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Anarchism and Organization

Errico Malatesta

1897

Organization which is, after all, only the practice of cooperation and solidarity, is a natural and necessary condition of social life; it is an inescapable fact which forces itself on everybody, as much on human society in general as on any group of people who are working towards a common objective. Since humanity neither wishes to, nor can, live in isolation it is inevitable that those people who have neither the means, nor a sufficiently developed social conscience to permit them to associate freely with those of a like mind and with common interests, are subjected to the organization by others, generally constituted in a class or as a ruling group, with the aim of exploiting the labor of others for their personal advantage. And the age-long oppression of the masses by a small privileged group has always been the result of the inability of the oppressed to agree among themselves to organize with others for production, for enjoyment and for the possible needs of defense against whoever might wish to exploit and oppress them. Anarchism exists to remedy this state of affairs ...

Now, it seems to us that organization, that is to say, association for a specific purpose and with the structure and means required to attain it, is a necessary aspect of social life. A human being in iso-

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lation cannot even live the life of a beast, for they would be unable to obtain nourishment for themselves, except perhaps in tropical regions or when the population is exceptionally sparse; and they would be, without exception, unable to rise much above the level of an animal. Having therefore to join with other humans, or more accurately, finding themselves united to them as a consequence of the evolutionary antecedents of the species, they must submit to the will of others (be enslaved) or subject others to his/her will (be in authority) or live with others in fraternal agreement in the interests of the greatest good of all (be an associate). Nobody can escape from this necessity.

Admitting as a possibility the existence of a community organized without authority, that is without compulsion — and anarchists must admit the possibility, or anarchism would have no meaning — let us pass on to discuss the organization of the anarchist movement.

In this case too, organization seems useful and necessary. If a movement means the whole — individuals with a common objective which they exert themselves to attain — it is natural that they should agree among themselves, join forces, share out the tasks and take all those steps which they think will lead to the achievement of those objectives. To remain isolated, each individual acting or seeking to act on their own without coordination, without preparation, without their modest efforts to a strong group, means condemning oneself to impotence, wasting one's efforts in small ineffectual action, and to lose faith very soon in one's aims and possibly being reduced to complete inactivity.

A mathematician, a chemist, a psychologist or a sociologist may say they have no programme or are concerned only with establishing the truth. They seek knowledge, they are not seeking to do something. But anarchism and socialism are not sciences; they are proposals, projects, that anarchists and socialists seek to realize and which, therefore need to be formulated as definite programs.

that it cannot desire more than that much organization, and of the kind it needs to attain power: Electoral organizations if it hopes to achieve it by legal means; Military organization if it relies on violent action. But we anarchists do not want to emancipate the people; we want the people to emancipate themselves. We do not believe in the good that comes from above and imposed by force; we want the new way of life to emerge from the body of the people and correspond to the state of their development and advance as they advance. It matters to us therefore that all interests and opinions should find their expression in a conscious organization and should influence communal life in proportion to their importance.

We have undertaken the task of struggling against existing social organization, and of overcoming the obstacles to the advent of a new society in which freedom and well being would be assured to everybody. To achieve this objective we organize ourselves and seek to become as numerous and as strong as possible. But if it were only our anarchist groupings that were organized; if the workers were to remain isolated like so many units unconcerned about each other and only linked by the common chain; if we ourselves besides being organized as anarchists in a federation, were not as workers organized with other workers, we could achieve nothing at all, or at most, we might be able to impose ourselves ... and then it would not be the triumph of anarchism, but our triumph. We could then go on calling ourselves anarchists, but in reality we should simply be rulers, and as impotent as all rulers are where the general good is concerned.

physical strength that is needed to subdue the organized might of the oppressors.

There have been anarchists, and there still are some, who while recognizing the need to organize today for propaganda and action, are hostile to all organizations which do not have anarchism as their goal or which do not follow anarchist methods of struggle. To those comrades it seemed that all organized forces for an objective less than radically revolutionary, were forces that the revolution was being deprived of. It seems to us instead, and experience has surely already confirmed our view, that their approach would condemn the anarchist movement to a state of perpetual sterility. To make propaganda we must be amongst the people, and it is in the workers' associations that workers find their comrades and especially those who are most disposed to understand and accept our ideas. But even when it is possible to do as much propaganda as we wished outside the associations, this could not have a noticeable effect on the working masses. Apart from a small number of individuals more educated and capable of abstract thought and theoretical enthusiasms, the worker cannot arrive at anarchism in one leap. To become an convinced anarchist, and not in name only, they must begin to feel the solidarity that joins them to their comrades, and to learn to cooperate with others in defense of common interests and that, by struggling against the bosses and against the government that supports them, should realize that bosses and governments are useless parasites and that the workers could manage the domestic economy by their own efforts. And when the worker has understood this, he or she is an anarchist even if they do not refer to themselves as such.

Furthermore, to encourage popular organizations of all kinds is the logical consequence of our basic ideas, and should therefore be an integral part of our programme. An authoritarian party, which aims at capturing power to impose its ideas, has an interest in the people remaining an amorphous mass, unable to act for themselves and therefore always easily dominated. And it follows, logically,

If it is true that organization creates leaders; if it is true that anarchists are unable to come together and arrive at an agreement without submitting themselves to an authority, this means that they are not yet very good anarchists, and before thinking of establishing an anarchist society within the world they must think of making themselves able to live anarchistically. The remedy does not lie in the abolition of organization but in the growing consciousness of each individual member. In small as well as large societies, apart from brute force, of which it cannot be a question for us, the origin and justification for authority lies in social disorganization.

When a community has needs and its members do not know how to organize spontaneously to provide them, someone comes forward, an authority who satisfies those needs by utilizing the services of all and directing them to their liking. If the roads are unsafe and the people do not know what measures to take, a police force emerges which in return for whatever services it renders expects to be supported and paid, as well as imposing itself and throwing its weight around; if some article is needed, and the community does not know how to arrange with the distant producers to supply it in exchange for goods produced locally, the merchant will appear who will profit by dealing with the needs of one section to sell and of the other to buy, and impose his/her own prices both on the producer and the consumer. This is what has happened in our midst; the less organized we have been, the more prone are we to be imposed on by a few individuals. And this is understandable. So much so that organization, far from creating authority, is the only cure for it and the only means whereby each one of us will get used to taking an active and conscious part in the collective work, and cease being passive instruments in the hands of leaders.

But an organization, it is argued, presupposes an obligation to coordinate one's own activities with those of others; thus it violates liberty and fetters initiative. As we see it, what really takes away liberty and makes initiative impossible is the isolation which renders it powerless. Freedom is not an abstract right but the pos-

sibility of acting; this is true among ourselves as well as society as a whole. And it is by cooperation with our fellow human beings that we find the means to express our activity and our power of initiative.

An anarchist organization must allow for complete autonomy, and independence, and therefore full responsibility, to individuals and groups; free agreement between those who think it useful to come together for cooperative action, for common aims; a moral duty to fulfill one's pledges and to take no action which is contrary to the accepted programme. On such bases one then introduces practical forms and suitable instruments to give real life to the organization. Thus the groups, the federation of groups, the federations of federations, meetings, congresses, correspondence committees and so on. But this also must be done freely, in such a way as not to restrict the thought and the initiative of individual members, but only to give greater scope to the efforts which in isolation would be impossible or ineffective. Thus for an anarchist organization congress, in spite of all the disadvantages from which they suffer as representative bodies, are free from authoritarianism in any shape or form because they do not legislate and do not impose their deliberations on others. They serve to maintain and increase personal contacts among the most active comrades, to summarize and encourage programmatic studies on the ways and means for action; to acquaint everybody with the situation in the regions and the kind of action most urgently needed; to summarize the various currents of anarchist opinions at the time and to prepare some kind of statistics therefrom. And their decisions are not binding, but simply suggestions, advice and proposals to submit to all concerned, and they do not become binding and executive except for those who accept them and for as long as they accept them. The administrative organs they nominate — Correspondence Commissions, etc. — have no directive powers, do not take initiatives except for those who specifically solicit and approve of them, and have no authority to impose their own views, which they can cer-

tainly hold and propagate as groups of comrades, but which cannot be presented as the official views of the organization. They publish the resolutions of the congresses and the opinions and proposals communicated to them by groups and individuals; and they act for those who want to make use of them, to facilitate relations between groups, and cooperation between those who are in agreement on various initiatives; each is free to correspond with whoever he/she likes direct, or make use of the other committees nominated by specific groupings.

In an anarchist organization individual members can express any opinion and use every tactic which is not in contradiction with the accepted principles and does not interfere with the activities of others. In every case a particular organization last so long as the reasons for union are superior to those for dissension; otherwise it disbands and makes way for other, more homogenous groupings. Certainly the life and permanence of an organization is a condition for success in the long struggle before us, and besides, it is natural that every institution should by instinct aim at lasting indefinitely. But the duration of a libertarian organization must be the result of the spiritual affinity of its members and of the adaptability of its constitution to the continually changing circumstances. When it can no longer serve a useful purpose it is better that it should die.

We would certainly be happy if we could all get along well together and unite all the forces of anarchism in a strong movement; but we do not believe in the solidity of organizations which are built on concessions and assumptions and in which there is no real agreement and sympathy between members. Better disunited than badly united. But we would wish that each individual joined their friends and that there should be no isolated forces, or lost forces.

It remains for us to speak of the organization of the working and oppressed masses for resistance against both the government and the employers. Workers will never be able to emancipate themselves so long as they do not find in union the moral, economic and