2. ARGENTINA: The F.O.R.A.

In the last edition of "Rebel Worker" we issued a special supplement on Spanish anarchosyndicalism, focusing on the CNT. This, the second of the special supplements, looks at the history of the FORA (Argentinian Regional Workers' Federation) - after the CNT, the second largest anarchosyndicalist union center in the world. The period, under discussion in this article, is the rise of the FORA in the 1900's to the 1920's and its decline, due to the rise of the communist party and Peronism from the 1930's to the 1960's. Written by Eduardo Columbo, this article was originally published in a special issue on Anarchism of the journal 'Government and Opposition' in 1970.

THE EARLY ANARCHIST MOVEMENT IN ARGENTINA

The origins of the first socialist organizations in Buenos Aires are rather obscure. Max Nettlau dates the foundation of the Buenos Aires section of the International in 1872; he describes this as ideologically 'good socialism, rather general, neither anarchist, nor [...] political nor authoritarian.' José Ingenieros, in an article published in the Alfabetización Socialista de la Vanguardia de 1879, says that the first group appeared in 1871; this was apparently a French group, and later a Spanish and an Italian group were founded. Generally speaking they were either socialists who believed in government by a workers' party, or republicans or internationalists.

One group was started in Córdoba in 1874. In 1876 the Bakuninist Centro de Propaganda Obrera (Centre for Workers' Propaganda) was founded. An anarchist paper, El Desnudamiento, was published from 1878 onwards. Before the end of the 19th century several newspapers were published from Buenos Aires with varying degrees of success. On 13 June 1897 La Protesta Humana first appeared. Originally it came out weekly but in 1903 it changed its name to La Protesta and appeared daily from April 1904. Despite various set-backs - embargoes, closures, destruction of machinery, attacks by patriotic groups and so on - it continued to survive and, appearing intermittently, it has now reached issue no. 8,113.

The first militant workers' union - the Bakers' Union - was founded in 1887 with the aid of Malatesta who was in Argentina between 1885 and 1889. Perhaps Malatesta's presence and tact helped to minimize rivalries and to eliminate the controversy between communist and collectivist anarchists. Debate remained on a more practical level, between those who favoured organizing and those who opposed it - though these latter should not be confused with the individualists who never had much influence in Argentina. The organizers stressed the workers' organization as the natural weapon for the struggle. The sociedades de resistencia (resistance groups), as the FORA's organizations are now and have always been called, were in their view the principal instrument for strikes, direct action, or 'revolutionary gymnastics'. This line almost completely dominated Argentine anarchism for many years. The anti-organizers, also anarchist-communists, and the individualists claimed that within the sociedades de resistencia the anarchists were no longer revolutionaries since they became totally involved in reformist activities. Their pressure was very important since it 'obliged the organizers in the workers union's to hold to their anarchist allegiance and beliefs.'
The social-democratic workers took the first steps towards a confederation. A commission was first created to carry out the wishes of the Paris Socialist Congress (June 1889) and from it derived the Centro Internacional Obrero (International Workers’ Centre) which convened a meeting for 1 May 1890. The resolutions were then laid for the Federación Obrera (Workers’ Federation) which was created in 1891 with half a dozen unions. Its mouthpiece was the Marxist El Obrero (‘The Worker’), which harshly attacked anarchism. The Federación Argentina de Trabajadores (FAO, Argentine Workers’ Federation) was formed in 1901, and in 1902, at its second congress, a socialist minority broke off (the groups which stayed within the Federation had 14,650 members, those which left 1,780). The dissident unions formed themselves into the legalistic and reformist Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT, General Workers’ Union) in 1903.

In 1902 there were lengthy strikes by the bakers, dockers and others. 15,000 men belonging to the Carta and Coach-drivers’ Federation joined the FAO. The following figures give some idea of the development of the workers’ revolutionary organization: ‘From 15 April to 15 July 1903, the 42 associate societies received 15,512 subscriptions and over the same period in the following year the figure rose to 52,895 subscriptions and the number of societies to 66’, according to a report of the Administrative Commission of the fourth congress held in 1904. At this congress the Federation changed its name to the Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (Argentinean Regional Workers’ Federation) or FORA, as it is still known today, and the Pacto de Solidaridad (Solidarity Pact) was agreed. At the following congress – the fifth – the ‘finalist’ declaration was approved. The fifth Argentine Workers’ Regional Congress, in accordance with the philosophical principles which provide the reason for the existence of the organization of workers’ federations, declares: ‘That it advises and recommends the widest possible study and propaganda to all its adherents with the object of teaching the workers the economic and philosophical principles of anarchist communism. This education, by preventing them from committing themselves merely on achieving the eight-hour day, will emancipate us collectively and consequently lead to the hoped-for social evolution.’

This fifth congress declaration became the basic policy for many years, and the movement, orientated as it was towards anarchic ends, opposed any other concept of trade unionism. Revolutionary syndicalism was seen as the way to maintain the class structure beyond the revolution. ‘We must not forget that a union is merely an economic by-product of the capitalist system, born from the needs of this epoch. To preserve it after the revolution would imply preserving the system which gave rise to it. The so-called doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism is a fiction. We, as anarchists, accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and try to ensure that they are used appropriately as closely as possible to our revolutionary ideals. […] That is to say, we do not intend to be mentally dominated by the unions; we intend to dominate them. In other words, to make the unions serve the propaganda, the defence and the affirmation of our ideas among the proletariat.’

Most of the Argentine anarchist movement was similarly opposed to a specific organization of anarchism on a national scale, that is to say, to an anarchist federation. They accepted ‘affinity’ groups, ateneos, working with the unions or in the districts, and people’s libraries, but they felt that a stable party type of organization would lead to the degeneration of anarchism into authoritarianism. Internationally, this ‘affine’ conception of anarchism was attacked by Malatesta and others. Nevertheless it lasted as long as anarchism remained the principal mass movement among the proletariat.

From the beginning the FORA organized itself outside any sort of legal legitimation, and in any work conflicts it demanded direct negotiations with the owners. It used the strike, the boycott, sabotage and the general strike. The fifth congress advised the workers ‘not to entrust themselves to be taken prisoners without justification’ and urged them to defend themselves with any kind of violence.

In February 1901 martial law was imposed after an abortive military coup, and was used as an excuse to shut down La Protesta, ranAsc workers’ centres and send various militants to Uruguay.

Towards the end of 1901, and of the century, a certain Carlos Falco was appointed Chief of Police and distinguished himself in the persecution of anarchists and the workers’ movement. At the 1909 First of May demonstration organized by the FORA in the Plaza Loren in the centre of Buenos Aires, the police opened fire on the demonstrators, several of whom were killed. A general strike was declared; the workers’ centres were shut down and there were some 2,000 arrests. The strike lasted nine days and was one of the most spontaneously unanimous movements. The Chief of Police was widely blamed, and on 13 November of the same year a young anarchist, Simon Radowitwsky, threw a bomb at his car and killed him and his secretary outright. ‘After the initial general confusion an unprecedented repression set in: La Protesta was raided, its machinery destroyed, workers’ centres underwent the same fate; within 48 hours thousands had been arrested; many were sent to Tierra del Fuego; others, the foreigners, were deported after many tortures.’ Martial law was declared and lasted until January 1902.

The repression seemed, however, to rejuvenate the anarchist movement. La Protesta reappeared in January, as soon as martial law had been lifted and its editorial and administrative group had been freed from their painful imprisonment on board the warship Guadalupe. In March a new anarchist daily evening paper, La Batalla, began to appear.

Next came the violent Centenario repression. A few months after La Batalla began to come out, the centenary of the revolution of May 1810 was celebrated – the anniversary of the colonies’ independence from Spain. Since worker and anarchist agitation was on the increase, martial law was reimposed and a new wave of vicious repression began, followed by a series of general strikes, arrests, deportations, closures, assassinations and tortures. And so it went on. Simon Radowitwsky could not be condemned to death since he was a minor, but he was sentenced to life in Ushuaia jail. Constant agitation was kept up on his behalf, since he was always regarded as one of the anarchists. Eventually, after several failures, he was released in 1910 with help from outside.

Anarchist activity was very intensive in the two decades between the ‘centenary’ repression and the coup d’état of General Urquiza. It had a powerful workers’ centre, and often a majority following in spite of the efforts of the parliamentary socialists to fuse with or control the workers’ movement; and it also had an extensive press: two dailies and dozens of union papers: La Anarquía, which took a violent incendiary line; the ‘supplement’ of La Protesta which appeared weekly for several years and later fortnightly, and in which Malatesta, Fabbrini, Nettaf, etc., all wrote and which took an inquisitive and esoteric intellectual line.

In 1919 there occurred a ‘tragic week’ in which the police killed a number of workers during a strike; a general strike was proclaimed and fiercely suppressed. In 1920-1 strikers in Patagonia were ‘pacified’ by forces under Colonel Varela. When, however, details of Varela’s methods became known, La Anarquía and La Protesta launched a campaign against the ‘killer of Patagonia’ which culminated in the assassination of Varela by an anarchist worker, Kurt Wielkens, on 27 January 1914.

On 6 September 1913 the era of military governments began in Argentina. It was accompanied by the most unveiled repression, which was a great blow to the anarchists: persecutions, closures, deportations, executions. On 11 September, Penina, a distributor of La Protesta, was shot in Rosario; shortly afterwards Di Giovanni and Scaforini met the same fate. All three died shouting ‘Long live anarchy!’ The FORA went underground. Three working-class drivers, arrested while distributing La Protesta and La Vej del Chanfleure (‘The Driver’s Voice’), were condemned to death by a military court, though the sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Since it had become impossible to distribute La Protesta, the editorial group decided to bring out an underground paper called Rebelión. Martial law was lifted at the end of the week, La Anarquía, and the daily, La Protesta, in collaboration with Ideas, Rebelión, FORA and the local workers’ unions of Santa Fé and Rosario, brought out a joint manifesto called ‘Eighteen Months of Military Terror’ informing the people about the political-social situation.

At the end of September 1919, two workers’ organizations amalgamated; these were the USA (Unión Sindical Argentina, Argentine Traders Union) representing a syndicalist trend, and the COA (Confederación Obrera Argentina, Argentine Workers’ Confederation) which was socialist. From these derived the present CGT (Confederación General de Trabajadores, General Labour Confederation). In its first public announcement the CGT declared: ‘The CGT, a body which represents the healthy elements of the workers’ groups in this country, believes in the administrative renewal undertaken by the provisional government and is ready to support it. … This confederation is also convinced that the provisional government only maintains martial law in order to ensure public tranquillity.’
In 1932 the second Regional Anarchist Conference was held in Rosario. (The first was held in 1932, at Avellaneda, in the province of Buenos Aires.) It was the outcome of agreements and understandings reached in the Villa Devoto prison by the anarchist militiamen imprisoned there during the Uriburu repressions. At this second congress a majority agreed on the necessity of setting up a specifically anarchist organization on a national scale, and a regional committee for anarchist co-ordination (CRRA) was created to this end. The efforts of this committee led to the foundation of the Argentine Anarcho-Communist Federation (FACA) in 1933, which changed its name at its fourth congress in 1935 to the present one of Argentine Libertarian Federation (FLA).

FACA carried out an intense campaign on behalf of political prisoners. Anarchist activity also intensified during the Spanish civil war. FACA brought out special editions of its newspaper, Acción Libertaria, and the SIA (Solidaridad Internacional Anti-Fascista) was started. This movement spread all over the country and provided efficient aid. Various militants were sent to Spain. FORA and its associate unions organized strikes and public meetings and continued their normal programme. But now the organization was clearly weaker and its impact diminished.

In 1935 another military coup led to more closures and repression and opened the way for General Perón's seizure of power.

While Peronism lasted, the whole anarchist movement went completely underground. All trade union premises, whether autonomous or associated with FORA, were closed; La Protesta was banned and begun to come out secretly whenever it could, as did the other newspapers of the movement. In 1936, after the imprisonment and torture of several FORA dockers, and despite the ideological differences which have always split the anarchist movement, an intense information campaign was jointly carried out by all sections of the libertarian movement. A newspaper, Agitación, was published and commissions were set up in the last and inland towns.

On the fall of Perón, several FORA unions which had been operating clandestinely were reformed, as autonomous entities; these included the unions of the plumbers, bakers, drivers, dockers and the Shipbuilding Workers' Federation. The latter organized a prolonged strike for a six-hour day — a long-standing FORA demand. But the strike failed owing to managerial intransigence and the complete lack of solidarity on the part of the reformist workers' movement centred around the CGT. (This was one organization, but it comprised many factions rivalling with each other for control.) A number of papers began to reappear openly: Acción Libertaria, La Protesta (formally), the old organ of FORA, Organización Obrera, and, intermittently, different union papers. In the post-Perón era La Protesta was closed down again and its executive editor imprisoned.

On various occasions anarchists formed groups within the student movement. Generally these were short-lived, and after the 1918 university reform they usually operated through the University Federation.

Gradually the once dynamic anarchist movement dwindled to inward-looking small groups of old militants with a sprinkling of young people who pass through the groups and leave without a trace. In the last ten years activities have been reduced to meetings and conferences in the groups' premises, public meetings of the FIA in commemoration of the Spanish civil war, or of the FORA for the first of May, or of the FORA committee for prisoners and deportees on the anniversary of Sacco and Vanzetti.

20TH-CENTURY ANARCHISM

In Argentina

Anarchism as a modern revolutionary ideology is, in the theoretical field, a pointed criticism of the established system with special reference to the system of political domination.

We are not concerned here with the Utopian aspects of the revolutionary idea; but with the fundamental anarchist political theory (as illustrated in the refusal to legislate on the future society) that the essence of the revolutionary system is its incompatibility with the established system; and therefore: if the revolutionary project is what the society is not, if its essence is critical thought, the total negation of established society, it is clear that both the established system and the revolutionary idea form part of the same historical continuity.

Revolution breaks this historical continuity, revolution is insurrectional action, only action can create new social conditions.
Argentina born in the provinces which moved to the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires amounted to almost 40 per cent of the national increase of the population of these same provinces. This mass migration brought vast numbers of people from the underdeveloped areas — people previously completely outside the country's political life — into the big cities and in particular into Buenos Aires. This internally migrating proletariat had been suddenly uprooted from a traditional way of life and deposited in the big city. It was not as the previous influx of the European proletariat, fleeing from highly developed industrial areas. It was the industrial revolution which brought this proletariat into the cities.

In Argentina, limited participatory democracy was already in a state of crisis. The ‘revolution’ of 6 September 1930 marked the beginning of the period of military usage and the ‘patricious fraud’ of the conservative backlash. From then on the army has, either openly or covertly, controlled the state apparatus — no institutional structure existed which could integrate large masses into the system. These masses demanded some kind of participation but were beset by the violent impact of the secular society. Charismatic leadership provided the answer: it adapted itself to mass demands for participation and granted the masses a series of actual gains which changed the traditional structure of the country. This movement, commonly known as ‘Peronism’, was bitterly opposed by the ruling classes (the bourgeoisie and the traditional upper classes) because it led to an increase in popular participation. On the other hand the Left generally failed to understand the process, and did not, or could not, take any action to support the new proletariat — untrammelled by its secular ideology — it attacked Peronism as a whole and in return was violently repressed by the state’s special forces.

Anarchism — like the other groups of the traditional Left, the Communist and Socialist Parties — saw only one side of the problem: the military fascist origins of the ruling group (Peron himself, and his political origins in military freemasonry and his early contacts with Nazism and fascism), and the suppression of organizational political liberties, the persecutions, closings down of newspapers, imprisonments, police tortures, deaths, permanent states of emergency, etc. They were unable to perceive the increased participation which Peronism provided for the masses of the people. They themselves remained isolated, unable to fulfill their promises. Their criticisms became increasingly abstract and removed from attainable reality. Peronism reinforced the drift of anarchism towards marginalism, and strengthened reformist trade unionism and the paternalist state, which reached its maximum under the charismatic leadership of Peron. Thus anarchism is suffering from what one can call a decay in ‘praxis’. It became virtually impossible for anarchist groups to keep to their ideas and their practice when faced with popular withdrawal from direct-action organisations. Maintaining their ideological ‘purity’ now meant withdrawing increasingly from reality; but giving up ‘purity’ meant moving towards reformism. How could electoral abstention be advocated if only a small number of members, bewildered and no one even noticed? Some of the older anarchists became conformists, abandoned the revolution, disowned insurrection, the people, and the possibility of change and withdrew into an anarchist liberalism which pined for democratic liberties. Others secluded themselves in ‘sects’, ritualized their ideology and periodically brought out the liturgy of the revolutionary martyrs, the Chicago martyrs or Sacco and Vanzetti.

CONTEMPORARY ANARCHISM

In Argentina

One military government has succeeded another since 1955. The so-called ‘Argentine revolution’ put an end to this in June 1966 when the three commanders-in-chief of the armed forces formed a military junta. All political parties were banned and the constitution was subordinated to a so-called ‘Statute of the Argentine Revolution’. Yet, contrary to past tradition, there was no systematic persecution of the anarchists, which is a clear indication of their reduced energies. At present the FORA still has several centres in Buenos Aires and a few small groups of militants inland. It has no unions, but groups of anarchists keep certain groups going within the different unions. The FORA committee for prisoners and deportees still looks after prisoners and keeps on with its other duties. FORA publishes leaflets, manifestos and its newspaper, Organización Obrera. For the last few years the traditional First of May rallies have been banned, and this has led to some arrests. Spontaneous organisation
capitalism has created in order to make profits; instead we should apply, widen and improve its dynamic in a social direction, for the benefit of all, since now it needs and can no longer do without the support of the entire community. [...] Reform is today's great revolution; the barricades have fulfilled their mission, that is if they ever had a mission. . . ."92

The editorial group of La Protesta, which is periodically elected by militants, continues to publish the paper, but sporadically, because since 1966 it comes out semi-cì clandestinely with no editor's or printer's name. Apart from printing difficulties its publication has not been impeded. Within the anarcho-communist line its main themes have derived from Malatesta and Bakunin, and its defence of the revolutionary movement has recently centered on student and workers insurrectional activity following the increase in international student agitation and the 1969 popular risings in Córdoba and Rosario. Other groups also exist which carry on various types of activity outside Buenos Aires, and also other publishers, collateral to the movement, who publish the anarchist classics and contemporary works.

But a new anarchist generation has now emerged apart from the above-named 'traditional' anarchist organizations. The young maintain contacts with the old but have formed their own organizations. The relations between the two groups are flexible and changing; both seek a common language. There is, it seems, a gap in the movement, a distance to be bridged. The advent of the new groups was signalled by two events: the Paris revolution of May 1968 and the Argentine popular rebellion in Rosario and Córdoba in May–June 1969. The former generated enthusiasm and small groups of militant students and workers were formed, courses were given on the basic ideas of anarchism in the premises of the Shipbuilding Workers' Federation, leaflets were distributed in the university and contacts sought with other groups inland. In May 1969 the prestige of the military government and its liberal façade of social peace was badly shaken when, following the assassination of a student by the police, student demonstrations began in the north. Workers' demonstrations followed. A new group broke away from the reformist CGT and, calling itself CGT de los Argentinos, confronted the government. The murder of two more students by the police of Rosario led to a spontaneous popular mobilization, barricades were erected, stones overcame police bullets and after several hours of struggle the army occupied the city and declared martial law. In Córdoba the struggle began with an active strike by the workers in the area's key factories. Workers and students trooped into the city, the police tried to break them up and when they failed resorted to shooting. Troops occupied the city, and sporadic shooting continued. Army units set up councils of war, curfews were imposed, etc. Agitation extended to all the universities and to several other cities. The bourgeois press blamed Havana and, as always, an international conspiracy. Their editorials stressed the damage to private property more than the workers' lives lost. Martial law once again became a normal feature of the country's life, and a new law was passed providing for the expulsion of foreigners, 'following the example', according to the executive, 'of law no. 4144 which was in operation for more than half a century'.

That vital component of the workers' revolutionary organization, direct action, had fallen out of use during the last few decades. But it was no longer a question of the six-hour day, once demanded by the FORA; the eight-hour day itself, won with such great effort, has ceased to be respected and in some places people now work ten- or twelve-hour days.

It must not be forgotten that Argentina is a developing country, and this conditions a series of structural factors which facilitate spontaneous popular risings; but there is one serious impediment to the creation of a revolutionary movement. Though there was extensive agitation, it tended to lose itself in the political manipulations of the pressure groups. Military dictatorship makes it easier for political opposition to unite, but it masks the fundamental reality of capitalist society and therefore impedes the development of the full revolutionary dialectic, thus encouraging the development of liberal deviations. This liberal deviationism is one of the clearest dangers anarchist groups have to overcome. Only by means of action can anarchist ideals hope to be rejuvenated and the theoretical arguments necessary for contemporary anarchism be developed.

Certain aspects of the anarchist revolutionary model are being widely propagated: rejection of leadership and of legislative or parliamentary channels, the emphasis on direct action at the lowest level of management, and the need for non-reformist revolutionary and subversive political action. This tends to lead to a revivace-
must with the Marxist Left on certain aspects of revolutionary praxis.

In this context, under the influence of what appears to be a new social situation, the Grupos Anarquistas Revolucionarios (GAR, Anarchist Revolutionary Groups) and the Juventud Anarquistas (Anarchist Youth) have been started up in Buenos Aires. There are also various groups linked to different faculties and secondary schools. At present they are at a stage where it is very difficult to predict future possibilities or the extent of the implicit ideological differences. There are also some groups in La Plata, Córdoba and Rosario, which can be classified along two general lines: those who operate within the Federaciones Universitarias, which are inclined more to liberalism, and those which are organized as independent groups and which in some places (La Plata, Córdoba) have formed direct-action groups together with revolutionary Marxists along the lines of the French Jeunesses of March Movement. These groups are reluctant to maintain formal contacts with the 'traditional' anarchist groups, and informal relations show certain generic lines of divergence.

The future, however, remains open, and, as Breton said, 'En maître de révolte nul n’a besoin d’ancêtres.'

The current situation in Argentina sees an easing of the tight military control which characterised so much of the 60's and 70's. Worker unrest has increased to the point of open defiance of the State and the present union hierarchy. Autonomous action and a new independent unionism is blossoming. The FORA itself, though still very small, is re-organising itself; new locals have sprung up and their press is now appearing once again.

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