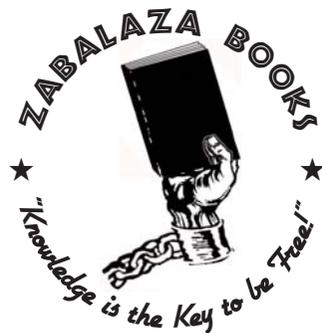


Insurrection - the armed rising of the people - has always been close to the heart of anarchism. The first programmatic documents of the anarchist movement were created by Bakunin and a group of European left-republican insurrectionists as they made the transition to anarchism in Italy in the 1860's. This was not a break with insurrectionism but with left-republicanism, shortly afterwards Bakunin was to take part in an insurrection in Lyon in 1870.



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Anarchism, Insurrections & Insurrectionalism



An Anarchist Communist Analysis

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Propaganda that most people will not act on is merely masturbatory. We all must find the courage to struggle in ways that push the state and pull us together, but there is a certain amount of truth I think to the idea that revolutions come when circumstances push them on people. And I do not know if we can expect people to risk everything and end up in jail for years on a large scale.

In the end I do not have any complete answers, just observations. But I know how I feel. And I am sick of feeling this way about Anarchism. I would also add that no matter what, I hope the animosity between camps ends. I am as guilty of it as any, but I truly think now that for many, there is no one they hate as much as anarchists of a different stripe, and that is a victory for the state. But we must also continue to argue and articulate our positions. I really do believe if this trend towards an emphasis on fighting cops and burning cars continues, we will only see comrades dead or in jail, a stronger police state, and NO revolution.

***For all Black Hearts that Bleed Red (or Green)
for the Injuries of the World***

AllisLost



I am not sure what the point of militant fighting is before we have come to that point.

I see why we should not wait for the revolution, but I think that it is a weakness of theory to consider ideas like organising labour as waiting. In my mind this represents instead the most fundamental revolutionary activity. We don't need to worry about being able to shoot cops. That we can do. Organise more Anarchists? That seems hard.

What I would like to see is more ways in which militancy does not outdistance totally the majority of people. I do see hope in ideas like the White Overall movement which allows people to focus on creating space and challenging the state, but does not seem to ask as much as throwing bombs. Mass action is always more powerful than individual action. And I believe it is the only thing that can change society.

And on a personal level, I must say that I find a great lack of hope or future in many insurrectionary tendencies. I do not know how much I have helped the movement by being beaten by cops on several occasions. I am not too proud to admit that it has left me feeling vulnerable and afraid, and alone. I do not think I would feel this way if it had been in circumstances when much of society supported the action. In addition, we need to be aware of how much we can match our propaganda. I have been in conflict more than many green anarchists I know, many of whom decry me as weak or cowardly for not supporting ideas like picking up a gun right now (not that they plan to of course)



Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism

Insurrection - the armed rising of the people - has always been close to the heart of anarchism. The first programmatic documents of the anarchist movement were created by Bakunin and a group of European left-republican insurrectionists as they made the transition to anarchism in Italy in the 1860's. This was not a break with insurrectionism but with left-republicanism, shortly afterwards Bakunin was to take part in an insurrection in Lyon in 1870.

European radical politics of the previous hundred years had been dominated by insurrections ever since the successful insurrection in France of 1789 had sparked off the process leading to the overthrow of the feudal order across the globe. The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 showed the power of the people in arms, this insurrectionary moment which changed the history of Europe probably involved only around one thousand people.

★ Insurrection and Class Politics

1789 also set a pattern where although the working people made up the mass of the insurrectionists it was the bourgeoisie who reaped the rewards - and suppressed the masses in the process of introducing their class rule. This lesson was not lost on those who saw freedom as something that had to involve the economic and social liberation of everyone, not the right of a new class to carry on 'democratic' exploitation of the masses.

In the republican insurrections that broke out in Europe in the century that followed, and in particular in 1848, the conflict between the republican capitalist and small capitalist classes and the republican masses became more and more pronounced. By the 1860's this conflict had led to the emergence of a specifically socialist movement that increasingly saw freedom for all as something that the republican bourgeoisie would fight against not for - alongside the old order if necessary. For Bakunin, it was the experience of the 1863 Polish insurrection where it became clear that the bourgeois republicans feared a peasant insurrection more

than the Czar that conclusively proved this point. So now the fight for freedom would need to take place under a new flag - one that sought to organise the working masses in their interests alone.

The early anarchists embraced the new forms of workers' organisation that were emerging, and in particular the International Workers Association or First International. But although they saw the power of the working class organised in unions, unlike the majority of the marxists they did not see this as meaning that capitalism could be reformed away. The anarchists insisted that insurrections would still be needed to bring down the old ruling class.

★ Early Anarchist Insurrections

Anarchist attempts at insurrection spread with the growing movement. In fact, even before the Lyon attempt the anarchist Chávez López was involved in an indigenous insurrectionary movement in Mexico which in April 1869 issued a manifesto calling for *"the revered principle of autonomous village governments to replace the sovereignty of a national government viewed to be the corrupt collabourator of the hacendados"*.¹ In Spain in the 1870's, where workers' attempts to form unions were met with repression, the anarchists were involved in many insurrections, and in the case of some small industrial towns were locally successful during the 1873 uprisings. In Alcoy for instance after paper workers who had struck for an eight-hour day were repressed *"The workers seized and burned the factories, killed the mayor and marched down the street with the heads of the policemen whom they had put to death."*² Spain was to see many, many anarchist led insurrections before the most successful - that which greeted and almost defeated the fascist coup of July 1936.

In Italy in 1877 Malatesta, Costa and Cafiero led an armed band into two villages in Campania. There they burned the tax registers and declared an end to Victor Emmanuel's reign - however their hope of sparking an insurrection failed and troops soon arrived. Bakunin had already been involved in an attempt to spark an insurrection in Bologna in 1874.

★ The Limits of Insurrections

Many of these early attempts at insurrection led to severe state repression. In Spain the movement was forced underground by the mid 1870's. This led into the 'Propaganda by Deed' period when some anarchists reacted to this repression by assassinating members of the ruling class, including a number of kings and presidents. The state in turn escalated the repression, after a bombing in Barcelona in 1892 some 400 people were taken to the dungeon at Montjuich where they were tortured. Fingernails were ripped out, men were hung from ceilings and had their genitals twisted and burned. Several died from torture before they were even brought to

Conflict in an Age of Ruin

First of all I think this article and many of the comments as well as the longer critical article are very well thought out and have given me much to think about.

Personally this is an issue that I have not been able to come to any solutions on, and I think it is a most important one for all of us to discuss.

I have long considered myself an Anarcho-Communist and believe that without question the primary duty of an Anarchist is to work for social revolution. To me this means that the working class will emancipate itself through class warfare. But to me I have always seen labour as the primary force of change. I think of revolution in terms of community groups and town meetings and labour unions. I do believe in the necessity of armed revolution, but I have always felt that that would be an inevitability.

By the same token, I see spontaneous acts of revolt as a long standing component of struggle. When the state pushes, people push back whether they are anarchists or not.

What I have a serious problem with is the current American Anarchist movement. I have found it to be a depressing place that has offered me no hope for the future, and more than once led me to consider abandoning it all together to work in labour unions or other groups.

I do not understand anarcho-punk, or primitivism, or college students as working class. I do not mean to be arrogant, but I simply do not know what to make of these things. I have found that many of the people that push ideas like insurrectionalism are deeply rooted in the middle class as well as deeply anti-worker ideas

And this to me is the root of the problem with focusing overmuch on insurrection. Without going into details, let me just say that I have been involved in things like black bloc tactics and have generally found them lacking. I liked that there was space created for conflict, but found that it was not a space that most working people found welcoming or hopeful, from what I have heard in conversations with fellow workers and non-anarchists. I do not feel that 200 people with sticks can defeat a heavily armed state, and to focus on that is to focus on a weak strategy.

To be sure we need to attempt to push conflict when we can, but I think Anarchists have not made much advances in making this conflict resonate with society. And that is the real issue. When the labour unions oppose the bosses openly, we will see conflict. When every community is armed against the cops, we will see conflict. But

Notes:

1. Neither enthusiastical participation in insurrections, nor armed struggle are distinctive elements of insurrectionalism regarding other political currents, included anarchist ones.
2. Recently, an article by Wayne Price, from NEFAC, called "Firmness in Principles, Flexibility in Tactics" was shedding some light on this issue, www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=4281

**You will find discussion of this article at
www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=4542**



trial and five were later executed.

Arguably the fatal theoretical flaw of this period was the belief that the working people were everywhere willing to rise and that all the anarchist group had to do was light the touchpaper with an insurrection. This weakness was not limited to anarchism - as we have seen it was also the approach of radical republicanism, which meant sometimes, as in Spain or Cuba the anarchists and the republicans found themselves fighting together against state forces. Elsewhere the left sometimes slotted into this role - the Easter Rebellion of 1916 in Ireland saw a military alliance between revolutionary syndicalists and nationalists.

However the original organisational approach of the anarchists around Bakunin was not limited to making attempts at insurrection, but also included the involvement of anarchists in the mass struggles of the working people. While some anarchists responded to circumstances by constructing an ideology of 'illegalism' the majority started to turn to these mass struggles and, in particular, entering or constructing mass unions on a revolutionary syndicalist base. In the opening years of the 20th century anarchists were involved in or simply built most of the revolutionary syndicalist unions that were to dominate radical politics up to the Russian revolution. Very often these unions were themselves then involved in insurrections, as in 1919 in both Argentina and Chile which included in Chile workers who *"took possession of the Patagonian town of Puerto Natales, under the red flag and anarcho-syndicalist principles."*³ Earlier, in 1911, the Mexican anarchists of the PLM, with the help of many IWW members from the USA, *"organised battalions ...in Baja California and took over the town of Mexicali and the surrounding areas"*.

★ Insurrections and Anarchist Communists

The anarchist communist organisational tradition within anarchism can be traced back to Bakunin and the first programmatic documents produced by the emerging anarchist movement in the 1860's. But these organisational ideas were not developed in any collective way again until the 1920's. Still there were individuals and groups that advocated the key features of organised anarchist communism; involvement in the mass struggle of the working people and the need for specific anarchist organisation and propaganda.

Anarchist communism was clarified in 1926 by a group of revolutionary exiles analysing why their efforts to date had failed. This resulted in the publication of the document known in English as the 'Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists' which we have analysed at length elsewhere.

Here the relevance is to note that, like their predecessors of the 1860's, this grouping of anarchist communists were trying to learn from the anarchist involvement in insurrections and revolution of the 1917-21 period. They include Nestor Makhno who had been the key figure of a massive anarchist led insurrection in the Western Ukraine. The Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine fought the Austro-Hungarians, anti-semitic pogromists, various white armies and the Bolshevik con-

trolled Red army over those years.

These platformists as they have come to be known wrote *“The principle of enslavement and exploitation of the masses by violence constitutes the basis of modern society. All the manifestations of its existence: the economy, politics, social relations, rest on class violence, of which the servicing organs are: authority, the police, the army, the judiciary... The progress of modern society: the technical evolution of capital and the perfection of its political system, fortifies the power of the ruling classes, and makes the struggle against them more difficult... Analysis of modern society leads us to the conclusion that the only way to transform capitalist society into a society of free workers is the way of violent social revolution.”*⁴

★ The Spanish Experience

The next development of anarchist communism once more involved those at the centre of an insurrection - this time the Friends of Durruti group who were active during the Barcelona insurrection of May 1937. The FoD *“members and supporters were prominent comrades from the Gelsa battle-front”*⁵

The FoD was composed of members of the CNT but was highly critical of the role the CNT had played in 1936 *“The CNT did not know how to live up to its role. It did not want to push ahead with the revolution with all its consequences. They were frightened by the foreign fleets... Has any revolution ever been made without having to overcome countless difficulties? Is there any revolution in the world, of the advanced type, that has been able to avert foreign intervention? ... Using fear as a springboard and letting oneself be swayed by timidity, one never succeeds. Only the bold, the resolute, men of courage may attain great victories. The timid have no right to lead the masses...The CNT ought to have leapt into the driver’s seat in the country, delivering a severe coup de grace to all that is outmoded and archaic. In this way we would have won the war and saved the revolution... But it did the opposite... It breathed a lungful of oxygen into an anaemic, terror-stricken bourgeoisie.”*⁶

Across much of the world anarchism had been crushed in the period up to, during and after World War Two. Anarchists were involved in partisan movements across Europe during the war but in the aftermath were repressed by eastern ‘communism’ or western ‘democracy’. In Uruguay, one of the few places where a sizeable anarchist communist movement survived, the FAU waged an underground armed struggle against the military dictatorship from the 1950’s. Cuban anarcho-syndicalists, in particular tobacco workers, played a significant role in the Cuban revolution only to be repressed in its aftermath by the new regime.

★ The Ideology of Insurrectionalism

There is a long tradition within anarchism of constructing ideologies out of a tactic.

We, therefore, cannot silence our criticism in the same way as those who are disagreement with us have the same duty to criticise. I say a duty, for the fraternal and constructive criticism, though not for this less energetic, is a need in order to develop a healthy movement and to look for ways to improve our praxis in the search for the road towards freedom. All it is needed to know is when, how and where criticism will be formulated, so it becomes a factor of strength of the movement instead of a factor of weakness. The same holds truth for action itself.

★ To Conclude...

I think insurrectionalism is useful for debate today not as much as for the criticism it directs towards authoritarian organisations or to the left, and not even to the anarchist movement. It is so, because it brings to our attention a number of the greatest weaknesses of the libertarian movement. It is the mirror image of our historical flaws and of our insufficiencies. Many of our comrades who would take a prudent distance from insurrectionalism would be surprised that, no matter they might disagree in the end results with it, they might be nonetheless sharing a number of its political foundations as well as some its weaknesses. It seems to me that insurrectionalism is not, as many comrades would want us to believe, a bizarre product of the ideological confusion of recent decades. It has been, instead, the expression of tendencies emerging at different times in history, in the face of certain circumstances of a very particular nature, and its expression has been possible due to the existence of serious fault lines in our politics and, what we believe to be, misconceptions. These misconceptions are nothing new and are not limited to insurrectionalism –they are far more widespread in the ranks of our movement than what we would believe.

To sum it up, I hold that insurrectionalism has been incubated, nurtured, bred and developed under the shade of the very mistakes of the anarchist movement (something equally valid for other leftist versions of a certain “insurrectionalism”) and their conscious expression, as a tendency in its own right over the last while, gives us the opportunity to deal with its politics and thus move forward.

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.
10th of December, 2006



our enemy's favour. Let us remember that this system is always looking for the seeds of division and for the slightest chance to attack dissent.

But not only criticism against insurrectionalism could be used by the State and its repressive forces; in fact, the very criticism made by insurrectionalists can work as a godsend for State to justify repression. A pathetic example of this is the declaration issued by the Informal Anarchist Co-ordination of Mexico in the face of the events in Oaxaca ("Solidaridad directa con los oprimidos y explotados de Oaxaca" November 16th). In this public declaration, the bulk of it is directed against the APPO, the CIPO-RFM and other popular organisations that were in direct fight against State and Capital. Not much for theory there, that was quintessential class struggle. But they preferred to spend their saliva and ink criticising in a dishonest way, and worse, resorting to some of the same arguments used by the State media that questioned the movement in Oaxaca. This criticism could not only be labelled as reactionary, but also as untimely, appearing at the very minute that the comrades there were needing the most of our solidarity and when repression was at its highest.

This attitude was in a remarkable contrast with the attitude assumed by the Magonist Liberation Commando (Democratic Revolutionary Tendency –Army of the People), which knew when to keep a low profile, which knew how to respect the different alternatives of struggle tactically assumed by protesters in Oaxaca and who were notably conscious that not only our criticism can be useful to the system, but also our own irresponsible action. They say so in a public statement on November 27th *"Up to now, we remained expectant and on alert in order to avoid repression to be unleashed over the popular movement gathered around the APPO under the excuse of the armed revolutionary struggle, but the brutality of the federal and national neoliberal government forces us to raise our voice and to make use of our weapons so as to contain and dissuade the neoliberal offensive that should not and cannot be tolerated by any revolutionary organisation"*

At the end of the day, the danger for our actions to be used into the system's favour (just like our differences can be) has to be considered seriously, but seems to be something absolutely underestimated, or worse, ignored by insurrectionalists. This is a serious omission, for we know thanks to historical experience how important it has been for the system the role of the agent provocateur and of stupid actions to look for ways to justify an excessive repression and to isolate the revolutionary movement from the masses. History is full examples, as those illustrated by Victor Serge in "What everyone should know about repression" (1925) about the provocateurs at the Czar's services in post 1905 Russia (remarkable as this document is, it was only possible thanks to documents seized after the 1917's revolution from the files of the okhrana, the political police of the Czar); Alexander Skirda in his book "Facing the Enemy" also gives us ample documentation from the French police files of the role of the provocateurs among the anarchist terrorist groups from 1880 until the end of that century. Stories of provocateurs and of senseless actions plague the records of the left and anarchism. But even more dangerous than the actions of the provocateurs themselves is the irresponsible or untimely action of sincere comrades, but too wrong in action or lacking any sense of direction to aim.

The long and deep involvement of anarchists in insurrections has, not surprisingly, given rise to an anarchist ideology of insurrectionalism.

An early self-definition of insurrectionalism in English is found in this 1993 translation: *"We consider the form of struggle best suited to the present state of class conflict in practically all situations is the insurrectional one, and this is particularly so in the Mediterranean area. By insurrectional practice we mean the revolutionary activity that intends to take the initiative in the struggle and does not limit itself to waiting or to simple defensive responses to attacks by the structures of power. Insurrectionalists do not subscribe to the quantitative practices typical of waiting, for example organisational projects whose first aim is to grow in numbers before intervening in struggles, and who during this waiting period limit themselves to proselytism and propaganda, or to the sterile as it is innocuous counter-information"*⁷

As an ideology insurrectionalism originates in the peculiar conditions of post war Italy and Greece. Towards the end of World War Two there was a real possibility of revolution in both countries. In many areas the fascists were driven out by left partisans before the allied armies arrived. But because of the Yalta agreement Stalin instructed the official revolutionary left of the Communist Party to hold back the struggle. As a result, Greece was to suffer decades of military dictatorship while in Italy the Communist Party continued to hold back struggles. Insurrectionalism was one of a number of new socialist ideologies which arose to address these particular circumstances. However the development of insurrectionalism in these countries is beyond the scope of this article. Here we want to look at the development of an insurrectionalist ideology in the Anglo world.

★ Insurrectionalism in the Anglo World

One insurrectionalist has described how the ideas spread from Italy *"Insurrectionary anarchism has been developing in the English language anarchist movement since the 1980s, thanks to translations and writings by Jean Weir in her "Elephant Editions" and her magazine "Insurrection". .. In Vancouver, Canada, local comrades involved in the Anarchist Black Cross, the local anarchist social center, and the magazines "No Picnic" and "Endless Struggle" were influenced by Jean's projects, and this carried over into the always developing practice of insurrectionary anarchists in this region today ... The anarchist magazine "Demolition Derby" in Montreal also covered some insurrectionary anarchist news back in the day"*⁸

That insurrectionalism should emerge as a more distinct trend in English language anarchism at this point in time should be no surprise. The massive boost anarchism received from the summit protest movement was in part due to the high visibility of black bloc style tactics. After the Prague summit protest of 2000, the state learned how to greatly reduce the effectiveness of such tactics. Soon after the disastrous experience of Genoa and a number of controlled blocs in the USA, arguments arose that emphasised greater militancy and more clandestine organisation on the one hand and a move away from the spectacle of summit protesting on the other.

Alongside this, many young people who were entering anarchist politics for the first time often made the incorrect assumption that the militant image that had first attracted their attention on the TV news was a product of insurrectionalism in particular. In fact, most varieties of class struggle anarchists, including anarchist communists and members of the syndicalist unions, had participated in black bloc style protests at the summits. As these all see actual insurrections as playing a significant role in achieving an anarchist society, there should be nothing surprising in them being involved in a little street fighting on the occasions when that tactic appears to make sense. By the time of Genoa, when the state had obviously greatly upped the level of repression it could deploy, anarchist communists were debating whether such tactics had a future in the columns of this magazine and other publications.

★ The Ideas of Insurrectionalism

It is probably useful to dispel a couple of myths about insurrectionalism at the start. Insurrectionalism is not limited to armed struggle, although it might include armed struggle, and most insurrectionalists are quite critical of the elitism of armed struggle vanguards. Nor does it mean continuously trying to start actual insurrections, most insurrectionalists are smart enough to realise that this maximum program is not always possible, even if they are also keen to condemn other anarchists for waiting.

So what is insurrectionalism? Do or Die 10 published a useful ⁹ introduction with the title “Insurrectionary Anarchy : Organising for Attack!”.¹⁰ I use substantive quotes from this article in the discussion that follows.

The concept of ‘attack’ is at the heart of the insurrectionist ideology, this was explained as follows

“Attack is the refusal of mediation, pacification, sacrifice, accommodation, and compromise in struggle. It is through acting and learning to act, not propaganda, that we will open the path to insurrection, although analysis and discussion have a role in clarifying how to act. Waiting only teaches waiting; in acting one learns to act.”

This essay drew from a number of previously published insurrectionalist works, one of these ‘At Daggers Drawn’ explained that

“The force of an insurrection is social, not military. Generalised rebellion is not measured by the armed clash but by the extent to which the economy is paralysed, the places of production and distribution taken over, the free giving that burns all calculation ... No guerilla group, no matter how effective, can take the place of this grandiose movement of destruction and transformation.”¹¹

★ Discussion and Revolutionary Praxis

Many of the weak aspects of anarchism are taken to paroxysm with insurrectionalism. Many of the things we actually consider to be basically wrong with them are not only to be found among insurrectionalists but rather they are to be found in one way or another present in the broader anarchist movement. We have talked of this tendency to freeze certain historical moments, of making general rules out of extraordinary experiences, of tactical dogmatism; but we recognise as another weakness of the anarchist movement the almost absolute lack of a tradition of constructive criticism. Discussions among anarchists are seldom directed towards clarifying situations or searching for solutions to the difficulties that the revolutionaries find into their practice. Most of the times discussions are motivated by a double effort of condemnation of the deviates and to demonstrate who’s the legitimate representative of ideological purity.

Another huge problem in discussion among anarchists is the use of blanket concepts, as demonstrated by comrade Black, that in fact help more to obscure than to clarify debate. For instance, it is too often that “unions” are criticised as if all of them were exactly the same thing... ignoring the world of difference between, let’s say, the IWW, the maquilas unions or the AFL-CIO in the US. To group them all under the same category not only doesn’t help the debate, but it is also a gross mistake that reveals an appalling political and conceptual weakness.

All these have caused, among other things, a serious lack of debate among libertarian circles. It is not our intention now to look for the roots of this problem, the one is caused by numerous reasons (isolation, idealism, absence of real practice, dogmatism, sectarianism, etc...), but we only intend to call the attention on the link existing between this lack of a tradition of constructive debate and the problem noted by comrade Black about the terms in which debate is usually posed: whether you are with us or against us.

Comrade Black correctly disagrees with the blackmail inherent to the claim made by insurrectionalists that any criticism to their actions means to side with the State and repression. No one is free from revolutionary criticism, least the revolutionary themselves. It is neither legitimate nor honest to say that he who criticises a stupid action is “adjusting the straight jacket” or is validating repression, or is siding with the State, or is a coward.

But I find it important to state that the line dividing left-wing criticism from right-wing criticism has to be unequivocally marked and cannot be left as a nebulous zone. For being true that we don’t have to accept everything other organisations do, nor remain silent in the face of actions we might consider stupid and wrong, we always have to be conscious that our criticism can be used by the class enemy if it is not clearly posed and if we don’t distinguish, above anything else, who is it the one with whom we have an antagonistic difference (State-Capital) from the comrades with whom we might have political differences, no matter how big, but which do not turn us into warring opposites. The problem here is not criticism, but how this criticism is posed. We do not want to see our criticism to be turned into an argument into repression’s and

★ Defence, Attack and Victory

To assume this tactical flexibility means to assume together with our action, the need to politically evaluate and analyse. It is a well known motto that there is no revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory, and vice versa. Political theory on its own is of no good, as practice on its own is of no good as well. But both concepts are irrelevant in the absence of political analysis to make theory and practice go hand in hand and to make them relevant for the here and now. It is necessary for making our practice effective as well.

Theory gives us tools to interpret reality, but they have to be applied, understanding the objective and subjective factors, as well as the huge range of factors combining of them both. In taking those factors into account, we are giving a direction to our practice. This is what will lead our way. I clarify that our focus is always in moving forward and in no case we privilege a mere waiting: there's always something to be done today. What is the most recommendable for the present, that varies enormously according to the context and we cannot have a pre determined alternative nor easy answers.

In moments when the class conflict is at a low level or on retreat, it is not that difficult to lose patience, thus falling into the hands of voluntarism and in the fetish of action. We know that social processes are long and we do not intend to make them any longer by putting lead shoes on our feet; but we know as well that history do not have shortcuts, that the processes of building an alternative take long and that the "final clash" is nothing but a myth that in reality happens in diverse struggles and confrontations throughout history. We have to be prepared for the moments when we can take a frontal offensive but, all too conscious of the complexity of social processes and of the fluctuations of class struggle, we have to be equally prepared to confront those moments when it is the State and the capitalist that will be sharpening their knives, so as to confront those moments of low struggle when indifference will probably beat us stronger than repression. Revolutionaries, above all, have to learn the art of perseverance. Impatience is not a good adviser as taught by revolutionary experience. This does not mean to wait, but to know how to choose the type of actions to perpetrate in certain moments.

All I want to say with this is that "attack", a central concept of insurrectionalism, is not all; in revolutionary struggle there is attack, as there is defence. There are moments to move forward, as there are moments to hold positions. Sometimes the moment for the offensive has to be carefully chosen and nothing of this can be predicted in none of the revolutionary doctrines. This can only be learnt through experience, political clarity and, above the rest, by a healthy environment for criticism that is mature and serious. At the end of the day, what we are interested in is not in doing actions as to calm the consciousness of our comrades, but our real interest is victory and, unfortunately, the number of attacks does not necessarily add up to that goal.

The insurrectionalist notion of attack is not one based on a vanguard achieving liberation for the working class. Instead they are clear that *"what the system is afraid of is not these acts of sabotage in themselves, so much as their spreading socially"*.¹² In other words the direct actions of a small group can only be successful if they are taken up across the working class. This is a much more useful way to discuss direct action that the more conventional left debate that polarises extremes of 'Direct Action crews' who see their actions in themselves as achieving the objective versus revolutionary organisations that refuse to move beyond propagandising for mass action - and all too often actually argue against 'elitist' small group actions.

★ Riots and Class Struggle

Insurrectionalists often recognize class struggle where the reformist left refuse to, so writing of Britain in the early 1980's Jean Weir observed that *"The struggles taking place in the inner city ghettos are often misunderstood as mindless violence. The young struggling against exclusion and boredom are advanced elements of the class clash. The ghetto walls must be broken down, not enclosed."*¹³

The idea that such actions need to be taken up across the working class is also seen by insurrectionalists as an important answer to the argument that the state can simply repress small groups. It is pointed out that *"It is materially impossible for the state and capital to police the whole social terrain"*.¹⁴

As might be imagined, individual desires are central to insurrectionalism but not as with the rugged individualism of the 'libertarian right'. Rather *"The desire for individual self-determination and self-realization leads to the necessity of a class analysis and class struggle"*.¹⁵

Much of the insurrectionalist theory we have looked at so far presents no real problems in principle for anarchist communists. On the theoretical level, the problems arise with the organisational ideology that insurrectionalists have constructed alongside this. Much of this has been constructed as an ideological critique of the rest of the anarchist movement.

★ The Organiser

The insurrectionist criticism of 'the organiser', while a useful warning of the dangers that come with such a role, has expanded into an ideological position that presents such dangers as inevitable. We are told *"It is the job of the organiser to transform the multitude into a controllable mass and to represent that mass to the media or state institutions"* and *"For the organiser... real action always takes a back seat to the maintenance of the media image"*

Probably most of us are familiar with left campaigns run by a particular party where exactly this has happened. But our experience is that this is not inevitable. It is quite

possible for individuals to help organise a struggle without this happening. A comrade has more time than anyone else so they take on a number of tasks that need to be done - are they not therefore an organiser?

The problem with the apparent blanket ban on 'organisers' is that it prevents analysis of why these problems arise and thus how they can be prevented.

In the case of media work there is no mystery. Anyone doing media work for a controversial struggle will be bombarded with questions about the likelihood of violence - in media terms this is a 'sexy' story. If they are getting this day after day, week after week then they will start to try to shape the struggle to follow this media agenda.

The solution is simple. This problem arises because the left tends to have their 'leader' who is doing the key organising of a protest also as the media contact for that protest. Our experience is that if you divorce the two roles so that the organisers of a specific event are not the people who speak to the media about it then the problem is greatly reduced if not eliminated. The actual organisers are isolated from the media but feed information to whoever is nominated as a media spokesperson. That media spokesperson however has no particular say about the organisation of the protest.

★ The Media and Popular Opinion

This leads onto the insurrectionalist description of the media. *"An opinion is not something first found among the public in general and then, afterwards, replayed through the media, as a simple reporting of the public opinion. An opinion exists in the media first. Secondly, the media then reproduces the opinion a million times over linking the opinion to a certain type of person (conservatives think x, liberals think y). Public opinion is produced as a series of simple choices or solutions ('I'm for globalization and free trade,' or 'I'm for more national control and protectionism'). We are all supposed to choose - as we choose our leaders or our burgers - instead of thinking for ourselves."*

This all sounds pretty good - and there is considerable truth in it. But this blanket analysis again prevents a discussion about how these problems can be overcome. Until the time we have our own alternative media - and in that case some of the problems above would still apply - we would be crazy not to use those sections of the media through which we might be able to reach the millions of people that lack of resources otherwise cut us off from.

And while the media likes to simplify the story by reducing it to binary choices, this does not mean that everyone who gets information from the media accepts this division. Many if not all people have an understanding that the media is flawed and so tend not to accept its binary divisions.

Waiting for the revolution?

We are told the left in general and the rest of the anarchist movement in particular hold

than predictable phrases, identical to what has been said by other anarchists in places and times totally different- and only after that, to try to look for ways to justify it. That's doing the thing the other way round: analytical efforts happen after the positions are already taken!

Another way for this tactical dogmatism to be expressed, as we were reminded by comrade Black, is in the tendency to construct a whole ideology or current around a single tactic: we find traces of this in certain forms of anarcho-syndicalism as well as in insurrectionalism. This is a particularly weak line of thought that reduces the complexity of the political landscape and of the libertarian struggle to unique and sacred formulas.

What is worth noting is that often revolutionary struggle demands a variety of tactics that are imposed by the very necessities of practice: pacific and armed forms of struggle, legal mechanisms and transgression of law, public and clandestine organisation, all of these has been used, not infrequently, simultaneously by the anarchist movement, and there's no other parameter to measure the effectiveness of these tactics than the objectives of the movement, or the progress made in the construction of popular power and the weakening of the bourgeois power. There are no intrinsic qualities for tactics: what can be valid today mightn't be so tomorrow. And at the end of the day, tactics can only be chosen and discarded in relation to a global strategic programme; so, any judgement around them should not be based on the tactics as such, but on the way they served to the long term objectives.

The parameter to measure the effectiveness of the actions of the anarchists should be nothing short of their programme - what becomes a major problem when most of the anarchist groups lack even the most basic of the programmes. How is it possible then to hold a coherent vision between the immediate action - that can be even elevated to a fetish- and the long term objectives that are not envisaged as nothing but vague slogans? Does this mean to suggest for the comrades to sit and wait eternally so as to have a brand new programme with the one we can go out and fight? Certainly not. Simply it means to develop our tasks as organisations and gain our space in the popular struggles while we develop on parallel and give specific shape to the general view on things provided by anarchist theory. It means to take the general principles of anarchism to a concrete alternative for a place and space given.

Comrade Black reminds us of the importance as a parameter to measure our solidarity action that the group of people we are practicing solidarity with approve our tactics (ie., workers on strike). This being valid, only represents a minor proportion of the possible actions in which anarchists are regularly involved. This type of action is only useful for the struggles in which anarchists are a group of external support (to be honest, this situation is more likely to happen in places like Ireland - country where the original author of the article is from- where the level of social struggles is extremely low and with a political level of militancy as low). Most of the times our action are not merely intending to support some external group of people, but would have ourselves as the primary actors of struggle (ie, we are the workers striking, etc.) or would respond to political motives of the very organisation.

of it. However, they are exceptional moments on history, moments that work as hinges that open new revolutionary and radical alternatives out of the crisis of the old. The very nature of class struggle is to have moments of an open and brazen confrontation and others of scarce struggle; it is this fact what makes necessary for the revolutionary organisation to have a strategic vision.

Often there had been tendencies in the left that have based their tactics into making general rules out of moments of the class struggle that, by definition, are transitory: thus, the social-democracy consolidated in the moment of low level of struggles after the Paris Commune, renouncing to revolution and putting forward a reform by stages approach as their strategy. For them, the moment of low confrontation was the historical rule –this is the main reason to their opportunism.

Contrary to this, there were those who made a general rule out of the peak moments of class struggle: council communism is an example of that. Their strategy of forming council bodies based in the experience of the European revolutions of the 1920s, without any room for the struggle for reform and only with an all or nothing programme. This leads to the opposite pole of opportunism, that is maximalism, what is not a problem in revolutionary times, but in moments of low intensity of class struggle leads to isolation and confines the revolutionary movement to be nothing but a sect, probably full of devotion, but with no decisive role in the popular organisation. The most dogmatic versions of this current are incapable of appreciating revolutionary potential of those experiences not adjusting to their scheme.

In regard to insurrectionalism, as we already expressed, there seems to be as well a tendency to make a general rule out of certain hot moments in the class struggle. The exclusive practice out of context of forms of action more proper of those moments of open confrontation, at the expense of other forms of struggle, seems to demonstrate this trend of freezing historical moments as stated. This can have nefarious consequences.

Revolutionary movements have to learn how to be flexible, how to accommodate to new circumstances without losing from sight their principles and their fundamental politics. We have to reject dogmatism not only theoretically, but also tactically. ²

★ Tactical Dogmatism

One of the biggest problems of anarchism today is dogmatism, as this replaces concrete analysis for a number of eternal slogans, which are absolute, inaccurate and aprioristic. In reality, dogmatism is only the other face of our theoretical insufficiencies. The theoretical documents of contemporary anarchism are often full of inaccuracies and are impregnated by a rigid spirit, unaltered by encounter with reality. Contrary to what many believe, it is not only in the ideological aspect where this dogmatism can be felt. Dogmatism is far stronger when it comes to tactics. We, unfortunately, often see tactics turned into principles.

A way in which this tactical dogmatism is expressed is in the tendency among many anarchists to enounce a tactic or a political position –generally, nothing more

“a critique of separation and representation that justifies waiting and accepts the role of the critic. With the pretext of not separating oneself from the ‘social movement’, one ends up denouncing any practice of attack as a ‘flight forward’ or mere ‘armed propaganda’. Once again revolutionaries are called to ‘unmask’ the real conditions of the exploited, this time by their very inaction. No revolt is consequently possible other than in a visible social movement. So anyone who acts must necessarily want to take the place of the proletariat. The only patriarchy to defend becomes ‘radical critique’, ‘revolutionary lucidity’. Life is miserable, so one cannot do anything but theorise misery.”¹⁶

Here we see the chief weakness of insurrectionalism - its lack of serious discussion of other anarchist tendencies. We are led to believe that other revolutionaries, including all other anarchists, favour waiting around and preaching about the evils of capitalism rather than also taking action. There are some very few groups for whom this is true, but the reality is that even amongst the non-anarchist revolutionary movement most organisations also engage in forms of direct action where they think this makes tactical sense. In reality this is also the judgement that insurrectionalists make - like everyone else they recognise the need to wait until they think the time is right. They recognise that tomorrow is not the day to storm the White House.

★ Critique of Organisation

Another place to find fault with the ideology of insurrectionalism is where it comes to the question of organisation. Insurrectionalism declares itself against ‘formal organisation’ and for ‘informal organisation’. Often quite what that means is unclear as ‘formal’ organisation is simply used as a label for all the things that can go wrong with an organisation.

Insurrectionalists attempt to define formal organisation as *“permanent organisations [which] synthesise all struggle within a single organisation, and organisations that mediate struggles with the institutions of domination. Permanent organisations tend to develop into institutions that stand above the struggling multitude. They tend to develop a formal or informal hierarchy and to disempower the multitude ... The hierarchical constitution of power-relations removes decision from the time such a decision is necessary and places it within the organisation ... permanent organisations tend to make decisions based not on the necessity of a specific goal or action, but on the needs of that organisation, especially its preservation. The organisation becomes an end in itself”*

While this is quite a good critique of Leninism or Social Democratic forms of organisation, it doesn't really describe ongoing forms of anarchist organisation - in particular anarchist communism organisation. Anarchist communists don't, for instance, seek to *“synthesise all struggle within a single organisation”*. Rather we think the specific anarchist organisation should involve itself in the struggles of the working

class, and that these struggle should be self-managed by the class - not run by any organisation, anarchist or otherwise.

★ Solutions to the Problems of Organisation

Far from developing hierarchy, our constitutions not only forbid formal hierarchy but contain provisions designed to prevent the development of informal hierarchy as well. For instance considerable informal power can fall to someone who is the only one who can do a particular task and who manages to hold onto this role for many years. So the WSM constitution says no member can hold any particular position for more than three years. After that time they have to step down.

These sorts of formal mechanisms to prevent the development of informal hierarchy are common in anarchist communist organisations. In fact, it is an example of where formal organisation is a greater protection against hierarchy, our formal method of organisation also allows us to agree rules to prevent informal hierarchy developing. Insurrectionalism lacks any serious critique of informal hierarchy but, as anyone active in the anarchist movement in the anglo world knows, the lack of sizeable formal organisation means that problems of hierarchy within the movement are most often problems of informal hierarchy.

If you strip out the things that can go wrong with an organisation, then the insurrectionalist concept of 'formal' organisation boils down to an organisation that continues to exist between and across struggles. Although even here the distinction is clouded because insurrectionalists also see that sometimes informal organisation may be involved in more than one struggle or may move from one struggle to another.

From an anarchist communist perspective, the major point of an organisation is to help create communication, common purpose and unity across and between struggles. Not in the formal sense of all struggles being forced into the one program and under the one set of leaders. But in the informal sense of the anarchist communist organisation acting as one channel of communication, movement and debate between the struggles that allows for greater communication and increases the chance of victory.

★ The Insurrectionalist Alternative - Informal Organisation

The method of organisation favoured by insurrectionists is guided by the principle that *"The smallest amount of organisation necessary to achieve one's aims is always the best to maximize our efforts."* What this means is small groups of comrades who know each other well and have a lot of time to spend with each other discussing out

the experience of the MIL develops during the 70s, when it is clear to everyone that the Franco regime is going to have a "natural death" and when the transition, on the grounds of the strict exclusion of the revolutionary elements, was on its way. Even the very mention of comrade Black of insurrectionalism emerging in the English speaking world in the 80s, is not a minor issue: these are the years of a very low level of class struggle as a whole and years that saw the neocons on the rise, by the hand of Thatcher in England and of the "Reaganomics" in the US.

Even in Chile, the experience of the MJL (Lautaro), what I regard as the direct referent giving a certain sense of tradition to the local movement that has some insurrectionalist features, dates from the late 80s, when the fate of the popular movement that grew in the struggle against the dictatorship was already decided. That very popular movement that had resorted without blushing to "all means of struggle", and that was at this stage worn out, on its decline and that in the end, found itself blocked by the democratic institutions, unable to fight back in the same way they have done, up to that very minute under Pinochet's tyranny.

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. This lack of confidence is frequently disguised in a highly abstract jargon about a proletariat that does not materialise but in spontaneous acts of revolt. This lack of confidence is not only expressed as a denunciation of certain bureaucratic, reformist or compromised tendencies that are hegemonic in the popular organisations (such a criticism we would share with them), but they criticise the very nature and the *raison d'être* of this organisations.

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 "baricade days". These moments are frozen in the minds of the militants and it is often that they try to capture them again by trying hard, by an exercise of will alone, by carrying on actions in order to "awaken the masses"... most of the times, these actions have the opposite result to the one expected and end up, against the will of its perpetrators, serving in the hands of repression.

This condemnation of the popular organisations and this sense of urgent action—the one that does not ponder its impact on the popular consciousness and that usually end up, in fact, as extreme forms of vanguard action, though theoretically they might claim a distance from the concept of vanguard as a whole—tends to make even worse the initial isolation, what makes, at the end of the day, even easier the tasks of the repression and annihilation of dissent to the system.

★ Making General Rules out of Exceptional Circumstances

When the levels of class struggle are high, those are the most relevant moments

differences. There's, therefore, needed an internal criticism and not only a formal criticism.

To understand the problem at the root of insurrectionalism's political conceptions (fundamentally wrong, in my opinion) we have to take into account that they are the offspring of a certain historical moment, something that cannot be regarded as a mere coincidence. Every political idea is a daughter of its times. Secondly, many of these political conceptions are common to a wide section of the left, beyond anarchism. Insurrectionalism is a particular response to some problems that are in no way the sole heritage of anarchism, but that expressed in a wide range of political currents. This I think to be of paramount importance, particularly in the Chilean experience, where there has been a generation that speaks an insurrectionalist language after moving forward from the "lutarismo" towards anarchism. Though there has been a certain change in their political ideas, it is this "insurrectionalist" quintessence that has given continuity to this generation that has changed, to a certain extent, aesthetics but not discourse.

★ The Political Context of the Birth of Insurrectionalism

First of all, I want to insist on the fact that despite insurrectionalism being portrayed as a new anarchist current for the last couple of decades, on various historical moments (and under various flags –marxist, republican and anarchist alike) there have emerged movements that share some fundamental features with insurrectionalism: rejection in practice of any type of organisation with some projection in time ("formal organisation" according to the insurrectionalists), rejection of systematic and methodical work, despise for the people's struggle for reforms and mass organisation, what is has as a counterpart voluntarism, maximalism, a primarily emotional approach to politics, a certain sense of urgency, impatience and immediatism.¹

Conditions for these sorts of tendencies to emerge in the anarchist milieu have taken place under very specific historic moments, in which there has been a combination, on the one hand, of a high level of repression from the system and, on the other, of a low level of popular struggles. This factors combined have been historically a fertile ground for insurrectionalist tendencies in anarchism. The first precedent was "Propaganda by the Deed", that was born as a result of the repression to the Paris Commune. Then we have terrorism in Russia during the repressive aftermath to the 1905 revolution and illegalism in France, just before the First Great War. In Argentina, these tendencies flourished at the end of the 20s and during the 30s, years of acute repression and of flinching of the once powerful workers movement –this was a desperate, though heroic, of a decadent movement. Then we have Italy and Greece during the early 60s, decades in which the Post War low tide of the popular movement was probably at its lowest and when it was felt with all its weight the political defeat of the anti-fascist left, smashed from the left by Stalinism. In Spain,

issues and taking action - affinity groups.

We are told *"to have an affinity with a comrade means to know them, to have deepened one's knowledge of them. As that knowledge grows, the affinity can increase to the point of making an action together possible.."*¹⁷

Of course insurrectionalists know that small groups are often too small to achieve an objective on their own so in that case they say that groups can federate together on a temporary basis for that specific goal.

There have even been attempts to extend this to the international level. *"The Anti-authoritarian Insurrectionalist International is aimed at being an informal organisation... [It]is therefore based on a progressive deepening of reciprocal knowledge among all its adherents... To this end all those who adhere to it should send the documentation that they consider necessary to make their activity known... to the promoting group."*¹⁸

★ Autonomous Base Nucleus

It is obvious that a successful libertarian revolution requires the mass of the people to be organised. Insurrectionalists recognise this and have attempted to construct models of mass organisation that fit within their ideological principles. Autonomous Base Nucleus, as they are called, were originally based on the Autonomous Movement of the Turin Railway Workers and the Self-managed leagues against the cruise missile base in Comiso.

Alfredo Bonanno in *The Anarchist Tension* described the Comiso experience *"A theoretical model of this kind was used in an attempt to prevent the construction of the American missile base in Comiso in the early '80s. The anarchists who intervened for two years built "self-managed leagues".*¹⁹

He summarized them as follow *"These groups should not be composed of anarchists alone, Anyone who intends to struggle to reach given objectives, even circumscribed ones, could participate so long as they take a number of essential conditions into account. First of all "permanent conflict" that is groups with the characteristic of attacking the reality in which they find themselves without waiting for orders from anywhere else. Then the characteristic of being "autonomous", that is of not depending on or having any relations at all with political parties or trade union organisations. Finally, the characteristic of facing problems one by one and not proposing platforms of generic claims that would inevitably transform themselves into administration along the lines of a mini-party or a small alternative trades union."*²⁰

For all that they have 'self-managed' in their title these leagues in fact look pretty much like the front organisations used for linking into and controlling social struggles by many Leninist organisations. Why so? Well the above definition is one of an organisation that while seeking to organise the masses does so along lines defined by the informal groups of anarchists. If it was truly self-managed, surely the League itself would define its method of operation and what issues it might like to struggle around? And from the start the leagues exclude not only all other competing organ-

isations but even relations with political parties or trade union organisations. Again, any real self-managed struggle would make the decision of who to have relations with for itself and not simply follow the dictat of an organised ideological minority.

Another insurrectionalist, O.V., defined the leagues as *“the element linking the specific informal anarchist organisation to social struggles”* and said of them *“These attacks are organised by the nuclei in collaboration with specific anarchist structures which provide practical and theoretical support, developing the search for the means required for the action pointing out the structures and individuals responsible for repression, and offering a minimum of defence against attempts at political or ideological recuperation by power or against repression pure and simple.”*²¹

If anything this is worse - the specific anarchist structures are given the role of making pretty much every significant decision for the league. This makes a nonsense of any claim to self-management and would turn such a league into a creature to be manipulated by a self-selected cadre of true revolutionaries supposedly capable of grappling with the issues that its other members cannot. This seems to fly so much in the face of what insurrectionalists say elsewhere that we should stop and pause to wonder why do they end up with such a position.

★ The Question of Agreement

The reason lies in the fact that common action obviously requires a certain level of common agreement. The insurrectionalist approach to this is quite hard to get a grasp of and is the reason why such odd contradictions open up in the self-managed leagues they advocate. The problem is that reaching agreement requires decision making and in the making of decisions you open the possibility of a decision being made by the majority that the informal cadre think is a mistake,

The Do or Die article tries to define this obvious problem away as follows *“Autonomy allows decisions to be made when they are necessary, instead of being pre-determined or delayed by the decision of a committee or meeting. This does not mean to say however that we shouldn’t think strategically about the future and make agreements or plans. On the contrary, plans and agreements are useful and important. What is emphasised is a flexibility that allows people to discard plans when they become useless. Plans should be adaptable to events as they unfold.”*

This asks more questions than it answers - how can you plan without pre-determining something? If a group of people *“think strategically about the future”* is that group not a *“committee or meeting”* even if it chooses not to use that name. And who argues for plans that are not *“adaptable to events as they unfold”*?

From an anarchist communist perspective, the point of thinking strategically about the future is to use that thinking to plan for the future. Plans involve making decisions in advance - pre-determining them to at least an extent. And plans should be made and agreed formally, that certainly involves meetings and may well involve the meeting of a committee. Why deny any of this?

Notes on the article “Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism”

The objective of this article is to deal with certain issues that I believe to be insufficiently dealt with, if at all, in the article of Joe Black, “Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism”. I believe these issues to be of importance if we are to debate on insurrectionalism, so as to understand in perspective some of its ideas and the specific place it has in the general anarchist movement.

Before going any further, I want to say that I find praiseworthy the approach of comrade Black on the subject; at no time, he slipped into easy dismissals, distortions, nor biased interpretations to which, unfortunately, we are so accustomed in the anarchist movement. Above all, his discussion has been respectful and he has clarified some of the misinterpretations on the topic that among the anarchist-communists are a common currency. Through this humble contribution to the debate I hope not to be lead astray from that spirit, and to deal only with real differences instead of creating artificial ones.

I believe the criticism of comrade Black, fundamentally accurate in a number of issues, to be nonetheless a merely formal criticism. It is a criticism of the insurrectionalist “recipe book”, but not of its “catechism”. He directs his criticisms to certain practices that insurrectionalists could well do or not. But he does not deal with the political conceptions lying behind that give shape to their positions and the organisational format they resort to – personally, I’m far from believing as comrade Black suggests, that our differences only emerge in the face of the organisation question. I’m of the opinion that those organisational issues are reflecting some basic political

23. Alfredo Bonanno, *Armed Joy*, Translated by Jean Weir, Original title *La gioia armata*, 1977 Edizioni Anarchismo, Catania, 1998 Elephant Editions, London, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/a_joy.html

**You will find discussion of this article at
www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=3430**



★ Negotiation

Like the more ideological anarcho-syndicalists, insurrectionalists take an ideological position against negotiations. “*Compromise only makes the state and capital stronger*” we are told. But this is a slogan that only works if you are a small group that has no influence on a struggle. Short of the revolution, it will be unusual to win a struggle outright so if our ideas are listened to we will again and again be faced with either a limited and therefore negotiated victory or snatching defeat from the jaws of victory because we advise fighting for more than we know can be won. Surely our aim should be to win everything that is possible, not to go down to glorious defeat?

Apparently not. One insurrectionalist favourably describes how “*The workers who, during a wildcat strike, carried a banner saying, ‘We are not asking for anything’ understood that the defeat is in the claim itself*”.²² This obviously can only make sense when the workers concerned are already revolutionaries. If this is a social struggle for say a rent reduction or an increase in wages, such a banner is an insult to the needs of those in the struggle.

Short of the revolution, the issue should not be whether or not to negotiate but rather who negotiates, on what mandate and subject to what procedures before an agreement can be made. The reality is that if these questions are avoided, then that vacuum will be filled by authoritarians happy to negotiate on their terms in a way that minimises their accountability.

★ Repression and Debate

Without going into the specifics of each controversy, a major problem in countries where insurrectionalists put their words into deeds is that this often means attacks that achieve little except on the one hand providing an excuse for state repression and on the other isolating all anarchists, not just those involved, from the broader social movement.

Insurrectionalists claim to be willing to debate tactics but the reality of state repression means that in practise any critique of such actions is presented as taking the side of the state. Nearly 30 years ago Bonanno attempted to define all those who thought such actions premature or counter productive as taking the side of the state when he wrote in ‘Armed Joy’ that

*“When we say the time is not ripe for an armed attack on the State we are pushing open the doors of the mental asylum for the comrades who are carrying out such attacks; when we say it is not the time for revolution we are tightening the cords of the straight jacket; when we say these actions are objectively a provocation we don the white coats of the torturers.”*²³

The reality is that many actions claimed by insurrectionalists are not above critique - and if workers are not allowed to critique such actions are they not simply reduced to passive spectators in a struggle between the state and the revolutionary minority? If, as Bonnano seems to imply, you can't even critique the most insane of actions then you can have no real discussion of tactics at all.

★ Towards an Anarchist Communist Theory

Anarchist communists have adopted a different test to that of sanity when it comes to the question of militant action. That is if you are claiming to act on behalf of a particular group, then you first need to have demonstrated that the group agrees with the sort of tactics you propose to use. This question is far more important to anarchist practise than the question of what some group of anarchists might decide is an appropriate tactic.

As we have seen, anarchist communists have no principled objection to insurrections, our movement has been built out of the tradition of insurrections within anarchism and we draw inspiration from many of those involved in such insurrections. In the present, we continue to defy the limitations the state seeks to put on protest where ever doing so carries the struggle forward. Again that is not just a judgement for us to make - in cases where we claim to be acting in solidarity with a group (eg of striking workers) then it must be that group that dictates the limits of the tactics that can be used in their struggle.

Insurrectionalism offers a useful critique of much that is standard left practise. But it falsely tries to extend that critique to all forms of anarchist organisation. And in some cases the solutions it advocates to overcome real problems of organisation are worse than the problems it set out to address. Anarchist communists can certainly learn from insurrectionalist writings but solutions to the problems of revolutionary organisation will not be found there.

Joe Black



Notes:

1. John M Hart's "Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class"
2. James Joll, *The Anarchists*, pg. 229
3. Thanks to Pepe for information on these events in Argentina and Chile.
4. *Organisational Platform for a General Union of Anarchists (Draft)* (also known as the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*), Dielo Trouda (Workers' Cause) Group, 1926, online at www.zabalaza.net
5. Jaime Balias (secretary of the Friends of Durruti), *Towards a Fresh Revolution*, online at <http://struggle.ws/fod/towardsintro.html>
6. *Towards a Fresh Revolution*
7. *For an Anti-authoritarian Insurrectionist International - Proposal for a Debate*, Anti-authoritarian Insurrectionalist International, (Promoting Group), Elephant Editions 1993, online at www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/inter.html
8. Andy posting in response to an early draft of this article on the anti-politics forum, see www.anti-politics.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1052
9. It does however contain at least one basic error, it weirdly describe the synthesist Italian Anarchist Federation as a "platformist organisation" which suggests the authors made little or no attempt to understand what platformism is before moving to reject it.
10. *Do or Die* #10, 2003, online at www.eco-action.org/dod/no10/anarchy.htm
11. Anon., *At Daggers Drawn with the Existent, its Defenders and its False Critics*, Elephant Editions, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/dagger.html
12. *Do or Die* #10, "Insurrectionary Anarchism and the Organisation of Attack".
13. J.W., *Insurrection*, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/insurr5.html
14. *Do or Die* #10, "Insurrectionary Anarchism and the Organisation of Attack".
15. *Do or Die* #10, "Insurrectionary Anarchism and the Organisation of Attack".
16. Anon., *At Daggers Drawn with the Existent, its Defenders and its False Critics*, Elephant Editions, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/dagger.html
17. O.V., *Insurrection*, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/insurr3.html
18. *For An Anti-authoritarian Insurrectionalist International*, Elephant Editions 1993, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/insurrint.html
19. Alfredo Bonanno, *The Anarchist Tension*, Original Title, *La Tensione anarchica*. Translated by Jean Weir, 1996, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/tension.html
20. Alfredo Bonanno, *The Anarchist Tension*, Original Title, *La Tensione anarchica*. Translated by Jean Weir, 1996, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/tension.html
21. O.V., *Insurrection*, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/insurr2.html
22. Anon., *At Daggers Drawn with the Existent, its Defenders and its False Critics*, Elephant Editions, online at www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/dagger.html