

ANARCHISM - SCENE OR MOVEMENT?

Do we need an Anarchist movement, or is an Anarchist “scene”, a loose social network of people socialising and working on the odd project, enough? The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group thinks we need a movement.

In this presentation, a number of criticisms will be made of the state of the Anarchist movement. We'd like to emphasise here that there probably isn't any group guilty of every problem we criticise and some will be innocent of most. We've seen, however, too many of them in various parts of Australia to ignore. Our point is that the faults are too wide-spread and the strengths are too thin on the ground. Collectively, we need to lift our game.

There are many Anarchists in Melbourne and elsewhere who are strongly committed to living what they feel is an Anarchist lifestyle. They try to construct their personal relationships along Anarchist lines and live in environmentally responsible ways. There is room for debate on the choices people make in this area, and I would take issue with some choices of some of those people, but the relevant point is they're making a genuine effort. While this is commendable, however, living an Anarchist lifestyle is not enough.

It's not enough, because society is more than just the sum of the lifestyles of the individuals who live in it. The personal is political, but other things are political as well. There is a capitalist class which controls the basic structures of society, which exercises what some may call “the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”. This class systematically constrains the choices which confront people, so that “doing the right thing” becomes difficult and sometimes runs counter to our individual interests.

A minor but effective example is the fact that many popular grocery items, which are unobjectionable in themselves, are only available in environmentally destructive packaging. We are then faced with the choice of self-denial or encouraging some corporation to continue trashing the environment. Marx said, “Men make their own history, but they do not do so in conditions of their own choosing”. The Anarchist response would be to agree with him, but add that the observation applies to women & children as well.

Because of this, we need to recognise that hanging about with Anarchist friends is fine, but by itself it won't change the world. Without a social movement to challenge and eventually overthrow capitalism and its institutions of power (principally but not solely the State), most people attempting to live an Anarchist lifestyle will find that their principles are eventually watered down & abandoned in

the face of the constrained choices they are forced to make every day. We need to be aware that the only force which can successfully challenge the capitalists is the working class of the world and that this can only happen through a revolution. The MACG is quite clear on this point and we're prepared to defend our view if anyone would like to debate the issue.

The Anarchist movement as a whole is at the moment pretty inward-looking, concentrating mainly on interactions between Anarchists. The exception to this is the number of practical projects being engaged in, but in most of these projects the politics are buried by the day-to-day activities and people outside don't get to see and understand why this or that bunch of Anarchists has chosen to do what they're doing.

Another aspect of how the movement is inward-looking is that many people feel excluded by a perceived dress code &/or dietary rules. Note that this operates even if there is no conscious intention to do this. A group of people operating informally can exclude people quite effectively just by having an impenetrable web of relationships that are invisible to outsiders. Informal exclusion is especially powerful if the "in crowd" have a distinctive form of dress (e.g. black, with varying amounts of metal) or are zealous vegans.

A somewhat more serious problem is that of the armchair revolutionaries. These people have infested the Anarchist movement for decades - ever since it re-emerged in Australia in the late 60s, in fact. These are the people who have a correct critique of Leninism, but use it as a smokescreen for not doing anything to demonstrate that they have a superior alternative. They may engage in some desultory activities, usually without being competent & reliable at them, but don't do anything substantial because it would mean dealing with the DSP/ISO/SocAlt/whoever.

Now that we've bagged the existing Anarchist movement pretty thoroughly, we're probably obliged to say what we think should be happening. Some of this is implied by the criticisms we made already, but it's good to spell it out anyway, since not everybody would have the same solution to a given problem.

First of all, we need conscious non-hierarchical organisation. Loose networks of individuals are not enough. Anarchist organisations need defined membership and clear non-authoritarian structures. We need to make deliberate decisions about what we do & how we do it. We need to be clear about how this relates to Anarchist theory and the strategies we have. The movement needs two types of organisation.

The first sort of organisation is the small group to propagate Anarchist ideas. Our group is an example. While we're certainly keen to have a few more members,

we don't want to get too big. Once we get up to double figures, we think it's best to split into two. We want to see Anarchist groups multiply rather than simply grow.

If you're looking for a model of the group we've got in mind, the affinity groups which comprised the Iberian Anarchist Federation in the 1930s are probably a good place to start, with one important difference - they will not join in a federation with like-minded groups. While an individual group should have common political positions and attempt to evolve a common platform, it would be a fatal mistake to extend this process beyond the group and into a federation. To take this step, as the Platformists propose, or even to aim seriously at it, would be to turn the federation into an Anarchist Party, with all the vices of political parties that Anarchists have castigated for over a century.

Instead of forming an Anarchist Federation based on political agreement, the small groups propagating Anarchist ideas should communicate as a network. Depending on their interests and activities, some would come together in temporary federations for limited purposes. In any case, the groups need to be clear about who is a member and who isn't and how people get to cross the boundary in either direction. They also need to be confident that their internal processes are consistent with their politics. Our group uses consensus decision-making, for example, and has adopted a statement that tells us what we mean by the term.

The second sort of organisation the movement needs is an Anarcho-Syndicalist union federation. Because we already have a union movement in Australia and because this movement is based on the English-speaking model of organising all workers regardless of their views, rather than the Mediterranean/Latin American model of organising workers according to their political affiliation, it is neither practical nor desirable to set this federation up as a rival to the ACTU. Instead, like the Australian IWW of 1907-17, the Anarcho-Syndicalist federation will emerge as a grass-roots insurgency in the official union movement.

While forming as an insurgency inside the official unions would make it organisationally more tenuous, it would also present a stronger challenge to the entire Laborite union bureaucracy. The federation would be open to the possibility of transforming an established union (as the NSW BLF was partially transformed in the early 70s), but recognise that this is unlikely to transpire. Rather, at some stage there would be a confrontation between the bureaucracy and the rank & file movement, resulting in a declaration of independence which casts out as much of the bureaucracy as possible at that moment.

Vital as an Anarcho-Syndicalist federation is, however, the rest of this presentation will discuss small propaganda groups. We don't have a substantial

Anarcho-Syndicalist federation yet and discussion about how to go about creating one is too big a topic to cram into this workshop. Please keep in mind, therefore, that the propaganda groups under discussion are envisaged to be only half the movement.

The Anarchist movement needs to do a lot more work in the area of public outreach. For decades, we've been very bad at making public propaganda for Anarchism and even worse at getting it out into the broader community, where people who don't already know about us live & work. Each small propaganda group should take up systematic work according to the strategy it thinks most appropriate for itself.

The movement as a whole, however, requires a network of regular stalls in working class communities and regular publications written & produced accessibly (e.g. good proof-reading and no "in crowd" references) and distributed widely. It also needs active & visible participation in working class struggles in a way which:

- (a) Promotes the success of the struggle;
- (b) Promotes awareness of Anarchist politics; and
- (c) Makes the connection between Anarchism and successful struggle.

This requires producing leaflets on particular topics during working class struggles and assembling Anarchist contingents in rallies. We need to be able to put forward Anarchist ideas about the way forward in the struggle. We are perfectly aware that Leninist groups do these sorts of things as well, but it is quite possible to do them in a genuine, constructive and non-authoritarian fashion rather than the manipulative and authoritarian way in which Leninists often behave.

Another general failing of the movement that needs addressing is the poor general level of education and debate. Because we don't have a mechanism for orienting people who are new to Anarchism, we find that the movement continually has to re-invent the wheel, with people and groups repeating the same mistakes of earlier ones. Worse, we find that there are plenty of people calling themselves Anarchists who put forward some deeply reactionary ideas in the name of Anarchism because they don't know any better.

These problems need fixing. We don't have the Party school to hand down the "correct line" to new Anarchists, and we don't want one either, but we do need to ensure that people new to the movement become sufficiently familiar with our history & principles fairly quickly. This doesn't mean that people can't put forward their own interpretation of Anarchism but, if people are going to depart from the

consensus of the movement, they at least have to know that they're doing it - and others have to know that as well.

Related to this is the fact that the ideas of the Leninists are seldom publicly challenged from the Left. This means that well-meaning but naive people continue to join Leninist groups because they genuinely want to make a revolution to abolish capitalism. Further, when people become disillusioned with Leninism, they often conclude that they have no choice but to become reconciled to capitalism. They drop out of the Left altogether because they either know nothing about Anarchism, or the little they know from observing Anarchists in action doesn't impress them.

What would be the mechanisms for turning this around? A series of good introductory pamphlets, made widely available, would help, but the ones presently existing are either poor quality or drastically out of date - and hard to get hold of to boot. Also useful would be a regular "Introduction to Anarchism" public lecture. Various groups in the movement could take turns supplying a speaker putting forward their view, in a non-sectarian way, of "Anarchy for Beginners". The most necessary thing, however, is for the movement to get used to debating its views publicly. By putting forward ideas in a way which forces them to be persuasive and comprehensible, the movement will educate its members in the process of making Anarchism more visible to the public.

Improving the movement's public outreach thus requires individual Anarchist groups to become more visible. They need to work out what they think about things, put them on paper and get active in ways that would enable their voices to be heard. Instead of hoping that people will develop Anarchist ideas spontaneously, or work it out for themselves upon seeing the example of a project organised along Anarchist lines, we need to go out and make our arguments in public, explaining our examples in our own words and drawing out the implications of them.

As we said at the start, we think that we need an Anarchist movement, not a scene. Just hanging about with a bunch of Anarchist mates isn't good enough. To make the movement what it could be, we need to take our ideas seriously and put them into practice in our own organisations. It's only in this way that we can both test our ideas against reality and build a movement which can actually change the world. And, if people want to get on board, we're happy to talk to them about how.