Anarchist Communist Federation
In The Tradition
Where Our Politics Comes From
1996

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This pamphlet comprises articles in the series “In the Tradition” that first appeared in *Organise*, the magazine of the Anarchist Federation between 1999 and 2004. It also includes, as an introduction, “the ACF: the first ten years” which originally appeared in *Organise* 42 in 1996 when the AF was still known as the Anarchist Communist Federation.

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# In The Tradition

## Where Our Politics Comes From

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# Contents

have been inspirational and we have learned most from the activity of (extra)ordinary people trying to understand and change their world.

The Anarchist Federation accepts no guru, no theoretical God or master. We think no libertarian group or individual should. But we reject anti-intellectualism and ahistorical approaches, both of which are far too common amongst anarchists. Neither do we favour an eclecticism that simply borrows from here and there without critical appreciation. We hope that readers will seek out for themselves the thinkers, groups and movements that we have talked about. We hope that readers will take the time to contact us, demanding to know why we haven't covered x, y and z! So many important events and theories haven't made it into the parts, perhaps we should have started work on a book several years ago!

But, in a period such as our own, when libertarian revolutionary movements are growing in areas where they had never existed until the last 20 years, then the need for an engagement with where we have been is central to any understanding of where we are going in the future. We hope that In the Tradition has made a small contribution to making that engagement possible.

THE END (for now!).

which attempted to co-ordinate activity in their sectors. These Committees were constantly having to out manoeuvre the various established trade unions, themselves competing for recognition and advantage. Wildcat strikes involving lorry drivers, nurses and care workers, brought thousands of self-organised workers out. When these struggles died down, some following more success than others, the independent Committees tended not to establish themselves, as in Italy, as permanent structures. Many of those involved in these strikes in 1990–1992 were subsequently involved in the mass strike wave of the Hot Autumn of 1995. Public sector workers responded to proposed attacks upon social security, pensions and the public budget with a series of strikes, mass demonstrations and occupations. With echoes of 1968 (see In The Tradition part 3), at times this took on an almost insurrectional character with pitched battles between coal miners and police, the occupation of public buildings and barricades rising in towns and cities across the country. Eventually, with union help, the most active groups of workers, such as the rail workers, were isolated and the struggles petered out.

What such events point to is that even in a period where the ruling class seems to have extinguished the spirit of revolt and any vision of a better world, the basic contradictions of capitalism create resistance. Likewise, the stranglehold of bureaucrats and officials is challenged by the innate creativity of the mass of working people, time and time again.

## In the tradition?

The In the Tradition series has attempted to draw the very briefest outline of the ideas, people and events that have influenced the development of the modern libertarian communist movement. Most of the events have allowed us insights into how people attempt to practically solve the problems of organisation and struggle. Many

were used in different industries and regions, the movement became known as the COBAS movement (from Committees of the Base) and used mass assemblies, recallable delegates and militant tactics to conduct their struggles. The political complexion of the movement was diverse and included various elements from the old Workers Autonomy movement of the 1970s, as well as Trotskyists, anarchists and others. Mostly its strength lay in mobilising those workers who were fed-up with the response of the established unions to attacks upon their sectors.

Although the COBAS movement was a positive example of self-organisation, it suffered from sectionalism and the desire o some of its activists to become a new trade union, a little more left and a little less bureaucratic than the traditional ones. In February 1991 the COBAS, alongside the anarcho-syndicalist union, the USI, organised a self-managed general strike against the Gulf War, which involved 200,000 people. This initiative brought more people out far more than the combined membership of the committees and USI put together.

A year later a formal organisation, the CUB (United rank and file confederation) was established, uniting workers across various sectors. This 'alternative' union is today one of several in Italy, including the UniCobas, which has an explicitly libertarian perspective. These organisations have developed their own bureaucratic practices and operate somewhere between a political group, a trade union and their original role as a tool of liaison and co- ordinated struggle.

## France: echoes of 1968?

In France during the early 1990s a similar development took place as workers in the health service, transport workers, posties, workers in the car industry, the airports and elsewhere began to self-organise. They established independent Liaison Committees



# ACF: the first ten years

THE SHIPWRECK OF anarchist communism in the late 70s meant that there was no anarchist communist organisation, not even a skeletal one, that could relate to the riots of 1981 and to the miners strike of 1984–5 as well as to mobilisations like the Stop the City actions of 1984. But in autumn 1984 two comrades, one a veteran of the ORA/AWA/LCG, had returned from France where they had been living and working and where they had been involved in the libertarian communist movement. A decision was made to set up the Libertarian Communist Discussion Group (LCDG) with the aim of creating a specific organisation. Copies of the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, left over from the AWA/LCG days, were distributed to bookshops, with a contact address for the Anarchist-Communist Discussion Group (ACDG). Progress was slow, until contact with the comrade who produced Virus, a duplicated magazine that defined itself as "Anarcho-socialist". This comrade had broken with the politics of the SWP and rapidly moved in an anarchist direction. Apart from its sense of humour, Virus was defined to a certain extent by its critiques of Leninism and of Marxism-not surprising considering the comrade's past experiences. From issue 5 Virus became the mouthpiece of the LCDG, and there were a series of articles on libertarian organisation. Other people were attracted to the group, and it transformed itself into the ACDG, which proclaimed a long-term aim of setting up a national anarchist-communist organisation. This came much sooner than expected, with the growth of the group, and a splinter from the Direct Action Movement, Syndicalist Fight, merging with the group. In March 1986

the Anarchist Communist Federation was officially founded, with an agreed set of aims and principles and constitutional structure that had been developed in the previous six months.

## Vacuum

Those anarchists who founded the ACF felt that there was a vacuum in the movement not filled by either the Direct Action Movement (DAM) or Class War. The objections to anarcho-syndicalism which would become more defined in the following years, precluded us joining DAM. Whilst we welcomed the imaginative approach of Class War, we saw that they lacked a strategy for the construction of a coherent national organisation and for the development of theory.

The development of the politics of the ACF is dealt with to a great extent in the accompanying article on *Organise!* What should be remarked upon is the quantum leap that the ACF made in its critique of the unions. A critique of anarcho-syndicalism was deepened and strengthened. At the same time the ACF broke with the ideas of rank-and- filism which had characterised the ORA/AWA/LCG period, as well as any false notions about national liberation and self-determination. That this was achieved, and achieved on a collective level, seems to have surprised some of our critics. For them, any development of politics must involve vicious infighting and splits, accustomed as they are to Bolshevik ways of functioning. That this was achieved without such a split points to the increasing political maturity of the ACF. The overall theoretical development of the ACF was light years ahead of most articles produced in the previous period. This is vitally important. For Anarchist-communism to survive it must develop both its theory and practice. In this respect the ACF has made important steps forward.

Unlike the previous organisations, the ACF has maintained a certain stability. It has survived the last ten years in times of great po-



class, "Give up now!". As no wave of resistance to the new reign of free market economics seemed to be forthcoming from the working class of the former Soviet Bloc, the early nineties looked bleak.

## The return of working class self-organisation

The defeat of the miners strike was an enormous blow to working class confidence. The subsequent unsuccessful struggles in British industry such as those of the print workers at Warrington and Wapping, along with the general run-down of manufacturing, left many feeling despondent. The community based struggle against the Poll Tax in the late 1980s-early 1990s, whilst inspiring, did not signal the beginnings of a new working class combativity. By 1996, the Liverpool Dockers' fight appeared like a struggle from another era. And, despite the efforts o the Dockers to internationalise the struggle and to seek new allies in the direct action oriented movements such as Reclaim the Streets, the dead hand of the Transport and General Workers Union ensured defeat.

## Autonomous struggle?

In parts of Europe during the period of 1986 until the mid-nineties, new developments in the class struggle were taking place. As everywhere, working class living conditions were under attack and as everywhere, the Trade Unions were desperately trying to maintain their negotiating positions and to control any autonomous struggle.

In Italy, self-organised co-ordinations of workers began to emerge during 1985, particularly amongst teachers, railway workers and metalworkers. These co- ordinations were outside the existing union and, where the traditional unions existed, quickly entered into conflict with them. Although different names

tic, but coherent approach, embracing "…an unbroken tradition of struggle". This tradition included the Diggers of the English Civil War, William Morris and the Marxist Rosa Luxemburg. It called for a "Green and libertarian critique of Marxism" and understood that "The war against the planet is a class war". Green Revolution was caught revolutionary potential in social ecology.

## The collapse of 'communism'

The end of 'existing socialism' with the death of the Soviet Union and the other state capitalist dictatorships was welcomed by libertarian communists, not least those few who lived in those countries. Hopes were artificially high that the possibility of a new working class movement for a self- managed socialism would emerge, somehow, from the wreckage of these societies. But, although a blossoming of libertarian and anti-capitalist groups, newspapers etc. was almost immediate, the reality was that, instability, ethnic conflict and massive attacks upon working class living conditions were the norm across the former 'Socialist' states as private capitalism arrived.

For the Stalinist left across the world the 'collapse of communism' created crisis and deepened schisms. But the Trotskyist left also felt the effects. The Workers States, however degenerated or deformed, were for them still examples of non-capitalist societies. Their collapse left them in an awkward situation.

For those who considered these so-called Workers States as variants of capitalist societies, however, their demise also had a strangely negative impact. Certainly we had no illusion that our God had failed, but the relentless trumpeting of the 'End of Communism' and by extension, of all collective solutions to the problems posed by capitalism, by the bourgeoisie was demoralising. "Look at what happens when you have a revolution. Dictatorship and unfreedom inevitably follows!" harped the ruling



litical inactivity (Despite high points of struggle like the anti-Poll Tax movement). The number of militants fully committed to the organisation have increased and the ACF has a much more stable base than it had at its foundation.

The ACF has also developed its politics through the collective preparation of a Manifesto and Programme which will be published this year. The ACF has analysed the changes in capitalism and developed a strategy which it believes can be of use in helping recreate a revolutionary movement.

The analyses developed in the pages of *Organise!* and within the ACF in general have had their effect on what passes for a revolutionary movement in Britain. The organisational moves that Class War instigated (turning itself from a paper group into an organisation) were influenced to a great extent by the strong arguments for the construction of revolutionary libertarian organisations within the pages of *Virus* Similarly the Aims and Principles of both the Scottish Anarchist Federation and the Tyneside Anarchist Group were influenced to an extent by the politics of the ACF.

## Strong contribution

The ACF has made a strong contribution, along with that of other groups and organisations, to the re-establishment of class struggle anarchism in this country. This is part of a long-term process dating back to the 70s, when the struggle began to reclaim the movement from those who opposed any talk of class analysis, (and for that matter of revolution itself) and offered various versions of pacifism, liberalism, individualism, and gradualism. Whilst these elements still exist, those who call themselves class struggle anarchists has increased considerably. This of course cannot just be put down to the theoretical illuminations of one or several groups, but to the stark reality of the ruling class attack in the last 20 years.

So much for some of the positive points of the ACF experience. What of the negative points of the ACF balance-sheet?

The ACF remains a comparatively small organisation. Its desire to create or be the component of a large revolutionary organisation and movement has failed to happen. Many are put off joining a group where a strong commitment and a lot of determination are required. Many libertarian revolutionaries are as yet unconvinced of the need to create a specific libertarian communist organisation. They remain tied to the ideas of local groups, or at best regional federations loosely linked, being adequate for the very difficult tasks of introducing libertarian revolutionary ideas and practices to the mass of the population. They remain unconvinced of the need for a unified strategy and practice, for ideological and tactical unity and collective action as we in the ACF have insisted upon consistently. Some remain mesmerised by the myths of nationalism and national liberation, some by illusions in the unions. They seem to be unconvinced for the need for a publication, distributed throughout Britain, under the control of its writers and sellers which could be an effective weapon in the fight to develop the anarchist movement. Of course some local groups or regional federations produce some fine publications, and we in the ACF would encourage the proliferation of all sorts of propaganda and discussion publications, whether they might be based on a town, a district, a workplace or industry, or aimed at a particular interest group. But alongside this must be a publication that addresses itself and responds to the needs and problems of the working class as a whole on a Britain-wide basis.

As we noted in Virus 9, in late 1986-early 1987 :"There has been little sharing of experiences among libertarians in various campaigns and struggles. Even on something as basic as a demonstration, libertarians have marched separately and in different parts of the demonstration". This still remains true today, despite several attempts by the ACF over the years to encourage coordinations, and even (still) on basic things like a united contingent on a demo.



*"In utopia man no more returns to his ancestral immediacy with nature than anarcho-communism returns to primitive communism. Whether now or in the future, human relationships with nature are mediated by science, technology and knowledge. But whether science, technology and knowledge will improve nature to its own benefit will depend upon man's ability to improve his social condition. Either revolution will create an ecological society, with new ecotechnologies and ecocommunities, or humanity and the natural world as we know it today will perish." (Post-scarcity anarchism, 1970).*

Bookchin's vision of a massively decentralised, stateless and classless society which rationally utilises technology in order to both save the planet and to save humanity remains a minority current within mainstream green thought and organisation. On the on hand, reformist green parties and pressure groups remain entirely within the camp of a kinder, gentler capitalism, whilst on the other Primitivist and post-primitivist groups prefer to rage against civilisation itself whilst following an equally reformist trajectory.

There is much to criticise in Bookchin's arguments. His rejection of the working class as motor force of revolutionary transformation, his support for a 'libertarian municipalism' which tends to equate to electoralism etc. But his arguments on the need for a liberatory technology and an anti-hierarchical praxis have certainly influenced the Anarchist Federation and even some of his ostensible critics in the ecological resistance.

## Green revolution

In the early 1990s, much of the cross fertilization between libertarian communist and green thought found organisational form in Britain with the journal Green Revolution: a revolutionary newspaper working for ecological survival, human liberation and direct action. Though short-lived, Green Revolution attempted an eclec-

address issues of environment and human scale economics, much of the productivism and technophilia of capitalist ideology was shared by early socialists, anarchists included.

This failure to address the alienating and environment destroying nature of unfettered economic 'progress' was evident in the brutal industrialisation of the so- called socialist nations. The supporters of the Soviet Union and its satellites sang the praises of the latest super-dam or the newest tractor production figures. But it was reflective of the lack of environmental awareness generally, that many of those who saw the 'existing socialist' nations for what they were, namely state capitalist dictatorships, failed to recognise the grotesque nature of the productivist ideology they reflected.

## Social ecology

A revolutionary anti-capitalist understanding of green politics was slow in developing. 'Ecology' was equated with the 'conservationism' of the past which more often than not, hankered after a pre-industrial golden age and hid a reactionary agenda. It was not until the work of Murray Bookchin, and his book 'Our Synthetic Environment' (1962) that a social ecology would begin to emerge based upon a revolutionary humanism. This perspective was most forcefully argued in the 1982 work 'The Ecology of Freedom'.

At the centre of social ecology was the realisation that the productivist nature of capitalism was wrapped up in hierarchical social relations as much as in the need for capital to constantly expand. So this productivism and the desire to dominate the earth are contained also within socialist ideologies, particularly Marxism which also defend hierarchical social relations. Even before the emergence of Primitivism or Deep Ecology, Bookchin realised the danger of an ecological understanding that was based upon a misanthropic, anti- humanist ideology.



Libertarians remain within their separate local groups and organisations. There is little dialogue and little attempt for united activity, for forums and debates where these are possible.

And yet not since the pre-World War 1 period and the late 60s has there been such a potential for the growth of the libertarian revolutionary movement. The collapse of Stalinism, the changes within social-democracy-including the British variety of Labourism- with the end of welfarism, and the effects of both of these on Trotskyism, have created a space which revolutionary anarchists must fill. That is why we will continue to argue for a specific, unified libertarian communist organisation, for coordination and dialogue between libertarian revolutionaries, for a revolutionary programme. We will continue to argue for these with determination. One of the points we have always made is that an Anarchist movement cannot be built overnight, through bluster, hype or stunts. Steady, consistent work carried out with patience and dogged determination, unglamourous and not readily rewarding as it may seem, is what a movement is built on. And we think that such an approach will eventually pay off.

Our friends, critics and enemies should all take note. We do not intend to go away. We will continue to work towards the greatest idea humanity has ever thought and dreamed of. For us the vision of Anarchist Communism, in which all are free and equal and live in harmony with each other and with nature, is something worth fighting for. It continues to be an inspiration for us, a lighthouse in the darkness of the human night. We will continue to hold aloft proudly the red and black banner of Anarchist Communism.

Stand with us! Join us!

# From 1st international & up to Spanish Revolution

## Theoretical understanding

This article is neither a family tree nor a systematic overview of revolutionary politics over the last 150 years, but rather an attempt to give recognition to those who have contributed to our political understanding. An authentic revolutionary theory is always in a state of development, building upon what has gone before it and trying to make a contribution to a core of ideas and practice which remains at the very centre of any revolutionary project. Theory, our understanding of the world, hasn't evolved in a straight line, but has rather developed in fits and starts relative to the class struggle itself. Often lessons learned appear to be 'lost' and then 'found' again years later. Revolutionaries appear to have sometimes spent time repeatedly re-inventing the wheel. Events in one country may remain almost unknown in others for linguistic and other reasons. Groups and individuals may be approaching similar conclusions from different starting points, unaware of each other's efforts. Ideological animosities often with barely rational bases may mean such efforts never benefit from the cross-pollination of ideas.

The ACF emerged in 1985/86 (as the Libertarian Communist Discussion Group) as an attempt to remedy the lack of coherent class politics and organisation amongst British anarchists. Beyond that objective the ACF had to defend an undogmatic approach, whilst rejecting a haphazard eclecticism which would guarantee political paralysis.



dynamic, inevitably led to an inconsistency in political line with regard to fundamentals such as the nature of the trade unions and national liberation struggles.

After a decade of trying to extricate itself from what it described as the "anarchist ghetto" the Class War Federation eventually dissolved itself after a final edition of the paper styled 'An open letter to the revolutionary movement' where they stated that "After almost 15 years of sometimes intense and frantic activity, Class War is still tiny in number and, as far as many in the organisation are concerned, going nowhere". A small rump of militants continued the organisation, which decided to describe itself as explicitly anarchist communist, though maintaining a populist and increasingly counter-cultural perspective.

But no discussion of international libertarian thought in the last 20 years can ignore the legacy of Class War. Class War, which in part at least was inspired by the experience of punk in the 1970s, breathed new life into the anarchist body-politic and brought a fresh, fiercely combative vision of revolutionary politics. This vision, which burned brightly for a short time, influenced many young working class militants, new to politics. Their irreverent approach shook up a complacent libertarian milieu. And, if nothing else, their emphasis on an antagonistic and emphatically class politics being central to libertarian revolution, helped return anarchism to its working class roots.

## A different direction?

If a group like Class War distinguished itself in its emphasis on class, then other libertarian currents were developing ideas which appeared to be moving in a different direction, that of prioritising the struggle against the environmental destruction of the planet.

Although libertarians such as Peter Kropotkin, Edward Carpenter and William Morris, were amongst the first people anywhere to

London. Annoyed and frustrated with what they saw as the clear lack of dynamism and general irrelevance of the anarchist 'scene' in Britain at the period, they adopted a populist and highly activist approach. The emergence of this group, which developed a nominally national federal structure in 1986, sent a shock wave through the anarchist 'scene', which at that time, with rare exception, was under the influence of pacifism, moralistic exclusivist lifestyle 'politics' and/or individualism.

Class War, not surprisingly, emphasised a populist version of class struggle anarchism, promoting working class combativity, focussing on community rather than workplace struggles. Their practical activity in the first years of their existence, other than the production and distribution of the newspaper, involved headline-grabbing heckling and public harassment of various (highly deserving)left figures. After a period of inventive, but inevitably less than successful 'stunts' such as the 'Bash the Rich' events, the new federation looked more seriously at their political development.

This period of intense discussion culminated in the production of a book titled 'Unfinished Business: the politics of Class War' (1992) which attempted to outline a new and distinct politics that distanced itself if not from the anarchist tradition, then at least from the present anarchist milieu. Simultaneously the book, somewhat unconvincingly, embraced a libertarian take on Marxism. Although a considerable section of Class War rejected much of the Unfinished Business thesis, the book itself was at least a serious attempt to both renovate libertarian thought and to address the issue of class at the end of the 20th century. In doing so it borrowed heavily from the politics of the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists (see part 2 of In the Tradition).

Regardless of the book, the actual Class War Federation, however, continued to be a synthesis of Platformist anarchism, autonomist Marxism, council communism and various other tendencies, all painted in populist colours. This created an ongoing tension in the organisation, which, though it contained a certain



## The First International

"The emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself"

This motto of the IWMA, probably penned by Karl Marx, defined the difference between the revolutionaries who viewed the working class to be the agent of revolutionary change (Marx, Bakunin) and those who saw the liberation of the working class as the task of other forces (The Utopian Socialists, Proudhonists and the Blanquists). The division in the International between the 'communists' (the Marxists) and the revolutionary socialists (anarchists) created two 'wings' of socialism. The vast majority of Marxists (social democrats, Leninists) have paid lip service to the motto of the First International whilst acting to negate it in practice. Despite all manners of confusions, tactical dead-ends and betrayals, the revolutionary anarchists have remained loyal to it.

## The Anarchist Communists

No AF bookstall is complete without at least a few of the classics of what might be termed traditional anarchist communist thought.

Although Bakunin,unable to envisage a communism without the state, had been a collectivist and had defended a form of exchange economy, by the 1880s the anarchist movement had rejected Proudhonistic economics in favour of communism. Peter Kropotkin is rightly considered the leading exponent of anarchist communism either side of the turn of the 19th Century and his book, The Conquest of bread (1888) is generally regarded as the most cogent work of insurrectionary, anarchist communism. Kropotkin argued that any revolution which failed to immediately communise social relations, expropriate the bourgeoisie and abolish the wages system was bound to recreate a form of private property based, exploitative society. The anarchist communists attacked the notion of a

transitional period characterised by the continuation of the money system, even if cash had been replaced by labour vouchers or other tokens. Unlike the social democratic movement, for whom the continuation of wage labour, under state control, was considered a central feature of 'socialism', the anarchist communists argued for a society based upon the idea of 'From each according to ability, to each according to need'.

## The International movement

Anarchist communism had its partisans in most parts of the world. It would be impossible to list even a fraction of who made an important contribution to the early theory and movement but notable are Carlo Cafiero, Sebastien Faure, Ricardo Flores Magon and Kotoku Shusui. Within the movement there existed various tactical differences. At a deeper level there were divisions between pro-organisation currents, such as those around the former social democrat MP Johann Most and Errico Malatesta and anti-organisation currents, such as those around Luigi Galleani. On the question of trade unionism and syndicalism there were also divisions. Although a majority of anarchist communists supported, critically or otherwise, the syndicalist movement, the early critics of any identification of anarchism with syndicalism, such as Malatesta, had a profound influence upon the early ACF as we looked at anarchist criticisms of trade unionism. Indeed, Malatesta's pragmatic anarchism has been important to the AF in many areas.

## The Socialist League

The domination of reformist social democracy in the labour movement wasn't only challenged by anarchists. In many countries anti-parliamentarist oppositions developed and in Britain a section of



the bureaucrats to show a lead, or to workers to "come through the experience" of demanding the impossible from that bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, rank and file NUM members, their families, friends and supporters were organising Hit Squads to target scabs and their supporters and to defend their communities. The traditions of Trade Union practice still held most miners back from attempting to reach out to other sectors of the working class directly, not via the bureaucracies of the official union structures. This widening of the struggle would not have guaranteed victory, but its failure to emerge condemned the struggle to defeat.

## The anarchist response

The anarchist and libertarian communist movement responded to the strike in fractured way, reflecting the fractured nature of that movement.

Although libertarians added to the numbers on picket lines, at demonstrations and in general support work, there was little co-ordinated activity and a very limited amount of serious analysis. Small collectives such as the London Workers Group (an open group of councillists, anarchists, autonomists etc.) the Wildcat group in Manchester and Careless Talk group in Staffordshire were amongst a minority who attempted to address the issues (such as the need to criticise the NUM and the need for the struggle to be spread by workers themselves) that were being ignored elsewhere.

## Class War

One group, which emerged during the Miners Strike, and which was to subsequently have a considerable impact upon the libertarian movement in Britain and beyond, was Class War. The Class War group and its eponymous tabloid-style newspaper had its origin amongst working class anarchists living in South Wales and

# Miners' Strike, Class War, Social Ecology & Greens, COBAS

This, the final part of the In the Tradition series, looks at developments in international libertarian thought and struggle over the last 20 or so years.

We finished part Four with a brief look at the Miners Strike of 1984–1985 and the impact this brutal struggle had upon the revolutionary movement. The strike showed the combatitivity, the fierce intelligence and the practical capability of an historic section of the working class, the mineworkers and their friends and families. It also showed the severe limitations of trade unionism and of the left and the weakness of the revolutionary libertarian movement.

## Demanding the impossible?

The leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers repeatedly called for solidarity action from other union leaderships, to, inevitably, no avail.

Sections of the Leninist left either called for increases in mass picketing (SWP) or for the Trades Union Congress to call a General Strike (Militant, WRP). The former 'tactic' was shown to be, on its own, a dead end at Orgreave where the massed miners were battered and dispersed in cossack style by mounted police. The second tactic was merely reflective of the bankruptcy of Trotskyism, most of whose partisans could think no further than calling upon



the Socialist League, a split from the Social Democratic Federation defended an anti-statist communist position, rejecting equally the policy of nationalisation put forward by social democracy. They condemned "State socialism, by whatever name it is called, whose aim it would be to make concessions to the working class while leaving the present system of capital and wages still in operation." Manifesto of the Socialist League 1885.

The Anti-statist communists, who included William Morris and Joseph Lane, were amongst the earliest critics of trade unionism, which they likened to the grease that oils the 'machine of exploitation'. In his 'anti-statist communist manifesto' of 1887 Lane described the trade unions as "becoming little better than benefit societies…" and rejected the campaign for the 8 hour day as a 'palliative measure'. For the likes of Morris, socialism or communism wasn't about shorter working hours, welfare relief or better wages, but was about creating the conditions in which people could live differently. The desire to live differently is central to, for example, our Manifesto for the Millennium.

## The Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolutions, February and October 1917, shook the world and sparked a wave of struggles across the globe. These events were inspirational to the working class and to anarchists and socialists who had opposed the slaughter of the 'Great War'. The soviets (councils) and the factory committees, which emerged as organs of working class power in the workplace and in society as a whole, represented a break with parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy. The Bolshevik seizure of power, which had the tacit support of the most active working class militants, quickly revealed itself as an usurpation of power from the working class and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' emerged as actually a dictator-

ship over the proletariat as the Bolshevik government developed capitalism in Russia.

The opposition to the usurpation of power wasn't long in coming from the workers and from revolutionaries, including some within the Bolshevik party itself. The factory committees which workers has organised to run industry co-ordinated resistance and advocated 'workers control' against the introduction of 'one-man management'. The workers hoped to keep decision making at the grassroots level. Whilst not the same as communisation, these attempts at workers self-management were, at least examples of self-activity and attempts at establishing autonomous working class organisation against the state and the imposition of one-man management as advocated by Lenin.

## The anarchists

The Russian anarcho-syndicalists attacked the bureaucratisation of the revolutionary process begun in February 1917, calling for the "immediate abolition of the state capitalist system and its replacement by a socialist system on anarchist communist lines". Considering the trade unions (which were dominated by Menshevik social democrats and Bolsheviks) "dead organisations" they described the factory committees as the "fighting organisational form of the entire workers' movement" upon whose shoulders "the revolution has placed the task of reconstructing economic life along communist lines". Programme of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Conference, Moscow August 1918.

Earlier that year within the Bolshevik Party, the so-called 'Left' communists, criticised the policy of the party which smothered the initiative of the workers saying "socialism and the socialist organisation of work will either be built by the proletariat itself, or it will not be built at all; but then something else will be erected, namely state capitalism." Kommunist No.2, April 1918.



Wildcat, based mainly in the North West of England, was amongst a very few currents that actually attempted to creatively advance communist political theory in the 1980s.

## Democracy

People involved with Wildcat and Workers Playtime, a left communist journal in London, amongst others, were involved in discussions on the nature of democracy and the fetishization of decision-making processes. Of course, communists have always rejected representative democracy in its classical liberal democratic-parliamentarian form, but now the content, not just the form of democracy was being questioned. Sometimes this took a consciously vanguardist tone, but besides the rhetoric there were serious questions raised about the need for working class militants to push ahead with action, regardless of the outcome of ballots, shows of hands etc. These questions were, partially at least, emerging because of the practical struggles that were taking place in the British coalfields during the 1984–85 miners strike. The capitalist media and sections of the left and far left were insisting that the National Union of Mineworkers should have held a ballot in order to have brought into the strike thousands of scabbing Nottinghamshire miners.

Communists began to talk of a need for the revolutionary minorities of the working class to, when necessary, to ignore 'majority' decisions and to find ways of organising in an egalitarian way without fetishising the atomising nature of democratic decision-making. These ideas were really a reflection of how workers in struggle (particularly the Hit Squads of the Miners Strike) have to operate in order to be effective.

The serial is concluded next issue with developments in international libertarian thought & struggle over the last 20 years or so.

ganisation signified a break with the chaotic synthesist approach to anarchism hitherto employed in post- war Britain, much of its politics seemed to echo the Trotskyist left. Eventually a large part of the organisation ended up joining the Trotskyist camp itself. Subsequent Platformist-orientated anarcho-communist groups, such as the Anarchist Workers Association (AWA) and the short-lived Libertarian Communist Group also displayed Leninist and reformist tendencies that would eventually see their abandoning libertarian politics. But the legacy of these groups was important for two reasons. One, they had, prior to their degeneration, established a bridgehead against the dominant tendencies within British anarchism, notably individualism and anti-organisationalism. And secondly they showed later militants how not to create consistently revolutionary organisations (a lesson unfortunately lost upon the Anarchist Workers Group of the 1980s/90s.).

Around the same period of the mid to late 1970s other tendencies also began to emerge, notably from an unlikely source the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB). This party, celebrating its centenary in 2004, defends a particular, and indeed consistent, version of Marxism that refuses any compromise with 'reformism' or struggles around bread and butter issues, instead organising to 'make socialists' through propaganda and to contest elections. Some younger members within the SPGB had begun to question the timeless orthodoxies of the party. These critical elements began to come together in a discussion circle which quickly realised that the way forward did not lie within the monolithic atmosphere of the party.

In the mid seventies this faction found itself outside the party. Calling itself 'Libertarian Communism' it attempted to re-assess much of the politics outlined in "In The Tradition" parts 1–3 whilst remaining in the framework of a Marxist analysis. After changing it's name to Social Revolution this group joined the libertarian socialist group Solidarity (see In the tradition pt.2), before embracing an unorthodox councilism in the early 1980s as the group Wildcat.



## The Makhnovist movement

In the Ukraine from 1918–1921 the imposition of state capitalism was resisted gun in hand by the Makhnovists, the Ukrainian Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army led by the anarchist communist Nestor Makhno. When not engaged in combat with the land owners, German adventurers, Ukrainian nationalists or the 'Red' army, the Makhnovists encouraged the establishment of voluntary "working" communes of peasants and workers. Although these, like the factory committees, were expressions of working class self-activity they were unable to attempt a total communisation of social relations prior to their destruction by the Bolsheviks. If socialism in one country is impossible, socialism in one region is likewise. Nonetheless, the Russian and Ukrainian revolutions remain an inspiration for us as they show the potentiality of working class self-organisation.

## The German Revolution and Council Communism

The German revolution (1918–23) saw repeated attempts by workers to set up organs of counter-power such as territorial councils and workplace committees. Communists and anarchists involved themselves in these class movements, trying to push them as far as they would go. The councils were, however, dominated in most areas by social democrats whose aim was to establish a (capitalist) republic and put themselves into power. Where things got out of control the 'socialists' had no hesitation in using the most reactionary militarist elements to murder the rebels and crush the incipient revolution.

The experience of the Russian and German councils led some revolutionaries to view workers councils as the highest expression of workers self-organisation. Most of these advocates of council revo-

lution had been on the extreme left of the social democratic parties of Germany and Holland (people like Otto Ruhle, a former social democrat MP) or in small groups in opposition to social democracy and to the world war (such as the International Communists of Germany (IKD)). Originally defining themselves as left communists, they were loyal to the Bolshevik revolution and the new Communist international but critical of the parliamentary and trade union policy of the Leninists. Against electoralism they pronounced "All power to the workers councils" and encouraged workers to abandon the trade unions and form 'industrial organisations' that would be explicitly anti-capitalist.

## Hard as Steel, Clear as Glass

The left communists, despite being in a majority, were expelled from the fledgling Communist Party in 1920 and founded their own Communist Workers Party, with around 40,000 members. The new party vowed to be "As hard as steel, as clear as glass", consisting of only the most resolute communists. Simultaneously, it rejected the idea of 'leadership politics', called for the dictatorship of the proletariat, not the party, and opposed the idea of 'injecting' consciousness into the working class from the outside. All of this earned Lenin's ire and his 'Left Wing Communism; An Infantile Disorder' spends much time attacking the left communists' "anarchist" deviations.

Some left communists, who after a definitive break with the Communist International, became known as council communists, rejected the idea of separate political and economic organisations and created a 'unitary' industrial organisation to parallel that of the Communist Workers Party. Others rejected anything but the loosest form of organisation and ended up being little more than individualists.



anything that moved including every 'national liberation' racket that emerged.

It is of little surprise then that many of the leading lights of the New Left were to re- appear in the last 35 years as thoroughly establishment figures, academics and media-gurus.

So, a balance sheet of the effect of the New Left shows that although it managed to bring up crucial questions, about what liberation must involve, which had remained marginal for many years, it was unable to give any answers.

## So what of the libertarians?

The events in France in 1968 (see In the Tradition pt.3) had given anarchist and other revolutionary movements both a big surprise and a great deal of attention. In the period of the early 1970s anarchist, libertarian Marxist, council and left communist group emerged across Europe in a wave of interest amongst young workers and students for methods of understanding and changing the world around them. The anarchist movement at this time had been at a particularly low ebb, having never recovered from the eclipse of the movement during the 1930s- 1940s. Certainly small currents still existed (see In the Tradition pt. 3) and some of these had attempted to renovate and bring forward new ideas. However, much of what passed for a movement was firmly embedded in a happier past and found it difficult to relate to the 'youth revolt' of the late 60s. In the French events of '68 the 'official' anarchists had played an essentially marginal role.

So, much re-inventing of the wheel took place in the early 1970s.

## British Platformism

1970 saw Britain's first Platformist group, with the forming of the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists (ORA). Although this or-

# New Left, Platformism, Wildcat

This, the fourth part of our look at the political theories and movements which have influenced our development, takes in the last 35 years. It has been a period of great worldwide change and a period where new ideas have emerged and old ones, seemingly eclipsed, have been rediscovered.

## The New Left

The 'New Left' which emerged in the 1960s attempted to distinguish itself from the old left of the established Communist parties, social democracy, Labourism and Stalinised socialism in general. It embraced the so-called 'Second wave' of feminism, sexual liberation and homosexual equality. Alongside antiracism, all these ideas seem mainstream today but to the old left even 40 years ago they were new and startling ideas. Certainly the notion of women's' liberation and of racial equality had been present since the birth of socialism, but rarely were they seen as central to the revolutionary project. Superficially, much of the New Left appeared genuinely libertarian, genuinely interested in a truly social revolution. In reality, much of the New Left was tied closely to either Leninism (quite often Maoist or Trotskyist) or to more openly reformist currents of thought. The New Left may have rejected the worst excesses of Stalinism but generally fell short of making any critique of top-down versions of socialism and in many ways copied the failed politics of the past, not least in their willingness to support



Most of the Council Communists considered themselves Marxists and many shared a common contempt for anarchism, considering it a 'petit-bourgeois' ideology. The German class struggle anarchists at this time were very strong, though often divided. After 1925, sections of the Council Communist movement worked together with the anarchists in 'anti-authoritarian blocs'.

The positive legacy of the left /Council Communists must be their theoretical breakthroughs in their analysis of the Trade Unions and parliamentary democracy and in their understanding of the centrality of working class self-organisation in the revolutionary project. Their negative legacy can be summed up in the fetishisation of the council form, at the expense of its actual content at any given time. This led to the ideology of 'councilism', which tended to see the councils as the answer to all problems, a mirror image of the Leninist fetishisation of the Party form. Despite their failings, the experience of the workers' councils and of Council Communist theory are very important for the subsequent development of revolutionary politics.

## The APCF

The 'British' contribution to the council communist tradition is mainly the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF), which from 1921 until the mid-1940s defended similar politics to those described above. The APCF, however, described itself as "anarcho-marxian" and attempted to utilise what it saw as the best in both 'traditions'.

During the inter-war years it was the most consistent amongst a small number of groups and individuals who defended a libertarian communist politics and was one of the few currents to oppose World War Two on revolutionary internationalist grounds, describing all the belligerent states, including the Soviet Union, as imperialist.

## The Platform

'There is no single humanity, there is a humanity, of classes, slaves and masters'. The 1926 Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists was without doubt the most remarkable contribution to anarchist politics and practice for perhaps a quarter of a century. Written by Piotr Arshinov, Nestor Makhno, Ida Mett and other revolutionary refugees from the Bolshevik regime, the Platform was uncompromising, coherent and tightly argued. It constituted a turning point in anarchism, a break with the anti-organisational tendencies, which had plagued the movement like a "yellow fever". The Platform argued that the anarchists had to be organised in order to carry out their task as the "organised vanguard" of the working class! Whilst the AF has never described itself as a Platformist organisation, the Platform has served to inoculate us from the "yellow fever" and we endorse its call for theoretical and tactical unity.

## Spanish Revolution

"There can be absolutely no common ground between exploiters and exploited which shall prevail, only battle can decide. Bourgeoisie or workers. Certainly not both of them at once". The Friends of Durruti, Barcelona, 1938.

The Spanish Civil War and revolution illuminated two facts. One, that apolitical anarchism is bound to fail. Two, that anti-fascism is used by part of the ruling class to unite the working class in defence of democratic capitalism.

The state of 'dual power' which existed following the early part of the Civil War between the revolutionary working class and peasantry and the Popular Front government in the Republic zone, inevitably gave way to the domination of the Republican-Stalinist-Social Democrat bourgeoisie. The opportunity to crush the republican and nationalist bourgeoisie was a real one for armed workers



## And in 'socialist' Poland...

The strikes and occupations were echoed in the proletarian insurgency in Poland in 1970–1, when workers responded to 'socialist' austerity measures with their very own May '68 (only in December and January!) burning down the ruling Stalinist party headquarters to the tune of the Internationale. In areas of the country the working class was effectively master of the situation. As in France, and indeed Italy, the working class balked at 'going the whole hog' but exhibited a need and desire to, if only temporarily, go beyond all forms of representation and to develop an *autonomous* activity. And all this without the leadership of the self-proclaimed vanguards...

The May-June events in France were the clearest confirmation that only a *mass social revolution* which stretched to every sector of exploited humanity could end the chaos of capitalism.

to. Workers were taking their struggles on to the streets, using imaginative direct actions. Occupations of city centres and sieges of municipal buildings continued throughout the 1970s.

## Restructuring

Struggles in Italy also took place around the prisons, which from the early 1970s were increasingly home to revolutionary militants, often culminating in massive demonstrations and prison riots. The period of heightened class struggles heralded in 1968 underwent a transformation as a new employers offensive, based upon the desire to avoid the emerging economic crisis, involved a technological restructuring of industry and the end of the 'workers fortresses' of the massive plants. On a political level, the Communist Party was increasingly integrated into the state structures in return for its complicity in this restructuring. This integration of the Communist Party was in part responsible for the emergence of urban armed struggle in the mid-70s.

## Armed struggle

Indeed, in Italy, the 1970s were defined by two aspects. Firstly, a level of militancy amongst a large number of workers both employed and unemployed which manifested itself in autonomous struggle both in the factories and on a territorial basis and which arguably reached its high point in the 'movement of '77'. Secondly, the "armed struggle for communism" carried out by several Leninist groups which, when not actually state sponsored contributed nothing to the actual class struggles which they claimed to somehow 'lead'. The activities of the latter, which left the working class as spectators to their own 'liberation', tend to overshadow the actual content of the class struggles that took place and any revolutionary potential.



and peasants but the power of the state remained intact and the initiatives of the anarchists rapidly undermined. The last attempt to re-assert the interests of the working masses took place during the Maydays of 1937. The CNT and FAI, with its 'anarchist' ministers to the fore, called off the escalating class war and the Spanish revolution was dead. The dissident CNT-FAI militants, the Friends of Durutti, summed it up saying that 'democracy defeated the Spanish people, not fascism'. Antifascist Spain had destroyed the Spanish revolution and paved the way for World War II.

# WW2 and after: Socialisme ou Barbarie, Hungary ’56, Solidarity, Noir et Rouge, leading up to May ’68

FEW ORGANISED POLITICAL groups opposed the Second World War from a class position. Those minorities who did included the anarchists, council communist (the remnants of the revolutionary workers movement of the 1920s in Germany, Holland and elsewhere) and left communists such as the Bordigists (Italian communists in exile who supported the positions of the first leader of the Italian Communist Party). In occupied Europe these groups were isolated and faced great dangers in trying to continue any political intervention. During the war years theoret¬ical devvelopments were understandably limited, militants were too busy dodging bullets, the draft etc. Following the thesis of their deceased leader, the Trotskvists predicted the inevitable collapse of the post-war Soviet Union to barbarism capitalism or the political revolution (read change of’ leadership) which would put Russia back on the road to socialism.

## Social democratic consensus

Optimism about possibilities for revolutionary change immediately following the war was shared by many on the left, anarchists and libertarian communists included. Memories of the wave of



students, the Sorbonne was cleared by the CRS on the 16th, others held out for a few more weeks. Militants insisted “the struggle continues “, as indeed it does, but the revolutionary potential in France was petering out. The struggle was to continue, but elsewhere. Solidarity, in the eyewitness account *Paris may 1968*

concluded that the events pointed to the need for:

*...the creation of a new kind of revolutionary movement...strong enough to outwit the bureaucratic manoeuvres, alert enough day by day to expose the duplicity of the ‘left leaderships, deeply enough implanted to explain the to the workers the real meaning of the students’ struggle, to propagate the idea of autonomous strike committees (linking up union and non-union members), of workers management and workers councils.*

## ITALIAN SUMMER

‘May 1968’ was followed by the Italian ‘Hot Summer’ of 1969 (which actually began in Autumn 1968), where a wave of strikes and factory occupations, often outside and against the union structures spread over industrial Italy. Mass strike meetings were opened up to ‘outsiders’ — local people, students and revolutionary militants. Particularly combative car worker strikes broke out in Alfa Romeo and Fiat plants and there were street confrontations with the cops throughout the year. University, but particularly high school, students were involved in struggles which echoed those of the French students mobilisations.

This wave of struggle gave birth to many organisations, both at the level of the factories and in the broader social milieu, the most notable being Lotta Continua (The Continuing Struggle) and Autonomia Operaia (Workers Autonomy). The anti-union nature of the struggles also gave rise to what became the theory and activity of ‘workers autonomy’ (not synonymous with the organisation of the same name), which the new organisations attempted to relate

## Reactionary mobilisation

The struggle had reached a critical point and the power which appeared for the taking began to look like it was slipping from the grasp of the would-be revolutionaries. The May 27th CGT demonstration of perhaps half a million workers passed off with little or no incident. Three days later President De Gaulle

announced an election within 40 days and supporters of the General and of the maintenance of capitalism generally suddenly sensed that the movement had stalled. A reactionary mobilisation took place with hundreds of thousands of France's bourgeoisie and their petit-bourgeois hangers on swamping Paris, calling for order, support for the police and a violent death for the Jew, Cohn-Bendit. The revolutionary initiative had been lost and it only remained for the trade unions to step in and mediate towards an orderly return to normality.

Not all workers (and certainly not all students) went back to 'normality' so compliantly. The strikes in the important sectors such as the railway, post and in the mines continued into the first week of June. The car workers at Renault, Peugeot and Citroen continued to occupy. But as the CGT and the other unions organised a return to work nationally, the most intransigent sections of the working class found themselves increasingly isolated and subject to state repression. On June 7th the Renault works at Flins was subject to a pre-dawn raid and the occupying workers expelled at gunpoint. Sporadic fighting in the countryside around the plant continued for three days. In various parts of France pickets refused to budge and were having to be battered out of the plants and back to normality.

In the Peugeot works in Sochaux an attack by the CRS was repulsed by volleys of bolts and other metal objects. In response the police opened fire on the workers, killing two. After a 36 hour battle, Sochaux was finally 'normalised'. Most car workers voted to return by the 17th, the striking radio and TV workers were the last to return, holding out until the second week of July. As for the



revolution at the end of the first world war remained. Howver, the way the pre-war revolutionary movement in Germany had been smashed, and the dominance of those 'heroes of the resistance', the Communist Parties in France and Italy. meant that upheaval was limited to strike movements rather than insurrections. Benefiting from the economic boom brought by post-war restructuring, a social democratic consensus prevailed in Europe. In Eastern Europe once powerful workers' movements were now under the Stalinist jackboot, having been 'liberated' by the Red Army. So. many revolutionaries felt the need to reassess the socialist project in light of the developments over the past 30 years. In 1946. a dissident faction developed within the French section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, whose leading lights included Cornelius Castoriadis. Claude Lefort and François Lyotard. Their movement away from Trotskyist orthodoxy led them to leave the Fourth International and, in 1945. to launch a journal, Socialisme ou Barbarie (Socialism or Barbarism) which rejected the Trotskyist idea that the USSR was a "degenerated workers state". Rather, SoB argued that the Soviet Uiion was a form of state capitalism. In itself, this was hardly a revelation, after all the Soviet Union had been characterised as such, by anarchists and left communists, as early as 1921, What was innovative was the idea developed by SoB of the bureaucratisation of society as a universal phenomenon. of which the Soviet Union was a particular variation ("totalitarian" as opposed to "fragmented" as in the West). This theory of bureaucratisation had consequences for the subsequent development of SoB's politics. Early meetings of SoB were attended by — amongst others — French Bordigists, Fontenis and fellow comrades, and by the people who would later set up the Situationist International. The meetings must have been very interesting!

## Autonomous struggle

Other than analysing the nature of the Soviet Union, the group also focussed on the importance of workers' autonomous struggles against their official 'representation', such as the Labour and Communist Parties. but particularly against the trade unions. Castoriadis made no attempt to hide the influence of the Council Communist Anton Pannekoek, in his understanding of socialism as something the working class does. rather than something that is done to it or is forced upon it by objective circumstance. The post war boom which showed little sign of abating led some within SoB, particularly but not only Castoriadis, to believe that capitalism had overcome its tendency to fall into periodic crisis and that, consequently, the existence of social struggle pointed to a different crisis, namely that of the organisation of social life under bureaucratic capitalism. For Castoriadis. the struggle between the owners of the means of production and the workers had been superseded by the struggle between the order-givers and order-takers, between the bureaucracy and those who carry out the orders of the bureaucrats. The struggle, therefore, had come down to the struggle over who manages production, the producers themselves or another strata. In terms of approach to organisational concerns. SoB started off from a partyist perspective hut became more spontaneist until its demise in 1966. Castoriadis himself dropped out of political life to become a professional intellectual (a critical psychologist no less!). Soon after, François Lyotard found well-paid work defending class society and theoretical cretinism as a guru of post-modernism. In 1963, SoB split and a group known as Pouvoir Ouvrier (Workers' Power. not to be confused with the British Trot group) emerged, critical of the 'new' class analysis, arguing for a more 'traditional' class analysis and the need for a vanguard-type organisation not so far removed from that of the Trotskyists. This group showed how a political current can get it half right!



workers councils". For a period it looked as if a revolution which would go far beyond merely getting rid of the Gaullist government was a distinct possibility. When the majority of the Occupation Committee prevaricated, the revolutionary elements, situationists and members of the Enrages group formed a Committee for Maintaining the Occupations on May 19th, which continued to call for the creation of workers councils. This call was echoed by various groups involved in the struggle in different parts of France, whilst increasing numbers of workers joined the strike movement. By the end of the week 10 million were on strike.

## For the abolition of bosses!

But the dead hand of Stalinism and of social democracy still lay heavily upon the working class. On the 24th the CGT called a mass demonstration of its members in Paris. The March 22nd Movement and the Action Committees called for a demonstration around the slogans "No to parliamentary solutions! No to negotiations which only prop up capitalism! Workers! Peasants! Students! Workers! Teachers! Schoolboys! (sic) Let us organise and co-ordinate our struggle: For the abolition of Bosses! All power to the Workers!" The CGT assembled, *in an effort to demobilise*, around 200,00 workers, the revolutionary demonstration being around 100,000 strong. During the latter demonstration the Stock Exchange was burnt down and various government ministries were saved not by the numbers of riot cops but the success of the Trotskyists Young 'Revolutionary' 'Communists' and the social democrats of the official student union in turning the demonstrators back into the 'security' of the Latin Quarter. On the same day in Bordeaux, demonstrators attempted to storm the municipal buildings and that night street fighting occurred in Paris, Lyons, Nantes and other cities.

which has been described as 'euphoric' the university buildings were transformed into a vast arena of revolutionary discussion and action, 24 hours a day. The original occupiers were soon joined by delegations from other educational institutes, from the high schools (where the Jeunesse Anarchiste Communiste (Anarchist Communist Youth) organisations played a significant role in forming Action Committees) and from factories and offices. Various committees developed with responsibilities for the occupation, propaganda, liaison committees with the workers and other students. Leninist groups argued with each other over the historical significance of it all and who would be providing the correct leadership. Funnily enough, none of them were required to do so. Those who really wanted to develop the movement as far it would go attempted to deepen the break with bourgeois society and to encourage the working class to take things into its own hands (and out of those of the parties and unions).

## Occupation of the workplaces

The occupation of factories and other workplaces began on May 14th when the Sud Aviation plant at Nantes was occupied by its workers. The next day the Renault factories at Cleon and Flins were occupied and over the next couple of days the wildcat strike wave was spread all over France. Few major workplaces were not affected, even in small rural towns. Action Committees were set up in numberless factories and offices and red (and sometimes black!) flags were hoisted over building sites, railway stations, schools and pitheads. By Monday May 20th the whole of France was paralysed. Students were talking with workers and workers were talking amongst themselves, the main question being "how far are we going to take this?". Back in the Sorbonne, revolutionary elements within the Occupation Committee issued a call for "the immediate occupation of all the factories in France and the formation of



## Platformism

The influence the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Comniunists (see 'In the tradition: part one') was felt particularly strongly in France and the debate between Platformists and Svnthesists raged in France throughout the 1930s, The Second World War put these arguments on ice for a time but they immediately resurfaced with the coming of 'peace'. The French Anarchist Federation became, for a time, dominated by Platformists. changing its name to the Libertarian Communist Federation (FCL) and excluding those who opposed the changes. The FCL emphasised engagement in the day-to-day struggles of the exploited and oppressed and an opposition to philosophical navel-gazing.

## Manifesto of Libertarian Communism

In 1953. Georges Fontenis of the FCL published the Manifesto of Libetarian Communism. The Manifesto, which remained untranslated into English until almost 35 years later, remains probably the most coherent example of Platformist writing available. In it, Fontenis powerfully argues that anarchism is a product of social and class struggle and not an "abstract philosophy" or "individualist ethic". Rather, he states, "It was born in and out of' the social and it had to wait for a given historic period and a given state of class antagonism for anarchist communist aspirations that Socialisme ou Barbarie and Noir et Rouge to show themselves clearly for the phenomenon or revolt to result in a coherent and completely revolutionary conception." The Manifesto like the Platform before it, defended theoretical unity; tactical unity; collective responsibilitv and a collective method of action, organised through a specific organisation. Whilst it rejected the notion of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' as a term too open to interpretation to be of use,

the Manifesto was viewed by some to lean too much towards a Leninism sans Lenin.

## Noir et Rouge and the Groupes Anarchistes d'Action Révolutionnaire

In 1955, the Revolutionary Anarchist Action Groups (GAAR) split from the Federation Communiste Libertaire (FCL), unhappy with all direction the FCL was taking (including flirtations with 'revolutionary' electoralism!),but wishing to continue to defend Platformism. The group launched a magazine Noir et Rouge (Black and Red) in 1956, which continued until 1970. The group changed its name to Noir et Rouge in 1961 and a year later some of those involved rejoined the French Anarchist Federation. Noir et Rouge had as their initial aim to "Prepare the basis of a rejuvenated anarchism and in order to do this the group attempted a reappraisal of the revolutionary experiences of the 20th century, particularly the experiences of worker's' councils in Russia and the collectivisations in the Spanish Revolution but also those of Hungary 1956 and the more recent attempts at 'self-management' in Yugoslavia and Algeria. This led the group, particularly after 1961, to criticise all 'traditional' revolutionary politics. including Platformism. It would appear were converging from very different backgrounds during the 1950s and early 1960s. Unlike the majority of the GAAR, the magazine group turned awav from a stress on organisation towards a more spontaneous approach. Unlike Socialisme ou Barbarie however. little of their writing was published in the English language and so their pioneering attempts to 'rejuvenate' anarchism are almost unknown outside France. Perhaps the most infamous associate of Noir et Rouge was Daniel Cohn—Bendit. 'Danny the Red'. who would play a role as spokesperson for the May events in France. Noir et Rouge, like SoB, and the Situationists (see below) had an important influence on the build-up to May 68 and



occurred in the Latin Quarter (the area around the University) whilst the cops attempted to pick up the troublemakers and generally intimidate the student population. The official student union (UNEF) and the lecturers union called an immediate strike in protest. This continued over the weekend as an emergency court jailed six student 'agitators' and the authorities banned the planned Monday demonstration. The march went ahead and was the biggest seen in Paris since the Algerian war. Between the Monday and the following Friday the momentum increased with ever larger numbers in the streets, talking, planning, organising. On the Friday the first barricades went up and the situation took a semi-insurrectionary turn following a 30,000 strong march where the University students were joined by large numbers of high school students and local workers. The police response was brutal in the extreme but the situation was changing from a 'student' protest isolated in Paris to something which would engulf millions throughout France, that is a *class movement.*

On May 13th, realising that a grassroots revolt was gathering momentum, the trade unions, led by the Stalinist CGT, called a one-day protest strike in order to let off a little steam and to maintain some sort of leadership role. The demonstration of at least 200,00 (some estimate a far higher figure) contained workers from every industry and workplace. At the 'official' end of the march the CGT stewards, of which there were at least 10,000, managed to get most of the crowd to disperse, although they needed to physically intimidate many non-party activists in order maintain control. Thousands still managed to converge on the Champ de Mars at the foot of the Eiffel tower to discuss just where the struggle was going.

## The correct leadership

On the 13th also, the Sorbonne was vacated by the CRS and subsequently occupied by students and others. In an atmosphere

The original agitation had its origins in the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris, a new ultra-modern nightmare of glass and steel stuck in the middle of a mainly Algerian immigrant working class area. In April 1967 some male students set up camp outside the female dormitories in protest against sexual segregation, setting a ball of dissent rolling which culminated in a student boycott of lectures in November.

## March 22nd

On March 22nd 1968 a group of students occupied the university administrative building in protest against the arrest of members of the National Vietnam Committee (anti-Vietnam war protests were taking place across the globe). This was the birth of the March 22nd Movement (M22), an affinity-type group of the amorphous New Left, but which included anarchists and people influenced by Situationist ideas. The M22 'spokesman' Daniel Cohn-Bendit was associated with the Noir et Rouge group of libertarian communists (see In the Tradition part 2) and, thanks to the media, his face became the face of the movement. Also amongst the student agitation were the Enrages, by no means all students themselves, but rather a group of troublemakers close to the Situationist International. From the student side these groups attempted to push the movement as far as it could go, against the forces of Stalinism and 'modernism' which attempted to keep the struggle a sectional one confined to improving the conditions of the monkeys in the University zoo.

The May events began with the call for a demonstration by the M22 for Monday, May 6th, in order to coincide with a disciplinary hearing involving M22 members at the Sorbonne and the official day for beginning exams. The academic authorities, hoping to crush the militant minority, closed the Sorbonne and called in the riot police, the CRS on Friday 3rd May. Violent clashes



the events themselves, despite the limited circulation of their ideas and publications. Something worth remembering when plodding on with our activities and propaganda.

## Gruppi Anarchici d'Azione Proletaria

In post-war Italy, anarchists influenced by the Platformist tradition and by the critical Marxism of the German communist Karl Korsch emerged. They opposed the direction of the large synthesist organisation, the Italian Anarchist Federation (FAI), which was beginning to reject class analysis in favour of a vague humanistic version of anarchism. Unlike the French Platformists, the Italians decided to split off from the FAI and form their own organisation. The Anarchist Groups of Proletarian Action (GAAP) in 1949/50. They empha¬sised the need for a rigorous political approach, an engagement with Marxism, and defended the class basis of anarchism. Much of their energy was engaged in the struggle against Stalinism, in the shape of the massive Italian Communist Party. On an international level they called for the opening of a revolutionary 'Third Front' against American anc Soviet imperialism and were part of the short-lived Libertarian Communist International alongside comrades in France and Spain. Isolated from traditional anarchism and ultimately marginalised by Stalinism in a period of low class struggle, the GAAP eventually merged with Azione Comunista, a confederation of dissident Trotskvist, Bordigist and former Communist Party militants, from which they were after a short time effectively expelled. This led to the group's disintegration.

## Hungary 1956

The Hungarian uprising of 1956 came as a breath of fresh air against the stink of Stalinism and had repercussions world-wide, inspiring many socialists of the post-war generation to question

not only the validity of 'actually existing socialism' but to ask "what is the content of' socialism?" The thesis of Socialisme ou Barbarie concerning the anti-bureaucratic nature of authentic socialism seemed acutely relevant. The group itself took the view that: "... over the coining years, all significant questions will be condensed into one: are you for or against the action and the program of the Hungarian workers?" So what exactly was the Hungarian Resolution and why was it such a turning point? Hungary in 1956 was under the government of Imre Nagy, a watered-down Stalinist entrusted by Moscow to 'liberalise' Hungary to put a secure lid on social discontent. Despite his 'reforms', the system of exploitation in the name of socialism continued to engender opposition. On 23rd October 1956, following a mobilisation in the capital, Budapest, by students demanding moderate reform, some of a 200,000 crowd of demonstrators attacked the state radio station and so began the Hungarian revolt, If students and intellectuals had provided the spark, it was the working class who carried the flame and made sure that the arrival of Soviet tanks was met with fierce resistance. Over the next few days a wave of insurrectionary fervour enveloped Hungary as workers left their factories and offices to take part in assaults upon the headquarters of the local 'red bourgeoisie' and their secret police. Workers' councils emerged in every industrial centre, effectively taking power at all levels. These councils coordinated at a local and regional level and attempted to realise a form of workers' control in the workplaces. The 'programme' of' the workers' councils varied from area to area but nowhere did they call for the reintroduction of free market capitalism. The limitations of their form of workers' control never had time to show themselves as the Hungarian revolution, failing to spread beyond its national borders, essentially succumbed to the military might of the Soviet army. The experience of the councils, which developed spontaneously. without the leadership of any vanguard party and which within a matter of days took responsibility for



## Social Revolution continues to haunt capitalism

The reality of the events of May-June, "the greatest revolutionary movement in France since the Paris Commune" (International Situationniste, September 1969) is very different. Although the actions of the students provided a detonator, the actual social explosion was manifested in the largest wildcat strike in history, the occupation of workplaces across the country and the proof, if proof were needed, that the spectre of social revolution continues to haunt capitalism.

Superficially, the insurgence of May 1968 appears to have come out of nowhere. In France and in Europe generally, class struggle was at a low-ebb; there appeared a massive depoliticisation, particularly amongst young people and prospects for any movement for revolutionary change seemed particularly remote.

However, amongst large sectors of the working class existed a long-standing bitterness born of long-neglected grievances concerning wage claims and simmering resentments over conditions of work. Amongst young workers particularly there existed a sense that the misery of the previous generation wasn't for them. It was amongst this part of the working class, including the 'blousons noir', the members of street gangs, that the revolutionary spark ignited and they were usually the first to join the students on the streets, in order to 'have a go' at the police.

In the Universities, the high-schools and In many workplaces there were also various revolutionary groups and individuals who had been agitating for years, some of whom were or had been involved in various libertarian socialist currents outlined in part 2 of In The Tradition. Prior to the May-June events these groups had enjoyed a growth, but one that could not be described as large or rapid. However, revolutionary ideas had a small but growing audience amongst significant sections of students and workers.

# France ’68 and its aftermath

This is part three of In The Tradition, a roughly chronological outline of the various political events, movements and ideas which have influenced the development of the Anarchist Federation.

We left off last time having looked at currents which emerged during the 1960s, particularly the British-based *Solidarity* and the Situationist International (see Organise! #53). Both of these groups were to see in the events in France of May-June 1968, confirmation of their argument that a modern revolution would be one which would develop through the autonomous activity of millions of ‘ordinary’ people and a revolution against the official ‘representatives’ of the working class; the unions, labour and communist parties.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the bourgeois media, ‘May ‘68’ has been reduced to a ‘student revolt’ centred entirely on Paris and in particular the occupied Sorbonne University, which involved some barricade building, some fighting with the police and a load of hot air. The modern media enjoys pointing to the subsequent political trajectories of various participants, notably the ‘spokesperson’ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, then a libertarian communist, now a NATO supporting Green MP, as proof that the events had no long lasting effect, were just an outburst of youthful exuberance by the children of the bourgeoisie etc.



production, distribution and communication on a national level had an enormous impact on those in the revolutionary movement willing to see past Stalinist lies about an attempted ‘capitalist restoration’ by ‘nationalists’. Whatever the limitations of the councils programme, the fact that the working class had once more shown its capacity for autonomous action was an inspiration for those fighting for working class self-organisation.

## Solidarity

Three years later in Britain, a current developed, under the influence of Socialisme ou Barbarie, which broke with Trotskyism (in this case the Socialist Labour League led by Gerry Healy). Originally called Socialism Reaffirmed, the group would become known as Solidarity and exist in one form or another for almost 30 years. Although initially seeing itself as a Marxist group critical of the Bolshevik heritage, it soon developed its own character as a ‘national organisation’ of libertarian socialists. In 1961 it published an English translation of the key statement of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group and consequentlv published much of the writing of Castoriadis (under the pen name Paul Cardan), including his post-1964 work. Like Castoriadis, Solidarity defended the need for workers’ self-management of production and of society, but not all those involved in the organisation fully accepted his notion of the new revoluntionary ‘subject’ being “order takers” rather than proletarians. The Situationist International (see below) suggested that, thanks to Solidarity’s translator. the group received Castoriadis’ work “… like the light that arrives on Earth from stars that have already long burned out” and were unaware that the founder of Socialisme ou Barbarie had long since died, politically speaking. Although the Anarchist Federation generallv rejects the term ‘self-management’ with all its ambiguity. it is obvious that many people within Solidarity interpreted the term as meaning the end of pro-

duction for sale or exchange. Whatever Solidarity's weaknesses (not least their fairly lax attitude to maintaining an international organisation and their lack of political direction after they effectively split around 1980). Solidarity was involved in important revolutionary activity and publishing for at least 20 of its 30 years, producing a wealth of literature defending a coherent vision of libertarian socialism that was unavailable elsewhere. Compared to many of the 'class struggle' anarchists in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, they developed a consistent body of politics that recognised the need for working class self-organisation outside social democratic and Leninist models.

## The Situationist International

The Situationist International was formed in 1957, from the unification of three avant-garde artistic/cultural groups. For the first five years of its existence, its main theoretical focus was on developing a critique of art, culture, town planning and anvthing else that they considered worth critiquing. Only in 1962. did the group — which, although numerically small. was geographically spread across Europe (based mainlv in France) — really develop a political perspective based on salvaging what was authentically revolutionary from the history and practice of the workers' movement. Much of their early political orientation was influenced by Socialisme ou Barbarie, and, like that group. their ambition was to help in the creation of a 'new revolutionary movement' based upon the proletariat of the 'industrial advanced countries'. By the time the situationists had formulated their positions, Socialisme ou Barbarie had, however, lost hope in the proletariat and had lost any dynamic presence in revolutionary political life (see above). One major problem with any appraisal of the Situationist International is the legacy left by some of their followers and intepreters (known sometimes as Pro-Situs). which leaves them looking like disgruntled, destructive intellectuals with very little positive contribution to make. Actually, judged on their own writings and record of activity, they were far from the 'arty misfits' their opponents would like to paint them. The situationists took Marx's conception of alienation and applied it to society as a whole rather than just to the world of work. They argued that alienated labour was central to existence in all aspects of daily life, as proletarians were confronted by their own alienation at every turn ahout. ln culture, sport, sexuality, education, pseudo-rebellion, everything that could be turned into a commoditv had been. This society of mediated images. of 'spectacle' could only be swept away by a proletarian revolution and the realisation of "generalised self-management", which for the situationists meant the abolition of wage labour and the state: "The only reason the situationists do not call themselves communists is so as not to be confused with the cadres of pro-Soviet or pro-Chinese anti-worker bureaucracies." [Italian section of the SI, 1969] So, by their actions should they be judged. In the May 1968 events in Paris the situationists. their comrades and allies were faced with a real-life revolutionary situation. Did they cut the mustard? Find out next time.