez. "Notes on article 'Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism'../../" Published on Anarkismo, Dec. 27 2006. http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=4542

4. For an excellent sketch of syndicalism in France, see Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organisation from Proudhon to May 1968*. Published by AK Press, 2002 (translation by Paul Sharkey).

5. José Antonio Gutiérrez. "The problems posed by the concrete class struggle and popular organisation…/../" Published on Anarkismo, Nov. 14 2005. http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=1743

6. Gutiérrez wrote an excellent analysis of the December 2001 rebellion in Argentina "Workers Without Bosses – Workers' Self-Management in Argentina../../", published on Anarkismo, May 31 2005. http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=627

7. Nestor Makhno. *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays* (edited by Alexandre Skirda), pp. 6-18. Published by AK Press, 1996.

to instigate a revolutionary movement.

In concluding, I will make a few general remarks. Our movement, from its inception to the present, has always been revolutionary first and foremost. Yet from the start we have failed again and again to fulfil our revolutionary task. Now we find our ideals more relevant than ever, faced as we are with social and environmental crises of unprecedented proportions. Nothing is more important for us today than to organise and prepare for the social revolution, inserting ourselves into the class struggle and steering it in a libertarian and revolutionary direction. Our approach in that task must consist of, on the one hand, laying the groundwork for popular power, and on the other hand, collecting our best militants along specifically anarchist lines whereby we will become the vanguard of the revolution, making of popular power a real revolutionary force free of statist orientation and poised to overthrow permanently the ruling classes and the state. That purpose is summed up well in the old slogan, which we might just as well adopt today and recover from its statist defamers – *the revolution in permanence*.

When the popular movement is on a low level of struggle, there's usually a growing feeling of isolation of the revolutionary movement from the masses; this leads often to a loss in the confidence in the mass organisations of the people and, actually, on the people themselves…. Also, the moments of a low level of popular struggle generally happen after high levels of class confrontation, so the militants still have lingering memories of the "barricade days../../". These moments are frozen in the minds of the militants and it is often that they try to capture them again … by carrying on actions in order to "awaken the masses../../"….[3]

In fact, these tactics only isolated the movement while alienating most of the workers. It was as a reaction to the resulting decline of the anarchist movement that anarcho-syndicalism appeared in its full expression, looking to the First International as its historical precedent and adopting the general strike as its preferred mode of action.

In reviving anarchism's heritage of working-class organisation, the syndicalists made one crucial departure from Bakunin's program: they rejected a specifically anarchist organisation, believing that syndicalism was "sufficient unto itself…/../" [4] The results are well known: it put anarchism back on the scene as credible force, but failed in every instance to achieve its revolutionary purpose. Rather, "revolutionary../../" syndicalism proved to be little more than a kind of militant reformism. The reasons for this are complex and controversial, but clearly it is by no means sufficient unto itself. Much of that idea can be traced to a certain dose of historical determinism, in contrast to the protagonist subjectivism usually espoused by anarchists (including insurrectionists, both in the broad sense, as in "propaganda by deed,../../" and in the specific theoretical sense, as in Bonanno or Hakim Bey).

On the other hand, the method of syndicalism can be traced to the same basic problem as insurrectionism, except that it occurs at a later phase. That is to say, after a period of low intensity in the class struggle along with high levels of exploitation and repression, labour union activity becomes a focal point for militant organising within the working class. At such moments, the struggle begins to intensify again as the workers take the offensive, and syndicalism functions as a central avenue of social insertion for revolutionaries. However, once the workers achieve their immediate goals, they lose their spirit of militancy and leave union leadership in the hands of a few officials more interested in negotiation and compromise than in working-class militancy. (This pattern even appears during the Spanish Revolution with the CNT-FAI – and that at a moment when the class struggle was at its highest ebb.)

Thus, each in their own way, insurrectionism and syndicalism reflect and represent the most important strengths and weaknesses of revolutionary anarchism. The former in many gets to the heart of anarchist ideas – it constantly attacks authority and calls the masses to revolt. The latter, on the other hand, connects the revolutionary struggle with the masses, bringing to the movement an effective means of mass organisation. Both carry on the anarchist

spirit of militancy and direct action, and indeed in some respects their tactics overlap (e.g. wildcat strikes, sitdowns, etc.). However, insurrectionism lacks a proper sense of long-term preparation and coordination (the whole purpose of revolutionary organisation), instead focusing on isolated acts of resistance in anticipation of a "spontaneous../../" uprising, while syndicalism on its own invariably winds up in the route as parliamentary reform, stopping short at immediate improvements and lacking the social impetus to step up the struggle. From this it seems that anarchism's unresolved problem is how to bring together an effective organisational practice and a revolutionary program to overthrow the ruling classes and the state, serving as a catalyst for the social upheaval by the working class.

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Let us be straightforward. To move ahead we must be clear about our purpose, and unfortunately it has become standard practice to always talk in terms of minimal programs said to be more specific and thus more relatable to the masses. The result is that our movement, insofar as its presence is felt at all, gets trapped in the programmatic framework of the conventional Left, and the measure of victory is set, so to speak, at the "lowest common denominator../../" rather than by our higher objectives. This practice is usually defended as necessary to connect with the larger social movement, and any attempt to guide that movement in a different direction is denounced as "vanguardism../../" on a par with Leninism. Breaking with this practice, we must take it upon ourselves to set our fundamental goals and our approach toward achieving them. Only in that way does our program make sense and our organisation take on some purpose in the eyes of the masses (whether or not they agree with us is a different issue).

Our program, like our ideology, is two-fold. The social ideals that guide us are in and of themselves creative. Our program therefore naturally involves a constructive aspect that is summed up by the notion of *libertarian communism*. As an immediate reflection of that we must set about a constructive project to lay the social basis today for the free society. On the other hand, our ideals are but an expression of the historic struggle by the popular masses (the proletariat, in particular) against the ruling classes (the capitalists) and their instruments of power (the state). That is why our ideology is, and has always been, *revolutionary* in the most complete sense. Therefore, our organisational program must be a program of struggle against the state and ruling classes. In short our fundamental purpose is the complete overthrow of the ruling classes and the state, and the expropriation of social wealth by the working classes (i.e. the proletariat). Put another way (perhaps slightly complete), we aim to subjugate authority to popular power by means of insurrection.

Now, that will not all occur on some climactic "great day…/../" Rather, it entails a long process of organising and constructing a concrete basis of popular power, together with an intensifying struggle originating in the immediate

organisations that press forward those struggles in a revolutionary way. That is not simply done through solidarity with unions and similar activities, but through active, forceful efforts to organise the working class in such a way that will advance the class struggle and reinforce their sense of self-direction in opposition to authorities. That might involve not only organising at the point of production, but also organising a permanent basis of popular power in the streets, neighbourhoods, communities, etc. In light of everything above, I would thus identify the following aspects of revolutionary organisation, as far as where and how we ought to organise:

- The **economic terrain** – the starting point of the class struggle – focused at the places of the production and distribution, and consisting of labour unions along with free farmers/peasants organisations (unions, cooperatives, farmers alliances, etc., all depending on the status of those involved).

- The **political terrain** – the point at which the struggle shifts from immediate demands to insurrection (i.e. open revolt against the state and ruling classes) – including everything in the economic terrain, along with various political groupings as well neighbourhood and community organisations, focused on the streets and other public centres.

- As a factor within the political terrain, the **ideological struggle** – the point where the working class internalizes revolutionary ideals – consisting of propaganda and news distribution, public debate and street oratory, study groups, etc., with the political groupings usually at the centre stage.

In reality these aspects frequently overlap, and at the same time the factors involved at each level are immensely more complex than what I have presented in attempting to sum up. At the frontline on every terrain, however, must be the anarchists, equipped in their left hand with a revolutionary program and in their right hand with a disciplined organisation and revolutionary practice.

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Such an approach as outlined above does not in any way exclude struggles around specific issues. Rather, it uses such struggles as a catalyst for popular and revolutionary organisation, as well as a mean of gauging our strength. At the same time, it shifts the emphasis from rhetorically calling upon the people to push their struggles further, to laying the permanent basis on which to broaden and intensify the real class struggle. That would require a keen understanding of both subjective and objective conditions – the social terrain and actors of struggle, the form and character of popular organisations, political influence of other parties or tendencies, etc. It also requires a disciplined organisation firmly grounded in day-to-day revolutionary practice, with an effective program around which to base such practice. Only in that way will our movement free itself of its present limitations and acquire the wherewithal

guardist, in the sense that we are leading and preparing the way for the social revolution – which, after all, is the whole purpose of revolutionary anarchism.

We may find some insight into this question, from the standpoint of the *Platform*, in experience of the Ukrainian peasant uprising during the Russian Revolution, as recounted by its leader Nestor Makhno (who also took part in drafting the *Platform*).[7] Regarding the role of the anarchists, he wrote:

… in such busy times there was no question of invoking anarchism's abstract notions with their rejection of disciplined organisation of revolutionary forces, the upshot of which was that anarchists would have found themselves isolated in revolutionary activity and stranded by the very existence of the creative and productive which was in principle theirs to play.

Shortly after he concluded:

We had furnished the best possible solution to this problem by ***organising*** *the insurrection directly and paying no heed to the possible carping from our fellow-believers regarding this vanguardist stance which they saw as ill suited to our anarchist teachings.*

Here, in fact, we might point to somewhat of insurrectionist approach, when he speaks of "organising the insurrection directly…/../" It is worth noting that Makhno himself and the Gulyai-Polye anarchist group, which organised the uprising, had been heavily involved in local armed actions after the revolution of 1905, exactly along insurrectionist lines (Gutiérrez specifically refers to this period in his article on insurrectionalism – see note 3). On the other hand, there is a crucial difference with this "vanguardist stance,../../" which is in the importance laid on organised preparation, in contrast to typical insurrectionist methods. In fact, the quotations cited above were specifically addressing the question of why the Gulyai-Polye group had *withheld* the insurrection for some time while they were preparing, whereas some had urged them to unleash it right away on the belief that this would incite a spontaneous rising all over the country.

The problem is more complex for us, given that we are outnumbered almost everywhere, and the conditions of struggle in most cases are not as clear-cut as in revolutionary Russia or Ukraine. The very fact that there is no popular revolutionary movement to speak of in a country like the United States (where I am writing from) has made it necessary to limit our activities to more immediate issues and soften the tone of our revolutionary objectives to the point that our goals seem substantially no different from the "radical Left../../" in general. Yet that approach, in the sense of issue-specific struggles, has only weakened our movement when it comes to our higher objectives, whatever sympathy it might inspire on the Left.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma, especially when it comes to middle-class workers (the majority of workers in "first-world../../" countries). But I believe that the solution is to be found by shifting our focus from issue-centre struggles to building popular

demands of the popular masses and growing to the point of a revolutionary social upheaval. To fulfil that task, we must devise and stick to a revolutionary program entailing both our higher objectives and our "medium-term../../" strategy, to be adapted as necessary but always consistent in its fundamental principles. That means we cannot minimize or reduce our program to a mere list of immediate demands. At the same time, it cannot mean unduly separating ourselves from the masses (the basic error of insurrectionism). In that sense, José Gutiérrez is correct in criticizing the common anarchist trend of "making general rules out of exceptional circumstances../../" (see note 3). It is crucial at this moment when the class struggle is barely picking up again in much of the world, that we adopt an organised practice that is consistent with our revolutionary principles but is also capable of winning over the masses.

How, then, are we to build a popular base and push forward in the class struggle? That is, how are we to take the offensive when as yet we lack the wherewithal to instigate a social upheaval? It is not enough talk about our being in the vanguard, or of social insertion into the popular struggle, when clearly that is nothing but an intent and not a method per se. I therefore turn to another piece by José Antonio Gutiérrez, on "The problems posed by the concrete class struggle and popular organisation,../../" where he highlights two aspects of this question: the "actors of struggle../../" and the "levels of organisation…/../" I would highly suggest to the reader that they see this article for themselves, as it is contains some valuable insights, but for the moment I will briefly review its content.

Concerning the "actors of struggle,../../" I would say that Gutiérrez hits the mark perfectly, showing a clear grasp of the subjective factors. That is enough for now and requires no further elaboration. With regard to organisation, he writes:

The levels of the organisation are determined by the merging of both a programme of action and the social nature of the actors…. To go any further, let us first agree on an unavoidable dilemma of every revolutionary movement … that only the unity of the working class can overthrow the ruling class and … that the working class is not a homogeneous block – there are different levels of awareness and class consciousness, there are different ideas, opinions, tendencies, some being more inclined to a libertarian pole, and others more towards an authoritarian pole.[5]

Finely put, and it is with that understanding that I will analyze the problem. Gutiérrez outlines three levels: the "social level../../" (broad-based popular organisations representing the "social actors../../" respectively), the "social political level../../" (narrower political tendencies within those organisations, libertarian fronts, etc.) and the "political revolutionary level../../" (specific political parties including various "social actors../../" – i.e. the specifically anarchist group). This is related to the concept of "organisation dualism../../" offered by some platformists, which however does not include the "social political level…/../" That concept is

basically taken from Bakunin's idea of the anarchist organisation acting apart from but alongside with the workers' associations, steering it in a revolutionary and libertarian direction. It is also contained more or less in the *Platform*, although not as expressly as in the other examples.

Gutiérrez makes an important step in analyzing "levels of organisation../../" in a more complex way than organisational dualism. In principle, the concept of dualism is exactly on the mark, in the sense that we must organise along *ideological lines* on the one hand, and on the other hand along *class lines*. However, popular and social organisations take on a more complex form than is contained in a simplistic "dualist../../" model. But I would argue that Gutiérrez also misses the point, for while his description of the "social political level../../" is accurate in some sense, it is not as fundamentally important as certain other factors which he does not discuss in detail. More precisely, it is indeed a crucial level but its main form is not the tendency as an "intermediate level…/../" Rather it must be understood in terms of the actual political character of popular organisations.

To elaborate, let us examine the "social level../../" more closely. This is the level representing the actors of struggle, in other words organised along class lines. In fact, it is the most basic level of organisation, for it is here that the proletariat organises itself and begins to develop a class consciousness. That consciousness, as Gutiérrez rightly notes, is often not fully developed and takes many, often contradictory forms. Nevertheless, class consciousness takes shape in the course of real struggles and in the demands of these organisations. Now, the tendencies which Gutiérrez speaks of (i.e. the "social political level../../") do indeed arise at the social level, but it is not necessarily confined to intra-organisational debate. In fact—and this if far more important – such political tendencies are often formed along the lines of broader social organisations, organised along class lines around revolutionary or libertarian principles.

That aspect is keenly felt in organised labour, where it has historically meant the difference between class compromise and working-class militancy. For us, it means the difference between an effective organised presence and social impotence. Not that we should distance ourselves from the less advanced elements among the working class – simply that we should be aware of where our strong and weak points are, and carefully note these political differences while gauging the overall position of the class struggle and our influence on it.

There is another aspect of social organisation, which is especially important for our own organised activity – namely, the *social terrain*. It is often assumed (as in syndicalism) that the centre of gravity within the class struggle is the workplace (the point of production). That holds true to a degree, in that that is where class identity is objectively forged in an economic sense. However, in fact it is very often in the streets, or similar spaces of free social movement and assembly, that revolutionary class consciousness is *subjectively* forged as the basis of popular power. Thus it is in the common setting (neighbourhood, community, etc.) that

the popular movement takes shape and the class struggle becomes revolutionary, in that encompasses the whole of society and attacks the ruling classes beyond the limited sphere of the workplace. Gutiérrez gives a good example of this in his article:

… identity as part of a certain actor of struggle becomes clear when the struggle emerges, and around certain organisational traditions. To give an example, in the year 1983 in Chile there erupted huge mass rallies against the dictatorship of Pinochet; although the calls to struggle came from the Miners' unions, the relative weakness of the unions … caused that the main space for protest were the slums – where the workers lived – and other layers of society as well, including small shop owners, and so on, took part on the struggle right beside workers. But the identity of these struggles was created around certain organisations and struggles that were located in that concrete space -the slums in this case.… This reflects the dynamic nature of the social actors, and of their identity. But the creation of such an identity, and the creation of those actual demands, are the ground over which struggle can flourish.…

This is an indication of the intimate relationship between popular power at the social level and revolutionary struggle at the political level. In specific terms, as the class struggle intensifies, the scene of struggle moves to a large extent from the production point (i.e. the economic arena) to the streets, where it attacks the ruling class's political institutions. It is in that context that the popular movement emerges as a definite political force, with the institutions of popular power also functioning as insurrectional organs. This has historically been the case in France, Russia, and to a lesser extent in Chile, Haiti, Argentina, and elsewhere in Latin America, just to name a few examples.[6] (The exceptions to this are armed uprisings, and even these have a similar pattern in the form of guerrilla warfare, starting with insignificant skirmishes, slowly gaining strength and moving toward a larger offensive in preparation for the "knock-out blow,../../" often accompanied by a general uprising behind enemy lines as an indication of popular support.)

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What of the specific anarchist organisation (i.e. the "political revolutionary level../../") – that is to say, the revolutionary vanguard? As "platformists,../../" we are agreed that such an organisation is needed to make our presence felt, to insert ourselves into the bubbling movement and to steer it in a revolutionary direction. Clearly propaganda is not enough – real action is of the highest importance to lay the groundwork for a popular upheaval. But to what extent do we set the tone of actions we partake in? Some platformists, in fact, continue to argue against "vanguardism../../" on the assertion that it is authoritarian, some even presenting it as though the inherent aim of any vanguard is to seize power for itself in the manner of Bolshevism. However, I would argue that to steer the working class in a revolutionary direction in an organised, practical way is necessarily van-