In reply to "A project of anarchist organization"

Dear Comrade Malatesta,

I have read your response to the project for an 'Organizational Platform of a General Union of Anarchists', a project published by the group of Russian anarchists abroad.

My impression is that either you have misunderstood the project for the 'Platform' or your refusal to recognize collective responsibility in revolutionary action and the directional function that the anarchist forces must take up, stems from a deep conviction about anarchism that leads you to disregard that principle of responsibility.

Yet, it is a fundamental principle, which guides each one of us in our way of understanding the anarchist idea, in our determination that it should penetrate to the masses, in its spirit of sacrifice. It is thanks to this that a man can choose the revolutionary way and ignore others. Without it no revolutionary could have the necessary strength or will or intelligence to bear the spectacle of social misery, and
even less fight against it. It is through the inspiration of collective responsibility that the revolutionaries of all epochs and all schools have united their forces; it is upon this that they based their hope that their partial revolts - revolts which opened the path for the oppressed - were not in vain, that the exploited would understand their aspirations, would extract from them the applications suitable for the time and would use them to find new paths toward their emancipation.

You yourself, dear Malatesta, recognize the individual responsibility of the anarchist revolutionary. And what is more, you have lent your support to it throughout your life as a militant. At least that is how I have understood your writings on anarchism. But you deny the necessity and usefulness of collective responsibility as regards the tendencies and actions of the anarchist movement as a whole. Collective responsibility alarms you; so you reject it.

For myself, who has acquired the habit of fully facing up to the realities of our movement, your denial of collective responsibility strikes me not only as without basis but dangerous for the social revolution, in which you would do well to take account of experience when it comes to fighting a decisive battle against all our enemies at once. Now my experience of the revolutionary battles of the past leads me to believe that no matter what the order of revolutionary events may be, one needs to give out serious directives, both ideological and tactical. This means that only a collective spirit, sound and devoted to anarchism, could express the requirements of the moment, through a collectively responsible will. None of us has the right to dodge that element of responsibility. On the contrary, if it has been until now overlooked among the ranks of the anarchists, it needs now to become, for us, communist anarchists, an article of our theoretical and practical program.

Only the collective spirit of its militants and their collective responsibility will allow modern anarchism to eliminate from its circles the idea, historically false, that anarchism cannot be a guide - either ideologically or in practice - for the mass of workers in a revolutionary period and therefore could not have overall responsibility.

I will not, in this letter, dwell on the other parts of your article against the 'Platform' project, such as the part where you see 'a church and an authority without police'. I will express only my surprise to see you use such an argument in the course of your criticism. I have given much thought to it and cannot accept your opinion.
No, you are not right. And because I am not in agreement with your confutation, using arguments that are too facile, I believe I am entitled to ask you:

1. Should anarchism take some responsibility in the struggle of the workers against their oppressors, capitalism, and its servant the State? If not, can you say why? If yes, must the anarchists work towards allowing their movement to exert influence on the same basis as the existing social order?

2. Can anarchism, in the state of disorganization in which it finds itself at the moment, exert any influence, ideological and practical, on social affairs and the struggle of the working class?

3. What are the means that anarchism should adopt outside the revolution and what are the means of which it can dispose to prove and affirm its constructive concepts?

4. Does anarchism need its own permanent organizations, closely tied among themselves by unity of goal and action to attain its ends?

5. What do the anarchists mean by *institutions to be established* with a view to guaranteeing the free development of society?

6. Can anarchism, in the communist society it conceives, do without social institutions? If yes, by what means? If no, which should it recognize and use and with what names bring them into being? Should the anarchists take on a leading function, therefore one of responsibility, or should they limit themselves to being irresponsible auxiliaries?

Your reply, dear Malatesta, would be of great importance to me for two reasons. It would allow me better to understand your way of seeing things as regards the questions of organizing the anarchist forces and the movement in general. And - let us be frank - your opinion is immediately accepted by most anarchists and sympathizers without any discussion, as that of an experienced militant who has remained all his life firmly faithful to his libertarian ideal. It therefore depends to a certain extent on your attitude whether a full study of the urgent questions which this epoch poses to our movement will be undertaken, and therefore whether its development will be slowed down or take a new leap forward. By remaining in the
stagnation of the past and present our movement will gain nothing. On the contrary, it is vital that in view of the events that loom before us it should have every chance to carry out its functions.

I set great store by your reply.

1928

with revolutionary greetings

Nestor Makhno

Dear Comrade

I have finally seen the letter you sent me more than a year ago, about my criticism of the Project for organizing a General Union of anarchists, published by a group of Russian anarchists abroad and known in our movement by the name of Platform'. Knowing my situation as you do, you will certainly have understood why I did not reply.

I cannot take part as I would like in discussion of the questions which interest us most, because censorship prevents me from receiving either the publications that are considered subversive or the letters which deal with political and social topics, and only after long intervals and by fortunate chance do I hear the dying echo of what the comrades say and do. Thus, I knew that the 'Platform' and my criticism of it had been widely discussed, but I knew little or nothing about what had been said; and your letter is the first written document on the subject that I have managed to see.

If we could correspond freely, I would ask you, before entering into the discussion, to clarify your views which, perhaps owing to an imperfect translation of the Russian into French, seem to me to be in part somewhat obscure. But things being as they are, I will reply to what I have understood, and hope that I shall then be able to see your response.

You are surprised that I do not accept the principle of collective responsibility, which you believe to be a fundamental principle that guides, and must guide the revolutionaries of the past, present and future.

For my part, I wonder what that notion of collective responsibility can ever mean from the lips of an anarchist.

I know that the military are in the habit of decimating corps of rebellious soldiers or
soldiers who have behaved badly in the face of the enemy by shooting at them indiscriminately. I know that the army chiefs have no scruples about destroying villages or cities and massacring an entire population, including children, because someone attempted to put up a resistance to invasion. I know that throughout the ages governments have in various ways threatened with and applied the system of collective responsibility to put a brake on the rebels, demand taxes, etc. And I understand that this could be an effective means of intimidation and oppression.

But how can people who fight for liberty and justice talk of collective responsibility when they can only be concerned with moral responsibility, whether or not material sanctions follow?!!

If, for example, in a conflict with an armed enemy force the man beside me acts as a coward, he may do harm to me and to everyone, but the shame can only be his for lacking the courage to sustain the role he took upon himself. If in a conspiracy a coconspirator betrays and sends his companions to prison, are the betrayed the ones responsible for the betrayal?

The 'Platform' said: 'The whole Union is responsible for the revolutionary and political activity of every member and each member will be responsible for the revolutionary and political activity of the Union.'

Can this be reconciled with the principles of autonomy and free initiative which the anarchists profess? I answered then: 'If the Union is responsible for what each member does, how can it leave to its individual members and to the various groups the freedom to apply the common program in the way they see fit? How can it be responsible for an action if it does not have the means to prevent it? Thus, the Union and through it the Executive Committee, would need to monitor the action of the individual members and order them what to do and what not to do; and since disapproval after the event cannot put right a previously accepted responsibility, no-one would be able to do anything before having obtained the go-ahead, permission from the committee. And then, can an individual accept responsibility for the action of a collectivity before knowing what the latter will do and if he cannot prevent it doing what he disapproves?'

Certainly I accept and support the view that anyone who associates and cooperates with others for a common purpose must feel the need to coordinate his actions with those of his fellow members and do nothing that harms the work of
others and, thus, the common cause; and respect the agreements that have been made - except when wishing sincerely to leave the association when emerging differences of opinion or changed circumstances or conflict over preferred methods make cooperation impossible or inappropriate. Just as I maintain that those who do not feel and do not practice that duty should be thrown out of the association.

Perhaps, speaking of collective responsibility, you mean precisely that accord and solidarity that must exist among the members of an association. And if that is so, your expression amounts, in my view, to an incorrect use of language, but basically it would only be an unimportant question of wording and agreement would soon be reached.

The really important question that you raise in your letter concerns the function (*le role*) of the anarchists in the social movement and the way they mean to carry it out. This is a matter of basics, of the raison d'etre of anarchism and one needs to be quite clear as to what one means.

You ask if the anarchists should (in the revolutionary movement and communistic organization of society) assume a directional and therefore responsible role, or limit themselves to being irresponsible auxiliaries.

Your question leaves me perplexed, because it lacks precision. It is possible to direct through advice and example, leaving the people - provided with the opportunities and means of supplying their own needs themselves - to adopt our methods and solutions if these are, or seem to be, better than those suggested and carried out by others. But it is also possible to direct by taking over command, that is by becoming a government and imposing one's own ideas and interests through police methods.

In which way would you want to direct?

We are anarchists because we believe that government (any government) is an evil, and that it is not possible to gain liberty, solidarity and justice without liberty. We cannot therefore aspire to government and we must do everything possible to prevent others - classes, parties or individuals - from taking power and becoming governments.

The responsibility of the leaders, a notion by which it seems to me that you want to guarantee that the public are protected from their abuses and errors, means nothing to me. Those in power are not truly responsible except when faced with a
revolution, and we cannot make the revolution every day, and generally it is only made after the government has already done all the evil it can.

You will understand that I am far from thinking that the anarchists should be satisfied with being the simple auxiliaries of other revolutionaries who, not being anarchists, naturally aspire to become the government.

On the contrary, I believe that we, anarchists, convinced of the validity of our program, must strive to acquire overwhelming influence in order to draw the movement towards the realization of our ideals. But such influence must be won by doing more and better than others, and will only be useful if won in that way.

Today we must deepen, develop and propagate our ideas and coordinate our forces in a common action. We must act within the labor movement to prevent it being limited to and corrupted by the exclusive pursuit of small improvements compatible with the capitalist system; and we must act in such a way that it contributes to preparing for a complete social transformation. We must work with the unorganized, and perhaps unorganizable, masses to awaken the spirit of revolt and the desire and hope for a free and happy life. We must initiate and support all movements that tend to weaken the forces of the State and of capitalism and to raise the mental level and material conditions of the workers. We must, in short, prepare, and prepare ourselves, morally and materially, for the revolutionary act which will open the way to the future.

And then, in the revolution, we must take an energetic part (if possible before and more effectively than the others) in the essential material struggle and drive it to the utmost limit in destroying all the repressive forces of the State. We must encourage the workers to take possession of the means of production (land, mines, factories and workshops, means of transport, etc.) and of stocks of manufactured goods; to organize immediately, on their own, an equitable distribution of consumer goods, and at the same time supply products for trade between communes and regions and for the continuation and intensification of production and all services useful to the public. We must, in all ways possible and according to local circumstances and opportunities, promote action by the workers' associations, the cooperatives, the voluntary groups - to prevent the emergence of new authoritarian powers, new governments, opposing them with violence if necessary, but above all rendering them useless. And where we do not find sufficient consensus among the
people and cannot prevent the reestablishment of the State with its authoritarian institutions and its coercive bodies, we must refuse to take part or to recognize it, rebelling against its impositions and demanding full autonomy for ourselves and for all the dissident minorities. In other words, we must remain in an actual or potential state of rebellion and, unable to win in the present, must at least prepare for the future.

Is this what you too mean by the part the anarchists should take in the preparation and carrying out of the revolution?

From what I know of you and your work I am inclined to believe that you do. But, when I see that in the Union that you support there is an Executive Committee to give ideological and organizational direction to the association I am assailed by the doubt that you would also like to see, within the general movement, a central body that would, in an authoritarian manner, dictate the theoretical and practical program of the revolution.

If this is so we are poles apart.

Your organization, or your managerial organs, may be composed of anarchists but they would only become nothing other than a government. Believing, in completely good faith, that they are necessary to the triumph of the revolution, they would, as a priority, make sure that they were well placed enough and strong enough to impose their will. They would therefore create armed corps for material defense and a bureaucracy for carrying out their commands and in the process they would paralyze the popular movement and kill the revolution.

That is what, I believe, has happened to the Bolsheviks.

There it is. I believe that the important thing is not the victory of our plans, our projects, our utopias, which in any case need the confirmation of experience and can be modified by experience, developed and adapted to the real moral and material conditions of the age and place. What matters most is that the people, men and women lose the sheeplike instincts and habits which thousands of years of slavery have instilled in them, and learn to think and act freely. And it is to this great work of moral liberation that the anarchists must specially dedicate themselves.

I thank you for the attention you have given to my letter and, in the hope of hearing from you further, send you my cordial greetings.
Risveglio (Geneva), December 1929

Note 1
- Nestor Makhno (1889-1934), Russian revolutionary organizer of the guerrilla army in the Ukraine (1918-1921) which defeated the White Army but lost to Trotsky's Red Army. He managed to escape and spent the rest of his life in Paris. He was one of the authors of the 'Platform'. Freedom Press are the publishers of P. Arshinov's history of the Makhnovist Movement (1918-1921), 284 pages, #5.00 (post free inland) - Editor.

Note 2
Apperantly Makhno wrote a reply to this letter. NH of the British AF (ACF) has translated it into English but as far as I'm aware it has not been published anywhere.

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