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Contents

As massive anti-corruption protests shake former socialist countries and NATO and Russia mass their troops along the border between East and West, anarchists are asking how best to intervene in the upheavals ahead in this contested region. Seeking a case study in resistance along the Eastern European rim, we talked with anarchists in Armenia about their experiences in recent demonstrations against corruption, the cost of living, and the current government. The lessons they pass on are instructive for participants in social movements all around the world.

Armenia gained independence in 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved. Its first years as a country were marked by war, as it fought Azerbaijan over the still unresolved territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The last two decades have seen repeated bouts of social unrest in this country torn by the consequences of war and economic hardship, but only in the last four years has the Western media paid the protests much attention.

“Leaving Armenia and joining the ranks of immigrants is currently the most widespread form of radicalization,” one comrade from this small nation in the Southern Caucasus tells us. And yet a small but committed community of anarchists has stayed, demonstrating what it means to fight against capitalism and the state in four consecutive years of protests in this post-socialist country.

2013: Fulfilled Demands Spell Death for Movements

In 2013, the city government of Yerevan, Armenia's capital, tried to increase the cost of public transportation from 100 to 150 drams. This provoked unprecedented anger. It only took a week for a thirty-person campaign to snowball into a massive decentralized movement attracting mostly high school and university students. Most of the participants were taking the streets for the first time. Simple and effective direct actions helped the movement to grow quickly. "You just went to the nearest bus stop, handed out fliers, paid the same amount you paid before, and urged people to do the same. Everybody knew why we were protesting. The task at hand was very specific and real," our comrades remember.

The movement stayed autonomous, free from the influence of political parties. Highly focused on everyday issues, it inspired people to fight and organize in various ways. Young people drove unofficial buses all day long and encouraged passengers to boycott the new fare, while others supported the riders financially. A self-organized car pool initiative spread across the city, with people sharing cars and even offering free rides to strangers. Things got serious when even some bus drivers joined the protests by skipping work or refusing to take money from passengers. Total chaos was right around the corner.

"It was a truly exciting experience, until the government did what it always does; it quickly agreed to the minimal requirements, thus preventing the expansion and radicalization of the movement," comrades observe with disappointment.

and unpredictable. Remember, anarchism has been a force in Armenia since the 19th century. Anarchists have never been numerous, but even today they remain determined to fight for a better world.

The movement's focus on everyday issues and avoidance of a more radical agenda were initially seen as strengths, as the movement drew a wide variety of people. Yet they ultimately proved to be weaknesses as well.

As soon as the government caved in to demands, the movement dissolved. Some blamed the inexperience of protesters, while others pointed to skewed media coverage or to the lack of assemblies. In any case, the cancellation of the fare hike drew a massive amount of people to the streets in celebration. People had demanded lower costs of living, and once the government met their demand, they thought they had won. "Any argument with a more experienced activist was perceived as an unnecessary politicization of the issue. It was clear one should abandon any hope of a bigger change," our comrades report, describing the moment they realized their movement had reached its own inborn limits.

2014: Autonomy Inspires Us, and Our Enemies as Well

The dust of the transportation fare protests had not yet settled on Yerevan's wide avenues when the turbulent year of 2014 began. The next big wave of protests, addressing the controversial reform of Armenia's national pension system, were dubbed the "Dem Em" (I am against) movement. The new pension system targeted young professionals born after 1973, forcing them to contribute at least 5% of their gross wages to private pension funds of a highly suspect nature until they retire.

"There are examples of similar reforms, both successful and unsuccessful, in other countries. However, in Armenia the main trigger for the resistance was not economic feasibility, but distrust towards the government, both current and future," comrades explain. "Would you lend money to a racketeer who is moving to Panama? Of course not."

The reform particularly angered young people in the IT industry, who earn much more than the average income in Armenia. On average, an Armenian making minimum wage will earn $115 in US currency a month, whereas the starting salary for an IT specialist in Armenia is around $650 per month. "The first public discussions of the anti-reform campaign resembled a gathering of a non-existent trade union for computer programmers; the discussions were spontaneously horizontal, but at the same time they were distrustful towards outsiders, especially towards those who had participated in other campaigns."

Programmers weren't the only ones organizing, though. Politicians had learned the strength of the street movement from previous protests. The "I am against" initiative was soon backed by the opposition parliamentary party. The movement didn't just gain the support of politicians, it also brought thousands of people to the streets, got a fancy sound system, and soon started to resemble trade unions in the worst possible way. "There were appointed leaders recognized by the media and police, the language of the protest became populist, and the decisions were made behind closed doors," our comrades report. The moment when the discourse about reform was taken over by political parties was the beginning of the end.

lice and the residents of the surrounding area. The authorities once again adopted the strategy of wearing the armed group out, and the group eventually surrendered.

In Armenia, as in most other post-socialist countries of the Eastern bloc, it is not easy to draw a clear distinction between protests seeking regime change and demonstrations triggered by more social and economic reasons. For now, people still believe that regime change will bring about a better life. "Power is personalized, while violence is systematic," our comrades from Armenia conclude. "Social protests that have specific, concrete, and visible demands and results are perceived as 'small victories.' No wonder that success in those protests practically always motivates people to strive for more, but people only return to demand the president's resignation."

Disobedient Voices of Freedom

"Is there a visible large-scale anti-capitalist agenda in Armenia? Definitely not. There are, however, a few affinity groups, small organizations that share anti-capitalist ideas, implement some projects, try to organize small-scale interventions," our comrades explain. Anti-election sentiments are more widespread, speaking to widespread disappointment with representative democracy. There is also a small but fierce feminist and queer community with radical views.

Although our comrades conclude that, for the majority of people, growing despair over their inability to change their lives appears to be the only thing transferred from one year's protests to the next, the situation in Armenia remains volatile

mained small. “Media quickly dubbed the remaining protesters as alcoholics, drug addicts, and radicals.” The Electric Yerevan movement was dead. A year later, the government announced the end of subsidies as well.

2016: From (Relatively Open) Protest to Armed (Right-Wing) Insurrection

On an early morning in July 2016, the people of Yerevan woke up to an odd series of events. An armed conservative nationalist group had seized the largest police station in the capital, containing most of the specialized equipment, ammunition, and weapons, demanding the resignation of the president of Armenia. This armed group was affiliated with the political prisoner Zhirayr Sefilyan, a leader of the opposition movement Founding Parliament. Their aim was to force regime change and to build a new type of state. Some were veterans of the Karabakh war. “They have experienced political oppression, but their conservative and nationalistic agenda was not much different from the government in power,” our comrades explain.

They encouraged people to break through the police cordon with Molotov cocktails and arm themselves. On the other side of a police cordon reinforced by several military vehicles, more people gathered every hour, reaching over 5000 in the evening. However, people refused to attempt an armed uprising. Their main demand was that bloodshed be avoided. The members of Founding Parliament, who joined the protest, were detained and arrested. The most violent clashes took place between po-

If in 2013, the city government actually had to completely back down on a fare hike, this time the government only had to promise to postpone the pension reform. Once again, people believed they had won, and the movement dissolved. Several months later, the government went back on their word, but the movement never came back to life. Our comrades did not consider this to be their struggle: “Leftists and anarchists did not participate in the movement at the beginning, when it was narrowly focused on professionals and therefore closed [to their participation], and refused to participate when it was led by the political parties and therefore, indirectly, by the authorities.”

2015: The Electricity in Our Veins Is the Destruction of Their Power

In the summer of 2015, a completely new stream of energy drew people together on the streets of Yerevan. Things started out a lot like the previous protests: the government tried to raise electricity prices 17 percent. As before, people took the streets to march and hold discussions. But what truly got the movement going was unprecedented police violence. This opened up a completely new set of opportunities.

On a warm June day, hundreds of people gathered in Yerevan to march towards the presidential palace. They soon stopped before a scene no social movement in Armenia had ever witnessed. The police had closed down the road with water cannons, cordons of officers, and barbed wire. Yet people refused to leave, transforming the march into a

sit-in—successfully occupying and blockading main avenues in downtown Yerevan.

That night, things got out of control. First, people delegitimized the self-proclaimed leaders of the protests, who tried to reduce the tension and even to get people to return to Freedom Square where the rally had started. The protesters had different kind of freedom in mind this time.

“Nobody wanted to return, so the suggestion was rejected,” comrades remember. It is worth noting that the discussion was not an assembly, and people did not try to vote or reach consensus. As the night was getting late, however, more and more people left the occupation.

Police struck early in the morning, using water cannons to brutally attack and disperse the remaining few hundred protesters. The police detained about 240 protesters; 25 were injured and three hospitalized. Officers targeted people covering the protests as well, destroying their cameras and memory cards.

This attempt to crush the movement by brute force produced the opposite effect. In less than 12 hours, about 8000 people returned to the streets under the banners of Electric Yerevan. Solidarity protests took place in many other cities and towns. It seemed that another clash was inevitable.

But the police were learning fast; they did not make any further attacks. Instead, the protest turned into a standoff, with a barricade of trash bins separating police and the protesters. That was when space for radical ideas started to close down. “The barricade quickly became a stage for people with loudspeakers. In addition, artists and politicians formed a “human

shield” to guarantee the security of people. Media were live-streaming 24 hours a day, and soon the protest took a more familiar and stable form.” By providing the protesters an opportunity to express a peaceful and inert disobedience, the authorities ensured that the protests would die down themselves.

At the same time, our Armenian comrades report that those who wanted to radicalize the protest or expand the range of tactics—mostly anarchists and other radicals—faced different challenges. On the one hand, police were detaining people for wearing anarchist symbols or just for spreading leaflets. That spread fear inside the movement, and the protesters themselves started to label any attempt to distribute radical material or introduce new slogans as a provocation.

But, as comrades recollect, anarchists were facing additional challenges. “Starting from the very first meetings, any attempt at public debate was immediately suppressed by the organizational group. As soon as there was any talk of expanding the protest agenda and the need to radicalize, the organizers would put on loud music, shady characters would appear to disrupt a conversation, so people were forced to leave the protest area, where police might detain them.”

As the government once again used a cheap trick, claiming they would subsidize the difference between the old electricity price and the new one, some organizers started to encourage people to stop occupying the streets of Yerevan. Although they failed to convince the majority of the people, the number of protesters was dropping day by day.

This was when the remaining participants started to organize assemblies. Yet the number of people in the streets re-