We Don't Need a "Plethora of Tactics", We Need a Climate Strategy

An anarchist-communist's response to Freedom News

AnarchyNouveau

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In Freedom Anarchist Journal's Winter 2023-2024 issue, Matt Azuley submitted an article introducing readers to Murray Bookchin's ideas of the communalist assembly[1] which disturbed and surprised me for how much it was outdated. The means it proposes to achieve an ecologically revolutionary ends are lacking, stagnant, and fall back on modes of thinking that seem directly inherited from the anti-globalization and Occupy era[2] which the anarchist movement cannot afford to normalise as we continue to enter an exponentially growing ecological collapse. While there are decent ideas to take from both Murray Bookchin and Peter Gelderloos as Matt Azuley has, they are both rather flawed in their own ways. There are a some well thought out points and ideas within the article, so my criticisms are entirely constructive and I aim to avoid sectarianism… But that this is what Freedom News is publishing in their own journal on climate struggle has me very concerned to say the least.

The lack of revolutionary strategic thinking on ecological struggles will be humanity and the planet's downfall if the revolutionary movement doesn't get its act together soon. If a diversity of tactics was all it took to overcome the limits of social movements as Matt Azuley suggests in this article (and Peter Gelderloos in The Solutions are Already Here[3]), then comrades worldwide would not be facing defeat after defeat in what are ultimately defensive struggles for the ecology. These insurrectionary limits are visible internationally; from the massive years-long and ongoing fight to defend Weelaunee/Atlanta forest from destruction in the "Stop Cop City" movement, the French struggles in the ZAD's and against the ecocidal Basin megaprojects, German struggles for forest defense and against ecocidal development such as the Tesla "gigafactory" and the mass movement against coal mining. In the global South, anti-extractivist movements have similarly hit wall after wall since the global descent into neoliberalism and fascism from the 70's to today. Many valiant stands have been made against imperialist extraction projects, but the power of capital has more often than not prevailed against the power of the organised and rebellious masses, except where said rebellion has reached every layer of the popular masses and turned into an all-out insurrection. For example, the recent social explosion in Panama against a proposed mining project[4], the Zapatista movement's struggle for autonomy across indigenous territories in so-called Mexico, or the 1991 struggle from revolutionaries in Bougainvillea against the Papua New Guinea government, the Rio Tinto mining corporation and the "Australian" navy[5].

[1] https://freedomnews.org.uk/2024/03/10/we-need-a-plethora-of-tactics/

[2] https://www.sproutdistro.com/catalog/zines/organizing/give-up-activism/

[3] https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745345116/the-solutions-are-already-here/ if you can spare the cash (Gelderloos has cancer) and https://libgen.is/book/index.php?md5=2D9BAC2405D94E46B518DF675402BF17 if you can't This wasn't a terrible book at all, but my main criticism is that Gelderloos confuses tactics and strategy in the book. I cannot expect Gelderloos to have known about the Green Bans and other "green syndicalist" things mentioned in this text, or to have had a background engaging with communalist ideas and structures. Gelderloos does go out of his way to talk about the role of the worker's movement in ecological revolution, but does not connect mass organisation and the worker's movement to bridge the limits of insurrectionary ecological resistance with popular power.

[4] https://www.anarchistfederation.net/widespread-protests-continue-against-mining-in-panama-despite-repression/

[5] There is a good documentary on this called The Coconut Revolution https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sl8KJDOqK4

On Bookchin and Communalism

As much as he is a controversial figure in the anarchist movement, I agree with Matthew that there is a pressing need to take Murray Bookchin's ideas on social ecology seriously. Bookchin was no saint; often coming across as a bitter old man embroiled in sectarianism with his contemporaries to the degree that he stopped identifying as an anarchist near the end of his life. The ideology he carved out for himself – Communalism[6] – has a lot of similarities to anarcho-syndicalism in that it over-emphasises a single form of mass organisation as the basis for a revolutionary strategy and erases the role of specific political organisations in the strategic struggle for social revolution. Unlike most anarcho-syndicalist organisations, Bookchin did have the good sense to remove the anarchist ideological branding from his proposal so the community assembly can be a functional popular organisation[7]. Bookchin's preferred form of anarchist organisation was the affinity group, as Matthew noted in his article in Freedom.

Bookchin came to this conclusion based on his assessment of the Spanish Civil War, taking influence from the CNT-FAI. I will definitely not be the first anarchist to say this, but despite having some great ideas, Bookchin was an idiot. The Friends of Durruti group[8] was right there as an example of a cohesive revolutionary organisation within the Spanish Civil War. It was formed in response to the weaknesses and failures of the FAI's loosely organised "synthesist" federation of affinity groups who were operating within the CNT in addressing the challenges faced by the social revolution.

The Friends of Durruti were what is known as a Specific Anarchist Organisation[9], a form of political organisation wherein anarchist militants (and affinity groups) coordinate socially inserting themselves into mass movements and organisations; examples include trade unions, communalist assemblies, struggles for social justice from the marginalised and oppressed, abolitionist movements, the anti-war movement and the environmentalist and anti-nuclear movements. The aim is to agitate within them from below and build their combative and working class character, organising for direct democracy and radical demands, and nurturing revolutionary horizons. An SAO can be formed with as little comrades as an affinity group, or can scale up into federations. The difference between the FAI's loose affiliation of affinity groups within the trade unions and an SAO is a matter of having a shared theoretical line, tactical (and in the case of especifismo, strategic) unity, and a revolutionary program. Examples include the Federation of Anarchist-Communists in Bulgaria or the currently existing Uruguayan Anarchist Federation[10] which developed the "especifismo" tendency based on their critique of the marxist "foquismo" guerilla strategy[11], which is also the common strategy in insurrectionary anarchism. SAO's can operate as above or underground organisations as the local situation and level of state repression determines. This strategy within the anarchist movement is broadly known as organisational dualism. While commonly associated with Anarkismo.net[12] affiliated organisations today, SAO's have existed before and irrespective of Anarkismo and the organisations which are a part of it:

[6] https://usufructcollective.substack.com/p/communalism-form-content-means-and

[7] https://www.ilrigsa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Popular-Organisation-web.pdf

[8] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/agustin-guillamon-the-friends-of-durruti-group-1937-1939-0

[9] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/tommy-lawson-foundational-concepts-of-the-specific-anarchist-organisation

[10] https://www.anarkismo.net/article/2526 and http://federacionanarquistauruguaya.uy/

[11] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/federacion-anarquista-uruguaya-copei

[12] https://www.anarkismo.net/

Examples include the Friends of Durruti, the International Working People's Association which influenced the Chicago May Day and 8 hour day struggles, Revolutionary Struggle in Greece which furthered the social war against the Greek state and EU, or Bakunin's Alliance of Socialist Democracy[13].

Bookchin was definitely onto something however in exploring the municipal/community assembly as an organisational form through which to construct a re-localisation and de-industrialisation of the economy in a process of de-growth. Given that we need a rapid transition to a simplified economy based on local self-sufficiency if we are to end our dependancy on fossil fuels and capitalist monoculures, local assemblies create the basis for communities to meet face to face to address the social and ecological issues which affect them. Many Anarkismo-affiliated SAO's (especially in Latin America) have been organising communalist assemblies for quite a while now, as spearheaded by the work of the Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro. Communalism's influence today is global; from the popular municipal councils of AANES/Rojava to the self-managed slums of Brazil, the ideas and practices have spread worldwide, especially in the global South. In the imperial core there are two initiatives of note:

1. The South-East Queensland Union of Renters in so-called Australia, formed by militants from Anarchist-Communists Meanjin[14]. SEQUR is a federalist housing union which aims to prefigure the communalist assembly and neighbourhood council forms as the structure through which its members organise and fight against landlord bullshit, with an aim toward building "community power" in solidarity with the trade union rank and file and other social movements.

2. The Symbiosis Federation of assemblies across North America, which is operating at a much larger scale though it appears to be facing numerous challenges such as sectarianism from both the anarchist and marxist movements for one. It should be noted that the so-called USA has a federation of autonomous tenant unions and a movement for forming neighbourhood councils[15]. SEQUR acts as an "Australian" alternative to both of these, essentially combining the aims of both USA-based federations into one.

Green anarchism and Class War: Bringing the Unions into Ecological Struggles

It is shocking that today Freedom publishes reflections on social ecology and the climate crisis in its journal without any mention of worker's struggles against ecocide at the point of production and from within the union movement. This is commonly referred to as "green syndicalism" and has its practical expression in a number of places historically; In North America from Judi Bari's organising work between the IWW and Earth First!, and "Canadian" workers in the Arctic taking action in solidarity with First Nation's anti-extraction struggles[16]. In Ocea-

[13] 1. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/agustin-guillamon-the-friends-of-durruti-group-1937-1939-0

2. https://anarchism.pageabode.com/anarchy-in-the-usa-iwpa/

3. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nikos-maziotis-interview-with-nikos-maziotis-imprisoned-member-of-revolutionary-struggle

4. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mikhail-bakunin-on-anarchy-en#toc44

[14] https://sequr.org/ and https://www.acmeanjin.org/articles/how-we-stopped-an-eviction

[15] https://www.symbiosis-revolution.org/ and https://atun-rsia.org/

[16] https://libcom.org/library/green-syndicalism-arctic

nia, this 2022 AngryWorkers (UK) interview of anarchist comrades from Red And Black Notes[17] explored the history of the Builder's Labourer's Federation and the subsequent Green and Black ban movements. The BLF rocked the foundations of Australian capitalism in the 70's and 80's and successfully fought against numerous ecocidal and racist development projects using direct action in conjunction with local communities. The BLF was forcibly de-registered and its members amalgamated by the state into the modern day Construction, Mining, Forestry and Energy Union, which remains the most militant union in "Australia" due to this extensive history.

Does this mean that I am advocating for a dichotomy of union organising and communalism against the use of insurrectionary tactics, and insertion into the existing environmentalist movement? Not at all. On the contrary, I believe all of these things are possible at the same time, and necessary. As the Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group said in their "The Burning Issue" edition of The Anvil[18]:

"The MACG's issue with Blockade Australia and similar organisations overseas isn't that their disruptive tactics go too far. Instead, we think they don't cause anywhere near enough disruption. A network of small secretive affinity groups can only cause minor and sporadic interruptions to the corporations destroying the planet. Furthermore, the activists are targeted with massive penalties which far outweigh the impact of their actions. We support these protestors, because at least they're doing something, but this isn't how the movement will win. A better strategy is needed."

Many anarchists are demoralised against union activity; after all, the global union movement has been in decline for decades now so it can be difficult to feel as if these structures can still be used by the working class for militant direct action. Many don't see the point, as most modern unions are highly bureaucratic and organising for libertarian reform within them is incredibly daunting compared to the more immediate gratification of other forms of action, especially as a lone activist or affinity group. There has been a particularly nasty reaction against participating in class organising from the various green anarchist tendencies, which can be traced back to the tensions and sectarianism between Murray Bookchin and his contemporaries in the USA like Bob Black, as well as with the "anti-civ" tendency which typically pits its decolonial and ecological ideas as inherently incompatible with the union movement and mass organisation. But while the coordinated work to fight within the rank-and-file for direct democracy is daunting, it can be done, is currently happening, and if we are to build a social revolution, we can't avoid it. To take a leaf from Peter Gelderloos, the solutions are already here. For any readers wondering where to begin on rank-and-file organising for popular control of their relevant union, Labor Notes has put out an incredibly useful and free guide to getting started called Secrets of a Successful Organiser[19]. It is well worth the read.

[17] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/when-construction-workers-put-their-foot-down-the-story-of-the-new-south-wales-blf

[18] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/melbourne-anarchist-communist-group-the-burning-issue

[19] You can email LaborNotes to get a free copy via the website here (they tell readers this in the book, though if you can spare the cash I'm sure they need it) https://www.labornotes.org/secrets or pirate it https://libgen.is/book/index.php?md5=3852C26ECC48E858B4BDA0AA9C07ABED

On the necessity of building rural, permacultural and climate disaster fronts

"What, then, should be done? Since the revolution cannot be imposed upon the rural areas, it must be germinated within the agricultural communities, by stirring up a revolutionary movement of the peasants themselves, inciting them to destroy, by direct action, every political, judicial, civil, and military institution, and to establish and organize anarchy through the whole countryside."
- Mikhail Bakunin, "Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis"

No discussion on revolutionary strategy in the face of the capitalist ecological catastrophe is complete without acknowledging the need for an extreme and rapid transformation in the division between the cities and countryside. In class society, cities are defined by their tendency toward importing resources from the countryside and generating a massive amount of waste energy. This is a commonly recognised issue within anarchism (Marx also explored this, especially in the Grundrisse and his posthumously published notebooks), and yet it is a sad reality in the west today that rural organising is rarely undertaken. In The Solutions are Already Here, Peter Gelderloos explored efforts toward organised food sovereignty and agroecology, but at a political level extensive work has been done by the FARJ on this front as well. Additionally, it would be ridiculous to ignore the fact that society is not in any way prepared for successive waves of ecological disaster and extreme weather events[20]. Rather than reacting to these spontaneously as they come, anarchists can take a long term approach; Preparing communities for disaster while building communalist assemblies and organising at a neighbourhood level against gentrification, industrial pollution and the racial oppression of black, colonised and migrant communities.

Both Bookchin and Kropotkin explored this problem extensively. Today it is a major focus of the degrowth and permaculture movements to retrofit the urban landscape to meet as many essential human needs without needing to transport resources from far away. This retrofitting of the existing urban landscape towards a green transition is a lot more possible than the anti-civ tendency has proposed in its critiques of urbanisation. Suburbia is the perfect density for local food forestry for instance, which would free up what is currently now farmland for rewilding and restoration of rural ecosystems.

However, without active work organising the rural working class, capitalist monocultures and extractivist industries won't abolish themselves. People that are today materially dependant on extractive industry and monocultural farming to make ends meet can become frontline ecological care workers restoring the ecosystems of the future. In order to achieve these ends, these people need to be politicised in the here and now fighting for material improvements and radical reforms over the issues affecting them via direct and collective action. The real and pressing material needs of people in the countryside need to be addressed toward building a rural movement. There is no time for elitism about the backwardness and conservatism in the countryside.

Footnotes:

[20] https://zabalazabooks.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/agroecology-and-organised-anarchism-an-interview-with-the-farj-brrn.pdf and https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/margaret-killjoy-it-s-time-to-build-resilient-communities

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