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Where is the Mass Organizing?

Adam Berkowicz

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Contrary to what many people think, anarchism is not allergic to organization. On the contrary, organization is crucial to movement building, and this is something that has been lost within our ranks for many decades. Unions, once a bedrock of socialist thought, have been co-opted across the world and decimated in the United States and the U.K. Today, most workers reside in either retail or health care service industries in an environment where there is no collective bargaining, no options to strike, and very few choices in the number of hours one can work for the day. In health care, the hours are absurdly long, while in retail, the numbers are dwindling rapidly. In both cases, there doesn't seem to be any mass organization to speak of.

Let me step back and put forward what I believe to be the three realms of anarchism: critique, tactics, and vision. The first, critiquing the world as it is, is something anarchists have been doing since the inception of the movement, and this is something that remains a strength, though the field is crowded with other forms of socialism and even the progressive left. One of the more promising ideas for critique stems from intersectionality, and though this was hardly an anarchist idea, it seems to

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fit in well with what anarchists practice. The potential building blocks of mass organization, intersectionality is still in battle among the left, and it is not clear if the common threads of oppression will lead to anything more substantial. In my neck of the woods, it has been primarily used as a springboard for legislative action.

Anarchist tactics were once significant enough to have become part of the mainstream historical narrative, though not for the reasons our forebears may have thought. Propaganda by the deed did not rally workers, and while direct action remains our primary means towards emancipation, the ideas behind these actions remain ambiguous. In the heyday of the IWW and other radical organizations, tactics were performed with specific purposes, whether for short-term objectives or propaganda, and while this is still the case among affinity groups, the impact of these actions are comparatively minimal due strictly to participating numbers. This is not to disparage modern actions, but only to point out that we lack the internal infrastructure to deal with local and regional problems; anarchism remains prevalent in metropolitan areas or along the coasts of the United States, while there is little to no presence across the midlands, rust-belt, or south that is connected to a broader movement.

I also want to address the vision of anarchism as well, which is necessarily a compendium of assorted views. From an organization point of view, it seems like we are currently stuck intellectually between the historically contextual views of long-dead anarchist thinkers and a shallow conception of anarchism as “democracy-extreme” or “everything is free” without much nuance. To be sure, there are plenty of anarchists who have thought about these issues from the point of humility and complexity of what we don’t know, but anarchism is only as potent as its general message, which remains weighed down by charges of utopianism and naivety. I am not sure what the answer is to these societal roadblocks, but I do feel confident that

it will take a larger organizational effort to get more voices heard and reanimate some stale conversations (the recently announced Channel Zero podcast initiative seems like a great start, though I’m not sure if transcripts are available).

In each of these three areas, there remains a deficit of mass organization. Anarchism cannot remain atomized and hope to inspire revolutionary action; its tenets have always (outside of some Egoist strains) relied on collective theory and practice, and this century cannot be any different. Obviously, there have been moments of mass movements (Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and the recent movement at Standing Rock come to mind), but none of these are explicitly anarchist or even anti-authoritarian. The internet has proven to be a boon for connecting with others across the world, but there are clearly issues concerning privacy and co-optation that may never be resolved.

So, I pose these questions to you all, hoping that we can continue to demand the impossible:

1. Is mass organization a necessity for anarchy?
2. Do unions remain a viable possibility, or are they a relic of the past?
3. With the embrace of intersectional thought, how do oppressed groups focus on collaboration and not on competition with each other?
4. Where do ‘the workers’ fit into this scheme? Once the center of the movement (and sadly focused on almost exclusively white male industrial workers, at least in the U.S.), how do we define what the workers are, if at all?
5. Must a new vision of mass organization be imagined, or does it already exist and instead needs to be implemented at a larger scale?