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Whatever Happened to the Anarchist Workers Group?

Alan MacSimoin

February 2008

For many years the experience of the Anarchist Workers Group in Britain was used to smear 'platformists' as some sort of authoritarian tapeworm within the body of anarchism. It was claimed that our politics leads people out of anarchism and into Leninism.

The emergence of the Anarchist Workers Group at the start of the 1990's was something the WSM welcomed. Most of the people involved initially came from the South London branch of the Direct Action Movement. At least one founder member of the ACF was also involved. They also had branches in the North of England with people from Manchester, Huddersfield and Liverpool.

Our welcoming of the AWG was for a number of reasons. Their experience within DAM had led them to reject Syndicalism, specifically as a rejection of DAM's policy of seeking to build revolutionary trade unions in opposition to the TUC ones. They also accepted the basis of the Platform of the Libertarian Communists, i.e. they wanted to build an organisation that would have a high degree of theoretical and tactical unity.

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On Ireland they took a firm anti-imperialist line, and took part in activity around the 'Time To Go' demonstrations. No other anarchist group in England had done so at the time. On a more incidental level, the AWG seemed not to be suffering from the Trophobia that prevents many English anarchist groups taking part in anything but their own fronts.

But after just two years AWG no longer existed. In the course of those two years they published four magazines and never grew beyond 30 members, before shrinking down to 10. The survivors changed the name of the organisation to Socialism from Below and decided they were going "beyond anarchism". Most of them quickly dropped out of activity and a couple ended up in the ex-Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party.

Why did this happen and what can we learn? After all, the experience of the AWG is still thrown up as an argument against our politics.

The WSM is in a unique position to do this as not only do we have the benefit of hindsight but we also have the advantage of having all their internal documents and bulletins. In addition WSM members attended two of their national conferences. On two occasions a couple of their members came over to Ireland for discussions and one of their members was an ex-member of the WSM who visited Ireland on a regular basis.

The AWG got off to a promising start, although the first issue of Socialism from Below trod on many toes, particularly in its excellent analysis of all that was wrong with British anarchism. Alongside it, a pamphlet called In Place Of Compromise set out a strategy for anarchists in the trade unions. This represented an advance on other anarchist positions at the time which either ignored the unions (Class War), attempted to build microscopic alternative unions (DAM) or rejected any organised participation (ACF). In Place Of Compromise shared many common features with WSM policy.

joining because we are a good organisation but also understand that our politics and methods are good because we are anarchists.

We need to constantly re-examine the anarchist tradition and educate newer members about what that tradition was and is. We should never stop discussing the basics of our politics, it can be boring for members who have been around for years but better than leaving some members with gaps in their understanding of anarchism.

The problems of the AWG fell into two major categories, political and organisational.

Throughout its short life the AWG never managed to regularly produce internal bulletins or keep the members informed of decisions made by the national committee. Bear in mind that this was in pre-internet days!

People were reluctant to act as national officers e.g. the Treasurer nearly always resigned after 6 months of half doing the job. As a result subs were never regularly collected from the members and money from sales of *Socialism from Below* was rarely collected. Too much was being done at the last moment, sometimes resulting in serious, if memorable, mistakes. One leaflet on abortion called for “free women on demand”.

This was a disastrous way to operate and left many members confused and demoralised. Yet no real attempts were made to sort things out. Any attempt to discuss solutions was brushed off as an organisational solution to a political problem. There was a political problem all right, the failure to treat organisation as a serious task in itself.

The political problems of the AWG came from a number of sources, some to do with the background of the members and some connected with the political climate at the time.

The AWG was aware, like ourselves, that contemporary anarchism as a set of ideas is a bit undeveloped in some areas. Its core ideas on the state, the Russian revolution and the role of a revolutionary organisation are spot on. However on imperialism, women’s oppression, racism and a host of other issues there is either little or no useful theory to guide anarchists today.

Most anarchist organisations don’t seem to mind. Within all the British groups contradictory positions are held by different people and no attempt is made to resolve this fundamental problem. Sometimes blind activism is substituted in the hope that if you are busy enough the holes will not show, which is fine until you meet up with another left organisation.

In this case you often bailed out and left it to them, this perhaps reached a high point with the anti-war campaign. The anarchists, incapable of challenging the trots about their domination of the existing campaigns, set up their own tiny alternatives. They voluntarily cut themselves off from contact with many enthusiastic anti-war campaigners.

This is a real problem, unfortunately the AWG's solution degenerated from the comical to the dangerous. Initially a load of areas were chosen and 'commissions' set up to develop theory in these areas. None of these commissions completed their work as most members were on two or three of them at once. They collapsed under their own workload.

Individuals still had a strong commitment to theoretical work so it was agreed that informal groups would meet socially and discuss a particular set of ideas. As there was seldom an internal bulletin their work did not reach the organisation as a whole.

This resulted in the rapid unofficial promotion of a small group of people to what was effectively the leadership of the organisation. By June of 1990 this resulted in a National conference where (as reported by one of the WSM observers present) "almost all the motions had come from this small group and it was obvious to us that the rest of the membership could not follow a fair proportion of the arguments or realise the full effect of what was being debated".

The AWG, because it was not afraid to face the Trots on their own ground, succeeded in winning over a few members of other left groups. These people had, however, come from a background where anarchists were presented as a group of middle class wallies without two ideas to rub together or as dropouts incapable of dealing with modern society. Within the AWG, however, there was no formal education about the anarchist tradition but a fair few articles slagging off green anarchists.

They had made the mistake of thinking that anyone who wants to join a revolutionary anarchist organisation must already be a revolutionary anarchist. If only life was that simple!

From another WSM report "At the last conference I was shocked to discover that one person who had been in the AWG for over a year knew by his own admission virtually nothing about the anarchists in the Spanish revolution. Not surprisingly many of these ex-trots came to believe that the AWG must be a radical departure from anarchism for it seemed radically different from what they had been told anarchism was".

One thing the emergence of the AWG demonstrated was that Anarchist groups are capable of being just as sectarian and childish as the silliest of Trotskyist groups. Most anarchist groups refused to even communicate with the AWG. Members of DAM even attempted to disrupt the AWG meeting at the London Anarchist Bookfair in 1991.

There was a complete lack of serious discussion. Instead debate between the groups was restricted to nasty, if funny, cartoons and smart alekey articles along with a large measure of rumour.

This had the effect of making several members of the AWG who were anarchists into people who thought there was no hope of rescuing anarchism from this inward looking and muddle headed swamp and they were better off striking out alone. After a while the AWG gave up on seriously addressing itself to anarchists at all. After the Gulf War, when they decided that anarchists should take a side against US imperialism and then interpreted that as calling for 'Victory to Iraq', they claimed it was almost impossible to get any anarchists to listen to them. To us it was also clear that, in London at least, they were no longer trying.

The lessons we drew from this sorry episode were influenced by the fact that we made many of the same mistakes in our early years and nearly met the same fate between 1986 and 1989. The first lesson is to make sure that people getting involved are not just