

Sexism, Power and the Left

Anarchist Federation of Scotland

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Contents

Struggles in the Left	3
The problem that won't go away	4

I've always thought the story of John MacLean was inspirational, despite the fact that he was never a libertarian communist.¹ But, a cult was created around him which didn't so much critically draw out the good things he stood for but turned him into something else. MacLean became The Great Leader, and an image of the type of working class man who's meant to save us and dies trying. This idea of socialism as a very male, patriarchal, top-down movement, embodied in one man, has been repeated so many times it's farcical.

Of course, I don't mean to simply equate MacLean or James Connolly, who I have some time for, with other such icons as Che Guevara, who was a complete authoritarian, or more recent examples like Hugo Chavez, a successful political manager who passed reforms and also fought autonomous working class organisation and indigenous communities. But wherever there's a tendency to canonize these figures, it reinforces our enthrallment to the past and its ideas, freezing them rather than moving beyond them, and it raises up representatives of real living, messy, anonymous class struggle, all to be conveniently used for present day attempts to impose statist, hierarchical solutions for change led by, almost always, Great Men.

Cults like these are a reflection of, and end up propagating both hierarchical forms of organisation and patriarchy.

Struggles in the Left

It was a long time in coming but at the anti-Bedroom Tax demonstration in Glasgow an important division in the Left in Scotland clearly came out into the open. I'm talking about the heckling of Dave Sherry, one of the speakers at the end, by people from different political groups or none who all see themselves as feminists or pro-feminists. Sherry, as a member not just of the SWP but also that party's Dispute Committee, was directly involved in covering up the rape by a senior party figure of a younger member. What happened and its background is explained in full here.

It was absolutely right that Sherry was openly challenged when given a public platform. It was also really encouraging that socialists, anarchists and others were united in shouting him down. I'm only sorry I missed my chance of heckling him because I was at the other side of George Square when it happened. But I'm sure there will be other opportunities of opposing SWP speakers in the future.

This wasn't an isolated incident, however, but part of wider developments where both misogyny and hierarchy have been closely linked.

The old authoritarian Left, after having lost much of its credibility, recognises the importance of the anti-Bedroom Tax campaign and has been trying as usual to put itself in a position of leadership in order to control it and regain political influence and power. Tommy Sheridan, out of prison for perjury, is back in the media spotlight as the face of the anti-Bedroom Tax campaign and, after everything he's done, still manages to muster enthusiastic support from his fan club. He briefly got himself elected secretary of the interim committee of the West of Scotland Anti-

¹ Check out Nan Milton's biography which gives an excellent insight into radical Scottish history. Anarchist Guy Aldred, who worked with MacLean, was also one of the first people to write about him. My argument isn't that we should stop commemorating figures like MacLean, but to be highly critical of how he is used and to what ends in the present. I would say the exact same about libertarian communist figures like Emma Goldman, Durruti and so on. In many other cases, though, I think icons of the past or present need to be ditched altogether.

Bedroom Tax Federation, before being forced to resign because of his divisive role. But don't count him out just yet.

Sherry was allowed to speak because those involved in the SWP, Solidarity party, and CWI Scotland engineered it, and they quickly closed ranks in defending him and his actions from the hecklers. Likewise, Tommy Sheridan, Great Leader of Solidarity, is supported in turn by the SWP and the CWI and they are all keen to give him a prominent place in public talks and the media.

These parties are parasites on already-existing struggles, and it's no coincidence that they have all been actively involved in giving a place to misogyny in some form or another.

The problem that won't go away

I agree with many of the points Mhairi McAlpine made in her article on the constant re-occurrence of sexism and sexual abuse in socialist organisations from Gerry Healy to George Galloway. Why does it keep happening? We live in a patriarchal society where misogyny is prevalent, men who gain influence in a party are able to manipulate lovers for their own ends and then marginalise and intimidate them, all men benefit from patriarchy and defend those, often in a position of power, who are called out.

But I think that we should also explore the structure of these organisations: the fact that they were all hierarchical parties.

Tommy Sheridan is in the position he is, as a socialist celebrity, because he was given power. From his days in Militant he was made the figurehead and spokesman of the anti-Poll Tax campaign – apparently speaking on behalf of all the grassroots groups who fought the Poll Tax, whether they liked it or not – and then in the SSP was at the centre of the party's electoral strategy. He was good in the media, he got votes and was encouraged to get as much publicity as he could. In other words, he was undoubtedly given a status and influence above ordinary members. There were and *are* a lot of good comrades in the SSP, but the criticisms people are making about Tommy now were already around long before the party was split over his scandal and lying. Those women and men who opposed him afterwards were absolutely in the right, but now that he's trying to make a comeback maybe it's time to look again at the context of his rise to influence.

Is it really surprising that manipulative, egoistic men are most successful in power politics?

Whether it's in electoralism or controlling a small top-down party like the SWP, men not only find their way to the top and stay there but patriarchy shapes the operation of power and influence, just as it does in wider society. Sure, there are prominent female leaders too, but they often end up doing just as much to defend male leaders, as happened in the SWP or with Solidarity.

What's the answer? I'd obviously disagree with those who argue that the aim should be another electoral, hierarchical party that replaces misogynist male leaders with pro-feminist leaders.

Patriarchy is one form of power over others, of hierarchy. We want to get rid of it altogether just like we want to get rid of ableism, white supremacy, heteronormativity and capitalism itself.² As anarchists we'd see this as being interconnected and that the organisations we build and the

² There's an excellent introduction to privilege theory and intersectionality written by AFed's Women Caucus: A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory.

struggles we're involved in need to be concerned with all these things. Those most directly affected by an oppression, should be the ones to lead the struggle against it, and organise separately whenever they see fit, but those not directly oppressed should be just as much concerned with, for example, pro-feminism and educating themselves about it, and not just leave (pro-)feminism to self-identifying women.

In all cases, though, we shouldn't pass on responsibility for challenging oppressions or exploitation to representatives to do it on our behalf but through structures that we ourselves build and control. It's entirely self-defeating to fight against people having power over us through means that contribute to people having power over us!

The Occupy movement might be pointed out as an example of how non-hierarchical organising doesn't necessarily lead to pro-feminist spaces. It's debatable to what extent Occupy was actually non-hierarchical, since it was started and maintained by a small number of activists who had the time and were able to live out in camps in the city centre, and who would tend to have control. AFed members that I'm aware of were never involved in Occupy in Scotland because of the many problems we saw with it, from its unclear demands and means to bring them about, to being dominated by liberal not anti-capitalist ideas as well as a toxic mixture of conspiracy theories. At the very least, though, Occupy was an attempt at non-hierarchical or grassroots organising that led to the creation of incredibly unsafe spaces where sexual abuse was widely reported both in the US and here in Britain. The nature of Occupy camps meant they were likely to be places where people were at risk anyway, but importantly the movement had no concern for adopting clear safer spaces policies and pro-feminism was conspicuous by its absence.

I don't think there's an easy solution to genuinely challenge something like patriarchy but I would definitely argue that it requires non-hierarchical modes of organising – by which I don't mean 'jazz hands' and endless hours of consensus, but decision-making that's directly democratic and effective – along with safer spaces policies, those directly affected having their own spaces and platforms, and a clearly pro-feminist stance adopted by everyone. The structures we need don't come ready-made but are developed through experimentation.

But, to be clear, sexism and misogyny is something that affects all organisations even those that actively try to challenge it and have structures that aim to ensure that control isn't given to a minority. It's something we have to constantly try to deal with and that we all need to get better at.

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Trigger warning: general discussion of rape and sexual abuse in socialist organisations.

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