

NOTES ON THE MIDWEST LIBERTARIAN CONFERENCE, May 28-31, Des Moines, Iowa

The conference began with a general meeting to welcome the participants and discuss the agenda for the day. The Des Moines and Ames groups handed out a proposal titled "Principles of Unity". We then split into workshops of six people to discuss points of the proposal. Each group contained at least one person who had worked on the proposal. In each of our groups there seemed to be much confusion, if not disagreement, over the principles, which seemed to reflect a Marxist influence. Most people in ours and other groups never got past debating the first two points. They were 1. "Members of the organization will strive for ideological unity", and 2. "Members of the organization hold a dialectical materialist perspective".

We then returned to a 2nd general meeting where one person from each of the ten groups gave a report. Many didn't seem to understand what was implied by the terms used. The principles seemed vague. They were never discussed fully or clarified sufficiently during the entire conference. After the reports were given, several arguments began. Everyone seemed defensive and there was much heated debate. It was suggested by the Iowa group that we once again number off into workshops to discuss points brought out at the first workshops. There was disagreement with this method of dividing into groups of six and some suggested alternative ways. One alternative was to separate according to one's willingness to work with Marxists and another to divide into groups with the same tendencies.

The meeting lagged on and the disagreements became less coherent. People became restless. We adjourned for lunch. Some individuals posted announcements of workshops to be held in the afternoon. Of the two major groups, one group consisted mostly of those who were interested in forming an organization which would umbrella all "libertarian socialists" per se. The other group wanted a strictly anarcho-communist network in the Midwest.

A general meeting was held again. The first group distributed a revised proposal of "The Principles of Unity" that was simplified and open-ended. They also proposed a newsletter to discuss different ideologies. The second group decided to read material concerning anarcho-communist principles to eventually, over a period of months, build a foundation for a communications network. There was \$13.40 collected for the cost of the first communique.

Discussion of the principles of unity dominated the rest of the afternoon. Many of the people felt the debates were becoming irrelevant and ego-oriented.

A women's caucus was held after the general meeting. It was brought up at the caucus that the general meetings were male dominated and had sexist undertones. Many women agreed with this point and decided to bring it up at the next general meeting.

After the events of this first day, it seemed to us that many people were discontented and the issues muddled.

The next day practical workshops took up most of the morning. Those workshops provided instruction on a variety of skills such as offset printing and graphic layout. The feminist workshop along with others were held that afternoon. It was decided to limit the attendance to women. At this workshop, several topics were dealt with but none were discussed fully because of inadequate time. There seemed to be an uneasiness amongst the women because of lack of familiarity with one another. Although the early part of the meeting was stilted, when there were disagreements, they were discussed rather than argued. We felt the strongest outcome of the meeting was a basis for further communication. The exchanging of addresses helped alleviate the isolation many women felt as anarcho-feminists in their communities.

Overall, the conference seemed regimented and far too limited in the time devoted to discussion of other proposals that had been brought to the conference. For us, the most positive aspect was an opportunity to meet other anarchists with whom we can work to form a strong and viable anarchist organization. We hope future conferences will be more open to (a) rational criticism (b) less structure and (c) less male domination and more female participation.

Obviously, we could not attend every single workshop and caucus; therefore, these opinions are based on both our own experiences and talks with individuals throughout the weekend.

We are very interested in hearing from other women and hope that they will contribute to future issues of Network Notes. *** Mimi & Susan
(note: reprinted from ANARCHIST FEMINIST NETWORK NOTES numero 3. Write, c/o Resurgence, P.O. Box 801, Evanston, Il., 60204)

Despite the egoizing, despite our apprehension, we stand on the threshold of coalescing together to form a strong anarchist movement for the first time in 50 years. If we work at it.

We actually agreed on a statement of principles and practice, perhaps a bit too general, but one that reflects all our politics as individuals, and transcends our differences.

It wasn't easy. We were paranoid of power plays and came close to destroying the tenuous feeling of unity by alienating and making our hosts feel defensive, a step not in keeping with our avowed principles of making and receiving criticism. We compromised.

Comrade Sam Dolgoff's strong push for studying his set of principles and coming back in a year to adopt them, took the form of a personal argument, as he let the amount of work he put into it get in the way of discussing it. I respect his work and find it a document worthy of consideration. I criticize myself for reciprocating in the argument.

We were paranoid of any mention of marxist terminology, (the feeling here cannot be attributed to any one person.) This ignores, I believe, a tool we could use, with caution, in explaining the nature of capitalism, in much the same way we have studied Proudhon's work "What is Property?". Let us then resolve to guard against vulgar marxism, but not be afraid of comrades who seek to understand the economic institutions we suffer under.

Some were unprepared for conducting workshops in a useful way, (I was not entirely confident about my teaching abilities).

But we came together and agreed on the roots necessary for the formulation of a social organization. Our principles reflect a decentralizing function, with the strong possibility of federative links. I hope that the declaration includes not only process but content as well.

Seeing as how we are to discuss the statement of principles for the next year, I would like to initiate a discussion of the concept of self-management, for the next issue of the bulletin.

Yours for the general strike

Fred Lappert columbus, ohio

Two of the points of discussion unresolved at the conference were: 1) the criticism i offered but was unable to clarify about the classist nature of our inability to prioritize for action focus major forms of oppression such as class, race and sex and 2) the necessity for ideological unity (by this i mean a basic agreement on the ideas, principles and analysis--or theory--which informs action). I would briefly like to explain my further thinking on these issues since the conference.

The bourgeois ideology of the society in which we live is, in part, a mixture of an extreme individualism--my needs over yours--and a submerging of individuality into a consumption oriented mass. It is the remnants of the bourgeois individualism--please don't confuse with individuality--which i perceived to be operating in our disagreements at the conference. To heighten personal experience and need as the only criteria for determining ones focus for revolutionary action stems from very individual experience. In general this experience is not that of the working class or poor class, nor is the stance which was issuing from it consistent with the needs of those classes.

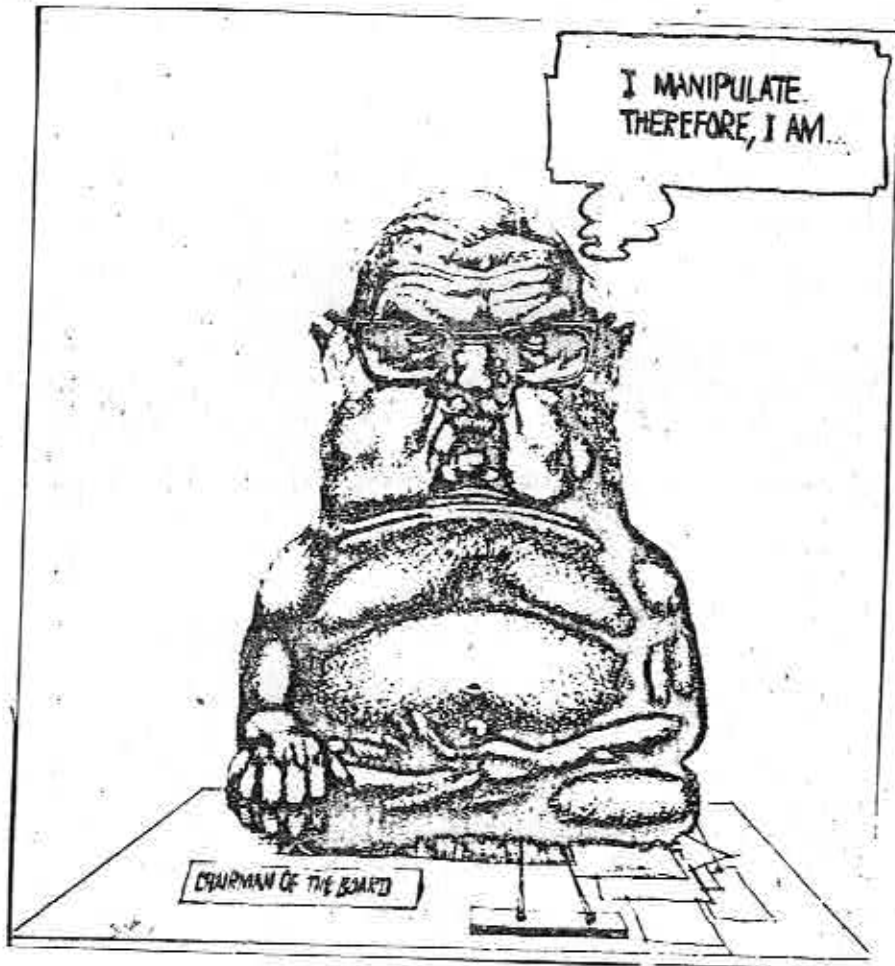
The inability to focus energy through a revolutionary strategy destroys the very possibility of a viable movement. Of course, as the movement grows the focus can and should broaden. Also, at the present time individual needs and experience must be an important consideration in choosing the focus for action. For example, as a white woman i have no justification for organizing blacks. However, i should raise the issue of racism as it pertains to the organizing of which i am a part. My personal experience will influence my choice for activity, but it will be one criteria in tension with the overall needs of the collective movement. This is the embodiment of the anarchist principle of the dynamic between individuality and collectivity.

To disregard collectivity when determining strategy is class based. This becomes classist because it inhibits collective action which serves the interest of people who are relatively better off than working and poor people. That was/is the gist of my criticism.

The second point which i tried to make is that a unity of ideas (principles, analysis, theory) is necessary within an organization as the foundation for action. These ideas give direction to all action; that is, they inform action. An organization with a unified perspective has a criteria upon which actions can be formulated, energies focused and movement supported. It is consistent with anarchism to support unity within an organization and a diversity of organizations. The level of unity will largely determine the sophistication of the action in which an organization can engage. Lack of unity blocks action through disagreements. This perspective is consistent with the desire to establish a statement of principles with which we can agree as libertarian communists.

This is a very brief explanation of my thinking, but hopefully it will serve to enable the useful insights to be identified through further exchange. Collective explanations of these points will be written by Des Moines people in the future.

--Karen Johnson



I MANIPULATE.
THEREFORE, I AM...

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

Here is a story Liz from Madison submitted to Free For All newspaper. It was rejected for publication because it was supposedly not relevant to enough of the readers. Liz says that a lot of the tone in the story reflects her involvement in an internal struggle within Free For All. A struggle between anarchist and marxist factions.

I arrived in Des Moines late Friday with an open mind and a relatively uncritical eye. I was looking forward to being with new and different people who share the belief that there is no government like no government, that any and all authority is inherently limiting to an individuals freedom, and that any attempt to control leads inevitably to authoritarianism. Unfortunately my naive state did not last for long.

Since the only party worth having is the one after bartime, I was mildly irritated, when handed a mimeographed sheet, to read that the saturday night parties were to "END NO LATER THAN MIDNIGHT (if not before)". Anyway my annoyance subsided when I learned that the bars didn't close until 2am. It was at the bar that I realized something funny was going on. Aside from the info on parties, I received a song sheet, a seven page mimeo of organizational concepts summarized by Sam Dolgoff and finally a proposal from the D.M. people. I had figured out by now that the D.M. people were a little hung up on structure, but the proposal itself was the clincher. Mild annoyance turned to mild amusement when I thought how diehard anarchist would react to a principle asking that "members of the organization hold a dialectical materialist perspective." I knew the next two days would be interesting when I read that "the organization will develop a defined organizational structure" which includes a "definition of leadership".

The lights came on all over D.M. the next morning when I was informed that the people from D.M. had originally gotten together as a Marxist/Leninist study group that, as someone said, "degenerated to anarchist sympathizers." Obviously they hadn't degenerated enough.

We split into groups to discuss the D.M. proposal. I decided to leave the hardcore attacks of the proposal to others and simply questioned the need to create another organization. The organization is necessary "to build towards an anarchist movement", replied Sam Dolgoff. Well I was not about to argue with that. Why not? After a while we reconvened to discuss what each of the small groups could or could not agree with in the proposal. The groups were pretty dull until one man stood up and delivered the ideal first negative speech. "It's basicly a Marxist proposal and I would like to ask for its rejection." (sigh of relief) He then went through the proposal point by point with specific objections that brought a loud round of applause at the end of his delivery.

Unfortunately, tension mounted as not quite everyone had been as impressed with the previous speech as I was. What later turned into a major split among the ranks really got under way when one person from D.M., in claiming he was willing to work with anyone willing to work with him, started

defending Stalinism. It was a madisonian who set the record straight when he said, "I am not working with any Stalinist! We have to crush Stalinism!!" People wanted to know why there was so much talk of Marx and forms of communism at an anarchist conference. It was at this point that we broke for lunch.

During lunch the list of potential workshops, caucuses, and meeting were posted. They included a wobbly caucus, a republican convention protest meeting and a terrorist workshop at midnight (ha ha). Most people either attended the sectarian anarchist caucus, or the nonsectarian anarchist and libertarian Marxist caucus. How's that for a split? Considering that libertarian Marxist is a contradiction in terms and feeling a little queasy having earlier spied a woman with a red star, I decided to try the sectarian anarchist caucus. Nothing much happened. People there wanted to know why at an anarchist conference we needed a seperate anarchist caucus.

At 5 we all met again to discuss the new proposal the non-sectarian anarchists had drawn up. Its principles of unity were basically harmless. In fact the proposal was so innocuous that any lefty organization could have adopted it. It called for self-management in all spheres of life and action on the local level. Disagreement arose over point five which said, "We are against all forms of domination and place a priority on working against racism, sexism, gay oppression, and class society." Why the objection? First of all, Anarchists see freedom as the very essence of life. Inherent in anarchism is the idea that people must be liberated not only from economic exploitation but from social, intellectual, and political oppression as well. Anarchists are against all forms of domination, so why regurgitate the empty cliches of the organized left? Apparently, though, the lefties had the dominant voices and after a good hour of bickering, "priority" was changed to "emphasis", with the principle otherwise intact.

The arguments continued all afternoon and the atmosphere was tense as most people were on the defensive. Finally one man stood up and shouted, "DON'T CALL ME A MARXIST. IT REALLY PISSES ME OFF WHEN PEOPLE CALL ME A MARXIST!" With this easily agreed to statement, the currant tension in the air dropped a good 200 volts.

The conference ended with criticism/self-criticism. It began typically enough, with one woman expressing disappointment at how little "the women" had talked the privious day. As no one could really disagree with that, discussion quickly moved on to probably the most crucial and relevent objection to the conference. A libertarian from Arkansas asked, "Why, if we claim to believe in self-management, can't we apply that concept to our own conference?" The conference was too rigid and structured. It was a structure which had been involuntarily imposed on the people, which explains why they were objecting. I would not say organizing conferences aren't productive. They can play a part in fighting the system. I would say though that maybe the movement, right now, is on another level that of talking to other people and attempting to live your life by what you believe. These things are equally as important and progressive as any conference, if not more so.

A new organization won't make the revolution---people will. And libertarian/anarchist ideas won't die even if every anarchist organization does. SO be optimistic and if everything else fails--

try eating spagetti.

Evaluation of Midwest Organizing and Communications Conference

We were charged, at the Columbia Conference a year ago, to structure a conference on organization and communication. On evaluation we agreed that our structure for meetings and tasks facilitated this goal. We decided however, that it was a real mistake not to have spent more time Saturday morning, at the first general meeting, going through the agenda for that day. If we had been more thorough we could have explained our ideas on decision making for the large group meetings. People would have had a better understanding of the tasks to accomplish and could have proposed differences if they had them. We were critical of the people who thought the conference was too bureaucratically structured and did not make any effort to give feedback by mail, beforehand. We also agreed that we should have announced the use of the office equipment to everyone at the first general meeting.

We talked about the way the first workshops on Saturday tended to have Des Moines people for facilitators. Given the level of our preparation and the time we spent working together as a group, it was understandable for this to happen. However, we think that we should have been stronger about refusing to be facilitators and pushed for others to play this role.

The purpose of the first general meeting, which was to list agreements and disagreements was hindered by one of the men "seizing the chair" and giving his own view of things. This led to immediate responses from individuals rather than a more disciplined response of listing what grew out of the small group discussions.

There was a lack of clear structure for making decisions in such a large group. At times when the group process stalemated it would have been facilitating to break into small buzz groups to sort out how to go on. Another constructive alternative would have been to have called for caucuses by regions, i.e. Des Moines, Chicago, etc. This would have allowed people to clarify thinking and participate more actively. This is something to seriously consider for future large group meetings.

Dividing into groups was done spontaneously, not as an organizational decision. People didn't know why they went where they did, and the points of agreement and disagreement were clouded by such responses as labeling groups with vague terms like "sectarian" and non-sectarian". Statements made by some

people that they could have gone into either group further indicates the lack of clear issues.

We criticized ourselves further for lack of clarity in the statement Des Moines-Ames people wrote on organization. Our use of undefined and unfamiliar terms contributed to confusion and divisiveness since it was the most thoroughly distributed paper and had a larger effect than if other papers would have been more widely circulated. This speaks to the lack of organization by other groups in preparing ahead as well as to our lack of foresight about the language problems that arose.

Several political issues emerged during the conference, in spite of a strong tendency to downplay them. Differences which affected the content of the conference were: 1) world view - idealistic/materialistic; 2) organization - let it flow/structure; 3) prioritizing of issues - personal/overall strategic importance. As with all contradictions these were not mutually exclusive, but they did indicate clear differences on which to base divisions or groupings among participants.

These disagreements or tendencies were interrelated and expressed in several ways. The discussion of prioritizing issues was an example of idealist and materialist stances in opposition. The question arising out of this was/is the importance of personal priorities in developing strategy. We think that making personal interests the basis for action rather than the interests of the working class as a group, is idealistic, that is non-strategic. It is not linked to a realistic assessment of the forces necessary to bring about change.

Advocates of a strategic approach to determining priority issues, a materialist approach, were saying that all the concerns which were being raised require organization to create change. This does not mean a complete sacrifice of personal needs and interests, but rather an integration of those with the interests of the group most likely to organize and struggle for change against the key issues or contradictions which uphold the present social order - classism, racism, and sexism.

The class implication growing out of this is the difference between the time middle class people have to put energy and priority time into personal needs, and the necessity for working class people to see themselves as a group with the solidarity necessary to fight their common struggles.

In light of our concern for working class development the difference in organizational outlook is an important one. Self-management as a basic element of anarchism is not eliminated by planned structure. In fact it can be facilitated when there is a structure, flexible to be sure, within which to work. It is nice to think that organization will flow together without planning but the chance is strong that the leadership will flow right to the people with experience, often the middle class who have had the opportunity to develop the necessary skills. Planning can spread that responsibility around, facilitating the process of self-management.

The varying opinions about what importance to place on working together with other groups, particularly libertarian Marxists appear to be linked somewhat to an understanding or organization and how it is most effectively developed. Where planning has taken place, where strategy has been developed to deal with class oppression, there is more possibility of maintaining strength and identity of anarchist principles while joining our efforts with people of different ideologies.

Looking critically at the weekend together, we concluded that if the structure for the weekend had been more clearly explained and if participants had been willing to identify disagreements, political differences could have been dealt with more constructively. As it was, we were able to pull together two groupings, even though their differences were not very clear. We can build from here, if we decide to do so. What is needed is a definition of who we are, a discussion of differences and action based on these differences.

We decided to delay this newsletter until we had received what seemed like a reasonable number of articles. Response has been slow. If this communication is to continue, we must receive financial support. The cost of this newsletter:

paper	4.50
plates	1.00
<u>mailing</u>	<u>15.00</u> (approximately)
total	20.50

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