

Colin Ward reports from Venice

Anarchy rules

IT IS HARD to imagine the city councils of Bath or Edinburgh turning over two of their most beautiful public squares for a week to a world anarchist congress with well over a thousand participants. But the communal council of Venice, after months of uncertainty, did so. The socialist mayor was willing, but the Communist majority in his coalition raised obstacles until a few days before the event.

All last week the Campo Santa Margherita was filled by seating for hundreds under awnings, an impromptu kitchen, trattoria and bar, an international bookshop, music, drama and non-stop discussion. And among the plane trees of the Campo San Polo; there were two large exhibitions in a huge striped marquee erected by voluntary anarchist labour.

One traced the association between artists and anarchism, from Courbet and Pissarro onwards. The other was a panorama of the history and geography of anarchism. Any group with something to tell the world could take over the tent, and a series of anarchist films were shown.

Meanwhile, in the cloistered calm of the school of architecture, the polyglot comrades had a series of formal seminars with the aid of simultaneous translation. The organisers, from Milan, and Geneva, reminded us that there have been dozens of international anarchist conferences in the past: indeed the first was in London over a century ago, with 43 people including the police spies.

Last week's celebration was, they declared, not a conference but a gathering. There were no resolutions, no votes, no lobbying and not much empty rhetoric, "but all the world is here."

For anarchism, as the exhibitions showed, has an extraordinary global distribution and continuity, even in countries where its propaganda for a self-organising, stateless society has been brutally suppressed by governments of right, left and centre. One of the world's most famous anarchist journals, *La Protesta*, started in the 1890s and suppressed since the 1960s, has just re-emerged and the Argentine comrades proudly brought copies with them.

The visiting Australians were celebrating a continuous anarchist presence down under since 1886, and one could go on through the geographical alphabet. There was one Korean anarchist in Venice and three Chinese; who were critics both of the Cultural Revolution and of the new regime, which they see as a Western-style techno-bureaucracy. From closer to home there were 125 Swedes and a similar number of Germans.

How refreshing to be in a community where everyone took it for granted that all governments are disasters, and all bosses, capitalists or commissars, are tyrants.

But were the assembled anarchists downcast at the failure of their precursors? No they were not. For some this was because their anarchism is a personal affirmation of their attitude to life which does not depend on success or failure. It can be

battered by circumstances and compromise but it never dies.

"By 1984," said one speaker in Venice, "states, whether capitalist or Communist, have achieved what every megalomaniac dictator in history has sought in vain: the power to destroy every citizen of every state." The anarchists claimed that the only way to liberate work was workers' control. The socialists' cure-all was state-control. The result is that industrial struggles are no longer fights with capitalists, but with the whole machinery of the state.

We saw this with the workers of Solidarity in Poland and we see it today in the miners' strike in Britain. Are the anarchists cast in the usual mould of romantic conspiratorial groups?

"No," answers the Milan anarchist Luciano Lanza, one of the organisers of the gathering, "Society is not going to be transformed by the action of marginal groups, but by the action of ordinary people, the people who take the tram or go to the cinema."

And he urged us to remember that before we criticise their anarchists for their ineffectiveness, we should reflect that after a century of propaganda for socialism, and a lifetime of experience in many countries of socialist government and socialist legislation, crudely reactionary politicians like Reagan and Thatcher are actually popular with the people who take the tram. And one of the reasons for their popularity is their spurious slogan of less government which appeals to people's natural sentiment that they want to be left alone to run their own lives.

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