

Why We Joined NEFAC

By WAYNE PRICE and W.E.B.

We are two members of the collective which publishes *The Utopian*. Recently we joined the Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC, commonly referred to as “nee-fak”). We joined because we see the need for a revolutionary transformation of society and the replacement of its authoritarian capitalist structures with organizational forms in which all people can participate in the making of all decisions which affect their lives. We also see the need for anarchists who share such a vision to be organized. Third, we believe that the working class will play a key role in the struggle against the inextricably intertwined racist, sexist and national oppressions of the present capitalist system.

NEFAC goes far in addressing these questions. First, it is a truly anarchist organization which forthrightly fights for the replacement of the present order with a democratic federation of popular councils. In this regard NEFAC rejects similar-appearing models put forth by social democrats and Marxist-Leninists as totalitarian prisons with the social democrats and Marxist-Leninists as the keepers.

Second, NEFAC puts itself squarely in the pro-organizational camp of anarchism. In particular, it is founded on the tradition of the Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists, written in 1926 by Nestor Makhno, Peter Arsimov, and other exiled Russian and Ukrainian anarchists. Following the Russian revolution and the state-capitalist counter-revolution which followed, these revolutionary anti-authoritarians tried to analyze why the anarchists had not seen their vision fulfilled, despite their significant influence among workers in Petrograd and Moscow and their leadership in the Ukrainian insurgent army. They concluded that the problem was the lack of organization of the anarchists. While not considering this 70-year-old document to be



Mass struggle against globalization, Genoa, Italy, 2001. (Marco di Lauro/AP)

word-for-word revealed truth, NEFAC unapologetically is committed to its pro-organizational tradition, known as “platformism.” Given the worship of disorganization within much of the anarchist movement, this view is extremely important if millions of people are ever to coordinate themselves in a revolution.

Third, NEFAC is pro-working-class. It differs from those, such as admirers of Murray Bookchin and various primitivists, who think that the workers, as workers, are inevitably non-revolutionary. It also differs from those who believe that the European-descended part of the working class is hopelessly poisoned by its racist privileges. NEFAC believes that the multi-racial, multi-national, working class is uniquely capable of stopping the wheels of capitalism and laying the footing for a new and democratic society. NEFAC holds that other aspects of oppression related to race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, etc., as well as ecological degradation, are also vitally important. They are in fact completely tied together in the present capitalist system. But at the same time a holistic approach must not become an excuse for downplaying the strategic importance of the working class.

As an organization NEFAC is committed to practical activism, propaganda and the development of theory. It is, for example, in the middle of anti-Nazi organizing and puts out several journals. This distinguishes it from much of the anarchist left, which tends to be either abstractly theoretical or (more often) anti-intellectual and crudely activist.

NEFAC is binational and bilingual (English and French; unfortunately, not yet Spanish). It is comprised of about 100 members and supporters, mostly in collectives from Quebec to Maryland. By plan it is limited to northeastern North America, which makes it possible for members to attend conventions easily. NEFAC encourages anarchists in other regions to form their own federations, which may eventually combine into a broader North American organization, as well as affiliate internationally. Already a Federation of Revolutionary Anarchist Collectives has formed in the Great Lakes area and there are beginnings of federations in the Pacific Northwest and in California. In short, anarchist organizing has begun to catch up with the recent upsurge of anarchist activism beginning with the 1999 Battle of Seattle.

Prior to joining NEFAC we had for nine years been part of the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation. While it existed, Love and Rage represented the first serious continental anarchist organization in decades. And before Love and Rage we were members of the Revolutionary Socialist League, a highly unusual Trotskyist grouping.

Why Were We Trotskyists?

It may be used against NEFAC that we were “Trots.” This was thrown in our faces more than once when we were in Love and Rage. (Ironically, at the end we ex-Trotskyists fought for anarchism in Love and Rage, while former anarchists turned toward Marxism-Leninism!) A simple defense is to admit we changed our minds over the years, and so what? Very few people quote Kropotkin at the age of four. People have to learn to be anarchists. This defense is valid as far as it goes, but it does not tell the whole story. While we changed the formal content of our politics, our political values have not changed. We believed in Trotskyism (which included Leninism and Marxism) because we thought it was the way to achieve a revolutionary libertarian-democratic socialism. We rejected it when we decided that it could not. We are committed to anarchism only so long as we think that socialist liberation can be achieved through it.

When we were Trotskyists, we interpreted Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky in the most anti-authoritarian way we could, giving them the benefit of the doubt whenever possible. (By “we,” this includes most of the Revolutionary Socialist League or RSL.) We focused on Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune (*The Civil War in France*) and Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. These interpreted the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a Commune-type of semi-state. It would be, we thought, composed of the self-organized vast majority of workers, and would begin immediately to “wither away,” even as it suppressed (dictated to) the capitalist minority. We liked Trotsky’s advocacy in the Thirties, in his Transitional Program, of replacing the bureaucratic-military state with multi-party, multi-tendency, soviets (workers’ councils) in the USSR (and in revolutionary Spain). With a certain amount of stretching, these views made it

possible to interpret Marxism as libertarian-democratic socialism. We still believe in the central idea of replacing the racist-patriarchal-capitalist state with a Commune-type of council system.

Because of this view, we always rejected the claims of Trotsky and the orthodox Trotskyists that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were some sort of “workers’ states,” degenerated, deformed, or merely dysfunctional. The issue was not a sociopolitical analysis of the Soviet Union. It was a question of what you thought socialism (or a workers’ state) really was. The orthodox followers of Trotsky thought that what made a system a “workers’ state” was whether it had nationalized property and a “planned” economy. Even though they knew that the actual Russian state was a totalitarian nightmare for the workers, they insisted that its nationalized property forms put it on the road to socialism. Instead we thought that worker control, workers’ democracy, was the central issue of what made a collectivized economy progressive or state-capitalist.

We believed that activism, without a revolutionary program, was mindless running around, while a program, without being part of mass struggles, was a blank letter. Central to Trotskyism, so we thought, was an effort to combine participation in the workers’ lives with the open and honest statement of revolutionary politics. In Trotsky’s terms, we thought it was important to “say what is,” to tell the truth to working people. It was not to find out whatever was popularly believed (whether or not we thought it was true) and to tail along behind it (the approach of the social democrats or of the Maoist “mass line”). The concepts of the united front, transitional demands, and permanent revolution were strategic approaches to combine nonsectarian participation in popular struggles with raising the need for revolutionary socialism. Not that we always did it right, but we made a real effort to find the best balance.

For this reason, we were sharply critical of the various Trotskyist sectarians, such as the Spartacist League, who made a program out of being offensive. But we also rejected the accommodating politics of the softer wing of Trotskyism, which today has become the International Socialist Organization and also Solidarity in the U.S. We

rejected their electoral approaches (such as the Peace and Freedom Party, a middle class protest party, forerunner of the present Green Party and Labor Party efforts). We felt that they were correct to support liberal oppositionists in the unions, but that they did so in an opportunist fashion, without raising political criticisms or stating a revolutionary program. In effect they were preparing to become the left wing of the union bureaucracy. The positive and negative aspects of their approach may be seen today in the development of Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

Over time we concluded that the faults we saw in the Trotskyist movement were more deeply rooted than we had first thought. The RSL reassessed its views of Trotskyism, then of Leninism, and finally even of Marxism. Several people played key roles in this reconsideration of our tradition, especially Ron Tabor. We decided that, for example, Lenin’s belief that his Marxism was the Absolute Truth (a belief based in Marx’s Marxism) played a part in the development of state capitalism in the Soviet Union. The final result of our discussions was the dissolution of the RSL and the merger of a handful of our members into the new Love and Rage Federation—as anarchists.

Our Hopes

We think that NEFAC has a great future ahead, as part of the North American and international anarchist upsurge. It is not perfect, and is still feeling its way. Despite an effort to base itself on a unified tradition of anarcho-communism, it is pretty heterogeneous in actual political views on many topics. But it is committed to discussion, internally and externally, to develop its theoretical views. It is correct to base itself on the communist tradition within anarchism, but using the label “communist,” after decades of Russian so-called Communism, creates an unnecessary barrier between it and many working people. To most people, “anarcho-communist” sounds like “libertarian-totalitarian.” While we reject the democratic centralist or vanguardist concepts of Lenin, we continue to believe in the need for revolutionary organization—which is why we are platformists. But NEFAC still seems to be more a network of collectives than a coherent federation.

It is mainly coordinated through the Internet (transparently in front of the state). We will work to change this in the future.

Sometimes, too, NEFAC members seem to us to be rigid and dogmatic when discussing post-revolutionary society, implying that it is necessary to everywhere leap immediately to a stateless, moneyless, purely communist society. We suspect that different regions will try out different ways of implementing libertarian socialist goals, in experimental and pluralistic fashions. We did not reject orthodox Marxism in order to become orthodox anarcho-communists (whatever that would be). This is one reason we value the open discussions within NEFAC.

NEFAC is right on the controversial issues of the anarchist movement. It is for real democracy and revolution, against primitivism, and for the working class. We are proud to be part of it.