



CONSTRUCTIVE ANARCHISM IN AOTEAROA **2009**
ideas towards building the anarchist movement in Aotearoa

The arrival of a new anarchist group in Aotearoa has opened the way for discussion of the various modes of anarchist organisation, including their benefits and their pitfalls. It's obvious that organisation on a larger scale is needed in order to link the various work done by anarchists in Aotearoa — I don't think there is too much opposition to this fact. However, it is the form of that organisation that is being discussed at the time of writing, and rightly so.

The purpose of this text is not to thoroughly evaluate the merits or flaws of labels such as 'Platformism', 'Neo-Platformism', 'Synthesis' or other neatly prescribed specifics of organisation. That would be a lengthy text in itself! Instead, I'd like to talk about issues that cut across any kind of organised line or label — primarily, what projects or types of struggle could we undertake as anarchists (without adjectives?) in order to increase the acceptance of anarchist ideas and action, libertarian communism, and truly egalitarian modes of relations in Aotearoa — or more specifically, in our places of work and our communities. From this cohesion of projects, an organisation of anarchists and its specific form could take shape from the bottom up around a program of action collectively decided, discussed and defined.

Here is the disclaimer: I am no veteran of anarchism in Aotearoa. My relative outsider status to past and present groups could be held against me, and that's fine. It could also be a positive thing. Nor do I pretend to be the first or an expert on the practice of ideas I may describe throughout the text. I'm not re-inventing the wheel. They are simply facets of an often fluid and fragmented theory for social change that I see particular value in. I also don't mean to say that the kind of work I describe here isn't already done, or that other work not mentioned has less value. So with that in mind, I'd like to delve into two main points which I hope to explore and share with the reader — these being struggle in the workplace, and community development. They are by no means separate and essentially interlock with, and feed off, each other. This involves creating Industrial Networks in the workplace, hand in hand with the creation of Community Unions or Assemblies. But first, a note on organisation. Also, apologies for my dryness!

ANARCHIST ORGANISATION

Arguments around anarchist organisation are nothing new. In fact, the discussion regarding Platformism and its spawn has been ongoing since the publication of 'Organisational Platform of a General Union of Anarchists' in 1926. What is interesting to note is that the countries and movements which have argued these ideas the most are overwhelmingly countries where the anarchist movement has become separated from, or has limited resonance amongst the labour movement. For example, the 'Platform' hardly made an impact in Spain and on Spanish anarchism. Why? Partly because of the uniqueness of Spanish anarchism, but also because anarchism in Spain was intricately linked to the problems of the labour movement, anarcho-sindicalist unions, working class communities and class struggle.

What this tells us is that the problems of specifics — of particular modes of organisation — are secondary when compared to the lack of recognition by many working people of anarchist ideas. Of course, an organisation helps with this, but to form the kind of inclusive and participatory 'workers' solidarity movement in line with the anarchist method from the 'bottom-up', without and outside of the needs of everyday working people, to me, seems backwards.

Instead, specific workers organisations could be the result of the need for specific anarchist organisation. And to do that, the need has to be known, and evident. Currently, it is not, and no pretense of forming a group on paper in the name of workers will create that need. Concrete action will create that need — organisation for the sake of organisation is not the cure all. So what constructive action can we, as anarchists, undertake to link anarchism back with the labour movement in Aotearoa? This, I believe, is the crux of the matter.

Problems facing us in Aotearoa

The problems that have hindered anarchism from growing in Aotearoa are many, and well beyond my scope or skills. The current low period of class struggle or consciousness is just one example (however that can be changed, as I mention later). Others include spying, paranoia, closed and close-knit groups, 'lifestyle' anarchism, and a lack of overall cohesion — all contributing to keeping anarchist actions confined, exclusive and ghettofied. However, all of these can and should be challenged.

In my mind, there are ways to change from a minority movement to a wider, visible and constructive alternative — however, they are easier said than done! To start to do this, we must make anarchism and its goals as transparent, inclusive and as shared as possible — not just in the forms of protests, pamphlets or zines (though these are definitely needed), but in the form of viable, constructive action around a program which demonstrates the validity and effectiveness of anarchist methods. I'm not saying groups aren't doing this now, but I think we need to be more explicit and cohesive in our collective positions, processes and projects with everyday people, especially workers. Asher touched on this in his article 'For Revolutionary Struggle, not Activism'. What I would like to do is try and expand on the things we could do to make this change from activism to revolutionary struggle a reality.

WORKPLACE STRUGGLE

The advantage of anarchist theory has always been in the fact that its ideas aren't solely limited to class, economic mysticism, and labour dogma. Past anarchist movements have managed to take into account both unions and the wider community successfully. However, classical or class struggle anarchism has more often than not been lost or watered down in Aotearoa circles. That is fine — we need to work in all kinds of diverse fields and in all aspects of our lives. But to neglect the very realm in which the majority of anarchist ideas were formulated is harmful to our current effectiveness.

Though anarchist/sindicalist ideas have featured in the NZ labour movement of the past, most notably in the 'Red Fed' and IWW era of 1908-1913, to pretend that anarchism has healthy links to the current labour movement is plain wrong. This may be seen as natural in a period of low class struggle, but it is also a symptom of a lack of specific and concrete anarchist agitation in the workplace.

Revolutionary conditions are not just something that 'happens' to workers. They are a result of the actions of the workers themselves, and in turn these actions are influenced by the strength of revolutionary ideology and the level of self activity that workers engage in. If this is true, then workers and workplace struggle can directly contribute to the creation of revolutionary conditions. Classic workplace direct action such as the go slow, sabotage, strikes and economic holdups to win immediate demands, coupled with concrete anarchist ideas of industrial solidarity and networks, workplace self-management, workers assemblies, equal relations of production, co-operation and federation — creating the new in the shell of the old — is a sure way to get nearer to complete social change, towards more egalitarian and non-hierarchical modes of working and existing. In short, to end capitalism and replace it with libertarian communism.

To get that far along needs some hard work. This could take place in the current unions (and yes, I realise how reformist they currently are), those un-unionised and outside of unions, and also amongst the unemployed — in the form of industrial networks.

Working Within Existing Unions

I recommend reading 'Trade Unions and Revolution', an excellent zine found at www.zabalaza.net/zababooks. I'm simply summarising most of their main points here, and rather briefly at that.

Why concentrate on the working class and unions? Simply because the working class creates all wealth under capitalism, and if we as workers refused to obey and used our position as producers to destroy the class system and other forms of oppression, we could create a free, stateless,

classless society based on direct democracy, self management and distribution according to need. Unions can play a double role, mobilising workers for mass action against the boss on day to day issues, and secondly, providing the organisational structure through which workers can collectively seize and self-manage the means of production directly and democratically.

Trade unions are one of the most important mass movements of the employed working class, as they are organisations founded on specific class interests, no matter how reformist or bureaucratic they currently are. Because of this feature, it forms an organisational stronghold of a specific class-consciousness that to some extent cuts across race, gender, and religion. They help workers realise that there are definite differences between employer and employee, that ‘the working class and the employer class have nothing in common.’ They are also based at the point of production — allowing workers to injure the bosses and halt production by their withdrawal of labour.

So, we should take up anarchist arguments within the current unions (as well as those un-unionised and unemployed as I mention later), oppose bureaucracy and union leaders, reformism, collaboration, and complacency, create class consciousness, advocate rank and file control of the unions, and above all, worker self activity. We need to amplify the existing grassroots union work and actions (such as the anti-90 Day Bill campaign) along explicitly libertarian and anarchist lines.

As part of this activity we should promote the ideas of Industrial Unionism — namely direct workers control of struggle via workplace assemblies and recallable committees. However, we are aware that economic struggle (and trade unionism as such) ‘cannot be an end in itself, since the struggle must also be waged at a political level to distinguish the role of the State’ (Errico Malatesta). Thus, as well as encouraging worker self-organisation and self-activity, we should also seek to politicise struggles and those involved in them. Only this process of self-activity and political discussion between equals within social struggles can ensure the process of working class self-liberation and the creation of new, more libertarian, forms of workplace organisation. The result of such activity may be a new form of workplace organisation (either workplace assemblies or industrial networks) or a reformed, more democratic version of the existing trade union. But either way, the aim is to get as many members of the current labour movement to become anarchists as possible or, at the very least, take a more libertarian and radical approach to their unions and workplace struggle.

New Unions vs Existing Unions

Why not start new, radical unions outside and against the existing unions? While this is desirable and will be the eventual goal, at this point I don’t think we should. Breaking away to form new unions takes the minority of fighting, militant workers out of the old union — leaving the mass of the workers open to bureaucracy and reformist orientation that provoked the split in the first place! Instead, we should work with the membership of existing unions and spread radical, anarchist ideas. Also, splitting would cause the breakaway union to be separate from, and often alienating to, the majority of existing workers — effectively causing disunity and hindering solidarity amongst workers. Currently, the majority of workers lack revolutionary political consciousness, and would not readily be attracted by the radical slogans of a separate union. This would not solve the isolation from workers we are currently facing, but potentially reinforce them. Until the workers are radicalised, existing unions are a good base to work from.

Union Bureaucracy

Aren’t unions bureaucratic by nature? No. The existence of a union bureaucracy is not inevitable, as shown by the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist union the CNT — having a membership of more than a million members in the early 1930’s without more than two paid officials. Bureaucracy comes with privilege and power — take that privilege away and base power, initiative and control with the rank and file through decentralisation, industrial federation and the techniques of anarcho-syndicalism and a union can change from reformist to revolutionary. We should always try to undercut the reliance on leadership by encouraging the self-activity of the workers. We can start to do this by working alongside the rank and file, to make the unions a truly rank and file movement.

In summary, we should work to build a section of anarchist organisation within the existing unions. This will include aiming to unify different sectional struggles or unions into an awareness of the overall struggle between classes (class solidarity), to explain the lessons of past struggles, to challenge the politics of reformism in the movement, and to spread anarchist ideas — including the view that unions can become the battering ram that destroys capitalism, and that unions need to be reconstructed in a decentralised and anti-bureaucratic manner. The larger goal is unions organised along anarcho-syndicalist lines. One way to start to do this within the existing unions here in Aotearoa is in the form of industrial networks.

Industrial Networks

Industrial networks are the means by which revolutionary industrial unions and other forms of libertarian workplace organisation can be created. It is a means of promoting anarcho-syndicalist/anarchist ideas within the workplace, so creating the basis on which a workplace movement based upon the ideas of industrial unionism could grow and expand.

The idea is very simple. An Industrial Network is a federation of anarchists in various workplaces and industry who support the ideas of anarchism and/or anarcho-syndicalism, namely direct action, solidarity and organisation from the bottom up. In other words, it would 'initially be a political grouping in the economic sphere, aiming to build a less reactive but positive organisation within the industry. The long term aim is, obviously, the creation of an anarcho-syndicalist union.'¹²³⁴⁵⁶

The Industrial Network would be an organisation of groups of anarchists within a workplace united into an industrial basis. They could pull their resources together to fund a regular bulletin and other forms of propaganda which they would distribute within their workplace and industry. These bulletins and leaflets would raise and discuss issues related to work and how to right back and win as well as placing workplace issues in a social and political context. This propaganda would present anarchist ideas of workplace organisation and resistance as well as general anarchist ideas and analysis. In this way anarchist ideas and tactics would be able to get a wider hearing and anarchists can have an input as anarchists into workplace struggles. The role of the anarchist group or anarcho-syndicalist (or revolutionary) union would basically be to call workplace assemblies, argue for direct workers control of struggle by these mass assemblies, promote direct action and solidarity, put across anarchist ideas and politics and keep things on the boil in the workplace.

The idea of Industrial networks exists because we face dual unionism (which means there are more than one union within a given workplace or industry). Therefore it's clear we should not expect to ever get a majority of the working class into a revolutionary union before explicit revolutionary situations develop. In addition, we should recognise that a revolutionary union is not just an economic fighting force, but also an organisation with a political context. To build such a union requires a lot of work and experience of which the Industrial Networks are but one aspect.

Thus industrial networks are intended to deal with the actual situation that confronts us, and provide a strategy for moving from our present reality toward our ultimate goals. Where one has only a handful of anarchists and syndicalists in a workplace or scattered across several workplaces there is a clear need for developing ways for us to effectively act in union, rather than be isolated and relegated to more general agitation. A handful of anarchists cannot meaningfully call a general strike. But we can agitate around specific industrial issues and organise our fellow workers to do something about them. Through such campaigns we demonstrate the advantages of rank-and-file unionism and direct action, show our fellow workers that our ideas are not mere abstract theory but can be implemented here and now, attract new members and supporters, and further develop our capacity to develop revolutionary unions in our workplaces.

Thus the creation of Industrial Networks and the calling for workplace assemblies is a recognition of where we are now in Aotearoa — with anarchist ideas very much in the minority.

Working Outside of the Unions

Industrial networks, amongst other things, are one effective way to struggle in the workplace and within the unions as they exist now. However, we shouldn't forget to look outside of the unions because a large number of people, as we know, are not unionised at all. Also, it doesn't take into account mothers, women and other workers outside of the workplace, the unemployed, ⁷ or those on the dole.

It is not enough to organise revolutionary unions in the workplace. We need to organise throughout the working class, the poor, and the unemployed. We need to be active in community-based campaigns such as rent strikes and other community development actions (see next section). We need to include women, mothers, the unemployed and others outside of typically recognised workplaces or industries. There needs to be unemployment unions and community unions based upon the same principles of decentralisation and direct action. In fact, there is already a precedent for this type of work in Aotearoa — the unemployment movement, especially around the 1930s has a vibrant and militant history. We shouldn't neglect these past or future struggles.

The success of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain, and to an extent the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), was their wider involvement in the community and working class culture — rent strike committees, libertarian youth activities, community schools and centres, militant song and art, periodicals etc, all helping to join the union to the wider community, and involving the wider community in the union. Therefore, the success of the movement depends on its success in engaging

entire communities of people, rather than just wage-labourers in protest action — and action which reaches beyond the traditional bounds of the workplace.

The future anarchist society will not be based purely on union structures (syndicates). There will, in addition, be community committees and others, which federated together with the syndicates will make up the free self-managing community. Therefore it would be wrong of me not to touch on another important focus of attention — community development.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community work is already being done throughout Aotearoa by all sorts of people — by visible organisations, and less visible ones such as the various anarcho-feminist groups, including much needed support groups between friends, neighbours and communities. I don't feel adapt enough to go into too much detail on community development, but as I said above, it must be related and linked to class struggle and working class problems in order to be successful and wide-reaching. What I want to touch on are a few basic points which are part and parcel of community development in an anarchist sense — change from the bottom up, valuing local knowledge, spaces for reflection, emotional and physical support, personal as the political, and community unions or assemblies. As I mentioned earlier, these same ideas should apply to workplace struggle as well as community action.

Change From Below

A central component to community development and anarchist ideas in general is that of change from below, which of course, includes participation and direct action. Encouraging participation is critical in all facets of struggle — in the workplace or in the community. People will participate if they feel the issues or actions are important to their own situation, hence the need for visible anarchist ideas and education around concrete realities. Issues such as social housing, rent rises, gentrification and other struggles all effect the community, and are a direct result of class and the capitalist system. This must be clearly illustrated and provoke people to get involved.

They will also get involved if they feel their actions will make a difference, that direct action gets the goods. Therefore the structures of particular actions must not be alienating, but inclusive and empowering, and above all, in tune with those participating. A way to do this is to value local knowledge, local culture, local skills and local processes that exist within the communities in question — while at the same time thinking globally, radically and pushing existing values along explicit anarchist lines. Above all, a class analysis must be evident in all community work, and all class struggle must have an aspect of community development processes.

Community Unionism

Community unionism is the term used by www.anarchistfaq.org for the process of creating participatory communities within the state. This section is directly taken from that site.

A community union is the creation of interested members of a community who decide to form an organisation to fight in their local community and for improvements within it. It is a forum² by which inhabitants can raise issues that affect themselves and others, and provide a means of solving these problems. As such, it is a means of directly involving local people in the life of their own communities and collectively solving the problems facing them as both individuals and as part of a wider society. Politics, therefore, is not separated into a specialised activity that only certain people do (i.e. politicians or activists). Instead, it becomes communalised and part of everyday life and in the hands of all.²

The community union could be based upon a mass assembly of its members. Here would be discussed the issues that effect the membership and how to solve them. Like the communes of a future anarchy, these community unions would be federated with other unions in different areas in order to co-ordinate joint activity and solve common problems. These confederations, like the basic union assemblies themselves, would be based upon direct democracy, mandated delegates and the creation of administrative action committees to see that the memberships decisions are carried out. The community union could also raise funds for strikes and other social protests, organise pickets and boycotts and generally aid others in struggle. By organising their own forms of direct action (such as tax and rent strikes, environmental protests and so on) they can weaken the state while building an self-managed infrastructure to replace the useful functions the state or capitalist firms currently provide.

Such community unions have been formed in many different countries in recent years to fight

against particularly evil attacks on the working class. In Italy, anarchists have organised a very successful Municipal Federation of the Base (FMB) in Spezzano Albanese (in the South of that country). This organisation is "an alternative to the power of the town hall" and provides a "glimpse of what a future libertarian society could be". In this way, local people take part in deciding what affects them and their community. They also, by taking part in self-managed community assemblies, develop their ability to participate and manage their own affairs, so showing that the state is unnecessary and harmful to their interests.

Elsewhere in Europe, the long, hard work of the C.N.T. in Spain has also resulted in mass village assemblies being created in the Puerto Real area, near Cadiz. As one C.N.T. member explains, "[e]very Thursday of every week, in the towns and villages in the area, we had all-village assemblies where anyone connected with the particular issue, whether they were actually workers, women or children or grandparents, could go along... and actually vote and take part in the decision making process of what was going to take place."

In these ways, a grassroots movement from below can be created, with direct democracy and participation becoming an inherent part of a local political culture of resistance, with people deciding things for themselves directly and without hierarchy. Such developments are the embryonic structures of a world based around direct democracy and participation, with a strong and dynamic community life. The combination of community unionism, along with industrial unionism, will be the key of creating an anarchist society. Community unionism, by creating the free commune within the state, allows us to become accustomed to managing our own affairs and seeing that an injury to one is an injury to all. In this way a social power and culture is created in opposition to the state.

Community Support

A culture in which supporting people emotionally and physically must be an important aspect of struggle if it is to be inclusive, sustainable, and revolutionary. To be able to create reflective and egalitarian spaces or alternative ways of living outside of and against the state is inherently radical — to link these ways of living with class struggle is revolutionary. This includes communal aspects in the home and the community, parenting and parent support groups, conflict resolution and other kinds of equal and co-operative interactions — mutual aid in action.

With this in mind, it is not only important to create anarchist social structures and non-hierarchical ways of operating in a wider sense, but to make our embodied activities and relations revolutionary also. The personal must be political as we are all reflections of our current society. To challenge ourselves is to challenge existing structures — but again, this personal deconstruction must be linked with wider, collective struggle if it is to be more than individualistic, 'lifestyle' politics. And yes, this deconstruction includes patriarchy, rape, and male domination within our own anarchist communities, and sooner rather than later.

These ideas are part of creating a new, revolutionary, class-based culture. What I want to finish on are the approaches we could take to start to do the kind of work mentioned above, cohesively and collectively. There are a number of approaches one could take, but I want to quickly touch on two — one which has just been tried by AWSM, and another which may have to be tried instead.

CREATING A CLASS-STRUGGLE FOCUS

AWSM/Platformist Approach

While AWSM have the right intentions in mind, the process around forming the group and the nature of the group structure is a problem. The form and action of a group is often reflected by its processes — and if the anarchist idea of means and ends being the same holds true, then concern over AWSM's process is a well founded one. If the method of organisation, the aim of an organisation, and the form of an organisation is vital to how the group will end up functioning — then AWSM, at this stage, has problems.

Essentially, AWSM realise that there is problems with the effectiveness of Anarchist ideas in Aotearoa, in the fact that our visibility is next to none. I agree. They also think the answer lies with the working class. Here, I also agree. However, according to AWSM the remedy for this is to organise yet another tight, anarchist group along lines of 'tactical' and 'theoretical' unity in step with platformist-inspired groups overseas. It is perfectly normal to imitate seemingly successful movements elsewhere as AWSM has done, but I think this approach is flawed. It doesn't take into account the possibility of a unique, Aotearoa-styled approach, created on its own terms and therefore adding to international anarchist thought. Nor does it take into account the success

of other organisations influenced by the other styles of organising, such as in Spain — I might add, a hugely successful hot-bed of anarchist organisation and eventual revolution.

Some degree of tactical and theoretical unity is needed to be effective. But to choose only one strand of anarchist thought as the basis of this unity, to group together selected individuals ‘pure’ enough in thought, and to essentially ignore or exclude other degrees of anarchist thought does not create unity at all, but in fact splinters and creates conflict between already splintered groups and individuals. AWSM are taking the same old road in seeking to create an organisation along a single ideology, which will end up with anarchists in Aotearoa either joining because there is no other alternative, or endless polemics between them and other groups in existence — instead of developing class-struggle propaganda and activities for the wider Aotearoa movement in general.

An Alternative Approach

It is our actions and activities which must be cohesive, and this can be done through the free agreement of existing anarchists interested in class struggle to a collective program, worked out collectively through regional and national assembly. This is far from ‘a mechanical alliance’, but a union of people on a number of basic positions with an awareness of the need for planned, organised collective effort. For example, the FAI in Spain, through discussion and publication of ideas and the frequent updating of positions through assemblies, figured out common ground to build highly successful class struggle upon.

Firstly, a call was put out amongst the whole anarchist community in Spain, Portugal and France proposing the idea of a peninsular federation. Items for the agenda were then put forward (including definitions of class, ideas around actions etc), and once decided, groups were given 3 months to prepare statements. The agenda was then discussed collectively with solidarity and co-operation, and certain resolutions were agreed upon and passed. These positions, through further action, were built upon and modified until the next assembly a year later.

From all accounts this has happened before in Aotearoa for a number of various conferences. So why couldn’t it be done with specific class issues put forward? AWSM in a sense has already done this, but they only invited a handful of chosen individuals without the consultation or involvement of a larger number of people. I believe if AWSM had proposed their group and ideas in the same way as the FAI had (Platformism/Synthesis ideas aside), then there would be real, widespread enthusiasm amongst anarchists right now for some kind of cohesive, class struggle position in Aotearoa. Instead, people are feeling confused, excluded and rather hostile.

So, an alternative approach would be to follow the processes mentioned above. Call a conference on specifically class struggle action. Gather people’s thoughts and ideas together and gauge interest. Discuss what class struggle actually means. Find some consensus or agreement on positions and ideas, and build from there. It’s not a quick fix, but it will go towards build the foundations for eventual residency in the working class — for constructive anarchism in Aotearoa.

I hope this text may go some way towards aiding this process. I openly welcome thoughts, comments and criticisms on the ideas I’ve put forward here, and firmly believe that the fact AWSM has formed — and now that class-issues are firmly back on the anarchist agenda — means we are moving forward towards a new and fresh phase of anarchism in Aotearoa.

Jared Davidson | January 2009

SOURCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

Industrial Networks and Community Unionsism — www.anarchistfaq.org

‘Trade Unions and Revolution’ — www.zabalaza.net/zababooks

‘Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI’ — Juan Gomez Casas

‘Community Development’ — Jim Ife and Frank Tesoriero

‘Constructive Anarchism’ — G.P.Maximoff. This includes the original Platform text, ‘The Reply’ by Voline and others, ‘A Plan For Anarchist Organisation’ by Errico Malatesta and letters between Malatesta and Makhno on the Platform.