

would inevitably disintegrate on encountering reality" (my emphasis).

By a 'mechanical assembly of individuals' they mean a group of individuals meeting together, yet not united in mind or in action. This undermines the entire meaning of organisation, which is to maximise the strength of the individuals through co-operation with others. Where there is no agreement, there can be little co-operation. This absence of co-operation only becomes obvious when the group is forced to take a position on a particular issue, a particular event in the wider world.

At this point, two things happen. Either, the individuals within the group act on their own particular interpretation of events in isolation, which raises the question, what is the point of being in such an organisation? Alternatively the group can decide to ignore the event, thus preventing disagreement.

This has a number of unfortunate side effects for anarchist politics. Most seriously, it means that the anarchist interpretation of events still will not be heard. For no matter how large the organisation, if all within it are speaking with different voices, the resulting confusion will result in an unclear and weak anarchist message. Such an organisation can produce a weekly paper, but each issue will argue a different point of view, as the authors producing it change. Our ideas will not be convincing, because we ourselves are not convinced by them. The second side effect is that our ideas will not develop and grow in depth and complexity because they will never be challenged by those within our own organisation. It is only by attempting to reach agreement, by exchanging competing conceptions of society, that we will be forced to consider all alternatives. Unchallenged our ideas will stagnate.

Without agreement on what should be done, the anarchist organisation remains no more than a collection of individuals. The members of that organisation don't see themselves as having any collective identity. Too often the lifetimes of such groups are the lifetimes of those most active individuals. There is no sense of building a body of work that will stretch into the future. Considering that in these times the revolution is a long term prospect, such short term planning is a tragic waste of energy and effort.

Often the experience of anarchists is that they are energetic and committed activists, but fail to publicize the link between the work they do and the ideas they believe in. One example of this is the successful anti-Poll Tax Campaign in England, Scotland and Wales. Although many anarchists were extremely involved in the struggle against this unjust tax, when victory finally came, anar-

chists didn't come out of it, as might be expected, in a strengthened position. We need to ask ourselves why this is so.

It would seem to be because anarchists concentrated their efforts making arguments against the tax, and sidelined arguments in favour of anarchism. Furthermore, though many worked as individuals they couldn't give any sense that they were part of any bigger movement. They were seen as good heads, and that was all. In contrast, despite the WSM's extremely small size when a similar campaign - the Anti-Water Charges Campaign - ended, we had heightened the profile of anarchism in Ireland. We emphasised that our opposition to an unjust tax was linked to our opposition to an unjust society and our belief that a better society is possible.

Returning to the question of efficiency and size, organisations in the 'Platform' tradition agree that size is important and they all seek to grow so that they are in a position of importance in society. However, they emphasise that all the positive attributes of belonging to a larger organisation, the increased work that can be undertaken, the increased human potential that can be drawn on, are undermined if such an organisation is directionless. The key point is that it is not a case of choosing between size or coherency, rather we should aim for both.

The importance of the Platform is that it clearly highlights the serious problems caused by the disorganised nature of loosely based anarchist organisations. It exposes a problem, it highlights how fatal this flaw in anarchism can be, it emphasises the urgency with which we must deal with it and compels us to come up with some answers.

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See www.wsm.ie

For further debate on the Platform, see
anarchistplatform.wordpress.com

You can download a copy of *'The Organisational Platform for a General Union of Anarchists (Draft)'* and further copies of this leaflet from:

www.zabalaza.net



What is 'The Platform' and what does it offer to Anarchists today



Anarchists are constantly thinking about how society is and how it could be. We strive towards the ideal of a free and democratic society. We know that, in order to get there, it will be necessary to tear down the present authoritarian system of government. Our struggle for freedom throws up many areas of controversy and debate. One of these has always been, and always will be, how do we get to a revolution? How do we organise for change? An important contribution to this debate was the *The Organisational Platform for a General Union of Anarchists (Draft)* (also known as the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*), a document which was written in 1926 by a group of exiled Russian and Ukrainian anarchists, and which still has much to offer to today's debates around the question of organisation.

The authors had participated in the Russian revolution and saw all their work, their hopes and dreams fail as an authoritarian Bolshevik state triumphed and destroyed real workers' power. They wrote the pamphlet in order to examine why the anarchist movement had failed to build on the success of the factory committees, where workers organising in their own workforces began to build a society based on both freedom and equality. In the first paragraph they state

"It is very significant that, in spite of the strength and incontestably positive character of libertarian ideas, and in spite of the facing up to the social revolution, and finally the heroism and innumerable sacrifices borne by the anarchists in the struggle for anarchist communism, the anarchist movement remains weak despite everything, and has appeared, very often, in the history of working class struggles as a small event, an episode, and not an important factor."

This is strong stuff, a wake up call for the anarchist movement. It is a call that we still need to hear. Despite

the virtual collapse of almost all other left wing tendencies, anarchism is still not in a position of strength. Even though the Trotskyist organisations have either evaporated into thin air, shrunk drastically in size or moved to social democracy, it is a sad fact, that were there a revolution tomorrow, they still would be in a better position to have their arguments heard and listened to than we would. This fact alone should give us pause for thought. We cannot be complacent, and rely on the hope that the obvious strength and rightness of our ideas will shine through and win the day. The world we live in is the product of struggles between competing ideas of how society should be organized. If the anarchist voice is weak and quiet, it won't be heard, and other arguments, other perspectives will win the day.

It is not my intention to go through The Platform with a fine-tooth comb. It was never intended to provide all the answers, in the introduction they make this clear:

"We have no doubts that there are gaps in the present platform. It has gaps, as do all new, practical steps of any importance. It is possible that certain important positions have been missed, or that others are inadequately treated, or that still others are too detailed or repetitive."

It was hoped, however, that it would form the beginning of a debate about how anarchists could escape from the doldrums they were in.

Instead I will look at some of the document's underlying principles, in particular the problems that they identify in anarchist organisations, which they describe as follows:

*"In all countries, the anarchist movement is advocated by several local organisations **advocating contradictory theories and practices, leaving no perspectives for the future, nor of a continuity in militant work, and habitually disappearing** hardly leaving the slightest trace behind them."* (my emphasis).

Their solution is the creation of certain type of anarchist organisation. Firstly the members of these organisations are in theoretical agreement with each other. Secondly they agree that if a certain type of work is prioritised, all should take part. Even today within the anarchist movement these are contentious ideas so it is worth exploring them in a little more detail.

The Platform's basic assumption is that there is a link between coherency and efficiency. Those who oppose the Platform argue that this link does not exist. To them effi-

ciency has nothing to do with how coherent an organisation is, rather it is a function of size. This position argues that the Platform, in its search for theoretical agreement, excludes those not in absolute agreement, and thus will always be smaller than a looser organisation. As size is of more importance than theory, practically these organisations will not be as effective.

This debate takes us to the centre of one of the most important debates within anarchism. How does a revolutionary change of society occur? What can anarchists do to assist in the process of bringing such change about?

Capitalism is an organized economic system. Its authority is promoted by many voices, including the parliamentary political parties, the media and education system (to name but a few). A successful revolution depends on the rejection of those voices by the majority of people in society. Not only do we have to reject capitalism, but we also need to have a vision of an alternative society. What is needed is an understanding both that capitalism should be defeated and that it can be replaced. For an anarchist revolution there has to be the recognition that we alone have the power and the ability to create that new world.

The role of an anarchist organisation is to spread these ideas. Not only do we need to highlight the negative and injurious aspects of capitalism (which is obvious to many anyway), we also need to develop explanations of how the system operates. This is what is meant by theory, simply it is the answer to the question 'why are things as they are?'. And we need to do one more thing; we need to be able to put our theory into practice, our understanding of how things work will inform how we struggle.

Returning to the Platform, the key problem with anarchist organisations as they existed is that they were not only incapable of developing such an approach, but didn't even see it as necessary. Because there was no agreement on theoretical issues, they could not provide answers to the working class. They could agree that women's oppression was wrong, but not explain why women were oppressed. They could agree that World War One was going to lead to death and destruction, but not why it had occurred. Such agreement is important because without it cooperation on activity, agreement on what to do, is unlikely. This is how the Platform's authors described such an organisation

*"Such an organisation having incorporated heterogeneous theoretical and practical elements, would only be a **mechanical assembly of individuals** each having a different conception of all the questions of the anarchist movement, an assembly which*