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WE WANT FREEDOM FOR ALL:

A JEWISH ANARCHIST STATEMENT

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I. FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Back in 1889, amidst the squalor and destitution of New York's Lower East Side, a group of young Jewish workers created the first anarchist journal to be published in Yiddish, Di Varhayt (The Truth). After 20 issues, the paper was reconstituted as Di Frei Arbeiter Shtimme (The Free Voice of Labor), and for the next 87 years it served as one of the major forums of anarchist thought in the Yiddish-speaking world as well as a leading journal of the Jewish labor movement and Yiddish culture.

It its heyday, Di Frei Arbeiter Shtimme was the voice of a movement composed of thousands of Jewish working women and men who were not only fighting the bosses in the sweatshops but also combatting domination and exploitation wherever encountered: in their unions, in their communities, in their homes and schools. They defied the puritanical conventions of their day by advocating such things as noncoercive open education, sexual freedom and equality, free love, birth control, atheism, resistance to conscription, and direct action against the capitalist system, militarism, and the State.

With the closing of Di Frei Arbeiter Shtimme in 1978 came the end of an era. Long in decline, the closing of the paper and the death of the movement behind it illuminated several shifts which have become apparent since the 1930's. The vibrant Yiddish culture of the Jewish immigrant working class--its language, literature, music, theatre, political and social institutions--has all but disappeared from contemporary Jewish life, jettisoned like so much excess baggage in the drive for acceptance and upward mobility in American society.

The Jewish communities and Jewish youth of today identify more with American and/or Israeli culture and political institutions than they do with Yiddishkeit and the revolutionary social aspirations and struggles of the bygone immigrant days. The older Jewish socialists and anarchists, who found and fought in the "Jewish" unions, have generally moved to the right as the unions themselves have become increasingly undemocratic and bureaucratized.

Yet still there are Jewish anarchists.

We identify ourselves as Jews because our primary cultural affiliation is with the Jewish people. Our "Jewishness" rests on cultural and political traditions as well as an awareness of anti-Semitism here and abroad, which has almost forced community upon us. While we reject nationalism and theocracy as well as the authoritarian and sexist aspects of Jewish life, we find in our past a tradition of free thought and militance which must be constantly revolutionized and revitalized.

We are anarchists because we align ourselves with that movement and theory which poses the most radical challenge to the state and capitalism: which proposes a society based on the free association and cooperation of individuals for mutual aid and the production of real social wealth, without bosses or classes of any sort. In other words, a society in which people control their own lives and not each other. Our anarchism is class-based because we are workers and it therefore reflects our day-to-day concerns and struggles for human dignity, environmental and occupational safety, and the democratic self-management of our work places, communities and schools.

Like many young Jews growing up in the 60's and 70's, we were led by our concerns as Jews and as people committed to social justice to seek out progressive Jewish alternatives to the reactionary institutions that dominate Jewish life in America. Most of us participated in the various movements of the Jewish left, such as the Jewish Socialist Youth Bund, the Radical Zionist Alliance, the Jewish Liberation Project, and the leftist-Zionist youth movements. While we encountered good ideas and good intentions in all of these groups, we were not satisfied with their overall perspectives on contemporary social struggle and Jewish life in America.

The left, in general, did not seem to be much more of a viable alternative, with its adherence to sectarianism, statism, and political authoritarianism. We turned to the libertarian left and found in it a revolutionary movement and analysis which corresponded with our own views. Returning to the heritage of the Jewish labor movement, we found a strong libertarian current within the tradition of Jewish working-class radicalism, which despite its unjustified obscurity is still viable today--namely, anarchism.

From our perspective as Jewish anarchists, we recognize that the liberation of the Jewish people is inextricably bound up with that of humanity as a whole. This liberation can only happen by means of the revolutionary reorganization of society.

We believe that every oppressed group must take control of its own destiny and liberate itself. This, however, cannot be achieved in a vacuum, isolated from the struggles of the rest of oppressed humanity. True liberation will only be achieved in the context of a universal social struggle for a new world order.

Therefore, while participating in the Jewish struggle for survival and autonomy, we actively support and take part in the following:

- 1) Opposition to all forms of discrimination and oppression that bar people from fully participating in society and realizing their total potential as free individuals because of their age, sex, race, nationality, sexual orientation, economic/social class, or disability.

- 2) Solidarity with working and oppressed peoples' struggles throughout the world.

- 3) The building of a revolutionary, democratic labor movement through autonomous, rank-and-file self-activity.

- 4) Opposition to those forms and uses of technology which pose serious threats to public health and safety as well as the overall negligent abuse and destruction of our environment.

- 5) Opposition to war, militarism, conscription, and the arms race.

- 6) Autonomous movements such as community organizations, self-help networks, and alternative educational, media, and

cultural projects that seek to create self-managing, democratic non-hierarchical alternatives to the State and the established order.

In all our endeavors, we oppose party building, political manipulation, and attempts to centralize activity and communication. Only through militant self-activity, self-organization, and self-direction can a revolutionary democratic movement develop. Consequently, we reject utilizing the political and legislative machinery of the State as a vehicle for fundamental social change. We advocate, instead, popular forms of democratically coordinated direct attention such as general strikes, mass occupations, boycotts, etc., to directly confront the system and, ultimately, to reclaim control of our lives and our world.

II. STATE AND CULTURE

We live in a society that embodies the principle of authority, that is, the rule of one individual or group over another. In such a society, the culture/religion/ideology of the group in power necessarily becomes that of the State. The options for the powerless minority groups are, at best, social disadvantage, pressure to assimilate or conformity; at worst, repression and genocide.

This has been the situation of the Jewish people for the past 2,000 years. The Jewish people have always constituted a distinct cultural/religious entity. Their inability and/or unwillingness to assimilate has often made the Jews easy scapegoats to divert the discontent and frustration of the people.

It can be argued that in liberal democracies, the Jew is a free citizen with full equality. For the most part, this is true for the Jew as an individual, but for the Jew as a member of a distinct culture and ethnic group seeking to preserve its identity, the situation is entirely different. Of course there is not brutal repression or genocide against Jews here in the U.S. at the

present. Nonetheless, the Jews, like every other ethnic group or national minority, must engage in a desperate fight against assimilation and communal disintegration.

The enemy in any oppressed people's struggle for survival and autonomy is never another people, even though it may be their culture which is forced upon us and in their name that we are oppressed. It is the very nature and structure of class society that creates the objective conditions for the emergence of anti-Semitism and all other forms of intolerance and oppression. So long as society institutionalizes violence, exploitation and domination; so long as people are forced to sell themselves and compete with each other in order to survive; so long as human life is considered expendable for the sake of power and profit, there will be oppressed and oppressors.

Ultimately, there can be but one enemy in any struggle for liberation--every social system based on social stratification, wage-labor and the institution of the State. The State is the hierarchical apparatus through which the ruling class protects its power and its interests, both domestic and foreign. It is an integral part of any social and economic system in which a ruling class dominates and exploits the rest of society. The authority of the State ultimately rests solely on coercion and armed force. It legitimizes its existence by invoking nationalism, religion and ideology.

But while coercion and armed force are the bulwark of the State, conformity is its foundation. With regards to national culture, we can see that cultural hegemony is part and parcel of social and political control. Throughout history it has always been achieved by replacing thousands of years of popular creativity and folk process with a bland, homogenized pseudo-culture organized around patriotism, the real purpose of which is to promote a false sense of unity of interests with the State and the ruling class.

There are, however, many instances when the State seems to promote ethnic diversity by encouraging minority groups to stage cultural events, or even funds ethnic cultural and educational programs and institutions. Needless to say, these

are merely token gestures. The tactics can change but the goal will always remain the same--cultural hegemony, either through assimilation or by co-opting and neutralizing the minority.

The State is aided in its efforts by a handful of individuals who have "made it" and are beholden to the system for their power and privileges. These "respected community leaders" cynically use the traditions and institutions of their community to impose the ideology of the ruling class and, consequently, assimilation on their own people.

The Jewish establishment is no exception. To be sure, it is not interested in creating a vibrant Jewish culture. The primary concern of the Jewish establishment is strengthening those organizations and institutions which enable them to maintain control over the Jewish community and share in political power in general.

III. RESTRUCTURING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Just as society as a whole must be restructured, so too the Jewish community must be restructured. The control of Jewish communal life can no longer be the private domain of the self-appointed, self-perpetuating "machearchy," i.e., the established Jewish organizations and their leadership. Administration of communal resources--cultural, educational and social institutions, communal funds, etc.--must be decentralized and democratic. New forms of communal organization must be developed that will enable every member of the community to fully participate in all aspects of Jewish communal life, to share in every level of decision-making, and to have equal access to all communal resources.

The philanthropic apparatus that exists ostensibly to facilitate efficient fund-raising and distribution for communal needs has become so bureaucratized and centralized that it does not serve the community and, in fact, has become effectively divorced from the realities and needs of the present-day Jewish community. Being organs of a Jewish

establishment rather than voluntary associations of the Jewish community as a whole, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, United Jewish Appeal, etc., exist only to centralize control of communal resources into the hands of their leadership, allowing them to impose their own agenda on Jewish communal life. The consequence is that Jewish social services are shamefully inadequate, inefficient, and dehumanizing in their dealings with both recipients and employees. The real needs of the community are often forced to take a back seat to the self-aggrandizing projects of the Jewish establishment, such as building luxurious synagogues and over-priced hospitals that the great bulk of the community will never set foot in.

It is clear that what is needed in the community is a return to the Jewish tradition of mutual aid and responsibility. The immigrant Jewish working class managed to "take care of its own" long before the days of large scale government social services, through an extensive network of self-help organizations such as landsmanshaft societies and Arbeiter Ring (Workmen's Circle), etc. We should draw upon their example by dismantling the current philanthropic bureaucracy and replacing it with a decentralized network of community based self-help organizations that would include everything from schools for the young to senior citizens centers, administered by the members and supported by the community. Through direct participation and direct democracy, all members of the community can derive a sense of individual dignity and worth, as well as a sense of empowerment, which is a crucial first step in the struggle for the elimination of authority and domination in society as a whole.

However, before we can even begin to restructure and revitalize the Jewish community we must develop a new understanding of it. Our community today is not a monolithic, homogenous entity, but rather an amalgam of many different ethnic, political and even religious groups. We have not only Jews of Eastern European background, but also Jews from other parts of Europe, from Israel, South America, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia,

all with our own languages, traditions and customs. Our religious beliefs run the gamut from atheist to orthodox and our political beliefs from Anarchist to Zionist. Our community contains a wide variety of lifestyles and sexual preferences, both traditional and non-traditional.

What binds us together is a personal affirmation of our membership in the Jewish people, a sense of personal affinity with a heritage and a culture, no matter how we may choose to express it. Recognizing this we must reject all attempts to impose one group's culture, language or beliefs on the rest of the Jewish community and strive toward a pluralistic community of communities. Only by broadening our perspectives and expanding on the values of social justice, mutual aid and responsibility, direct democracy and free discussion and debate inherent in Jewish culture, can we evolve as a free people in every sense of the term.

IV. RELIGION AND CULTURE

Throughout the history of the Jewish anarchist movement, we Jewish anarchists have been accused of trying to destroy Judaism and promote assimilation, due to our outspoken atheism and secular orientation. What we have consistently opposed and continue to oppose in Judaism are not the folk customs and traditions but rather the theocratic conventions that uphold patriarchal sexism, adherence to authority as well as the mystification and simplification of life and the universe which is inherent in all theologies.

We utterly reject the current debate on "Who is a Jew," particularly when it is utilized by the Israeli government and religious authorities to determine government policy on immigration, citizenship, etc. As we stated before, Jewish identity is a matter of personal choice and affirmation. We oppose any attempts by any authority outside that of a personal conscience to dictate the meaning of Jewishness. Similarly, we are determined to resist every incursion into our private

lives by any and all religious authorities, especially when they threaten the rights of every individual to control their bodies as well as their life style.

We support the efforts of many Jews today seeking to develop a creative Jewish lifestyle outside the narrow framework of establishment Judaism. One encouraging example of this is the Havurah movement. The Havurah or "fellowship" is a small, autonomous circle of friends and neighbors that get together to create their own approach to the study and practice of Judaism based on their own beliefs and lifestyles. Aside from the Havurah movement there are many other examples of emerging alternatives, such as cooperatives and collectives of various sorts, as well as new educational, cultural and media projects, all of which strive to reclaim Jewish heritage and culture and instill positive social consciousness in contemporary Jewish life. Despite the fact that this progressive trend is still small and outside the mainstream of the community, we hope that these efforts will come to capture the imagination of the Jewish community as a whole and become the basis of a new sense of Jewish existence and community.

V. ZIONISM

The Jewish anarchist movement has consistently opposed political Zionism since the inception of that movement in 1897. We reject the notion that Zionism is the liberation movement of the Jewish people. Zionism, like all other nationalist political movements has as its goal the establishment and perpetuation of a nation-state. As we stated earlier, the nation-state is, by the very nature of its hierarchic structure, the primary instrument of class rule, militarism and imperialism. As we shall show, the State of Israel is no exception to this rule.

Since the beginning of the 19th century modern political nationalism has been the major force that has shaped the world political order. Its organization form, the centralized nation-state, has become the mode of political organization throughout the world. When oppressed peoples have

liberated themselves from the bonds of colonialism and foreign domination they established a nation-state through which to exercise their national sovereignty. Yet a close look at history and the current world situation shows that "national liberation" through the means of the nation-state is just a matter of replacing foreign bosses with native ones, and that in the current era that national sovereignty and self-determination are myths.

The new nation-states created by triumphant nationalist movements have invariably wound up as the product and property of the national bourgeoisie, who usually made up the leadership of those movements anyway. Since the triumph of the Bolshevik counter-revolution in Russia an increasingly common phenomenon is the rise to power of a bureaucratic "new class" composed of functionaries, technocrats and those intellectuals who place themselves at the service of the new "people's" state. In either case the result has been the continuation of class rule and the brutal repression of those who fought to create the new state under the banner of "freedom" and found only continued slavery.

In most cases, the new nation-states have based their rule on previously existing relations of power and domination and which they quickly incorporate into the new social structure. Even the so-called socialist revolutions of the 20th century have wound up with the "socialist" state taking up many of the most hated aspects of the old regime. Israel is somewhat different in this respect since its social structure is the result of the Zionist effort to superimpose a Jewish nation-state with a Jewish majority on a country where the overwhelming population was Palestinian-Arab. In order to accomplish this the Zionist movement had to create exclusively Jewish political, social and economic structure based solely on the labor of Jewish immigrants and not the resident Arab workforce. Without going into detail on how this was accomplished, the result was the transformation of the Palestinian majority

into a marginal minority in their own country, excluded for the most part from the mainstream of Israeli social, political and economic life.

But there is far more to the emergence of Israel as a nation-state than the conflict between Jews and Palestinians. For Israel, like any other nation-state in the modern era, is merely a unit in the international pecking order of competing nations, with the superpowers on top. The end of World War II left the world divided into two camps, East and West, with Russia and the United States at the head of each. At the same time a rising Third World nationalism played a major role in the dissolution of the old empires and in the establishment of new states. These new nation-states followed the pattern we stated earlier, where a new ruling class simply replaced the old imperialist regime. Israel was no exception to the rule. In its case, the ruling elite was the Ashkenazic Zionist establishment.

At the same time, the self-determination sought by the anti-colonialist movements turned out to be a sham, as the newly independent nations, as well as the already existing states, were drawn either into one camp or another. Any who attempted to resist were crushed outright or sooner or later co-opted. We can only look at the history of the Non-Aligned Movement to see this process at work. Israel, having been born in 1948, was inevitably subject to this dynamic and soon drawn into the Western camp. Today it has become a major vehicle for American foreign policy in the Middle East. So much for the Zionist dream of national independence for the Jews.

There are some who contend, as the Zionist movement does, that no matter what Israel's position in the Western camp, it remains the primary means of Jewish liberation. Yet Israel has been in existence since 1948 and only a small part of the entire world Jewish population lives there. The situation of world Jewry is still tenuous. Anti-semitism is on the rise and many communities are threatened with repression, if not annihilation. Yet what has Israel done to prevent this situ-

ation? It has sold arms to regimes like Iran and Argentina which repress Jews, and has even demanded, in the case of Soviet Jewry, that the U.S. bar its doors to those Soviet Jews who refuse to emigrate to Israel.

When confronted with this, Zionists offer the lame excuse that Israel is a small country and must worry about its own survival first. This is exactly the point. Israel is only a small country, racked with problems, both internal and external. How then can its existence protect Jews in every corner of the world? The best it can offer is refuge, and refuge is not liberation.

The Zionist panacea for all the problems that the modern Jew must confront today, whether it be anti-semitism, assimilation or any other "tsores," is Aliya, that is, emigration to Israel. While there is a handful of Jews who feel an idealistic affinity with "The Land" and who seek to fulfill their ideals through Aliya, the majority of Jews are not so inclined. The Israeli government seeks to compensate for this lack of idealism with tax inducements and special privileges for new Olim (immigrants), particularly those from the West. This policy has caused a great deal of resentment in Israel, especially among the "Oriental" Jews. These Jews, who make up the majority of the Israeli population, came to Israel with nothing but dreams and promises, only to find disappointment and discrimination.

Zionism, no different from any other movement seeking political power had to gain political hegemony in the Jewish community before it could achieve the establishment of a nation-state. It did this by absorbing the Jewish establishment, and supplanting indigenous Jewish cultures with its own Hebrew culture.

Once in the Jewish community, there was a whole spectrum of political movements and beliefs, now there is one official ideology, with little dissent tolerated. Dissenters from Zionism are labeled "self-hating" Jews and are

ostracized. Efforts are turned toward promoting Hebrew culture as the Jewish culture, while Yiddish, Ladino and every other Jewish culture now at the verge of extinction, are left to their fates.

VI. THEIR ANTI-ZIONISM AND OURS

Our opposition to Zionism has nothing to do with the current anti-Israel crusade being waged by the Arab/Islamic states and their allies. Their anti-Zionism stems from opportunistic, political self-interest. Our opposition stems from principled disagreement rooted in historical debate. Their objective is a new political power base, ours is revolution.

Unlike most of the left, we do not put down one form of nationalism in favor of another. From our perspective, the P.L.O. is simply a nation-state without a permanent territory of its own (though it can be argued that Lebanon is in fact its territory). The P.L.O. has its own standing army, bureaus of government, and means of enforcing its power (witness the assassinations of Palestinians who stray from the P.L.O. line). It is not inconceivable that despite the fierce hatred that exists between these two states, Israel and the P.L.O. can negotiate an official peace. States are not guided by ideals and ideologies, but by practical self-interest.

A P.L.O. state on the West Bank will be no better or worse than any other regime in the area. It will stifle its opposition and streamline its political program to secure its power. Of course, since the West Bank has no real industries or resources of its own, it will most certainly be dependent on the richer Arab/Islamic states and/or either of the big Super Powers. We can also speculate that it will probably resume economic relations with its most hated enemy, the Zionist State of Israel.

While we reject the P.L.O., we most vehemently oppose the military occupation of the "administered territories" by Israel. We totally support the right of the Palestinian people to determine their own future, free from the manipulations of all powers, whether it be Israel, the P.L.O., or anyone

else. Though we oppose the current political system in Israel, we, nevertheless, equally support the right of the Israeli Jewish community to determine its own destiny.

VII. OUR VISION

We support those forces in Israel, the Mid-East, and the world in general, seeking to create real peace and understanding among the peoples of the Middle-East. However, it is not enough to bank on negotiated treaties between nation states. States cannot and will not create real peace. All they can offer is an armed truce. Real peace can only come about when the working and oppressed peoples of the world transcend the facade of nationalism and religious dogma and the systems which maintain their power and privilege.

Our vision for the Middle-East and the world in general is a decentralized, supra-national federation of peoples based on free association and generalized self-management, in which the earth's resources are shared and accessible to all in an atmosphere of freedom, equality, and peace. The Jewish people will take its place in this new world order not as a centralized nation-state, but as an autonomous community of communities, with complete control over its own communal resources and its own future.

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The Libertarian Workers Group is a group of working people and unemployed in the N.Y. metropolitan area. We include anarchists, libertarian-communist and are concerned with those issues that affect us working people and residents of this area.

We hope this document will generate discussion and debate in the anarchist movement and Jewish community. We welcome all comments, criticisms, etc.

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