

Thought and Struggle

Anarchist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland

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History

The AF has its roots in a number of small anarchist groupings active in the 1970s. In addition, the founding members were inspired by the rich anarchist tradition on the Continent, especially in France. Taking what we thought was best from the past and from abroad, the goal was to create an anarchist communist organisation, firmly based on the class struggle or social anarchist tradition.

The project received crucial impetus with the bringing on board of the innovative magazine *Virus*. The Anarchist Communist Discussion was then launched at the Anarchist Bookfair in October 1985. We received remarkable interest in our project and by April 1986, there was enough stability to formalise the organisation into the Anarchist Communist Federation. Though there is some historic continuity with earlier anarchist groups in Britain, the new federation is mainly a new phenomenon, drawing on people new to anarchism in the 1980s. We started out with a set of aims and principles, which remain largely in tact, but there have still been considerable development in our politics, as new people join and offer new perspectives, and as we develop our ideas in the course of what is going on in the class struggle itself. In the late 90s we changed our name to the Anarchist Federation, not because we had changed our politics, but for pragmatic reasons.

Aims and Principles

The central plank of our principles, like all anarchist organisations, is the recognition of the need to bring an end to capitalism (in all its varieties) as well as the State, which can never be used as a vehicle to transform society. In addition, we believe that these objectives can only come about through a social revolution, where the working class organises itself to both ideologically and physically overthrow the system. Our definition of the working class is broad, reflecting the fact that capitalism has undergone significant changes. A social revolution can only come about as a result of the will of the vast majority of the population, including office and shop workers, public sector employees, the unwaged, women working in the home, children and retired people, as well as the traditional industrial workers. Anarchism is about individuals changing as part of a general social struggle. It is not about individuals changing their lifestyle and hoping capitalism will go away. Neither do we fetishise violence, recognising that the use of violence can produce new hierarchies. The revolution will primarily come about through non-military means, as we develop our power through a variety of social, economic, political and cultural forms of resistance. It is to this end that we work. Nevertheless, we realise that it is unavoidable and therefore do not hold pacifism to be a point of principle.

Another important principle of the AF is that it is not just class exploitation and oppression that needs to be abolished. Though we do not necessarily use the concept of patriarchy, we believe that the oppression of women pre-dates capitalism and will not automatically disappear with its end. Sexism permeates the working class as well as the anarchist scene and will require particular struggles to rid ourselves of this legacy. At the same time, we do not see struggles against sexism as totally separate from those against the overall system of hierarchy and oppression. Recently, the women's movement has been in decline and this is reflected in the lack of focus on specifically anti-sexist struggles in our propaganda and our activities. This is something

we are trying to deal with—how not to be gender-blind in our analysis of the working class and the class struggle. We also recognise that there may be instances where women will need to organise as independently in order to develop ideas and confidence and applaud those initiatives aimed at developing anarchofeminism. However, we do not support ‘cross-class’ alliances, which end up benefiting mainly middle class women. For example, ‘equal opportunities’ policies have largely meant that women have equal opportunities to become bosses and managers, politicians or media personalities.

We have a similar analysis of anti-racist struggles. The social revolution must bring an end to all forms of prejudice and therefore racism needs to be combated within the working class itself. However, as with anti-sexist struggles, we recognise that there can be a potential for reactionary politics. We have seen a growth in racism for a variety of reasons, not just to do with September 11 th, and much of our propaganda and activity has been directed at building anarchist resistance to racism and fascism without forming ‘unholy’ alliances with reactionary religious groups. Nevertheless, we have had limited success in attracting people from a broad spectrum of ethnic backgrounds and understand the suspicion many people might have towards ‘white’ organisations. We hope that through our practice, in the workplace and community, these divisions will be overcome, without pandering to reactionary ideologies.

We also recognise many other forms of oppression, such as sexuality, disability and age. Anarchists must never turn a blind eye to any kind of domination and should be prepared to combat any signs of discrimination at all levels of society. However, we do not believe that we should be calling on the State for help. Prejudice and reactionary practices will only disappear through activity and struggle, enabling people to change in their core, not just on the surface.

The nature of Trade Unionism in Britain has posed many problems for us when trying to decide on a workplace strategy. The unions are not only reformist but are often totally implicated in the exploitation of the working class. Our experience led us to adopt what some may call an ‘anti-union’ position. We argue that people should not take up positions in the union and that in many cases there is no point in even being a member of the union if its role is particularly counter revolutionary. There is no point in trying to ‘democratise’ the unions or try and make them more combative. It is in their nature to negotiate with capitalism, not to seriously undermine it. They cannot be reformed. This position has caused some difficulties because as most workplace activity takes place within the context of the official union, what do we actually do? We have argued that we should be trying to organise informal groups of militant workers, whether they be union members or not. The aim is not to establish an alternative union structure, which would only end up becoming another reformist union, but to be a source of revolutionary propaganda and a catalyst for action.

In practice, our members take a very pragmatic approach to organising in the workplace. Members adopt whatever strategy seems most effective for furthering struggle and resisting exploitation. Though we do not advocate anarcho-syndicalism as an overall strategy, we do not dismiss efforts to form structures, which group anarchists as workers or across industries, in order to further anarchist influence in economic struggles. Several of our comrades are members of the Industrial Workers of the World. The main principle of all our workplace activity is to build up revolutionary, non-hierarchical forms of organisation, whatever name is given to them.

Economic struggle in the workplace is only one aspect of building a new society. Exploitation and oppression take many forms and extends into all parts of our lives. Though we are a ‘class struggle’ organisation, this struggle is social and personal, as well as economic. Therefore, we

argue that anarchists must fight on a number of ‘fronts’. One such ‘front’ is the community. We are aware that community in the traditional sense does not really exist, but there are issues that affect localities where people live. These issues include transport, provision of public services and the effect of the environment on health. Though these issues can be raised in a workplace context, effective action requires a broader organisational base, incorporating people as both producers and consumers.

The locality is also the context in which we engage in anti-fascist, environmental, anti-war and anti-religion campaigns. Though members will raise these issues at work, we stress the importance of organising local actions and distributing propaganda at the community level—on the streets, in public meetings and through direct action. Members work with other anarchists to set up local groups with the aim of raising awareness of anarchist ideas amongst the wider working class and initiating action.

We have a strong internationalist perspective and are particularly critical of national liberation movements and ideologies. There can be no ‘better’ government. The only way we can achieve true liberation is through internationalism, which refuses to choose between oppressors. History has shown that the ‘lesser of the two evils’ soon turns out to be just as ‘evil’. Meanwhile, you have abandoned your own principles and weakened your own movement. Our members in Ireland have pioneered, in very difficult conditions, an anarchism that refuses to take sides with either nationalism. It is only by building up the international anarchist movement that we can effectively challenge all oppressors and therefore we are active members of the International of Anarchist Federations.

All our activities are directed to the development of a ‘culture of resistance’. Whatever the arena of struggle, it is essential that we build up the confidence and willingness of the working class to fight back against all aspects of capitalism and the State. This culture of resistance will build on localised actions and single issue campaigns, but go beyond this isolated resistance in order to construct a generalised revolutionary movement that seeks to create a completely new society.

Organisation

The AF has evolved firmly within the tradition of organised anarchism. In other words, we believe, that an effective revolutionary strategy needs anarchists to group together in such a way that they can spread anarchist ideas and practices, co-ordinate and generalise struggles and debate and clarify ideas. This must be done on a local, national and international level. However, this organisation does not substitute itself for working class activity, but rather acts as a ‘leadership of ideas’, which themselves are worked out through the participation of anarchists in struggle. The organisation, existing as it does over time, is in a position to gather together a wealth of experiences, acting as a memory of the movement as well as a forum for formulating new ideas and strategies.

We are organised on federalist lines, which means we are a federation of individuals and groups with no central political or administrative apparatus. This does not mean that we have no decision-making structure, something that only leads to informal leadership cliques rather than formal ones. We have one national conference and three national delegate meetings a year, which take decisions on our general orientation, strategy and action. However, these decisions

are reached through extended discussion in the Internal Bulletin and on an internet discussion list. It is very rare that we have anything that is not generally agreed after discussion. If we do vote on anything, the vote is first open to any member to register a negative vote. If the decision is still made, then groups and/or individuals are still free to not implement the decision as long as they do not seek to undermine the organisation. One of our central concerns is, therefore, how to ensure maximum participation of all members and how to avoid formal and informal hierarchies. After all, it is our experiences that will provide the basis for alternative ways of organising society. We do not always succeed in achieving the standards of participation that we aspire to; however, we are continually reviewing our practice. Though the structures and mechanisms for participation may be in place, we recognise that there are many individual reasons why some are more dominant than others, related to issues of confidence, age, experience, gender and educational background. Therefore it is not enough just to say that the organisation is non-hierarchical. It is necessary to actively encourage participation, through rotation of tasks, involving individuals in small group and commission work and helping to build confidence through workshops and educational.

We are an organisation of activists. We publish and distribute a bi-annual magazine, *Organise!* (800 copies) and a monthly free bulletin, *Resistance* (3000–5000 copies). We also produce a range of pamphlets, posters and stickers. The aim of our propaganda is primarily to spread anarchist ideas throughout all sections of the working class. However, *Organise!* is aimed more at those who are already politicised to a greater extent and therefore focuses on debates and theory that will provoke discussion in the anarchist and wider political movement. In addition to distributing propaganda, individual members are engaged in a wide variety of activities, in the workplace, in local anarchist or anti-authoritarian groups, in universities and colleges and in campaigns and actions against the war, around environmental issues, supporting asylum seekers, and challenging reactionary ideas of religious fanatics and fascists.

How do we differ from other anarchists

The anarchist movement has grown in numbers and in influence over the past decade. People have been attracted to anarchism for a variety of reasons and therefore it is a diverse movement, both in terms of ideas and practices. This diversity can be a positive feature of the movement, and the AF recognises that we do not have a monopoly of ‘truth’ on what anarchism should be. However, there are several principles that we take to be vital, and feel that it is only our organisation that groups all of these principles together. We have outlined these principles in this text, but we will now discuss briefly why exist as a distinctive organisation.

1. Organisation

Not all anarchists put the same stress as we do on formal organisation, at both the national and international organisation. Though strong local groups and initiatives are the basis of an effective national organisation, co-ordination and sharing of ideas must happen on the widest level if we are ever to organise a revolution. In addition, this organisation must be permanent, in the sense that it continues to exist and be active regardless of what big events may be taking place or how active particular individuals are. We need an organisation that can continue to exist, regardless of whether some individuals drop out or become less active. For similar reasons we

need to be sceptical of ‘networks’, which come and go, as well as having a tendency to operate with informal hierarchies.

2. Anarchist Communism

We are part of the anarchist tradition, sometimes referred to as anarchist communism, which believes in the importance of building a political organisation that is based on the working class (in the broadest sense), and which is active on a number of fronts. This is what distinguishes us from anarcho-syndicalism. Though we are part of the same social anarchist tradition (anarchist communists and anarcho-syndicalists are likely to be in the same organisation in countries like Spain, France and Italy), we emphasise different tactics and strategies. For us, building an anarcho-syndicalist union can only ever form one prong of an overall strategy and even then has to be adapted to the context in line with revolutionary anarchist principles. Anarchist communism also rejects other forms of anarchism such as green, ‘lifestylism’, and insurrectionalism. Though concern for the environment is a key part of our politics, it does not take priority over any other issue. We welcome the fact that people refuse to conform to bourgeois codes but a revolution will not come about by dressing differently or living in squats.

In any case, experience has shown that these alternative lifestyles are short-lived, with many soon becoming key members of the establishment. Anarchism is something to be maintained in all stages of life, even if the anarchist holds down a job, has children, or takes out a mortgage. Anarchists, after all, should be part of the working class, not in their own ghetto of alternative ‘activists’. That doesn’t mean, however, that anarchists should seek to adopt some stereotyped working class image. The anarchist movement should contain a diverse range of people, not conforming to any stereotype. What matters are one’s ideas, practice and commitment. Similarly, we reject insurrectionism as a strategy to achieve anarchism. Individuals may become frustrated at our inability to strike effectively against our oppressors, but unfortunately there are no shortcuts. Films like ‘Lord of the Rings’ and ‘The Matrix’ make it seem that heroic individual action is the key to fighting our enemy, but this is an illusion. It is the everyday organising and struggle that forms the basis for all the more obvious revolutionary moments. Individual ‘heroics’ can never be a substitute for mass action. In addition, individual acts of violence are usually counterproductive, bringing down repression on a movement not yet strong enough to defend itself. As the Italian Anarchist Federation declared after being mistakenly associated with a recent letter bomb—‘Anarchism cannot be delivered through a letter box’. However, there may be circumstances where such actions are justified, but only when the actions are directly linked and supported by a wider movement.

3. Practice

AF members are involved in a diverse range of struggles. We support initiatives such as the anti-G8 preparations because they are part of the general struggle to build a culture of resistance. However, we do not prioritise organising for such big events as we also have our day-to day work to spread anarchist ideas and action in the working class movement. As we are not a large organisation, we cannot do everything. Some of our members will be involved in these initiatives, but we do not believe that it is worth abandoning our normal activity in order to make the enormous financial and time commitment that such events require. We strongly believe that

our main focus must be to develop an anarchist presence within the working class both in the workplace and the locality. The future for anarchism and for the planet lies in anarchism being taken up by a wide variety of working class people in their everyday struggles.

Building the Movement

The AF will support and work with any individual or group who shares the general aim of creating an anarchist society. We have our distinctive perspective on how to bring this aim about, a perspective that is part of a long tradition, and will continue to argue for this perspective to be the basis for the building of a strong and effective anarchist movement. However, we also recognise that if this tradition is not to become a historical relic, it must be continually enriched by new ideas and practices. We hope that British anarchism will grow into an effective and influential movement within the working class, bringing together a wide variety of occupations, social groups and generations. This will require long-term commitment and perseverance, through both the 'highs' and 'lows' of political activity. We will do whatever is necessary to contribute to the building of such a movement, as the future of us all depends on it.

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