

anchorage anarchy

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Cargo Cults and Proletariat Image

by Jason Rodgers

I went to the 100th anniversary celebration of the Bread and Roses strike, on labor day in my new home of Lawrence, MA. In the Boston area anarchists tend toward being red anarchists (it seems), while I tend towards what might be called green, insurrectionary, or post-left positions. Nonetheless, I am allergic to dogma and like to look for a variety of avenues of affinity.

There were a number of anarchist oriented tables set up at the festival. There was also a Socialist Workers cable, which I avoided as much as possible. Something weird about a middle aged, white, commie trying to sell me books by Malcolm X. I should've asked about the Mother Plane and other esoteric aspects of Nation of Islam theology.

The Sacco and Vanzetti Commemoration society had a table set up. I engaged the fellow behind it in conversation. His thoughts were a touch scattered, but I'll give him a pass, as the Boston Sacco and Vanzetti memorial march had just happened and judging from his battered eye socket, he had participated enthusiastically.

There were two Industrial Workers of the World tables set up. One housed the New Hampshire and Maine chapters, the other housed the Boston chapter. I spoke with the Maine and New Hampshire chapters. Though we obviously came from different perspectives, they were willing to engage in

dialog. They were enthusiastic, though much of the talk seemed like a sort of sales pitch.



I attempted to talk to the Boston chapter of the IWW, but they seemed to have little interest. Any question was given a short response, with little interest in dialog. This was not due to any more pressing concerns, there were only a couple people who even approached their table. They seemed to ignore these people as well.

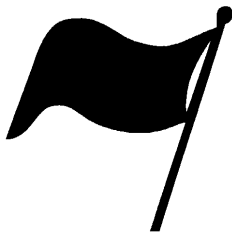
One strange aspect of these folks is that the younger members all seemed to be wearing a punk version of old time clothes, almost a crust tinged version of the musical Newsies. I took this as a sort of steampunk fashion. Now I've been involved in punk and Discordianism, so I'm not inclined to dismiss

fashion and costume out of hand. However, when combined with a disinterest in dialog, this does concern me. It makes me feel as if it may be a politics of style. Dress up like an industrial worker, while attending grad school.

At one point one of the Wobblies stood on a chair and began reading Alexander Berkman to those passing by. He was attempting to do soapboxing. I walked nearby again about five minutes later and there was no more reading. The point of soapboxing is to keep reading, doing it until one is exhausted and then ideally being replaced by another. If you give up because no one is paying attention within five minutes, it defeats the point. It seems to me it was only done in order to say it was done, it was a ritual.



Who knows, I may be wrong. Maybe they didn't want to engage in dialog because they were shy. However, at this point, it seems to me that, like most of leftism, the wobblies are more of a shell and a viable force to disrupt capital. They may now just be a series of rituals. A commie cargo cult. This seems to be the nature of our postmodern civilization. Everything is reduced to a commodifiable image, a signifier stripped of meaning. The electronic communication systems that have been deployed worldwide have helped in the development of a new stage in late capitalism. Leftist groups, such as anarcho-communists, tend to extend allegiance to a techno-industrial society, feeling that the problem is not the structure of society, but that they are not in charge of it. This is their greatest weakness. It also leaves them open to recuperation on a grand scale, becoming just another identity that can be worn. The society of the spectacle can transform resistance into just another image. At one point the IWW may have been a revolutionary force. Certain incidents in their history suggest that they still maintain the potential to be such, look for instance at the *Rebel Worker*. However, as long as they remain within the bounds of hegemonic leftism, they will be merely a ritual to recuperate dissatisfaction.



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Reflections on the Revolution in Spain

In advance of a trip to Spain earlier this year, I decided to read a up a bit more on the Spanish civil war and social revolution of the 30s. I had, over the years, already read some on this period, largely writings by those sympathetic to the anarchist movement, and what I had learned had left me quite skeptical of the methods and intentions of these anarchists, as well as those who wrote so glowingly of them. Their defenders took great pains to excuse their decidedly authoritarian approach to organizing and social relations in general, citing war conditions as a justification for the surrender of basic anarchist principles.

What I found with further reading did nothing to change my outlook. It only served to demonstrate once again how many anarchists fail to recognize the manifestations of authority and hierarchy which have plagued the anarchist movement since its beginnings in the first International. Over and over, abuses of individuals' freedom are excused as "mistakes," playing politics explained as necessary to win the anti-fascist war, and military discipline mischaracterized as voluntary obedience in the interest of the social revolution. This is, of course, not terribly different from the way anarchists have ignored or justified the authoritarian approaches of Bakunin and Makhno, (not to mention Frank Statists like Che and the *sandinistas*). But the fact that such dissimulation persists despite the huge body of literature which clearly demonstrates that the Spanish revolution was anything but anarchist, makes this an appropriate starting point for a critique of the authoritarianism so characteristic of much of the anarchist left.

Anarchy from Above and Below

The Spanish anarchist movement was hierarchically organized from the very beginning, but this top-down structure was based on voluntary agreement by individual members, who were not bound to follow policies made by others in the organization. There was an established leadership, but these leaders had jobs outside the organization like the other members and were not permanent paid staff like leaders in more traditional labor unions. Though they had no formal power over other members, they were much more involved in the day-to-day running of the movement than the average rank-and-file member and possessed very real influence and authority. This allowed an anarchist vanguard to dominate and direct the policies of the larger, and not exclusively anarchist, labor organizations which eventually evolved into the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT). Conferences at various levels from local to national periodically set official policy, but meetings above the strictly local level were always attended by delegates or representatives and so reflected not the views of individual members, but, instead, those of



leaders who supposedly spoke for them. The CNT was hyper-organized, with all sorts of sections, commissions, and federations, an organizational approach which has become characteristic of syndicalist anarchists.

With the founding, in 1927, of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI), the anarchist leaders formalized their strategy of directing the CNT from above. All FAI members had to be members of the CNT and the federation itself was dominated by a peninsular committee which often functioned as a sort of anarchist central committee. The FAI was founded to steer the CNT in an anarchist direction but, like the CNT, had both authoritarian and libertarian aspects: the controlling peninsular committee side-by-side with small affinity groups that had considerable freedom of action.

Despite its obsession with structure and the domineering approach of its leaders, the CNT was often a very effective body for organizing and representing workers in factories, offices, and agriculture. It had a large membership nationally and completely dominated the labor movement in Barcelona and elsewhere in Catalonia. Many of the rank-and-file members took an active role in the life of the organization and the union sponsored social clubs and *ateneos* where members could get together outside of work or union meetings to socialize and learn. The CNT was an important part of the daily life of many working people, especially in Barcelona, and the authoritarian tendencies of many of its leaders were relatively unimportant in most of the average member's interactions with the group.

The Mierda Hits the Fan

This all changed, however, in 1936 when the workers of Barcelona, led by the

anarchists, defeated a military uprising in support of Franco's attempted *coup d'état*. After the suppression of the military, the anarchists were the strongest force in Barcelona. They had weapons and popular support and the local government, the *Generalitat*, was powerless. However, instead of ignoring the old government and going about the business of helping organize a libertarian society, the anarchist leaders went posthaste to the politicians and handed them back the power they had completely lost. The anarchists, throughout the ensuing three years of war, went on to collaborate not just with the government of Catalonia, but with the central government in Madrid, and later Valencia, maintaining their support for the state and politicians despite organized attacks upon them by their allies in this popular front, especially the communist party.



During this time anarchists not only supported the politicians from outside, but some of them even took jobs as government ministers, while others took part in various state commissions and bodies. (Anarchists had also joined revolutionary governmental organs during the uprisings in 1873.) In the countryside, the anarchist Council of Aragón was really the only government in that region

for much of the war. Just as an earlier war had served as an excuse for the centralization and militarization of soviet society carried out by the bolsheviks, the civil war in spain served as cover for the strengthening of the authoritarian impulses of the organizationalists at the core of the FAI and CNT. Instead of relying on behind-the-scenes manipulation and getting their way through moral authority alone as they had in the past, the anarchist leaders became open politicians.



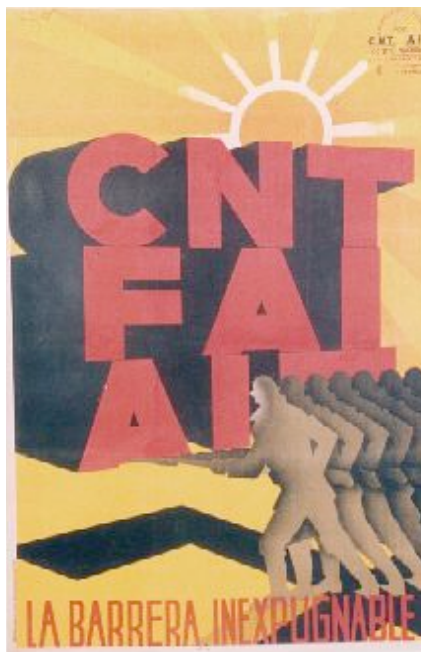
During their years in government, the anarchists encouraged their supporters to vote, imposed a draft, and requisitioned (ie, stole) food and animals from peasants to support their military organization. In a number of instances they went so far as to impose their puritanical beliefs on others by closing bars and cafes; banning the use of alcohol, tobacco, and even coffee; and forcing prostitutes to give up sex work. Their militias were, from the beginning, based on command and obedience, but became more and more authoritarian as the war wore on. They contended that military discipline was voluntary, but “anarchist” conscription and

support for execution of deserters and “spies,” put the lie to this claim. The anarchists embraced force as a way of doing business and day-by-day became more like the other statist revolutionaries with whom they collaborated.

While there is debate about whether anarchists were responsible for the killing of large numbers of catholic clergy and religious early in the war, there is no doubt that many anarchists actively endorsed such attacks, while others, at the time and since, excused them as regrettable incidents that were, however, understandable in light of the awful history of abuses by the catholic church. Some anarchists did condemn these attacks, but often only because they were tactically unwise, not because they were morally reprehensible. The line of the excuse-makers went (and goes) something like this: we don’t recommend killing priests, but you have to understand that when people are freed from oppression they will lash out indiscriminately and unfairly at times—that’s what happens in a revolution. (It is as if revolutionary workers should not be held to basic humanistic principles and standards because they were oppressed. This is condescending to working people, regarding them as children whose bad behavior should be tolerated pending their further moral development under the guidance of the sophisticated anarchist elite who are more morally and ethically discerning.)

The anarchist leadership put more value on their own program and what they thought was most important than on the preservation and defense of individual freedom. And their most important goal was winning the war, whatever the cost. The CNT and FAI could not conceive that free people were capable of defending themselves unsupervised by an

elite, so they embraced the traditional authoritarian approach to waging war. People were conscripted and forced to join the anarchist military, orders had to be obeyed, deserters could be executed, militias took supplies from farmers, and agricultural collectives “voluntarily” donated to the militias whether individual members liked it or not. Most ironic in all this was that the anarchists made common cause with the communists despite the increasingly obvious fact that a republican victory in the war would have resulted in a communist-run government that would have been at least as serious a threat to the anarchists and other non-stalinist workers and peasants as were the military fascists.



The war effort became the be-all and end-all for the anarchists and no compromise seemed too great in pursuit of victory over the fascists. However, the anarchists’ partners in the popular front, especially the communists,

were not so single-minded—they were just as interested in stamping out the libertarian spirit in Spain as they were in winning the war. So, while the communists put great effort and resources into exterminating the anti-stalinist socialists of the POUM and militarily destroying the Council of Aragón instead of using all their resources to fight the war, the anarchists felt it necessary to sacrifice the struggle for social freedom to the fight to preserve one form of government over another. But even if one believes that Spain would have been better off under a communist police state than under a fascist one, the compromises and betrayals of principle of the anarchists were all for naught, since they did not, in the end, prevent the victory of Franco and the subsequent killings and persecution of revolutionaries.

Our Movement, Right or Wrong

The compromises and “mistakes” of the Spanish anarchists were explained away or justified by their outside supporters at the time. Even Emma Goldman, who clearly did not learn the lesson one would have hoped she had from her initial support of and later disillusionment with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, carried water for the FAI and CNT. And it was not for lack of information about what was really happening in Spain. Goldman and other foreign anarchists visited Spain during the war and were well aware of the actions of the anarchists, as is obvious from their writings. But they failed to offer a thorough-going critique, and turned into cheerleaders for a losing team—a team that lost both the war and their anarchist principles.

Later anarchist writers have largely fallen into the same trap. Book after book, by both participants in the events and outside

historians, repeats the same justifications for the failings of the anarchists. They picture the CNT and FAI leaders as well-intentioned revolutionaries who really did have a libertarian vision at heart, but who were forced to compromise their ideas and actions by the circumstances of history. But I believe this is an inaccurate reading of events. In fact, the actions of the anarchists were entirely predictable and were consistent with much of prior (and subsequent) anarchist history.



Authority and Liberty: Strange Bedfellows

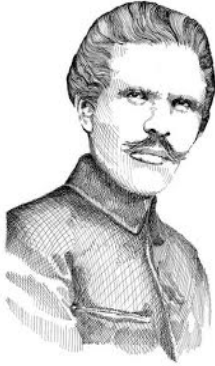
From the days of Bakunin and the International on, there has been a tension in the anarchist movement between the authoritarian and libertarian impulses, just as there is in the larger society. Despite his writings about freedom, Bakunin's approach to organizing was hardly different from that of Marx, his rival for control of the international workers' movement. Bakunin was at the head of a number of secret societies whose goals were to manipulate and control the revolutionary workers' movement. He was

used to giving orders and having followers and was accommodated and supported by many others in the early anarchist movement. While there was certainly a reason for some level of secrecy among anarchists organizing against the authoritarian regimes of the day, the conspiratorial spirit of these early anarchists set a tone for the later movement which has had serious consequences.

Used to conspiracies and secret organizations, many anarchists were initially unable to see the true character of the bolsheviks, for instance. Despite the apparently libertarian program spelled out in *State and Revolution*, Lenin was an authoritarian through and through and the bolsheviks' maneuvering to neuter the soviets from the very start should have been obvious to all antiauthoritarians. But many anarchists stubbornly failed to acknowledge that there was no true social revolution going on in Russia. Some, like Berkman and Goldman, continued to support the bolsheviks even as they were killing and jailing Russian anarchists. Not until Trotsky and the Red Army slaughtered the rebels at Kronstadt did the truth become too obvious for them to ignore.

But hope springs eternal, so when Makhno and his associates set up an anarchist army and "free territory" in Ukraine, the anarchists had a new hero, a new revolution to support. But the *Makhnovshchina* was another flawed utopia. In a weird foreshadowing of Spain, Makhno and his allies constituted themselves as a revolutionary government in all but name, and in this case even had their own intelligence department. Makhno was a former Red Army officer, so it should come as no surprise that he would institute conscription and order—

and even carry out—executions. What should be, but sadly isn't, surprising is that anarchists continue to consider his mini-police state some sort of positive example for anarchists.



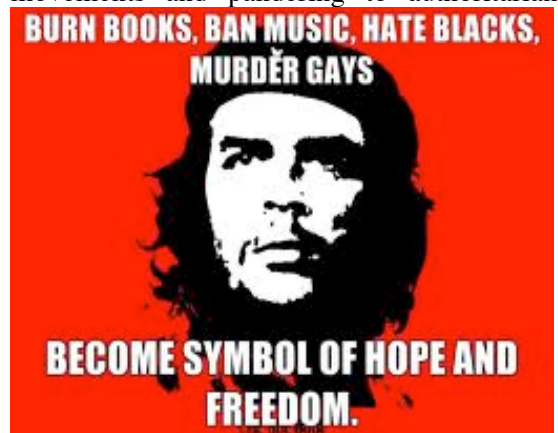
From the authoritarian “experiment” in Ukraine under Makhno and his associates, to the Platformists (a group of syndicalists including Makhno which favored an almost Leninist approach to anarchist organization), to the Spanish Revolution, anarchists have often acted like statist and politicians but have been given a pass by other anarchists. In recent years American anarchists have even resuscitated the original *Platform*, and have set up federations dedicated to its authoritarian approach to social change. The word anarchist has nearly become devoid of any real meaning, since one can support any form of social change, from voting to nationalist military uprisings, and still consider oneself part of the libertarian movement.

Anarchy as a Fashion Statement

It is dismaying that today's anarchist movement seems unable or unwilling to reject its history of tolerance of, even support for, authoritarian individuals and movements masquerading as anarchists. In fact, the problem goes even further—anarchists commonly express their support for

revolutionaries and rebels whose goals are not even theoretically anarchist. Just as the Spanish anarchists justified their association with communists and other statists, contemporary anarchists have supported the *sandinistas* and *zapatistas*, and it is not uncommon to see anarchists wearing t-shirts or other gear portraying a image of Che. A well-known anarchist book distributor in the United States features books by all sorts of Marxists, nationalists, and authoritarian *sub/comandantes*, and an anarchist newspaper in Boston several years ago defended a local leftist politician accused of accepting a bribe (Shocking!), declaring he “will never sell out the people, for he is of the people. He is truly a rare breed of political representative...”

It would appear that anarchists are so desperate for revolutionary heroes of some sort, as was Goldman, that they lie to themselves (and others) about authoritarian individuals and movements, trying to paint them as something they clearly are not. Romanticizing failed libertarian social movements and pandering to authoritarian



politicians and revolutionaries is more appealing than confronting the truth—that the anarchist movement has few successes to its credit, largely because it has failed to confront

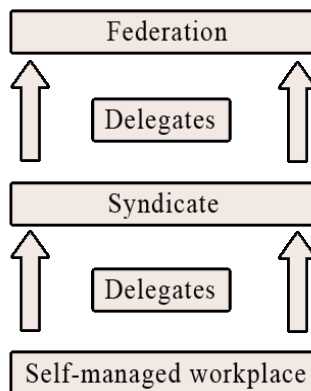
the authoritarian personalities and impulses within it. It would be easier, perhaps, to make the case for a libertarian future if we had a nice solid example of a successful anarchy in the past. But that does not justify anarchist dissimulation about what really happened in ukraine and spain.



There is something else going on here, as well. Anarchists fear alienating other leftists, not to mention the many who see themselves as part of the anarchist movement but have no understanding that anarchists are anything other than the far left of the socialist movement—in fact, the libertarian movement is riddled with leftists who have adopted the name anarchist simply as a fashion statement devoid of any substantive anti-authoritarian content. I have written elsewhere that anarchists need not be embarrassed by being described as extremists, but should instead embrace the term. There are all sorts of liberals and radicals who will gladly come up with pragmatic, compromising approaches to social change. There is no reason that the anarchist movement should be doing the same thing, as it so commonly does. Anarchists should be the ones to push the envelope, not be just another sect sucking up to reformists seeking more government action as a solution to social problems, or some nationalist military movement in mexico that poses as the savior of the peasantry. We need to call out authority, racism/nationalism, and any other

statist approaches to social change and promote non-statist alternatives. If that results in our isolation from the statist left, that is not a bad thing.

But too many anarchists seem to support governmental approaches because they believe that hierarchy and authority are acceptable as long they as they further socialist and collectivist models of social organization. That is why some anarchists support and participate in movements seeking a more extensive welfare state or talk enthusiastically about the authoritarian collectives in Mondragon or idolize military leaders like *subcomandante* Marcos who writes of autonomy and peasant collectives (“guided,” of course, by the likes of him and his military cronies). Such libertarians either overlook or justify the sacrifice of (others’) freedom in pursuit of the socialist social change that they promote. That was the problem in ukraine and spain, and remains a problem in the contemporary anarchist movement. Platformists, and syndicalists in general, view the formation of collectives (whether the community, the council, the committee, or any number of other groups) and the socialization of resources as the most important social change anarchists can pursue.



No matter that this approach inevitably creates an anarchist elite and limits on individual freedom of action. While opponents criticize anarchists as unregenerate individualists, there is little evidence of a commitment to individual liberty in much of what passes for the anarchist movement at the moment.

Conclusion

The biggest problem in Spain was that the anarchists did not really believe in the philosophy they wrote and talked about for so many years. They did not have the courage of their convictions. When they had the opportunity, the day after the defeat of the military uprising, to continue on and help develop the stateless society they found themselves in in Catalonia, they instead chose to turn to the state. They never had enough faith in the huge number of anarchists in Catalonia and Aragón to tell the politicians enough was enough and carry on as if they did not exist, which was essentially true since the state had no actual power there at that time. If they had really believed their propaganda that regular working people, in field, factories, restaurants, and shops, had the wisdom and knowledge to fend for themselves and create a new libertarian society on their own initiative, they would never have so easily turned their victory into defeat by encouraging the reinstitution of the state on the morn of the revolution.

And their supporters and apologists share the same fatal flaw. If anarchists really believe that free people can create a free society, we need to keep saying that every chance we get. We need to say the *sandinistas* were dictators and murderers when they drafted working people as cannon fodder and shot people who did not follow

their orders. We need to say a military organization with *comandantes* and *subcomandantes* can never create a free society. And we need to say that those who call themselves anarchists should act like anarchists.

The anarchists in Spain lost the moral high ground the moment they chose to reestablish a government in a free space, when they chose not to help turn a temporary autonomous zone into a permanent one. They then went on to draft working people to die in battle, forced agricultural workers into collectives whether they wished to join or not, became active politicians in local and national governments, supported executions of both deserters and supporters of their opponents. In other words they became exactly what anarchists supposedly abhor: authoritarian politicians who use force when words aren't sufficient to enforce compliance with the demands of the "anarchist" powers-that-be. Vernon Richards perhaps said it best in his conclusion to *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*:

"The fact of the matter is that for the revolutionaries as well as the Government *all means were justified* to achieve the ends of mobilizing the whole country on a war footing. And in those circumstances the assumption is that everybody should support the 'cause.' Those who do not are made to; those who resist or who do not react in the manner prescribed are hounded, humiliated, punished or liquidated.

"Thousands of members of the revolutionary movement held official positions in para-governmental institutions. They sat on the popular tribunals as well as guarding and

running the prisons. There is no evidence that they objected to the punishments in the hundreds of death sentences meted out by the tribunals. The CNT press provides a gloomy catalog of death sentences pronounced and executed, without a murmur of disapproval. Any comments are in fact of approval. 'May it serve as an example!' was *Solidaridad Obrera's* headline (9/19/36) to the announcement of the execution of a rebel leader in Minorca.



"One could even say that the attitude of the CNT-FAI to legalized violence during the period 1936-1939 is such as to make their collaborationist deviation pale into insignificance. Violence for them was no longer a weapon of defense against armed attack by Franco's forces. It was the weapon of revenge (the execution of 'fascist' prisoners), intimidation (public execution of deserters), of deterrence ('The death penalty for the thief'—*Solidaridad*

Obrera, 9/17/36). We say without hesitation that an anarchist cannot justify the shooting of any person who is unarmed, *whatever his crime*. Even less justification is there in executing those who refuse to kill, or who have helped 'the enemy' with information, etc. ... 'And are we to spare the lives of those men who have been responsible for the extermination of hundreds of our comrades?' we shall be asked by those Spanish workers who believed with the anarchist Gonzalo de Reparaz in the philosophy of 'Terror against Terror,' or with Juan Peiró's 'Revenge and a fierce revenge. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' And there is only one answer: Yes!

"There are many ways of changing society. One is by exterminating morally or physically all those who disagree with your way of thinking; the other is by first convincing sufficient people of the rightness of your ideas. Between these two extremes are a number of variations on the first theme but, we submit, they can be no variations on the second. The self-styled 'realists' among the libertarians believed that compromise is morally justified since it produces results. If we are to judge the 'results' by the history of the international socialist and communist movements or by the *Platformists* in the international anarchist movement and the 'circumstantialists' of the Spanish CNT-FAI, we can only draw one conclusion: that where the means are authoritarian, the ends, the real or

dreamed-of future society, is authoritarian, and never results in the free society. Violence as a means breeds violence; the cult of personalities as a means breeds dictators—big and small—and servile masses; governments—even with the collaboration of socialists and anarchists—breed more government. Surely then, freedom as a means breeds more freedom, possibly even the Free Society!

“... We believe there is something more real, more positive and more revolutionary in resisting war than in participating in it; that it is more civilized and more revolutionary to defend the right of a fascist to live than to support the Tribunals which have the legal powers to shoot him; that it is more realistic to talk to the people from the gutter than from government benches; that in the long run it is more rewarding to influence minds by discussion than to mold them by coercion.

“Last, but not least, the question is one of human dignity, of self-respect, and of respect for one’s fellows. There are certain things no person can do without ceasing to be human. As anarchists we willingly accept the limitations thus imposed on our actions for, in the words of the old French anarchist Sebastien Faure:

“‘I am aware of the fact that it is not always possible to do what one should do; but I know that there are things that on no account can one ever do.’”

Letter to the Editor

Dear Joe,

I forgot to say in my last letter that the New York IWW Arts Branch was organized by Mel Most, an old-time anarchist now sadly forgotten, Judith Malina and Hannon Reznikov, and Bob Fass. Mel suddenly died, and that took the wind out of our sails. A movie about Bob Fass was recently released (I missed it but heard it was good). Hannon died young... Judith is still going strong, heading for 90! Thanks for reprinting the article from *The Storm*, great individualist mag edited by Mark Sullivan, several issues co-edited by

Yours truly,

Peter Lamborn Wilson

