

Anarchist Organisation: Why it is Failing

Graham Purchase

1998

Contents

Blanket rejection of rational/natural authority and leadership roles	3
Problem of Egoism/Psychological make up of anarchists	4
Factionalism	5
Anarchist Organisation as navel gazing/end in itself	7
Formalization/Legalization of Anarchist Organisations	8
Lack of Federation	9
Conclusion	9
Communes, Collectives and Claptrap	11
Communal experimentalism	11
Collectives and Support/propaganda Groups	11

Anarchist organisations are an insignificant aspect of social history and the present day life of the people. In comparison other non-governmental, community etc., groups are flourishing. The small number of anarchist groups are resource poor (in terms of both people, premises and equipment) and fraught with internal arguments and in dispute with other anarchist organisations. It is useful therefore, to examine from an historical and contemporaneous viewpoint, some of the major reasons for these failings.

Blanket rejection of rational/natural authority and leadership roles

This is the belief, promotion and practice of silly 1960's notions of organisation usually based around the 'open meeting'. A model where any one from anywhere can participate. Their opinion (and vote) being equal to any other. Such hopeless open church approaches to decision making is not helped much by some sort of basic membership criteria when members as a core theoretical/ideological belief reject natural leadership roles, even those based upon the acquisition of knowledge, expertise and skills gained over years of sustained effort. In actual fact, however, 'leaderless' grouplets (because of their small, often friendship based nature) usually become psychologically dominated by one or some of the membership. This is sometimes referred to as the tyranny of structurelessness and occurs because leadership is a feature of all human social activity. Anarchism has to accept (though not unconditionally) Durruti's (organisational ability/military and tactical skills) and Kropotkin's (intellectual leadership). It is not leadership that has to be eliminated, but those forms of leadership based upon authoritarian top down command models or those which have a profoundly non-rational or irrational basis. Some common forms of non-authoritarian leadership are:

- Task-based — We accept the expertise of a competent builder or bootmaker. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, reminds us, that a ship's passengers/crew in a tempest, will accept the authority of an able captain: "treating him as though he were a God". Respect for craft/activity/task based expertise or authority is essential to organisational harmony. If people's expertise is disregarded or they feel that their knowledge is not valued they will become demoralized and leave the group disillusioned.
- Organisational ability — People also vary in their organisational ability — some people are definitely much better at organising things and people than others. None of this sort of thing necessarily implies authoritarianism. Leadership, can be about skilled facilitation and coordination of the various resources of the group and not just bossing people about.
- Time — amount of input.
- Interest — especially when nobody else was willing to take on certain roles/tasks
- Intellectual leadership — Bakuninism, Proudhonism etc.

I include the following quote from Chaz Bufe (who like myself has been around long enough to have a firm grasp of the morass that passes for anarchist organisation), not because I cannot think of what to write, but because it is nice to find someone with whom one can agree. Chaz

writes almost exactly what I would have written — and clearly encapsulates what I understand as non-authoritarian leadership.

“In the 60’s and 70’s many leftist, anarchist and feminist groups agonised over how to eliminate leadership, equating all leadership (including temporary, task-based leadership) with authoritarian leadership. Their fruitless efforts confirm what the more astute anarchists have been saying for over a century — that it’s a mistake to think that any kind of group or organisation can exist without leadership; the question is, what kind of leadership is it going to be? A new model must be found that is superior to the anti-leadership model and the traditional hierachal static leadership ideal, where the leader directs everything, regardless of their interest, motivation, or expertise and the led are expected to follow orders, no matter how stupid. In the new model, those who have the most expertise, the most interest, and the most commitment provide the leadership. The key here is that they derive their authority not through coercion, but precisely through their interest, expertise, and commitment; as well, only those who feel attracted to the projects will (temporarily) follow them — and, ideally, these temporary followers will, at one time or another, be leaders of other projects. Another key element is that, in this new model, leadership is permeable — anyone who has sufficient motivation and commitment will likely become part of the multifaceted, de facto, and ever-changing leadership within a nonhierarchical organisation” (*A future Worth Living: Thoughts on Getting There*, See Sharp Press, 1988 page 21 — slightly modified by me)

Problem of Egoism/Psychological make up of anarchists

I thinks that its is fair to say that many active anarchists have a history which involves some sort of reaction to parental, social etc., authority leading to an inability to accept rational forms of authority. Others who come to anarchism are often bruised by their experiences withing authoritarian leftist or Stalinist groupings. This leads some anarchists (or those in someway drawn to anarchism) to reject all forms of authority whilst at the same time often being self important/opinionated people who find it difficult to work with others. This accounts for the tremendous amount of bickering within and between groups. The problem of egocentrism among many attracted to anarchism also amplifies undesirable developments associated with naturally occurring leadership (authoritarianism, power politiking etc) in group dynamics. This is not a new phenomenon. Max Nettlau in his History of Anarchism concludes:

“Everywhere, the group which believed itself more advanced fought those anarchists it considered less advanced, and isolation grew — a phenomenon that had nothing to do with either the libertarian idea or with solidarity but was the outcome of sheer arbitrariness and egocentrism” *Short History of Anarchism*, Freedom Press 1996, page 150. This is a translation of 1932–4 Spanish edition

Factionalism

Factionalism, like leadership, is an aspect of all human groupings both governmental and non-governmental. Note, for example the several East Timor support groups or the intense suspicion/factionalism between the war-time-division (guardian of Geneva convention) and the civil division (aid for disasters etc) of the International Red Cross. Sometime intense hatred can result in murder as occurred recently within the Australian Cat Protection Society and National Action (an Australian Nazi group) a number of years ago. Factionalism is a prominent feature of parliamentary politics and governmental politics generally. It is a feature of both right and left wing non-mainstream/extreme groupings. Factionalism is unavoidable within and between human groupings. It comes with the territory. It is stupid to pretend that anarchist organisation will overcome it.

Factionalism is not just a destructive phenomena but also an intensely creative one. Indeed, anarchism came about as a result of factionalism between the state-socialists and non-state-socialists in the first workers international in the 19th century. If people never disagreed with one another political theory would never have evolved. When factionalism reveals, or is a catalyst for the growth, of two completely incompatible outlooks, then this breach is not only necessary, but becomes permanent and unbridgeable.

Ideological disputation between those who identify themselves as anarchists has been a prominent feature of the anarchist movements since its birth in the middle 19th century. There have been 5 basic factions:

1. anarcho-syndicalism – Industrial unionism, workers self management
2. anarchist communism – Communal organisation of economic life. Right to free consumption. Internal factionalism revolves around isolationist (pure communist/communal experimentalist) and Federalist wings
3. eco-anarchism – Natural environmental region. Internal factionalism between industrial and anti-industrial/primitivist wing
4. individualist anarchism – Non-capitalist market place, monetary reform. Rejects right to free consumption. Need for individual economic autonomy
5. libertarianism or lifestylism – Nudism, vegetarianism, free love, Esperanto etc., movements

(1-3) One of the main purposes of my many works on anarchism has been to show that there is not a contradiction between the first of these 3 factionalisms (see my brief pamphlets *Anarchist Society* or *The New Anarchy*). Any anarchist society would most likely necessarily contain elements of all three (but in terms of practical revolutionary strategy only syndicalism has any real possibility of initially overthrowing capitalism). Humans must live somewhere (the natural bio- or eco-region being the only real method of demarcating space and place once the state is destroyed), that those same people must live with a certain group of others in that place (commune, city, suburb, town, village). Communalism, self-sufficiency and regionalism will not generate a global postal service etc., which require inter-communal/regional workers organisation (Industrial Syndicalism).

(4) Individualist anarchism although originally incorporating a great diversity of trends became rapidly and primarily focused upon monetary reform. They explored methods of communal monetary exchange that allowed for individual economic independence whilst freeing money from state-capitalist power structures (and potential tyranny of the communist collective and syndicalist economic monopoly). Many of their ideas have parallels with modern Local Exchange and Trading Systems (LETS). In fact there has been something of a revival in individualist-anarchist-like monetary experiments in recent years. Many contemporary anarchists have shown quite amount of non-prejudiced interest in LETS et. al schemes. Whatever the dispute between the communist and individualist anarchists may have been in the past they no longer seem so fundamental.

(5) Whereas there is no inherent or unbridgeable contradiction between (1 to 4) the environmental, syndicalist, communalist and individualist intellectual factions of anarchism the same does not hold true for the contradiction between anarchism and libertarianism (nowdays referred to as lifestylism). Libertarianism, (which grew out of anarchist individualism but rapidly became distinct from it) traditionally advocated a variety of lifesylisms, ranging from nudist colonies, self-sufficiency through communal isolationism/experimentalism, vegetarianism, free-love, Esperanto, minority sexualities/sexual tastes, avant-garde fashion/art/music/theatre etc., and so on.

[It should be noted that in the United States, the concept labeled 'libertarianism' went from being a philosophy of a regulation-free society to a 'free-market' political ideology, while 'lifestylism' went in a different direction. -ed.]

Some may believe that the arguments between lifestylers and anarchists is a new phenomenon. This is not the case. Extreme lifestylism has been a feature of the anarchist landscape for over a century. Nettlau in his Short History of Anarchism remarks:

"From 1895 there was an outburst of ideological sub-species. Among them were the naturism of that era, which was a defence of savage primitivism, followed by the naturism which was based on diet, vegetarianism and so on, as well as the little centres of the simple life – of short duration. Neo-Malthusianism [about the right to contraception and free love mustn't be confused with modern meaning – graham] gained considerable ground, led to discussions of the sex problem; while this was no doubt a matter of free choice for the individual, its effect upon our movement was to create a diversion of energy and attention. There were popular universities, the theatre of the people, centres for child education and other useful and congenial activities, suitable for an era of great tranquility, but they brought little added energy and little new force to anarchist ideas. It always seemed to me, anarchists had something else to do than meddle with Esperanto, sexual Neo-Malthusianism and other such deviations. This they Failed to do and they were relegated to second place." (pages 288–89)

"Landauer, writing to me in 1910, thought that the new generation of anarchists, which he stated he found in all countries was characterised to by 'the habitual', 'routine', 'uniformity', or 'dull repetition'. They based their anarchism upon the erroneous supposition that all our intellectual labour has already been accomplished, and that one may as well now devote oneself to such pleasant pursuits as the study of Esperanto, Neo-malthusianism, primitive colonies, and sometimes even to illegal

acts and expropriation [eg. shoplifting, graham] – in other words, we do not move forward, we hang back, we scatter our energies.” (page 229)

It is difficult not to agree with Nettlau and Landauer. Nudist colonies (as profit making capitalist holiday options) exist all over Europe and Australia, vegetarianism is practiced by many people for a wide variety of reasons, ‘free-love’ has not been a live issue since the end of the 1970’s (when the socio-sexual fall-out from the introduction and use of the pill was much discussed) and Esperanto, although spoken globally by 1 million people, has hardly been a force for world change.

It cannot be doubted that interest/lifestyle perspectives with which the so-called anarchist and leftist subculture still abounds is a diversion from the main ideological road. There is no point in trying to reconcile lifestylism and anarchism. Lifesylism involves individual lifestyle choice whilst anarchism aims to create a mass workers movement. Anarchism developed out of the international worker’s movement, whilst vegetarianism and sexual expressionism have their own his/her-stories. Gay libertarianism or vegetarian-anarchists are are an insignificant footnote in the history of the vegetarian and gay liberation movements.

The involvement of anarchists in NGO’s, single-issue support/protest groups, ‘food not bombs’, ‘reclaim the city’, ‘West Papau’, food fadism, music, fashion etc, although positive and useful interests/activities does not further the cause of anarchism either practically or intellectually. Mutual aid, interest and other human-associational groups, in virtue of the fact that they are non-governmental, will be a feature of any future anarchist society. They are not however groups that are aimed at expelling government from society and in promoting workers self management. Even those non-governmental organisations and community groups that are broadly compatible with anarchism (and there are many that are not eg., Salvation Army, Boy Scouts ad. infinitum) they at best aim at piecemeal reform, parliamentary lobbying, theatrical performances or palliative care. They are not revolutionary organisations. Conversely they drain energy from genuine revolutionary agitation among the workers, especially in the economically strategic major industries.

Anarchist Organisation as navel gazing/end in itself

People unacquainted with anarchist theory and practice nearly always think that anarchism and organisation are contradictory. Although anarchists are often at pains to explain that anarchism is not chaos, there is some truth in the idea that anarchist propaganda groups should not be inwardly focusing upon their own internal organisation. Bakunin was famous for his promotion of non-existent organisations or ones with no membership. The CNT/FAI prior to the outbreak of the civil war had little formal centralized organisation. The aim of anarchism is to encourage the workers to organize themselves for the overthrow of capitalism with a view to running society/economy for the benefit of themselves and the rest of humanity. The aim of the anarchist propaganda groups is to promote and facilitate the growth of a revolutionary workers movement and not to focus upon the structure, processes and development of their own organisations; as this often leads to the formation of intellectual vanguards or inward looking micro-grouplets unengaged with the real arena of struggle among the workers. (These navel gazing tendencies have been analysed by me in an earlier speech on anarchist organisation delivered a couple of months

ago, see **Communes Collectives and Claptrap**, *Rebel Worker* #152 April-May 1998 [see below – ed.])

Formalization/Legalization of Anarchist Organisations

Because longer established anarchist organisations (for financial/practical rather than ideological reasons) often come to own buildings, printing presses, and other commercially valuable assets, it has been found necessary to form themselves into incorporated legal associations or develop highly formalized procedures. One of the main reasons for legal incorporation is to avoid the only other option, where an individual member of the group legally owns the valuable property. Individuals go mad, have breakdowns, change their views and even become capitalists (and unfortunately have the capital of the anarchist organisation at their legal disposal). The transition of a propaganda group with all its inherent defects into a legal organisation, although preferable to individual ownership, has usually been the source of endless bickering and often violence. The legal structures surrounding the A house in Melbourne or Jura in Sydney, as a result of the problems listed below, have all experienced and generated hostility, violent take overs (or attempts to do so) and vitriolic denouncements posted informally or in press articles spamming specific people and groups (as Stalinists, fascists, dictators, mad, etc). This comes about for 3 main reasons:

1. Director Mentality: Incorporation can lead to the development of a director mentality (cheque-book anarchism) among ‘board’ members and ‘office’ holders. This results in patterns of behaviour associated with hierarchical structures such as power trips and paranoia concerning the attitudes and activities of ‘ordinary’ members of the group.
2. Misconceptions: The tedious bureaucratic and rather thankless tasks associated with maintaining legal structures (as well as other institutions such as bookshops/stalls, drop-in centres) means that people who take on these positions feel that their efforts are not appreciated. Activists who undertake such tasks (especially when others are not willing to undertake the necessary labour) often become bitter because of mis-perceptions and grossly unfair criticisms by utopian fanatics (often holding silly/anything goes conceptions of organisational spontaneity), idealistic newcomers, and rival factions/grouplets. Not only do the ‘workhorses’ of many long-established formalised and legalised organisations get no thanks for undertaking tedious tasks, year in year out, but receive outright hostility; accused of being stalinists, dictators or little fascists, who must necessarily be (violently) overthrown. Misperceptions concerning the roles and tasks associated with formalisation/legalisation is actually a much more common cause of conflict than the development of the director mentality. However the pathological egocentrism of some anarchists makes them less than ideal board members as well as engendering deep resentment and envy among other egocentrists who aspire to joining the board and becoming someone important.
3. Old guard/rear guard phenomenon: People who have been involved with an organisation for years are often unable to relinquish board membership or office. Formal rotation procedures breakdown due to lack of suitable candidates, but more often, due to a ‘fear of change’ and a ‘fortress mentality’, simply end-up shuffling the old-guard around. Sometimes this policy is deliberate, hoping to create a rear-guard in the form of a legal barrier

to take-over attempts from opposing anarchist/socialist factions, scoundrels and profiteers. When the majority of the membership of umbrella legal organisations have no day to day involvement in the actual running of the project, or (as is quite common) are not seen in the premises from one year to the next – the organisation withers from above. This happens because there is the opening up a kind of worker/managerial divide as well as a generation gap (in the worst case scenarios creating a gerentocracy). Moreover, the legal office holders (because they are not around very much) have little understanding of group-specific dynamics at the grass-roots leading a tendency to form their opinions upon the basis of hearsay, gossip and lobbying rather than upon actual knowledge. This destroys the fluidity of spontaneous leadership turnover making leadership static and impermeable.

Lack of Federation

Federation has failed because of one-up-mans-ship by egocentric group leaders etc. It has also failed because of unfocused lifestylist deviations/energy drains. Federations have to be based around commonality of aims and interests. In my view there has been a fragmentation of focus leading to extreme disunity in diversity and an absence of a viat matrix of core beliefs necessary for effective ideational glue. People participating in wide range of ‘radical’ NGO’s, who also happen to identify themselves as anarchists does not deliver unified effort. Moreover the unifying factor for various groups should be the development of anarchist worker organisations, not aboriginal land rights or anti-road protests. The combination of ego-centrism and lifestylism has generally resulted in the development of isolated unfederated (quietly or overtly hostile) grouplets. Where larger national or global legalized/formalized (supposedly federative but rarely so) anarchist structures have been developed and maintained, such as the CNT or IWA, they have been racked by infighting, expulsions, and in the case of the CNT prolonged court cases over money and property. Apparently federalist organisations such as the IWA have become centralized, irrelevant and ethnocentric organisations riven with intense and incomprehensible in fighting. I will not dwell upon the sad and fractious ending of the federation between the Melbourne and Sydney branches of the IWA here in Australia several years ago. Even where federations do peacefully exist, they exist in name only (nominally), ie., simply swapping publications rather than an active, vital co-ordination. The inability of anarchist groups to form and maintain effective regional, national and international federations has greatly reduced the effectiveness and relevance of anarchist organisation in the age of global-capitalism which can only be defeated by a global workers movement.

Conclusion

Anarchist organisation are in a very sad state, both in terms of the tiny number of activists and their pitiful understanding of the organisational/interpersonal dynamics of voluntary human groupings – despite advocating a future society that is conceived as being composed largely of them. Conflict, violence, envy, malice, hatred, power lust are at times a feature of all (non-governmental political) associations, resulting in purges and takeovers. Freedom expelled Kropotkin (over his support of World War One), the Red Cross expelled their founder for their

own reasons. Burn-out and stupidity also play their part in demoralising those activists not interested with the antics of self-important egoists.

In summary the main lessons to be learnt from all this is: (1) To accept rational leadership roles. (2) To ensure that the focus of the anarchist propaganda group/federation is centered out in the real economic world; encouraging the workers to form organisations capable of taking human society beyond its present capitalist stage. (3) To maintain a robust rejection of diversionary lifestyle perspectives/activities without engaging in unnecessary factionalism with other anarchist perspective.

Anarchists having learnt the lesson, that self organisation is not automatically harmonious, in fact quite often rather the opposite, are best urged to use this knowledge to advise the workers, when factionalism and egoism, threaten to destroy militant worker groups.

Communes, Collectives and Claptrap

Communal experimentalism

Many respected anarchist thinkers of the past, for example, Kropotkin and Reclus were appalled by their comrades/contemporaries attempt to create an anarchist or new society through the creation of small and isolated communist/communal experiments. An unfortunate practice with a long history and which shares characteristics or has parallels with monasticism, religious fanaticism/isolationism, colonialism and early communist experiments, rather than with modern anarchism as developed by workers during the first worker's international. Except those communal experiments based upon religious or authoritarian principles such ventures have never succeeded in lasting very long. The attempt to create economic self-sufficient 'Utopian' communes in the wilderness, usually under difficult financial circumstances, by a very small number of people, mostly unacquainted with agricultural/horticultural work, never succeeded in the 19th century — and the re-emergence of this infantile idea during the 'flower-power' era was a major reason for the failure of anarchism during its partial resurgence during the 1960's and 1970's (partial in that it was largely associated with pre-industrial/neo-primitivist perspectives propounded by university/hippy dropouts rather than workers and industrial issues). The reasons why such communist/communalist experiments fail are many and various, not least of which is that people get sick and tired of one another rather quickly. The fact that village life was never that easy nor economically viable, at least since the industrial revolution, makes the attempt to construct a new village founded upon untried and Utopian principles from scratch virtual stupidity. More pertinently such self-indulgent activity has absolutely no relation to the economics of the real world and no impact upon the masses what so ever, and hence has no propaganda value. Besides it is not necessary to communalize everything, act as one big family and all eat around the same table. Housing co-operatives, community land trusts etc., can provide affordable housing and joint access to communal facilities without needing to foolishly attempt to create a communist utopia amongst a group of strangers bound only by an commitment to a usually ill-defined and probably unrealisable ideal. These issues are explored intelligently, and in some detail in a recently published pamphlet (available from the ASN) by Kropotkin, entitled *Small Communal Experiments and Why They Fail*.

Collectives and Support/propaganda Groups

As a noun a collective describes any social group whatsoever. As a political concept it is so indistinct as to be practically worthless for the purpose of describing or analysing social phenomena. At the very least however we can say that a collective is a group or association rather than an individual or the state. However, this can describe anything from a large company to a group of children building a cubby house. Actually the most fruitful approach to the concept of collec-

tivity is to point out that it is derived from the Latin *to pick*, thus collectivism denotes a state where people can pick or choose who they work with, and the way in which they work together. This is a very common form of organisation, a perfect example of a collective might be a group of people who happen to meet each other down the pub one Saturday night and get-it-together to play beach volley ball every Sunday thereafter. The point being that the way in which the group functions and comes together is a matter of choice rather than being imposed upon them. The word collective in anarchist thought specifically refers to an economic arrangement that lies between capitalism and anarchist communism. For example, the anarcho-communist idea of 'the big pile system' where people just take what they need from the common stock is perhaps too utopian to achieve right away. Thus, alternatively, it might be better to try this out with stuff that is plentiful whilst having some sort of formalised exchange system for less common items. The latter position was described as a collectivist or more realistic/practical programme rather than a communist position. Anarchists in the Spanish civil war used the term to describe a wide variety of economic experiments in villages and in factories/industries in Barcelona. The resurgence of interest in anarchism in the 1960's led to the word being misapplied by misguided hippies to describe what had previously been described as a 'propaganda group', sometimes, and sometimes not, centred around a prominent writer or activist, for example, the *Freedom Group*, the *Friends of Durruti Group* or the *Miners Support Group*. Propaganda groups are many and various. The most common activities are running a bookshop/cafe/drop-in Centre, printing pamphlets, producing newspapers, running lecture series. A propaganda group is not an economic group upon which people gain their livelihood, but a voluntary, usually loss-making activity participated in during the members spare time (which people seem to have very little of these days). Anarchist propaganda groups, unlike most other political groupings have the added disadvantage of not having a party structure (and unfortunately these days attract people who eschew political and intellectual leadership). The point is though, that a propaganda group is not a collective, as it has no economic basis. A propaganda group is a group set up to persuade the general public to collectivise their communities and industries, it is not itself a collective. There are of course many collectives (outside the specifically historical anarchist use of the word) that do not have an economic basis, our group of beach volley ballers for example. Collective behaviour is very, very common, but only economic collectivism has any real political significance. To label a propaganda group a collective or the attempt to collectivise a loose assemblage of people undertaking propaganda activities upon a sporadic, and at best part-time basis, which provide them no economic reward, is at worst silly, and at best, hopelessly utopian and bound to fail. Obviously, what is needed is a party structure, not a propaganda group attempting the mega-utopian project of creating a communist utopia within the shell of their own propaganda group, in the absence of any economic link with the real world. However, in the absence of a party structure some organisation is required. As anarchism is still very much at the propaganda stage of its development, merely an idea-ology rather than real-ity it is best to be rather modest in ones organisational aspirations. A group of 5 or 10 people (such as our volley ball group) can work very effectively with one another – without ever having a formal meeting – and simply relying upon a trusted network of people who respect each others areas of expertise and pool their efforts together with the minimum of fuss. Our miners support group during the British Miners Strike, the jura media project or the recent conferences staged in co-operation with jura media and Bob Gould are all examples, within my own experience, where something was collectively (in the broad non-economic sense) achieved without giving ourselves the fancy title 'collective' nor pretend-

ing that we could ever become some such thing. On the other hand, those propaganda groups who aspire to create their own communist utopia in the shell of their own propaganda group are always racked by argument, dissension and open violence., and when their members fail to live up to communist-utopian ideals (upon which in the real world there is rarely any agreement in any case) they crash in smouldering compost of mutual criticism. Also in a small voluntary, non-economic organisation, people can always come and go as they please and have varying amounts of time (and they are usually economically better off by not participating), inevitably the effort by some or one or two is always greater than the rest and meetings are either poorly attended, boring or unnecessary for such small groupings.

Alternatively they tend to be dominated by utopian fanatics every ready to grumble about other's collective deficiencies. Moreover, propaganda groups never grow beyond a small size — there is no economic or party glue — to hold them together. The constant complaint by such groups that “we never seem to grow” is based upon the mistaken premise that small propaganda groups can ever grow beyond a certain size and whether it is desirable that they do so in any case. The purpose of a propaganda group is that it seeks to promote the growth of anarchist economic collectives in the real world and beyond a certain, quite small number of people, the growth of its own organisation is irrelevant. Propaganda groups should be judged by their effectiveness in producing propaganda, and more relevantly creating anarchist structures/awareness in the real economic world. The notion that individual propaganda groups can grow beyond a few people is silly, though of course a federation of them is another matter again, as this is the growth of a propaganda movement, the proliferation of propaganda groups (Federations have their own organisational problems which I'm not going into right now. Also the relationship of the propaganda group to a real collectived syndicate or commune, also creates problems when it becomes an intellectual vanguard or second force. The discussion surrounding the FAI/CNT relationship in Spanish revolution is instructive in this respect). Beyond this the type of activities open to small propaganda groups such as bookshops, newspapers etc., are typically not particularly suitable projects for the instantaneous creation of communist ideals. In the real world small newspapers typically require an editorial role, writers, printers, cartoonists, layout designers, money, dogs-body work, the resident computer wizz, time, a marketer, distributor, photographers etc., — these skills and resources are not evenly distributed or interchangeable in the real world, and usually less so in the world of the propagation of revolutionary ideals. Moreover, the need for editorial supervision and the sectarian nature of newsprint mean that it is most unfavourable activity around which to develop an egalitarian collective.

In the real world small bookshops (becoming very rare now) are usually run as a small business by individual proprietors with a knowledge and talent for the book business. A book business is not run by ideologies but by taking informed risks and building up solid relationships with one's suppliers and buyers. This is achieved through consistency, efficiency, judgment and economic necessity. A group of people who are not economically dependent upon the business, involving themselves inconsistently and haphazardly, and who often have little or no knowledge of the book business (or any business for that matter) is very far from a good start. Unfortunately those concerned with running such ventures fail to realise that running a small book business is not an exercise in creating a collective utopia but in adequate returns and selling books. Even when such bookshops do succeed (for a while) the participants delude themselves that running a small book business slightly more democratically than usual is some sort of really amazing goal in itself, which it is not. Co-operatives, book clubs, mutualist associations or LETS can achieve this, with-

out having any real political agenda/affiliations at all. But because people's income is dependent upon the success of the venture (ie., it is a real economic entity not a propaganda group) there is more likelihood that the correct solutions will be found — rather than spending ones time arguing about how things fall short of some ill-defined notion of collectivity — eventually leading to dissension, discord and economic failure. Beyond this the less politically charged or a-political nature of economic co-operatives also means that they are less susceptible to the silly ideological squabbles that beset most anarchist bookshops. Anarchist cafes, usually with a smaller and less intimidating range of anarchist propaganda, suffer from all of the above deficiencies but have the added problem that the general public treat it as a coffee shop, and treat those who serve on them very badly on occasions, leading those who work on them to get pissed off. It is one thing getting treated like shit when your earning some money its quite another when you're not. Anarchists have also attempted to get their propaganda across by involving themselves in so called 'community issues'. These issues are usually catered for by a host of other community groups and deflects effort away from all important agitation (from the point of view of any genuine revolutionary effort) in the industrial and economic sectors of society. Although the propaganda group (be it a bookshop, newspaper or show) is a vital element of any revolutionary strategy — anarchists are well advised not to mistakenly place their hopes that a propaganda group can be, of itself, anything more than it is, and that to do so, is at best self-indulgent navel-gazing and at worst a sad and destructive delusion. The major strategy of genuine revolutionaries in Australia has been the attempt to create industrial support groups, which is another type of propaganda activity involving the publication of industry specific newspapers and the giving of practical aid during industrial disputes. The main problem with this activity is that just when one has a 1 or 2 militant workers they tend to be sacked, minor battles are often won but this is mitigated by the constant loss of politicised workers. However there are occasions when propaganda of this kind can have more widespread results. The magazine *Sparks* and the propaganda/support group surrounding it, undoubtedly encouraged the development of anarchist and syndicalist thinking and activity amongst Melbourne tram workers in the 1990 dispute and lockout. (See Anarcho-Syndicalism in Practice: The Melbourne Tram Dispute and Lockout January-February 1990 available from the ASN) The fact that this industrial movement was ultimately unsuccessful does not detract from the fact that focused and consistent propaganda by a small group of committed activists can penetrate economically and politically important industrial sectors leading to the attempt of the workers to take control, and perhaps, ultimately achieve the collectivisation of their industries, by which time the workers will be doing it for themselves and the propaganda/support group will have long since disappeared. The left has a tendency to talk in terms of a propaganda group or party 'having' 'controlling' etc., this or that union — leading to intellectual vanguardism external to workers own organisation. It is important to realise that a propaganda group is a means to an end and not an end in itself and the failure to appreciate this results in the re-emergence of partyism and governmentalism (or the propaganda group or intellectual leadership becomes a party or government in waiting) A development which is fatal to the development of an anarchist society.

The Anarchist Library

Anti-Copyright



Graham Purchase
Anarchist Organisation: Why it is Failing
1998

Retrieved on 24 June 2011 from www.spunk.org & www.spunk.org

theanarchistlibrary.org