The Revolutionary Revival in Eastern Europe

by Sam Dolgoff

The world anarcho-syndicalist labor movement is not a utopia. It rests on very solid foundations, tracing back to Robert Owen, the International Workers Association (First International, founded 1864), the English Guild Socialist movement, and the pre-World War I syndicalist movements. The revolutionary traditions of the Russian radical movement are deeply penetrated by anarcho-syndicalist/communist and populist tendencies which arose spontaneously. Lenin, alarmed that mass revolts threatened the collapse of his Bolshevik-Marxist regime, recalled that:

We came across the biggest internal political crisis of the Soviet Union, brought to the surface by the wide disturbances pervading not only peasants but also the workers; and this movement was more to the left than the Bolsheviks... (Quoted by G.P. Maximoff, The Guillotine at Work)

The Left, to save the Revolution, demanded free soviets, factories and workshops to the workers, and the abolition of the State and the monopoly of power by the new bureaucracy.

Although the revolutionary movement was finally snuffed out with the massacre of the rebellious Kronstadt sailors in 1921, the Russian people, unable to revolt by force of arms, continued waging a relentless guerilla war of passive resistance against the police state. They have, in the course of their struggles, developed ingenious ways of harassing and seriously frustrating the plans of their tyrants (loafing, slow downs, wildcat strikes, sporadic acts of violence, evading laws, ridicule, etc.)

Before the heroic Kronstadt sailors were massacred, Russia was literally covered with a thick network of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist groups. Bookshops were flooded with anarchist literature. Interest in our ideas reached even the most remote corners of the vast empire. In Leningrad alone, circulation of the anarcho-syndicalist journal Dielo Truda reached 25,000 and the anarchist journal Buravestnik had a similar readership. The first All Russian Trade Union Congress was attended by delegates representing 250,000 anarcho-syndicalist workers. (See G.P. Maximoff, Syndicalists in the Russian Revolution)

Anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist tendencies continued to inspire uprisings in Poland, East Germany and Hungary in the 1950s. In Hungary, for example, the liberal historian Francis Fijito emphasizes these points:

While rejecting the totalitarian communist system, the Hungarian people displayed no desire to restore capitalism. The path of the uprising did not lean backward, but forward to
the democratization of socialism.... From the first days of the uprising, the various workers councils (Soviets) began to form regional and national federations, just as the revolutionary committees had taken over the functions of the municipal councils—similar organizations were formed by students, teachers, intellectuals and technicians. Thus, on the ruins there arose a new state that was no longer to be an instrument of oppression, let alone... a red aristocracy based on a police force and foreign troops.... Some of the features of the Hungarian revolutionary movement brought to mind the peaceful, federalist and productive anarchy that Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin dreamed of. We were attracted to Proudhon's anti-authoritarian socialism for the simple reason that people are closer to us than gigantic machineries... *(The Rape of Hungary, pp 333, 329)*

In a powerful exposé refuting the false claim that the communist Yugoslav totalitarian regime has really established workers and peasants self-management, historian Ernst Halperin—not an anarchist—concedes that these ideas belong not to Marxism, but to the mental armory of an anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist current that was at first a mighty river out in the open... after being dammed and diverted by the Marxists... The simple fact is that the very existence of the totalitarian party is incompatible with the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist social order.

*(Tito: The Triumphant Heretic—reprinted in Our Generation, p 7)*

Halperin also notes that the Yugoslav group of Spanish civil war volunteers came under the influence of anarcho-syndicalist ideas.

The central task of the original anarcho-syndicalist movement—to put into effect the principles formulated by Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon, and the tendencies inherent in the Revolution—remains the prime objective of the revived Anarcho-Syndicalist Confederation (KAS). The KAS has adapted these ideas to modern conditions in its program. History has confirmed the analysis and the predictions of the anarcho-syndicalist. The state-nationalized property has become the de facto property of the functionaries, the bureaucracy the source of arbitrary and flagrant abuses of power and corruption.

Anarchists seek to replace state centralization with Federalism. Federalism springs not from decrees made and enforced from above by the State, but from the natural, ineluctable interdependence of mankind and the will to harmony. Political Scientist Ernest Barker accurately defines the contrast between society and the State:

the area of society is voluntary cooperation. Its energy is that of good will. Its method that of elasticity; while that of the state is, rather, mechanical action. Its energy force. Its method rigidity...

*(Political Thought in England, p 67)*

Only Federalism—coordination of self-managed associations—can rescue Russia from certain disaster. Our slogan, "All power to the People, Not to Political Parties" means that all the infinite needs and functions of social life, coordinated and self-managed locally, regionally, nationally and internationally will at last constitute the new, free social order. This, the final aim and the soul of socialism, is rendering people increasingly receptive to anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist ideas.

Perestroika, imposed from above, has already become a gigantic bureaucratic apparatus. All attempts to find even other non-communist parties lead also to the emergence of centralized political structures and ruthless exploitation by a gang of conniving politicians. We stand for the abolition of the State and all other authoritarian institutions. We believe that independent associations—cultural, ecological, etc.—should unite in the common struggle to establish their rights and their freedoms. The KAS does not fight for the conquest of power, but seeks to attain its aims by publicizing its convictions, supporting the creation of new and independent social organizations; the personal participation of its members in
social movements and in the struggles of the oppressed and exploited masses.
The massive resistance in the Russian sphere, and in Russia itself, is fired by
the universal conviction, as the anarchist Gustav Landauer put it way back in
1911, that "Marxism is the plague of our age and the curse of the socialist
movement..." Today, more and more rebels are seeking an alternative to
authoritarianism, and are increasingly receptive to the message of our comrades.
Long Live Self-Managed Socialism!

(Part of this article is summarized from a KAS propaganda tract reprinted in the
anarchist periodical Le Monde Libertaire, March 28, 1990)