

Guilty by Association

Turmoil on the Left

Anarchist Communist Federation

1996

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The ACF has always argued that the Labour Party is little more than an expression of the interests of a faction of the ruling class. With the launching of New Labour this is now more evident than ever. Various sections of the Left are now re-aligning in attempts to fill the political void – i.e. to claim to speak for the working class and to win our votes. Last Organise! featured analysis of Arthur Scargill's new baby, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), which is still rooted in the old fashioned belief that socialist trade unionism, with the appropriate political support, can turn things around for the working class. In response, new initiatives by Militant, Workers Revolutionary Party Workers Press and others concentrate on political manoeuvring to win over the class.

However, one of the new groupings is of special interest to anarchist communists, because its political orientation and structure appears to reflect many of our own priorities. The Independent Working Class Association (IWCA) is an alliance of individual activists and sponsor groups (mainly political organisations). It says that it is for working class self-activity, that it will expose redundant Labourism and workplace based politics, and that it is in favour of a 'bottom up' structure in which all its members can participate equally. Is this an organisation which we should be joining? After all, one of the organisations which founded it, Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), has already shown itself willing and able to defeat the racist class enemy on the streets – surely an indication that the IWCA is not all mouth and bureaucracy like most of the Left. The other main founder of the IWCA is Red Action (RA). They split from the party hacks in the Socialist Workers Party in order to pursue pro-working class politics. Unlike most of the Left they also recognise that the potential power base of the class no longer lies solely in the workplace but, arguably, predominantly in the community.

Unholy Alliance

But there are real problems with the IWCA. The most obvious of these is its lack of a political programme. It sees this as a positive virtue in that it will prevent it being dominated politically by any one group. But what good is a political organisation without a basic programme or a set of aims and principles? Without these, it is merely a protest group. In reality, the lack of political discussion conceals the fact that the unholy alliance of groups which comprise the IWCA will be incapable of working together on any long term basis. Genuine working class activists who are opposed to party politics, capitalism and the state will surely grow disillusioned with putting time and energy into working with most of them. Most of the sponsors are Leninist opportunists who will use the IWCA as a recruiting ground. For example, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), are orthodox Leninists who will not tolerate anything which conflicts with their own party organisation, and will join any faction under the sun if it means they can recruit. Open Polemic an internal faction of the CPGB, and Partisan are also ex-Communist Party Leninists. The Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), will no doubt be arguing that the IWCA support the Cuban 'social revolution'!

Anti-Fascist Action

AFA's declared reason for its involvement is in order to be able to offer a practical alternative to many working class people who may vote for the fascist British National Party (BNP) because

they feel betrayed by Labour (rather than because they are inherently racist). In the past AFA, in order to preserve unity and effectiveness, was a single issue anti-fascist organisation, but its paper Fighting Talk is now stating its need for a politically Leftist agenda, which it hopes the IWCA will provide. But to tell working class people that voting for some minority Left candidate in opposition to Labour and the BNP will improve the shit in which they live, is only to play the state's game. AFA aren't doing this for the cynical reasons for which politicians and the rest of the Left do it, to build their party's power base, they are doing it to stop fascist candidates getting in at election time. But it is a diversion from where many in AFA know the real fight lies.

Whatever the working class credentials of Red Action, they represent a vanguardist tendency which is common to most Left groupings. Whereas Anarchist Communists emphasise the need for working class 'self-organisation', RA emphasise the need for 'an organisation' to represent the working class. They are unconditionally pro-Republican on the Irish question, a position anarchists do not consider either anti-capitalist or pro-working class. Yet, in their aims and principles they extol the virtues of working class self activity. This phrase also features heavily in IWCA literature, but so does the rather dubious assertion that working class militants, on joining, would form the bridgehead between the IWCA as a political opposition within the Left and the working class proper. RA and the IWCA, it would seem, view 'the organisation' as something outside the working class. So is the class to be active on its own behalf? Or is it to be represented by militants acting within already established political boundaries?

In truth, the IWCA concept of self-activity is a far cry from the anarchist communist one. Although the IWCA does not actually define the sort of society it wishes to create, we can assume that RA will assert their own view of a workers paradise which, they state, is democratic authority, not the abolition of authority. And RA are also correct in saying that this most perfect democracy would be regarded by anarchists as authoritarian. In the absence of a political programme, the IWCA cannot blame us for looking at the agendas of its component parts for an idea of what kinds of politics it will eventually adopt, and it looks like this will be a variety of militant, activist, born-again (non-Trotskyist) Leninism.

Political Party

The IWCA's 'bottom up' structure is designed, whether cynically or naively, so that once the organisation picks up more individual members than political sponsors, policy will be determined by democratic process. That is to say, whichever tendency, party or faction in the IWCA can get most members to a meeting will get their way, whether or not their ideas are best. This is what is wrong with democracy. Organisations like the ACF have long ago recognised this, but the IWCA states unashamedly that the groups and individuals who work hardest will have the greatest influence. In the longer term then, when it does get some political content, the IWCA will begin to adopt the same agenda as the biggest group within it. In time honoured fashion, the other groups will struggle for power and either the IWCA will split or smaller factions and numerous disillusioned individuals will leave. It will then be a political party. It is not at all certain the IWCA structure has been adopted with party building in mind. Very possibly the founders believe their claim that this structure...is not designed for the sponsors, but to limit the influence of the sponsors. But in its vague desire to create a new structure for working class political organisation,

and in pig-headedly ignoring anarchist critiques and models for organisation, the IWCA structure is open to abuse by majority views.

In the short term, before any group is able to dominate, political debate is being ditched in favour of activism. The IWCA emphasises that it will be an organisation of activists. But what will these activists do? All the emphasis so far is on building the organisation. Internal literature stresses the need to publicise the organisation at every meeting no matter how vaguely relevant, in order to recruit and to raise money, emphasising that membership is without precondition. Does this mean that we can expect frantic interventions from the IWCA in campaigns like the anti-Job Seekers Allowance, as this organisation without a political programme of its own attempts to set our agenda (as its literature says it aims to do)?

Hostile to Labour?

Then there is the issue of IWCA attempts to get the sponsorship of Anarchist and Syndicalist organisations. Are the IWCA seriously interested in attracting groups whom it knows will oppose their flawed structure, their lack of a political direction and the 'hidden' politics which will eventually emerge? Anarchists were invited to the initial IWCA meeting and went along curious and open-minded. Seeing what sort of political forces were involved and realising the lack of potential for anything new or positive for revolutionaries, the ACF has since had nothing to do with the project. The Solidarity Federation (anarcho-syndicalists) appear to have distanced themselves, whilst the Class War Federation appears divided, at least one local group affiliating, with others taking a hostile stance. The whole episode looks rather as though the IWCA was trying to appear non-sectarian, and to label anarchists as sectarian. Bearing in mind the attacks on anarchism which regularly appear in the pages of Red Action, being out numbered by libertarian socialists in the IWCA was probably the last thing they wanted, not least because the presence of anarchist organisations would expose the lie that the IWCA is distinct from anything that exists in Britain now or in the recent past — a working class organisation not only independent, but hostile to Labour.

Hilarious Chaos

The political parties and organisations who comprise the majority of the membership of the IWCA are too small themselves to have much influence on the Left, and they hope to change this first by joining and then by dominating a new organisation. In truth, they will probably either be discredited or lose their momentum in the face of the other new and revived groupings which are emerging. They are already completely overshadowed by the SLP and by various initiatives of Militant in England and Scotland (the Socialist Alliances). The IWCA is presumably planning to spring into public life around election time, when the working class will thrill to the hilarious chaos which will ensue when various Left groups try to work out their electoral strategy — not least regarding what policy to adopt regarding each other's candidates in marginal seats! What a spectacle!

It remains to be seen whether the IWCA, if they last that long, will be advocating the electoral system as a means to create a constituency within the working class. For our part, we think that

the future lies not within the ballot box, which is always a diversion, but in the potential for working class self-organisation in both workplace and neighbourhood.

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