Anarcho
The irresistible correctness of anarchism
July 24, 2008

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A lengthy critique of the SWP's attempt to rewrite the history of the resistance to Italian fascism in the early 1920s as well as the revolutionary Red Years after World War I. An important, if not well known, bit of anarchist history.

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political strategy which can undermine the false radicalism of Fascism with a real radical alternative, one which encourages the active participation of working class people in solving the problems we all face regardless of colour, sex or religion. It could take the form of encouraging community and workplace assemblies and the use of direct action and solidarity to fight for improvements in our lives.

And it involves a political struggle, as much against the false ideologies of a bankrupt state socialist tradition as fascism. After all, the BNP is taking advantage of the weakness of both reformist and revolutionary socialism. We need to reclaim the libertarian roots of socialism and present an alternative to capitalism, Labourism and Bolshevism. It is no coincidence that Fascism in Italy and Spain had to be enforced onto a rebellious working class. Both countries had strong anarchist movements who fought fascism tooth and nail. The sad fact is that if the anarchist ideas on fighting capitalism and fascism had been followed in Italy by the Marxist parties then the history of the world would have been different. Not that the reader would know this from Behan's book.

Which comes as no surprise. As Behan states, "every united front is an arena for political and ideological struggle." (p. 105) It was the threat that the anarchists would win that struggle which played a key role in the PSI and PCI refusal to join a united front or take part in the AdP. It also explains why Behan's account of this period is so lacking. For reading "**the Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini**" a reader with a basic knowledge of the period and the ideas and actions of the anarchists can draw but one conclusion, namely the irresistible correctness of anarchism.

We need to start to create the equivalent of the UAI today, so that when struggle increases we are in a position to spread our ideas and influence it in a libertarian direction. The events in Italy also show the benefits and drawbacks of dual unionism. It is undoubtedly true that the USI influenced the movement massively but it is also true that the members of the socialist union remained tied to their leaders and organisation. Malatesta pondered that as *"the General Confederation could not be destroyed and replaced with another equally powerful organisation, would it not have been better to have avoided schism and remain within the organisation to warn members against the somnolence of its leaders?"*[96] As such, ways for anarchists to work within existing mass organisations should be discussed in the light of the successes and failures of the USI.

By way of a conclusion...

So what is required? Well, an anti-fascism that is clearly working class would be a start. One that does not water down its ideas to gain support from politicians and the middle classes. One that combines physical confrontation with political confrontation. It also means addressing the real causes of social problems (and the role of the Labour Party in maintaining them) and presenting a positive alternative vision rather than the status quo. It means recognising that anti-fascism is not enough and, moreover, that it has been responsible for numerous revolutionary defeats (the Spanish Revolution springs to mind).

Ultimately it means rejecting Behan's modified "popular front" vision and a return to the "united front" advocated by the anarchists during the two red years. One which is based on working class organisations and concerns. It means building on the example of AFA, not the ANL, and devising a

[96] **The Anarchist Revolution**, p. 33

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instead we are subjected to inappropriate comparisons of the ANL to the AdP.

It also means that fighting fascism, as the AdP was well aware, means violence. Behan seems ambiguous on this matter. He states that *"physically confronting Nazis"* involves *"flyposting"* or *"wiping out fascist slogans."* While that is necessary, it is not *"physically confronting"* anyone. He is on firmer ground when he talks about *"countering their attempts at mass leafleting, marching or holding public meetings."* Then he states this *"often brings the violent Nazi nature of the hardcore to the surface, thus undercutting their support even further."* (pp. 119–120) What does that mean? That violence alienates potential fascists? Does that mean anti-fascists should be pacifists, provoking the BNP to violence? That, as history shows, will embolden the Nazi's, not discourage them.

Simply put, if anti-fascism means sacrificing yourself to expose the "violent nature" of Nazism then it will fail. Anarchists do not expose Nazism because it is violent. We oppose it because it is violence directed against the working class. It is violence used to repress working class people and subject them to both state and capital. It is violence that is used to divide the working class, to get them fighting amongst themselves rather than their real common enemies — the rich and powerful. Moreover, it seems strange that a party dedicated (in theory) to insurrection and state repression of "counter-revolution" (including rebellious working class people) should place exposing Nazi violence so high on its anti-fascist strategy. But it does play well with concerned liberals "outraged" by fascism (and it panders to their often less than hidden elitism against the working class).

Lastly, there are lessons for anarchists today. The impact of the libertarian in Italy post-world war was impressive. It shows the need to organise effectively, both politically and industrially. It shows that we cannot wait for a revolution or mass revolt before we organise together. By then it is too late.

based on self-management, direct action and solidarity (i.e. anarchism).

Which points to the flaw in Behan's conclusions. Incredibly he asserts that the ANL has "some similarities" to the AdP. (p. 119) What an insult to the AdP! The AdP was rooted in working class life and militants with an organic link to meaningful working class organisations. It is precisely such links and organisations that need to be rebuilt. And to make them relevant they need to based on what working class people want and need, not want the SWP assumes they need. Anti-fascism needs to be clear that "Popular front" anti-fascism has never worked. It needs a clear working class perspective, the perspective Behan pays lip-service to while advocating the opposite, namely the awareness that anti-capitalism is not just theoretically essential to fighting fascism but practically so.

And there was/is an anti-fascist organisation which was based on that perspective, namely Anti-Fascist Action (AFA). Let us not forget that the SWP created the ANL overnight, ignoring the fact that there already existed a broad-based anti-fascist group (namely AFA). Since the ANL came on the scene, fascism in the UK has become more of a threat, not less. Sadly Behan fails to address this issue. The same blindness afflicts his discussion of the "anti-capitalist" movement. Ironically, while arguing the need for groups to *"be inside the anti-capitalist movement"* to try and *"influence its general direction"* he acknowledges *"its growing reformism."* (p. 118) Needless to say, he does not ponder why the period of increased SWP and other leftist involvement in that movement is also marked by falling radicalism. While not denying that all groups should involve themselves in mass struggle, what is significant is that fact that since the SWP has got involved and formed it front group ***"Globalise Resistance"*** the movement's radicalism has withered. Could something be wrong with the SWP's approach? Sadly, such self-criticism is nowhere to be seen and

The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini, Tom Behan, Bookmarks, 2003, £8

> ***"If the anarchists are not careful, their enemies will write their history"*** (Gaetano Salvemini)[1]

The rise of fascism in Italy is a subject that should be of interest to anarchists. This is because Mussolini's rise cannot be detached from the ***biennio rosso***, the two red years of 1919 and 1920. This reached its peak with the factory occupations of 1920, when hundreds of thousands of workers took over their workplaces and peasants squatted the land they used but did not own. Italy was on the verge of social revolution. Fascism was a response to this, a tool by the ruling class to crush working class organisation, resistance and power. It was, to use Luigi Fabbri's expression, a *"preventative counter-revolution."*

Unfortunately, there are few, if any, decent books on this period in English. The best books on the factory occupations are out of print.[2] As for working class resistance to fascism, the situation is even worse. All of which made the recent publication of Tom Behan's **"The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini"** potentially very important. This book, by the UK's Socialist Worker Party's publisher *Bookmarks*, claimed to be the about the *"Arditi del Popolo"* (AdP), the first anti-fascist movement in the world. Its name literally means the "people's shock troops" and its groups managed to stop Mussolini's Black Shirts on numerous occasions from attacking working class areas.

[1] quoted by Carl Levy, *"Italian Anarchism, 1870–1926,"* **For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice**, David Goodway "Ed.), Routledge, 1989.

[2] Paolo Spriano, **The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920**, Pluto Press 1975; Gwyn A. Williams, **Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy 1911–1921**, Pluto Press, 1975; Martin Clark, **Antonio Gramsci and the Revolution that Failed**, Yale University Press, 1977

This group, like popular resistance in general, is rarely mentioned in accounts of the rise of Fascism. Except for the pamphlet **"Red Years, Black Years"** on anarchist resistance[3] and a short article in Anti-Fascist Action's paper **"Fighting Talk"** the existence of this group, never mind its activity, has not been known to English speaking anti-fascists. And it is not surprising that accounts of it have been limited to such sources. As Behan notes *"[d]espite the initial success of the AdP, the group has been largely erased from history ... [This] owes much to the hostility of left-wing parties at the time, and their subsequent failure to face up to their own fatal mistakes. The historiography of the working class has been dominated by Communist and Socialist historians, and it was these organisations that were unwilling to recognise some uncomfortable truths."* (pp. 2–3)

As will be discussed, it was only the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists who supported this movement wholeheartedly. Not, of course, you would know that from Behan's account. Which is the reason for this review, namely to reclaim anarchist and working class history from those, like the SWP, who seek to misuse it for their own ends. Behan's account of the Italian labour movement, the near revolution after the war, the resistance to fascism and the lessons to be learned are all skewed in favour of the SWP's very peculiar version of anarchism and the needs to justify its non-revolutionary practice and ideology.[4]

So this review is an attempt to reclaim anarchist history by exposing the phoney revolutionary politics and scholarship of the SWP. A thankless task, of course, but an essential one. Anarchists need to care about our history and defend it against

[3] **Red Years, Black Years: Anarchist Resistance to Fascism in Italy**, ASP, London, 1989

[4] See, for example, Pat Stack's incredibly embarrassing essay *"Anarchy in the UK?"* for how low the SWP are willing to go to distort anarchism. Replies can be found at: anarchism.pageabode.com and anarchism.pageabode.com

aimed at a specific goal," but by working class organisations. Yet one of his major conclusions seems to be that the anti-fascists in the 1920s made a mistake in not organising with elements of the bourgeoisie.

So where does that leave the ANL? The ANL, he claims, is "a united front" yet it is not based on any class organisations. Rather it is a mish-mash of various individuals and tendencies, united by the lowest common denominator of being "outraged and disgusted" by fascism. (p. 120) If fascism is a symptom of the disease of capitalism, how can you effectively combat it when anti-capitalism is replaced by anti-fascism? Nor is it a case of disagreeing over "what solutions should be offered" when fighting fascism. The solutions will affect the means used. How can it pursue a strong class policy against fascism if, by so doing, it will alienate the "middle class" elements the SWP wants to attract? How can it present an honest anti-fascism if it has to soft-peddle the role of Labour in keeping capitalism going in order to retain members?

Behan does not explain how the *"long term"* aim of the *"working class"* needing to *"be mobilised to fight the system — capitalism — which generates fascism"* can be reconciled with involving the middle class. (p. 109) Similarly, when he correctly argues that "a political understanding was needed in which anti-fascists clearly realised that to defeat fascism the state also needed to be defeated" (p. 87) he fails to explain how this is possible in the ANL and for it to remain purely anti-fascist. Ultimately, the SWP fails to recognise that an anti-fascism which waters down anti-capitalism will simply play the same role as Stalinism did in the Spanish Revolution, namely destroying socialism to placate the middle classes. Little wonder, then, that its interventions in such places as the North of England have meet with so little success — in spite of leafleting against the BNP, people still voted for them. Clearly labelled them "Nazi Hitler-lovers" simply does not work. Fascism will only be defeated when a viable working class socialism exists — one

"a revolutionary party is needed to educate and organise together with workers." (p. 120) Thus the working class (like the AdP) is considered the steam which the engineers of revolution use to implement its ideologically correct principles. That revolutionary theory is based as much on listening and learning as on talking and educating escapes Bolshevism. Rather than a socialism rooted in, and growing out of, working class life and struggles, we have a "socialism" which the working class must be "educated" into following.

Little wonder that armed with such an elitist and patronising attitude the SWP and its fronts have been so ineffectual against the BNP. Rather than present a working class socialism, the SWP is pursuing an essentially conservative agenda. Its "anti-fascism" amounts to supporting the status quo and fails to explain the class argument against fascism. By defending bourgeois society against fascism, the SWP are incapable of building a real anti-fascism as this needs to be anti-capitalist.

Perhaps this explains why Behan seems to consider that the class based politics of the 1920s as a mistake. He opposes the *"sterile verbal extremism"* of the PSI which resulted in *"a practical refusal to make common cause with any 'progressive bourgeois' elements."* (p. 96) He states that by 1921 the working class *"was now on the defensive and needed allies. This meant creating alliances on the ground, even outside the working class."* (p. 74) He complains that the *"fascists managed to win over the urban middle classes,"* caused in part by the left being "obsessed with attacking the middle classes as a whole rather than wining large sections of them to an anti-fascist position." (p. 75)

By these comments he indicates the SWP fronts have more in common with Stalin's "popular front" than the "united front" of Malatesta and the anarchists or even the "united front" of Lenin. Behan notes that the former *"involved Communist parties entering into broad national agreements with the leaderships of major bourgeois organisations and political parties."* (p. 104) The "united front" is, as he says, *"unity in action from below*

those more than willing to distort it as no one else will. To grow our movement needs to learn from and build upon the successes and failures of the past. And that will never happen if we do not know and understand our own history, how our ideas were applied in the past and why the likes of the SWP feel the need to lie about both.

An honest account of the events discussed by Behan in his book would quickly come to one conclusion, namely that anarchist ideas were proven right during this period. It was the anarchists, not the Marxists, who were at the forefront of the struggle against both capitalism and fascism. This can be seen from Behan's analysis of the failure of the Italian Socialists and Communists, where every suggestion he makes was, in fact, proposed at the time by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists and ignored by the Marxists.[5]

Unsurprisingly, given this, Behan fails to inform his reader of numerous key facts about this period, specifically the role of libertarians in the struggle. Once an honest account of libertarian theory and practice is presented it becomes obvious that **"The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini,"** much against its author's desires, irresistibly proves the correctness of anarchism. This review is, in part, an attempt to present the evidence to support this claim and to expose the distortions of Behan's account.

Not all Bad

Before discussing the distortions Behan inflicts upon the reader and what these mean for the politics and activity of the SWP, it is necessary to indicate why someone would want to read this book. It is not all bad. The actual accounts of the development of the AdP and specific (successful) fights against the

[5] To save space, the term anarchist will be used to cover both anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists.

Black Shirts in Rome, Parma and Sarzana presents the English speaking world with much new material. This information is inspiring and worth reading. It is a shame you have to wade through so much crap to get to it. Hopefully the books he culls this information from will be translated into English some time.

Similarly, the role of fascism as a defence of capitalism against a rebellious working class is clearly presented. The actions of the bourgeois state in protecting the Black Shirts, the links between them and the police and the funding provided by wealthy industrialists and landlords are indicated. Behan quotes from the **Times** and Winston Churchill's praise for Mussolini from 1927 to show that fascism was supported internationally by the ruling class because it effectively put the working class back into the place allotted to it by capitalism. He notes that around 6,000 working class people were murdered by fascists and police between 1917 and 1922, with tens of thousands wounded.[6] And, of course, Behan is right in stressing that fascism could have been stopped and in placing the AdP at the centre of any attempt to do so.

The major limitation in Behan's book is that it is ideologically driven. It aims to show that Leninism is correct. In order to do that, he must rewrite history quite significantly. In particular, he must rewrite the role of anarchism during this period. Only by doing this can be present Leninism as the only

[6] Unsurprisingly, Behan fails to mention that while this onslaught against the Italian working class was going on, Italy received a Soviet trade mission in March 1921 and after protracted negotiations signed a trade agreement at the end of the year. [E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 3, p. 340] Indeed, Bolshevik Russia was happy to negotiate with fascist Italy and Mussolini declared himself prepared for *de jure* recognition of the Soviet Government in November 1923, a declaration which was triumphantly hailed in Moscow as the first *"breach in the old Entente united front against Soviet Russia."* [E.H. Carr, **The Interregnum: 1923–1924**, p. 249]

attacked the policies and actions of those parties? Does this not mean any "united front" would replace a radical analysis of the causes of fascism and militant approach to fighting it with a bland support for the status quo that is failing working class people and creating the conditions by which some turn to fascism and other to religious fundamentalism?

Which suggests that the SWP dominated Anti-Nazi League (ANL) will be as ineffectual in fighting fascism in the future as it has been in the past. Fascism in Europe today needs to be fought using revolutionary socialist ideas, not (to quote Behan) *"two simple strands,"* namely *"the exposure of people pretending to be democrats as Nazi Hitler-lovers"* and *"militant campaigning to ensure that the Nazis never gain a stable foothold in society."* (p. 119) This does not present an alternative to fascism and, moreover, can boil down to supporting New Labour (or even the Tories) as a preferable "alternative" to fascism. Given that these parties are responsible for maintaining the social problems that the BNP try to use to scapegoat minorities, the message is that "anti-fascism" means supporting the status quo and the shit conditions working class people face.

Needless to say, Behan pays lip service to the need for anti-fascism to be relevant to working class people. He says that we should be *"encouraging working class people to defend their jobs and public services."* (p. 120) Yet this is not seen as being at the core of anti-fascism as it not one of the *"two simple strands"* he claims that the ANL is based on. Nor does he seem aware that many people do not have jobs to defend nor are public services the be all and end all of working class needs. Which shows how far the SWP is from working class life. As such, the situation now reflects that of 1920 in that it shows the failure of Marxist revolutionary politics as well as reformism. Yes, stopping the fascist threat *"requires revolutionary socialist politics"* (p. 120) but the SWP does not have them. Its Bolshevism and middle class base places it outside the working class. This is implicitly acknowledged when Behan somewhat patronising states that

stration. However, he states against all logic that *"the anti-capitalist movement has shown great strength"* in that the big demonstrations *"have brought people together, and taught them the importance of having hundreds of thousands of people on the streets — of safety in numbers."* (p. 118) This after he has proven the opposite, namely that large numbers did not stop the police attacking the Genoa demonstration! If the rise of fascism can be said to show anything it is *"safety in numbers"* is not enough. There were millions in radical unions and groups during 1918–1922, but the fascists attacked them anyway and won. Simply put, large numbers are not automatically powerful unless they are organised well. As his own book shows, the Marxist alternative simply fails to do this.

Needless to say, the struggle against fascism today is somewhat dissimilar to those facing the working class in Italy in the early 1920s. There has been no near revolution and the traditional forms of working class organisation are clearly alienated from the working class. Unlike Italy, fascism is not needed by the ruling class to crush rebellious working class (although, of course, that may change). Moreover, the Labour Party is in power and, consequently, responsible for many attacks on working class which the BNP uses to present itself as a "radical" alternative for white working class people. While the failure of reformist politics is a root cause for the rise of fascism then and now, the actual nature of that failure is radically different. This means that the tactics fascists use today are different than those of the Black Shirts in Italy and so the means of combating have to be different. It means that the "united front" strategy has to be re-evaluated and modified as required.

The idea of a "united front" based on pure anti-fascism cannot be used as simply as the SWP would like to suggest. After all, how could a "united front" which involved the Labour Party (as opposed to individual members) campaign against the anti-working class policies it was implementing? How could it attract members of mainstream parties if it resolutely

valid revolutionary theory available.[7] Ironically it is easy to refute Behan's account of anarchism and its role in this period. We need only look at the books he himself uses as references.[8] Once that is done, a radically different picture emerges than the one that Behan presents.[9] While his sources will be supplemented by other sources, this does not change the fact that Behan has significantly abused his references.

The distorting influence of ideology

For the SWP (and most Marxists) anarchism is dismissed as "individualism" or "petty bourgeois" and, as such, against collective working class struggle and organisation and eschew the need to organise to spread radical ideas. As anarchism is no such thing, the SWP get round this factual problem by dividing anarchists into two. There are the "anarchists" and they follow many of the ideas of Proudhon and Bakunin (sometimes Kropotkin gets a mentions) and then there are the "syndicalists." The SWP tend to imply that the latter are quasi-Marxist as they obviously do ***not*** reject collective working class struggle and organisation. But the syndicalists are damned because they reject "politics," "political struggle" and (most importantly) the "political party."

The problem with the SWP view of anarchism is that it factually wrong. Needless to say, anarchists do not reject collective working class struggle and organisation and syndicalists also

[7] This is not the first time the SWP have done this. John Rees in *"In Defence of October"* does a similar hatchet job on both the Kronstadt rebels and the Makhnovists (indeed, the methods used are similar). See anarchism.pageabode.com for details.

[8] This is usually the case with SWP accounts. It is obviously case that the leadership assumes that no one will check their references. Someone should tell their membership to do so. Perhaps that way we can stop the leadership treating them as idiots.

[9] This will, by necessity, be restricted to English language books. However, it is doubtful that Behan has used the Italian sources in a different way.

follow many of the ideas of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin. Similarly, anarchists and many syndicalists tend to favour organising together into groups and federations to spread their ideas in the class struggle. As such, the SWP's view of anarchism bears little relationship to the reality of anarchist ideas and action.

With that in mind, we would expect any account of struggles in a country with a large anarchist movement to be shaped by this distorted vision of anarchism. We can expect the following:

1. The anarchists are not mentioned even if our influence is key to understanding what happened.

2. When they are mentioned, then it will be in passing.

3. When a few anarchists act in ways that confirm the SWP's prejudices then these will be given more space than the 99% of anarchists who are doing what the SWP say we don't do.

4. If anarchists do things that the SWP says we don't then we are labelled "syndicalist" and no mention is made of influential anarchist federations and newpapers.

Behan book confirms these predictions time and time again. For example, Behan makes absolutely no mention of the **Italian Anarchist Union** (UAI), the twenty thousand strong anarchist federation with a daily newspaper which played a key role in the ***biennio rosso***. That this omission happens to coincide with the SWP's distortions on anarchism is, maybe, a coincidence, but a handy one. It ***does*** makes perfect sense if you subscribe to the position that anarchists reject political organisation but it does great mischief to any account that seeks to understand the dynamics of history.

The aim of this essay is, as noted, to reclaim working class history from those seek to abuse it for their own ends. Part

(p. 57) Nowhere in the provided quote is there any sign of nationalism, quite the opposite. It is usually expected that a quote is used to bolster a statement, not refute it. If Behan gets such basic points wrong, it is fair to say that his attention is less than focused on the AdP!

Lastly, Behan notes that Bordiga thought that *"fifth columnists could have entered the [AdP] organisation with some kind of strategic intent."* (p. 69) He quotes a PCI member justifying his party's refusal to be involved with the AdP because, in part, Secondari, the head of the organisation, *"was publicly accused as being a police spy and didn't explain himself."* (p. 107) Behan, ironically, has followed this example by labelling the more militant elements of the current "anti-capitalist" movement as state agents. As he put it in the November, 2002, issue of ***"Socialist Review"***: *"The Black Bloc: One particularly aggressive kind can easily be spotted. They dress all in black, but have a red stripe running down their trousers-we're talking about the carabinieri police force."*[95] But, of course, the SWP is not being sectarian when it equates the Black Bloc with the police…

Today

Perhaps the problems with the historical accuracy of many of Behan's claims and assertions could be forgiven if he managed to draw correct conclusions from the resistance to the rise of fascism in Italy. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, he does not. As he says, with the rise of fascism across Europe, "this is not just ancient history." (p. 116) Unfortunately he seems intent on repeating history rather than learning from it.

This can be seen from his discussion of the state repression of the Genoa protests in July, 2001, for example. Behan does mention the obvious links between the police and fascists and the fact that the police attacked the huge "anti-capitalist" demon-

[95] *"Tom Behan analyses the Italian left"*, www.swp.org.uk

the most politically sophisticated activists" (p. 109) should have elected (and re-elected until 1926!) such incompetent leaders is left unasked never mind unanswered! He complains that the AdP had to *"prioritise military matters over political issues,"* although he claims that if the PCI had been more involved it *"would have become more 'political' and would have widened its horizons."* (p. 109) Why the anarchists, republicans and socialists involved were not capable of doing that is not explained, but it is significant that Behan thinks it impossible for the AdP to develop revolutionary ideas by themselves. In this he repeats some of the most repulsive aspects of Lenin's ideas and, like Lenin, is proved wrong by the development of the class struggle. Simply put, like the Russian workers in 1905, 1917 and 1921 in regard to the Bolsheviks, the AdP were more advanced than the PCI.

So while Behan states that the AdP are at the core of the book, very little analysis of the organisation is actually presented. While there is descriptive accounts of various events (and it should be stressed that much of this is new to English speakers) the fact is that Behan discusses the ins and outs of the internal politics of the PCI and its relations with Moscow more than giving a serious account of the problems facing the AdP, how it organised, how confronted both fascism and its relations with other anti-fascist forces. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the AdP's first manifesto states that it was *"An anarchic formation **par excellence**."* (p. 57) In a country with a strong anarchist movement and tradition, such a comment cannot be considered accidental.

When Behan does discuss the politics of the AdP he rarely does it justice. For example, Behan states that while the AdP had broken with fascism and sought to oppose it, it *"they were still influenced by the ideas of D'Annunzio and therefore nationalism"* before quoting their first manifesto which clearly stated that *"We reject the manipulations and greed of patriotism, which takes pride only in its race. We avoid all nationalist scheming."*

of this, by necessity, will involve reclaiming anarchist history from those who seek to bury it. Why bother, some may ask. The answer is simple. If these distortions of history are not answered then a new generation of activists will have false understanding of history and anarchism. And those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. Hopefully by showing the distortions of history and anarchism that Behan inflicts on his readers, members of the SWP will wonder why their leadership lies to them so regularly. And, perhaps, they will seek out genuine revolutionary ideas and start thinking for themselves.

The Anarchists

To be fair, at least Behan's book does actually mention anarchists.[10] Sometimes they are part of "the left," sometimes they are not.[11] As a rule of thumb, it seems to be that when the anarchists are pursuing a line opposed to the Socialists or Communists but which Behan is in agreement with then they are not included.[12]

[10] The SWP seem to have a rule of thumb. People are named as anarchists or they are named as being influential in the working class, rarely both. Thus the Chicago Martyrs are usually called trade union leaders but not anarchists or, more rarely, anarchists and not trade union leaders. Louise Michel is called a Communard, but not an anarchist, and so on.

[11] Given the poverty of the Left, its best to leave it up to the reader to decide whether this is a bad thing or not!

[12] It would be interesting to find the exact facts about certain of Behan's comments. While he generally notes a Marxist influence (such as calling the anarchist stronghold Sarzana a *"Socialist-run"* town) he becomes very vague at other times. Thus Behan talks about a Parma AdP leader *"writing in a newspaper"* (p. 86) which was produced in Milan. As Milan was the home of the anarchist daily, could that explain the anonymity? Similarly, he when mentions that *"the trade council"* in Parma took *"an active part in trying to mobilise workers"*, (p. 81) we have to ask which one? The CGL, USI or UIL? This anonymity could be explained by the fact that Parma had been the headquarters of the USI until early 1920. Then there is the reference to

For example, Behan states that state repression and propaganda in 1917 saw *"the left flipping over and supporting the war."* (p. 21) In fact, the anarchists had *"been intransigent revolutionary 'defeatists' (i.e. anti-war) throughout the war."*[13] Their position did not change in 1917. Similarly, he argues that rise of fascism would not have happened if the AdP *"had been supported by the rest of the left"* (p. 51) yet the anarchists were the only group which ***did*** support the organisation wholeheartedly.[14] He notes that the railway workers' had *"[o]ne of the most militant unions"* and it *"had supported the Arditi del popolo the most"* (p. 51) but fails to mention that the *"libertarians were strong in their tradition areas,"* which included, among others, both Parma and the railwaymen (*"The independent railway and maritime unions were heavily influenced"*).[15] Perhaps, therefore, it is unsurprising that the AdP had *"a very high proportion of railway workers"* in it. (p. 62)

Then there is the example of Rome, where an ad hoc "Roman proletarian defence committee" was formed. Behan notes that two of its members came from the *"Roman trades council, as well as members of the Republican Party and individuals who defined themselves as anarcho-communists. Nobody attended from the Communist or Socialist parties."* (p. 58) Given that Rome was an anarchist stronghold, it would not be surprising if the trades council mentioned by Behan was an Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) one, particularly given the fact that UAI represen-

the *"two Roman trade councils"* in the *"Proletarian Defence Council."* (p. 72) Given PSI hostility to it, can we really be expected that one of them was the socialist trade union?

[13] Tobias Abse, *"The Rise of Fascism in an Industrial City,"* **Rethinking Italian Fascism**, p. 54

[14] Behan reiterates this claim, talking of *"the hostility of the rest left"* to the AdP and of the *"political mistakes of the established left."* (p. 109) Given the stupidity of the PSI and PCI it is probably good that the anarchists are not included in Behan's "left"!

[15] Williams, **Proletarian Order**, p. 194; Levy talks about *"the anarchist-led railwaymen"* [Levy, **Gramsci and the Anarchists**, p. 222]

Behan states that the AdP *"represented a clear alternative to the inadequacies of both the PCI and the PSI"* which *"many rank and file Communists and Socialists instinctively wanted to be part of."* The tragedy was that the *"Communist and Socialist left never came together around an enlarged AdP to form a united front against fascist attacks."* (p. 108) By not mentioning the anarchists, Behan avoids having to explain to his readers why the PSI and PCI refused to take up the long standing anarchist proposal for united action and why the anarchists were able to take part in the AdP. As well as explaining that, he could also explain why Marxist organisations consistently failed to express the wishes of their rank and files. After all, it does not bode well for the membership of such parties that their leaderships can effectively ignore them!

The Arditi del Popolo

Which shows the deep flaw in the whole work. While Behan claims that the AdP *"forms the central part"* of his book the fact is, to paraphrase Trotsky's abhorrent analogy[94], this organisation plays the same *"central part"* as steam does in a piston. The ***real*** focus is on the Communist Party, the organisation Behan obviously sees as providing the necessary leadership for the masses.

Ironically, even here his account exposes the limitations of Leninism rather than its necessity. The reader obviously invited to draw the conclusion that only if the PCI had not elected Amedeo Bordiga leader then the PCI could have lead the masses to a victory they were obviously unable to achieve by themselves. Why the people Behan considers as *"often*

[94] *"Without a guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston. But nevertheless, what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam."* [**History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 17]

ter is that the strongest working-class resistance to fascism was *"in Parma, Ancona, Livorno, la Spezia, Bari, Civitavecchia, Rome, Pisa and Piombino"* all of which had a strong libertarian tradition.[90] Behan own examples of successful working class resistance to fascism supports this. He points to Rome[91], Parma and Sarzana (where inhabitants worked in nearby La Spezia or *"the traditionally anarchist stronghold of Carrara"*).

It would, therefore, be far more truthful to say that success in Parma (as elsewhere) was due to the successful application of libertarian ideas of a revolutionary united front. This policy based itself on the direct action traditions developed by libertarian organisations and which members of other parties saw the validity of and joined (usually against the wishes of their own leadership). The actions of the libertarians were crucial in the success of resistance in Parma and so they cannot be left as an afterthought as Behan desires. As one anarchist pamphlet correctly puts it, the *"[i]nsurrections at Sarzanna, in July 1921, and at Parma, in August 1922, are examples of the correctness of the policies which the anarchists urged in action and propaganda."*[92] One historian points to the AdP in Livorno as *"the most fully translated into reality"* example of the *"united front of the four 'subversive' groups — Socialists, Communists. Republicans, and anarchists – put forward by the anarchist Malatesta."*[93] While Behan mentions Livorno (p. 55) he does not mention the massive growth in libertarian influence which, undoubtedly, made the anti-fascist unity and resistance he praises possible.

[90] Tobias Abse, **Op. Cit.**, p. 56

[91] Behan notes that *"[m]any individual anarchists and* ***Arditi*** *went to the meetings"* of the *"Proletarian Defence Committee"* which defeated the fascists in November 1920. This committee was made up of *"the two Roman trades councils and the Republican Party."* (p. 72) He also notes the *"trade union and Socialist Party leaders effectively fell silent in those crucial hours, saying nothing and organising nothing"* as well as *"the lack of PCI involvement"* in the anti-fascist victory. (pp. 73–4)

[92] **Red Years, Black Years**, p. 2

[93] Tobias Abse, **Op. Cit.**, p. 74

tatives obviously attended (i.e. those anarcho-communist "individuals" Behan mentions) and the stated opposition by the socialists and communists. Similarly, Behan notes that a general strike was called in Rome and the entire Lazio region in response to a fascist outrage at the end of July, 1921. He notes that the AdP *"had asked the trades council to call it."* (p. 61) Given that the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) had a peace pack with the fascists, it seems unlikely that it was a socialist trades council which responded to the call. It would be interesting to know which trades council was involved as it would indicate where the main support for the AdP came from and which kind of politics were attracted to its militant, direct actionist anti-fascism.

Then there is the way that anarchists only seem to appear as "individuals" and never as part of a political organisation. Behan does not mention the existence of the UAI (Italian Anarchist Union), an extremely influential federation of anarchist groups with a daily newspaper. Thus he repeats the old SWP nonsense about anarchists rejecting specific political organisation. Syndicalists in the USI also appear, so allowing Behan to maintain the ridiculous notion that anarchists and syndicalists have fundamentally different political ideas.

Moreover, he consistently distorts the influence, role and politics of our comrades in order to marginalise them. For example, he states that in the 1870s anarchism was *"more attuned to the needs of the peasants"* and that it *"was concentrated in the towns and countryside of the South, and had relatively little following in the northern cities."* (p. 6–7) While this may reflect Marxist ideology on the social roots of anarchism, the facts are radically different. Indeed, Behan's comments are directly contradicted by a book he uses as a reference (and so, presumably, has read). According to Nunzio Pernicone's in depth study of Italian anarchism in this period its *"real stronghold"* was *"north-central Italy."* Moreover, the majority of members were arti-

sans and workers, and the *"social element with the least representation"* was the peasantry.[16]

Needless to say, Behan inflicts all the standard Marxist nonsense about anarchism onto his readers. He opines that *"[s]uch was the strength of Bakunin's following that Federick Engels complained in 1872 that his stance was 'so simple that it could be learnt by heart in five minutes.'"* (p. 6) It is hard to work out what Behan is arguing here due to his mutilation of the English language. Is he really suggesting that the strength of Bakunin's following resulted in his ideas being "so simple" rather than vice versa? But, of course, quoting Engels on Bakunin is as convincing an argument as quoting the Pope on the joys of Catholicism. We need not bother discussing the obvious contempt Behan expresses towards the intellect of the workers and artisans of Italy who found in Bakunin's ideas inspiration for their struggles.[17] As will be discussed, Behan himself provides more than enough evidence to show that it was Bakunin, not Engels, who correctly predicted the fate of Italian Marxism.

Ironically, while he attacks the Italian anarchists for their failed insurrections of 1874 and 1877, he fails to note that these attempts where, in fact, at odds with Bakunin's ideas on the matter. While happy to quote Malatesta from Pernicone's book decades later on the baseless hopes of spontaneous revolution arising from these insurrections, Behan fails to present Pernicone's explanations for this policy in the social and political contexts of the time. Nor does Behan note that *"any critique of Bakunin's theory must take into account the fact that the insurrections had not been conducted in conformity*

[16] **Italian Anarchism, 1864–1892**, p. 76 and pp.78–9

[17] Behan's contempt matches that of Engels himself who, as Pernicone makes clear, *"consistently underestimated Bakunin as a political adversary and refused to believe that Italian workers might embrace anarchist doctrines."* He failed to acknowledge that anarchism *"was rapidly developing a following among Italian artisans and workers,"* preferring to indulge in conspiracy theories to explain the unpopularity of the Marxist program. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 52]

Now, why should the existence of a very large anarchist movement cause the PCI leadership to be sectarian? Behan does not explain. Perhaps he wants the reader to conclude that it was anarchist sectarianism that caused the PCI leadership to reciprocate? But such a conclusion could not be drawn in light of over two years of consistent anarchist arguments for a revolutionary united front. But, then, Behan fails to mention this. He only quotes Malatesta from May 1921 on its necessity. Yet as Malatesta is the only person Behan does quote arguing for a united front, some evidence is there to show that the terrible policies of the PCI cannot be considered the fault of the anarchists. So where does that leave us? Could it be that the PCI leadership was sectarian simply because they knew that if their members worked with anarchists then, in all likelihood, they would leave the party and become anarchists? If we look, at say, Luigi Fabbri's total and utter destruction of Bukharin's arguments against anarchism we can say that the PCI leadership's concerns were justified (just as today the SWP leaderships' smears against anarchism can be understood in a similar light).[89]

Which, of course, would explain Behan's own approach to anarchists in his book. He consistently distorts the ideas, actions and influence of libertarians in the Italian labour movement, the ***biennio rosso*** and the resistance to fascism. He continually fails to mention how deep anarchist involvement in the AdP actually was. At best he mentions them in passing, at worse he ignores them. For example, he manages to turn history on its head by concentrating on the Socialists and Communists in the libertarian stronghold of Parma and then stating *"crucially, they were joined by revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists"*! While the way he phrased it could be considered as an implicit compliment to the anarchists, the facts of the mat-

[89] See Luigi Fabbri's classic essay **Anarchy and 'Scientific' Communism**. This essay is available at: www.zabalaza.net

that was not the party's leadership." He added that this policy *"served to disqualify a mass movement which had started from below and which could instead have been exploited by us politically."*[88] Unsurprisingly, Behan only quotes the second part of Gramsci's argument (p. 108) so turning his support for the disastrous PCI policy into opposition. This selective quoting also has the advantage of hiding the lack of PCI influence in the AdP and so hiding key information to the readers seeking to understand the actions of the PCI.

Looking at Gramsci's full argument, it becomes clear that for the PCI the struggle against fascism was seen purely as a means of gaining more members. Moreover, it is clear that Moscow wanted a PCI dominated "united front," not a democratic one. Bukharin stated that the PCI *"was too weak to dominate this spontaneous movement."* (p. 107) The Comintern stated that the PSI and PCI should merge in such a way as to *"assure a firm revolutionary Communist leadership."* (p. 101) How this could be achieved when Behan admits that the PSI *"had about three times"* as many members as the PCI is not explained. Thus we have a "united front" whose aim was to secure and increase Communist influence and, if this could not be achieved, it is doubtful that it would have been supported. When the opposite was a possibility, they preferred defeat and fascism than risk their followers becoming influenced by anarchism. Which, in his own way, is confirmed by Behan himself. Pondering the actions of the PCI leadership he tries to explain this by the PCI being a young party ("infantile," perhaps?) as well as being *"much smaller"* than the Socialist Party. He then lets the cat out of the bag by stating *"it also had to contend with a very large anarchist movement."* This *"context,"* he states, allows some of its *"suspicion and sectarianism"* to be *"understood"* (but not defended). (p. 94)

[88] **Selections from Political Writings (1921–1926)**, p. 333

with his teachings. For all his alleged reliance on the revolutionary 'instincts' and 'spontaneity' of the masses, Bakunin had always been cautious to emphasise practical considerations, such as the need for organisation and preparedness." The Italian anarchists had not forged *"a revolutionary alliance between the urban working classes and the peasant masses"* as Bakunin had consistently argued.[18] As Pernicone notes, the Italian anarchists in the 1880s and 1890s should have placed *"greater emphasis on trade unionism and economic struggle, especially since many anarchists, including Bakunin, had long recognised the revolutionary potential of syndicalism."*[19] The experience of anarchism after the turn of the century (particularly in 1919–20) show the validity of Bakunin's ideas in this respect.[20] It is to Malatesta's credit that his re-evaluation of his old ideas the 1890s helped this process of returning to the roots of anarchism in the labour movement.

The Red Years

However, his most outrageous claim is the that *"semi-anarchist, semi-revolutionary syndicalist USI federation ... with its main stronghold in the rural areas of the Po valley ... therefore played a relatively minor role in the big industrial disputes"* of the ***biennio rosso***. (p. 25)

Needless to say, he does provide a reference for this claim, a 1963 book by D Horowitz called **"The Italian Labor Movement."** Sadly, Behan fails to explain why he should prefer this source than the more recent work by Gwyn Williams, Carl Levy and Martin Clark (all of which he uses as references). Nor

[18] Pernicone, **Op. Cit.**, p. 94

[19] Pernicone, **Op. Cit.**, p. 117

[20] To present a typical quote from Bakunin on this subject: *"Organise the city proletariat in the name of revolutionary Socialism, and in doing this unite it into one preparatory organisation together with the peasantry."* [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 378]

does he explain why he then bothers to note a few pages later that the *"anarchist USI federation argued for offensive rather than defensive occupations, and for involving other categories of workers"* in the run up to the factory occupations of September 1920. (p. 32) Why an organisation which played a *"relatively minor role"* in these events should even be mentioned is left unexplained.

Perhaps an answer can be gleaned from looking at the books Behan rejects in favour of Horowitz? If you do, you will be struck by the fact they are quite clear on the significant role played by the USI during these *"big industrial disputes."* It is significant that Behan rejects the books that concentrate on the events and dynamics of this intense period of class struggle in favour of an academic account of the whole labour movement. Simply put, Behan is distorting history.

Suffice to say, Behan is following the leading Socialist (then Communist) Antonio Gramsci in this. In July, 1920, Gramsci wrote a report on the Turin movement of factory councils for the Executive Committee of the Third International. Like Behan, Gramsci mentioned the anarchists in passing. Williams comments on this aspect of Gramsci's report:

> *"It would perhaps be uncomradely to remind the shade of Antonio of his ringing statement a year earlier — 'To tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act.' In that same report he said the Turin movement, betrayed and abandoned by the whole socialist movement, still found popular support during the April struggle ... He omitted to mention that these actions were either directly led or indirectly inspired by anarcho-syndicalists. He refrained from making the point that the council movement outside Turin was essentially anarcho-syndicalist. And when he said of Turin 'Anarchist and syndicalist groups have hardly any influence*

and increased their success around the country." (p. 105) How could the influx of PCI members have resulted in better *"leadership"* when, he claims, *"communists"* already were the leaders and that the members *"probably"* also were? And how could they become communists if, as he earlier claimed, they already were? Even the four people he discusses in the conclusion fail to support his assertion. Of the four, only one became a communist (he was originally a socialist). The anarchist remained an anarchist and the communist remained a communist. Unless he claims that Argo Secondari's descent into madness is equivalent to becoming a communist, we are left with only a minority becoming communist.

The contradictions can only be explained by the simple fact that the *"majority"* in the AdP were not, in fact, *"probably"* communists at all. This can be seen from Behan's account. After all, why should the PCI have opposed participation in the AdP if *"communists"* were *"probably"* the majority of the activists? That seems an illogical and insupportable assertion on Behan's part. And these hopes are not supported by the arguments of the PCI leadership. Gramsci[87], for example, looked back at this period and stated that *"the party leadership's attitude on the question of the Arditi del Popolo ... corresponded to a need to prevent the party members from being controlled by a leadership*

[87] For Behan, Gramsci is the great hero. *"Apart from Gramsci,"* he states, *"PCI leaders only started to come to their senses when it was too late."* (p. 99) This is in relation to events in mid-1922. Yet as one historian notes, Gramsci *"fought hard against"* the *"danger"* of being *"absorbed"* into *"a generic anti-Fascist front, interested mainly in persevering 'bourgeois liberties' ... Even in 1925, he was not interested in preserving 'bourgeois liberties'. That was not what the Communist Party had been formed to do."* He *"denounced those right-wing Communists ... who held that the Communists should be the 'left-wing' of an anti-Fascist coalition."* [Clark, **Op. Cit.**] Even in 1926, Gramsci did not distance himself from the decisions of the PCI leadership over the AdP. While acknowledging it isolated the PCI from the masses he substantially agreed with why that was required. Unsurprisingly, Behan selectively quotes Gramsci on this matter.

Secret Police (i.e. what would be considered the *"proletarian's revolutionary military organisation"*) were under party control. It had to be to implement the party dictatorship. Given that the leadership of the PCI considered themselves as following in the Bolshevik's footsteps, it is easy to see why they advocated the positions they did.

It would seem incredulous to fail to mention, never mind discussion, these influences from Moscow when evaluating the decisions and actions of the PCI. Yet this is what Behan does. He fails to explain why Borghia and the bulk of the PCI held the positions it did. Surely the arguments made by these comrades are worthy of reporting? Even if flawed, it is unconvincing to simply dismiss them without real discussion. Nor is it convincing to ignore the negative influence associated with Russian Bolshevism and the rhetoric it used to justify its dictatorship.

Making your mind up!

In spite of lack of evidence and official PCI hostility, Behan tries his best to paint the PCI as the mainspring of the AdP. While acknowledging that *"its membership came from many different political traditions"* he asserts that the *"majority were probably Communists"* (p. 62) and that *"as far as can be established, the majority of AdP activists defined themselves as 'Communists,' although most probably weren't members of the PCI."*[86] (p. 98) He then contradicts himself in the conclusion by stating that while many *Arditi* were Socialists, anarchists or even Republicans *"if they continued to engage in politics they generally became Communists."* (p. 114) He also argues that the PCI should have *"entered the AdP en masse"* and this (*"in all probability"!*) would have provided them a *"more stable leadership, on the working mass,' he could perhaps be forgiven for not reporting that these un-influential groups were in March-April threatening to cut the council movement out from under him."*[21]

According to Williams, *"Anarchism and syndicalism during 1919–1920 are neglected and ill-served by history."*[22] *"Anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists,"* he stresses, *"were the most consistently and totally revolutionary group on the left ... the most obvious feature of the history of syndicalism and anarchism in 1919–20: rapid and virtually continuous growth ... The syndicalists above all captured militant working-class opinion which the socialist movement was utterly failing to capture."*[23]

This role can be seen from the factory occupations. On 17th February 1920, metal and shipbuilding plants in Liguria were occupied by their workers *"under syndicalist leadership."*[24] Unsurprisingly, therefore, it was the anarchists and syndicalists who first raised the idea of occupying workplaces.[25] In March 1920, during *"a strong syndicalist campaign to establish [workers'] councils in Milan, Armando Borghi [anarchist secretary of the USI] called for mass factory occupations. In Turin, the re-election of workshop commissars was just ending in a two-week orgy of passionate discussion and workers caught the fever. [Factory Council] Commissars began to call for*

[86] Given that most anarchists described themselves at the time as communist-anarchists and had done so since the 1880s, it does not automatically mean that "communist" equates to Marxist at this time.

[21] **Proletarian Order**, pp. 193–4

[22] **Ibid.**, p. 252, fn 2. Clark agrees, noting that the USI *"remained important throughout 1919 and 1920 — indeed, their influence has been much underestimated by must historians."* [**Antonio Gramsci and the revolution that failed**, p. 34]

[23] **Proletarian Order**, pp. 194–195

[24] **Ibid.**, p. 199

[25] For example, Malatesta raised the idea in **Umanita Nova** in March, 1920: *"General strikes of protest no longer upset anyone ... One must seek something else. We put forward an idea: take-over of factories... the method certainly has a future, because it corresponds to the ultimate ends of the workers' movement and constitutes an exercise preparing one for the ultimate act of expropriation."* [**Life and Ideas**, p. 134]

occupations." Unsurprisingly, the secretary of the syndicalist metal-workers *"urged support for the Turin councils because they represented anti-bureaucratic direct action, aimed at control of the factory and could be the first cells of syndicalist industrial unions ... The syndicalist congress voted to support the councils... Malatesta ... supported them as a form of direct action guaranteed to generate rebelliousness ...* ***Umanita Nova*** *and* ***Guerra di Classe*** *[paper of the USI] became almost as committed to the councils as* ***L'Ordine Nuovo*** *and the Turin edition of* ***Avanti.***"[26] Indeed, *"by March 1920 the syndicaists were virtually the only spokesmen left for popular discontent ... in the spring of 1920 ... the syndicalists provided temporarily the most influential leadership for many sections of the Italian working class."*
27

In Turin itself libertarians *"worked within FIOM"* and had been *"heavily involved in the* ***Ordine Nuovo*** *campaign from the beginning."*[28] In April, 1920, the *"syndicalists were the only ones to move"*[29] in support of the Turin general strike.[30] The railway workers in Pisa and Florence refused to transport troops who were being sent to Turin. There were strikes all around Genoa, among dock workers and in workplaces where the USI was a major influence. This process continued throughout the summer and *"by mid-July the Turin metal-workers were once more in opposition to their official Union leadership about 'revolutionary' issue; it was, however, the syndicalists, and not the [Marxist]* ***Ordine Nuovo****, who were at the head of the movement."* The growth of syndicalist influence *"was not confined*

[26] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 200, p. 193 and p. 196]

[27] Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 94

[28] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 195

[29] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 207

[30] Behan notes that the *"PSI leaders refused to call for solidarity action elsewhere"* but does not mention syndicalist solidarity (p. 29)

lack of PSI interest in the anarchist call for a revolutionary front, a call first made in 1919.

Moreover, once the PCI was formed the likelihood of it joining in an "united front" with what its members considered as the Italian equivalent of the Mensheviks would have been even more remote. After all, had not the PSI, like the Mensheviks, betrayed the working class? Had it not sided with the bourgeoisie, as had the Mensheviks? And if the Bolsheviks were arresting (and even shooting) Mensheviks in Russia, how could Communists in Italy work with their equivalents? Thus when Behan quotes Bordiga from 1921 arguing that *"Fascists and social democrats are bit two aspects of tomorrow's single enemy"* (p; 93) he fails to note that this had been the Bolshevik line against the Russian social-democrats for at least three years.
85

These influences from Moscow can explain other PCI decisions Behan notes but fails to discuss. This can be seen from the PCI leadership's position on the AdP. They argued that (to quote Bordiga) the *"proletarian's revolutionary military organisation must be on a* ***party*** *basis"* and so members *"cannot and must not take part in activities organised by other parties, or which in any event arise outside the party."* (p. 68) The success of the AdP in Sarazana (and elsewhere) did not change that policy, nor did the fact that many rank and file communists ignored the leadership.

Behan makes no real attempt to explain this decision. This is unsurprising as this policy can best be understood if events in Russia are taken into account. There both the Army and

it is perhaps a question of years." (p. 103) As the PSI/PCI in 1920/1 thought it was a "question of months," it is obvious why they were hostile to the anarchist call for an united front.

[85] Similarly, when Bordiga stated that the PCI *"should aim at the liquidation of all other anti-fascist oppositions"* he was simply following the lead of the Bolsheviks, who had eliminated all opposition to the party. [E.H. Carr, **Op. Cit.**, p. 84]

groups had any links with the White counter-revolution, they simply asked the Bolsheviks to stick to their pre-1917 rhetoric and the soviet constitution. This did not stop the Bolsheviks demonising them, particularly the Mensheviks. These positions were, unsurprisingly, transmitted into other Communist Parties. This included pro-Communists in the Italian Socialist Party and the PCI once it split from the PSI in early 1921.

Thus we find Avanti on the 26th of September, 1920, arguing that *"in Russia, under the soviet regime, the Party really directs all State policy and all public activities; individuals as well as groups being utterly subordinated to the decisions of the Party, so that**the dictatorship of the proletariat is really the dictatorship of the party and, as such, of its central committee.**"*[81] Malatesta correctly argued that *"we know what we have to look forward to: the dictatorship of the leadership of the Socialist Party, or of the as yet unborn Communist Party."*[82] Bordiga obviously subscribed to this position, as can be seen from his 1921 essay ***"Party and Class"*** where he stressed that the *"direction of class action is delegated to the party."*[83]

So when Behan attacks Bordiga for being *"wrong on the issue of democracy"* (p. 92), he fails to place Bordiga's arguments within the context of developments within the Bolshevik revolution and the actions and ideology of Lenin and Trotsky. Needless to say, such a perspective would automatically exclude any notion of a "united front" during this period. How could you work with others if the aim was to impose your own dictatorship in the near future?[84]This helps explain the

[81] quoted by Malatesta, *"Enfin! Ce Que C'est que ;a 'Dictatorship of the proletariat'"*, **Anarchistes, Socialistes et Communistes**, p. 209

[82] **Ibid.**

[83] *"Party and Class,"* contained in **Bordiga versus Pannekoek**, Antagonism Press p. 39. Bordiga's essay is clearly an attempt to justify the Bolshevik truism that revolution required party rule over the working class.

[84] Behan quotes Trotsky from 1921 arguing that the "united front" was required because *"we are no longer close to seizing power in the world revolution. In 1919 we thought it was a question of months, but now we are saying that*

to Turin: it was a national phenomenon."[31] Indeed, **Ordine Nuovo** *"played no part in the events leading up to the factory occupations in Turin, and ... it was opposed to factory seizure as a method of class struggle."*[32] Rather it was the syndicalists who *"continued their agitation for factory seizure"* at this time, with the occupations caused, in part, *"by the strength of syndicalist ideas."*[33]

By September, 1920, the main reason why idea of large-scale stay-in strikes in Italy was in the air was thanks to anarchist influence: *"Central to the climate of the crisis was the rise of the syndicalists."* In mid-August, the USI metal-workers *"called for both unions to occupy the factories"* and called for *"a preventive occupation"* against lock-outs. The USI saw this as the *"expropriation of the factories by the metal-workers"* (which must *"be defended by all necessary measures"*) and saw the need *"to call the workers of other industries into battle."*[34] Indeed, *"[i]f the FIOM had not embraced the syndicalist idea of an occupation of factories to counter an employer's lockout, the USI may well have won significant support from the politically active working class of Turin."*[35]

Italy was *"paralysed, with half a million workers occupying their factories and raising red and black flags over them."* The movement spread throughout Italy, not only in the industrial heartland around Milan, Turin and Genoa, but also in Rome, Florence, Naples and Palermo. The *"militants of the USI were certainly in the forefront of the movement,"* while **Umanita Nova** argued that *"the movement is very serious and we must do everything we can to channel it towards a massive extension."* The persistent call of the USI was for *"an extension of the movement to the whole of industry to institute their 'expropriating*

[31] Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 145

[32] Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 162

[33] Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 154 and p. 156

[34] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 236, pp. 238–9

[35] Carl Levy, **Op. Cit.**, p. 129

general strike.'"[36] Railway workers, *"heavily influenced"* by the libertarians, refused to transport troops, workers went on strike against the orders of the reformist unions and peasants occupied the land.[37]

Quite impressive for a movement which had "*played a relatively minor role"* in these struggles! While the occupations may have occurred without this libertarian agitation, it is unlikely. Therefore it is simply dishonest of Behan to downplay the key role anarchists and syndicalists played in this period, particularly in the industrial disputes and the factory councils and occupations. Given the crucial role libertarians played in these events, it is unsurprising that Behan prefers to reference an academic study of Italian trade unionism rather than those later studies that specifically concentrate on the dynamics of the class struggle during the near-revolutionary period in question?

The Factory Councils and Anarchism

This support for the councils is unsurprising, given the role these had played in revolutionary anarchist theory since Bakunin. As he saw it, the revolution would be based on *"the federative alliance of all working men's associations"* which could *"constitute the Commune."* The *"revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation."*[38] Italian anarchists stressed this position during the Red Years. To quote one from the July 1920 UAI congress at Bologna:

[36] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 236 and pp. 243–4

[37] **Op. Cit.**, p. 194

[38] **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 170 and p. 172

is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position ...'"[78] By the second congress of the Communist International, Zinoviev was openly proclaiming this position on the debate on the role of the Communist Party. He opined:

> *"Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class ... the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party."*[79]

In the same year Lenin stressed that the *"very presentation of the question — 'dictatorship of the Party or dictatorship of the class, dictatorship (Party) of the leaders or dictatorship (Party) of the masses?' is evidence of the most incredible and hopeless confusion of mind"* and *"[t]o go so far ... as to draw a contrast in general between the dictatorship of the masses and the dictatorship of the leaders, is ridiculously absurd and stupid."*[80]

This theoretical justification for party rule was, as can be seen, not based on specifically Russian needs but was rather universalised into a general law of revolution. Moreover, this position was combined with state repression directed against other socialists (such as the Mensheviks, Left-SRs, etc.) as well as anarchists, militant workers and peasants. None of these

[78] **Collected Works**, vol. 29, p. 535

[79] **Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 1, pp. 151–2

[80] **Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder**, p. 27 and p. 25

masses role that of simply following them. A far more fruitful discussion would have been to explain what it was about the Marxist organisations that allowed such terrible leaders to dominate in the first place and, equally important, why their membership not only put up with them but also carried out their orders.

But such an analysis would hardly be a Leninist one and so it is unsurprisingly not even mentioned.

Moscow

Behan mentions that the *"[o]ne of the reasons for the popularity of the PCI was the tremendous prestige of the Bolshevik party in Russia, which had led a successful revolution in 1917."* (p. 99) Yet he singularly fails to discuss how PCI policies were influenced by developments in Bolshevik practice and theory. If he did, then the reader would gain an insight into why the PCI acted like it did. Moreover, they would start to question how "successful" the Russian Revolution actually was.

The period being discussed is an important one in the development of Bolshevism. While the Bolshevik party had seized power in 1917 with working class support, by the summer of 1918 things had changed. Faced with rejection in soviet elections throughout European Russia the Bolsheviks replied by disbanding and gerrymandering soviets.[77] By the beginning of the civil war, the Bolshevik government had become a dictatorship ***over*** the proletariat (as Bakunin had predicted). As the civil war progressed, the Bolshevik position solidified, with Lenin proclaiming in 1919 that *"[w]hen we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party ... we say, 'Yes, it*

words *"Lenin is dead. Long live liberty."* [Peter Marshal, **Demanding the Impossible**, p. 353]

[77] For example, see Samuel Farber's **Before Stalinism** for a short but useful summary.

> *"[The Councils are] the proper organisations for enrolling, in preparation for the Revolution, all manual or intellectual producers right on the job. [The Councils] are, in accordance with the ends of anarchist communist principles, absolutely ant-State organisations and possible nuclei for the future direction of industrial and agricultural production."*[39]

Significantly, the USI Metal-Workers Union considered *"the seizure of the factories"* as a means by which *"the workers' united front must exist in reality."*[40] In May, 1920, a Lombardy anarchist conference called for a big propaganda campaign for factory councils and *"the united front of the masses."*[41] Needless to say, Behan fails to note the anarchist support for the councils as a means of creating a united front from below. Given that his book argues that this was an essential means for combating fascism, such an omission is extremely strange.

This support for factory councils was not unique to Italian Anarchism. For example, the Russian Anarchists recognised this affinity of workers' councils to anarchism during the 1905 revolution. Unlike the Russian Marxists (both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks), they saw the soviets as being the practical confirmation of anarchist ideas of working class self-organisation as being the framework of a socialist society. For example, the syndicalists *"regarded the soviets ... as admirable versions of the* ***bourses du travail****, but with a revolutionary function added to suit Russian conditions. Open to all leftist workers regardless of specific political affiliation, the soviets were to act as nonpartisan labour councils improvised 'from below' ... with the aim of bringing down the old regime."* The anarchists of **Khleb i Volia** *"also likened the 1905 Petersburg Soviet — as a nonparty mass or-*

[39] quoted by John M. Camett, **Antonio Gramsci and the Origins and Italian Communism**, p. 124

[40] quoted by Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 155

[41] quoted by Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 118

ganisation — to the central committee of the Paris Commune of 1871."[42] Kropotkin argued that anarchists should take part in the soviets as long as they *"are organs of the struggle against the bourgeoisie and the state, and not organs of authority."*[43]

The unaccidental demonisation of anarchism

While Behan's comments regarding anarchism have little relationship to reality, they do reflect SWP ideology on the matter. After all, the SWP like to claim that anarchism rejects collective class struggle. Presenting an accurate picture of anarchist involvement in the *Bennio Rosso* (and the AdP) would confuse their members and so it goes unmentioned. Therefore it is unsurprising, given the SWP's line on this matter, that Behan actually gives more space to denouncing the *"notorious incident"* of a bomb attack on a Milan theatre than anarchist participation in mass struggle. He even gives *"terrorist attacks"* (of which he presents one!) equal billing with the occupation of the factories and the growth of socialism and communism[44] for making fascism an *"attractive proposition"* (p. 46) for many!

He patronisingly introduces this subject by stating that *"[a]lthough anarchists did play a vital role within [the AdP] generally, sadly some had a tendency to engage in individual 'deeds,' or acts of terrorism."* (p. 45) So ***one*** act, committed by a few anarchists, is considered more typical of anarchism than the thousands who took part in the AdP across the country. As usual, reality is different. As Carl Levy notes the *"anarchists played an important roles in the Arditit del Popolo in*

[42] Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, pp. 80–1

[43] quoted by Graham Purchase, **Evolution and Revolution**, p. 30

[44] Behan makes no mention, of course, about the growth of anarchism in this period.

ists along the same line and their rejection.[75] He could have recounted the PSI and PCI arguments against this libertarian suggestion. By so doing, he would have helped to understand the period better and indicate the real obstacles that existed to his suggestion of a "united front" against fascism. He never addresses the question of whether the PSI (or its leadership) would have supported a Italian Communist Party (PCI) call for a "united front" if it had made it.

But Behan fails to do this and so the reader is left perplexed to why "the left" in Italy acted as it did. This is unsurprising, given the SWP's perspective on anarchism. By mentioning these calls for a revolutionary front the SWP would have confused its membership with an account of anarchists which shattered their usual caricatures and distortions. Ultimately, for a book whose aim is to put forward the case for a "united front" it seems strange that Behan fails to mention attempts to form such organisations in this period. Perhaps he wants the reader to think that the idea of a "united front" came purely from Lenin and Trotsky? Or that it was all Bordiga's fault?

And this does seem to be the gist of Behan's book. He continually points us in the direction of flawed leaders, not in the dynamics of the class struggle. Thus Behan states that it is *"hard to be sufficiently critical of Amedeo Bordiga in this period"* (p. 91) with the obvious conclusion being that if the PCI had a better leader then fascism would have been defeated! We are left with the question of what would have happened if there had been an Italian Lenin (or Trotsky) in 1919 or if Lenin (or Trotsky) had argued for the "united front" in 1919.[76] Thus, ironically, history is reduced to the actions of a few great men, with the

[75] Writing in 1926, Malatesta talked about *"the constant efforts made by those leaders [of the socialist trade union] to frustrate any proposal for unification and keep dissidents at bay"* during this time. [**The Anarchist Revolution**, p. 33]

[76] Ironically, Malatesta was called by some the *"Lenin of Italy,"* a notion he rejected and combated. He greeted Lenin's death in 1924 with the

says it all. It suggests a reason why the libertarian "united front" was never seriously considered by the Marxists at this time.[73]

Behan, surprisingly, quotes Malatesta's appeal for unity against fascism made in May 1922. (p. 49) Given that one of his main lessons from this period is the need for a united front, it seems strange that he remains quiet on these anarchist and syndicalist calls and Marxist responses to them. After all, as Tobias Abse argues, *"[w]hat happened in Parma in August 1922 ... could have happened elsewhere, if only the leadership of the Socialist and Communist parties thrown their weight behind the call of the anarchist Malatesta for a united revolutionary front against Fascism."*[74] He does not note that this call for co-operation had been urged since early 1919, nor does he discuss why the socialists and communists rejected these appeals until it was too late (1922 saw the creation of a Labour Alliance whose general strike in August was, as Behan recounts, defeated by fascist violence).

Given that Behan's book is an attempt to explain the necessity of a united front against fascism, it seems strange (to say the least) that he fails to mention these anarchist calls (and the debates they must have produced). These calls must be known to him as they are in books he uses as a references, yet he fails to mention them or explain why the PSI could not be won over to an alliance. Unsurprisingly, therefore, when Behan talks about *"an AdP united front"* he just talks about a *"clear united-front approach to Socialists"* by the PCI (p. 105) and singularly fails to discuss the long history of anarchist calls to the Social-

[73] Clark quotes a police informer stating in May 1290 that the Socialist deputies *"would not be averse to a little reaction to induce the masses to return to the orders of their leaders who have lost influence through the fault of anarchist propagandists."* [quoted by Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 146f]

[74] Tobias Abse, **Op. Cit.**, p. 56

1921" which was *"particularly successful in central Italy were the traditions of libertarian 'subversivism' were the strongest."* He notes that it was *"the sectarianism of the communists"* and the *"timidity of the socialists"* which weakened it.[45] *"It is no coincidence,"*states Tobias Abse, *"that the strongest working-class resistance to Fascism was in ... towns or cities in which there was quite a strong anarchist, syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist tradition."*[46]

Behan then helps the reader understand his point by stating that *"[s]uch acts [sic!] of individual terrorism were completely different from the traditions of the organised working class"* which are *"open and mass resistance."* (p. 45) He then goes on to quote Trotsky on the futility of such tactics. It is a shame he did not quote Kropotkin's thoughts on this issue. In 1894 Kropotkin argued that a *"structure based on centuries of history cannot be destroyed by a few kilos of explosives."*[47] Miller summarises the standard anarchist position on this matter by noting that *"Kropotkin decried the futility of the terrorist act ... The real meaning of 'propaganda by the deed' was mass resistance to the oppression of the state, collective action against tyranny ... Masses, not individuals, make the social revolution."*[48]But, of course, presenting an accurate account of anarchism's ideas on this matter could result in Behan's reader finding out more about it. Suffice to say, if someone generalised about Marxism from the example of the Red Brigades as Behan does about anarchism here, he would have a fit.

Incidentally, even his own example fails Behan. This bombing campaign had nothing to do with the resistance to fascism. Rather, it was in support of the hunger strike which Malatesta and other imprisoned anarchists mounted to

[45] **Op. Cit.**, p. 222

[46] **Op. Cit.**, p. 56

[47] quoted by Martin A. Miller, **Kropotkin**, p. 174

[48] Miller, **Ibid.**, pp. 174–5

protest their imprisonment since October 1920. Significantly, Behan fails to mention that the Prime Minister had arrested the entire leadership of the USI and UAI after the factory occupations had been betrayed (showing that the Italian state, unlike Behan, knew where the really revolutionary threat was in Italy in those days). In this, he repeats the example of the Marxists of the time who *"more-or-less ignored the persecution of the libertarians"* until the hunger strike in the spring of 1921.[49]

Moreover, anarchists had used *"open and mass resistance."* In the words of Marie-Louise Berneri:

> *"The workers had been too demoralised by the defeat which followed the occupation of the factories to put up any serious opposition. The situation was different in February 1920; then the Government tried to arrest Malatesta ... Immediately all the major towns of Tuscany declared a general strike ... Malatesta was released."*

She points out that *"Anarchists and Syndicalists all over Italy organised demonstrations in order to obtain the liberation of their comrades but they received no solidarity from the socialist organisations."*[50] The Socialist paper urged its readers *"to pay no attention to any appeals for action"* until they had *"been duly passed by the Party's central organs and by the economic organisations competent to deal with them."* They finally decided upon a one hour strike! As Berneri argues, *"[t]hanks to the complicity of the Socialist Reformist organisations the Government was able to keep Malatesta and Borghi in prison for nine months."*[51]

[49] Carl Levy, **Op. Cit.**, 221–2

[50] Tobias Abse, for example, records the libertarian-led general strike in Livorno in March 1921 to release Malatesta [**Op. Cit.**, p. 71]

[51] *"The Rise of Fascism in Italy,"* **War Commentary**, mid-September 1943, p. 10

libertarians. As well as *"being involved [in] the politics of the local trade unions ... [It] was also the birthplace of the Torinese Red Guards."*[69] Given the key role Behan gives to the "united front" it seems strange that he fails to discuss these events.

It should be noted that this opposition to a united front with anarchists had a long history. Behan fails to note that Gramsci (his obvious preference for PCI leader) had *"opposed politically inspired united fronts of anarchists and socialists in Turin or in Italy"* between 1916 and early 1918.[70] Given that there had been a public debate on this matter between Luigi Fabbri and Serrati (for the PSI), it would have been useful for Behan to summarise this discussion (and subsequent ones) in order for the reader to evaluate his claim that the "united front" was a practical option against fascism and, equally important, the hurdles that it faced. But perhaps we should not be surprised, as it seems likely that this book was written to justify current SWP practice that actually to understand previous revolutionary struggles and suggested tactics.

Unsurprisingly, Behan does not bother to inform the reader of practical steps made towards this libertarian inspired "united front" before 1922. For example, in mid-September 1920 the USI sponsored an "inter-proletariat" convention with delegates from the syndicalist federation, the rail and maritime unions and the UAI.[71] In contrast, June of that year saw the PSI agree to accept an invitation from the USI to a joint conference only for it to break off talks after a popular uprising in the anarchist stronghold of Ancona and when the syndicalists *"swept to the head"* of a movement against the production of arms which might be used against Soviet Russia.[72] That the PSI refused to participate in talks when the class struggle intensified and was no longer under PSI control

[69] Levy, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 138–139.

[70] Levy, **Op. Cit.**, p. 103

[71] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 264

[72] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, p. 217

the Marches" the rest of Italy was *"incapable even of making any kind of collective gesture."* So much for decades of socialist activity! Significantly, the *"several of the centres of revolutionary potential that Serrati singled out were in fact* ***syndicalist*** *strongholds."* Williams argues that the *"revolutionary logic"* of all sectors of the socialists was long-term.[66] It seems likely that the habits generated by Marxist tactics played the key role. The PSI, like most Marxists, saw the revolution as a party affair, particularly the party hierarchy, and seemed wary of participating in movements outside its control.

A similar process of occurred in the summer of 1920 in Turin, where the PSI branch was controlled by an alliance of abstentionist communists and the **Ordine Nuovo**. This alliance *"broke up in the summer of 1920, mainly over the important issue of whether Socialists should collaborate with anarchists and syndicalists."* Two of the founders of **Ordine Nuovo** (Tasca and Terracini) were opposed to collaboration, the branch secretary (an abstentionist) was not. A resolution in July, calling for PSI branches to send delegates to take part in a meeting in Genoa of revolutionary and Trade Union organisations, caused the executive committee to split and, finally, resign.[67] While, ironically, the abstentionists advocated *"meetings of representatives of the various organisations, and among the workers of city and country, to create unity of thought and action"* the electionists (which included most of Gramsci's colleagues on **Ordine Nuovo**) *"deplored the strength of the anarchists and syndicalists."*[68] A year before, a similar situation arose in Turin with the PSI refusing to a formal alliance with the anarchists after the **Avanti!** offices in Milan had been burned by fascists. This did not stop the **Fascio Sindacale d'Azione Rivoluzionaria** being created by

[66] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 81–2

[67] Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 140

[68] Clark, **Op. Cit.**, p. 143 and p. 142

Lastly, Behan incredibly calls the bombers the *"followers of the anarchist leader Errico Malatesta."* Surely he must be aware that Malatesta, like most anarchists then and now, did not subscribe to such tactics?

Perhaps it is unsurprising that Behan spends more time quoting Trotsky than discussing the roots of this act and its real relationship with anarchist theory and anarchist practice in Italy at the time? It does fit into the standard SWP view of anarchism.

Syndicalism and politics

Behan, needless to say, recycles usual Marxist myths about syndicalism as well as anarchism. He states that for syndicalists *"close involvement in struggles for political reforms could constitute a trap in the long term, in which activists would be sucked into accepting the best of current system had to offer."* This position, he claims, *"meant, on a day to day basis, 'politics' was left to the reformists."* He then quotes Tony Cliff on British Syndicalism: *"Syndicalism had no answer to the generalised political arguments of Labour, because it rejected 'politics' in principle."* (p. 13)

While quoting Cliff may be enough for SWP members, for others this answers nothing. If Cliff was wrong then quoting him does not suddenly make him right! And Cliff, like Behan, is wrong. These assertions are wrong on two levels. Firstly, syndicalists do not actually have the position Behan (and Cliff) claims they have and, secondly, Behan's own work supports the syndicalist position.

Syndicalists, like anarchists, do not reject *"politics"* or "*struggles for political reforms"* in the abstract. They are keenly aware of the necessity of political theory, particularly on the role of the state. As one historian on British syndicalism correctly notes while this kind of assertion is *"certainly a deeply embed-*

ded article of faith among those marxists who have taken Lenin's strictures against syndicalism at face value," it *"bears little relation to the actual nature of revolutionary industrial structures."* The syndicalists did not *"neglect politics and the state ... on the contrary"* they were *"highly 'political' in that they sought to understand, challenge and destroy the structure of capitalist power in society. They quite clearly perceived the oppressive role of the state whose periodic intervention in industrial unrest could hardly have been missed."*[52]

As for *"struggles for political reforms,"* syndicalists are in favour of such struggles as long as they are conducted by means of direct action and solidarity on working class terrain (i.e. within industry or in the community). They reject "politics" and political "struggles" when they involve electioneering and a few leaders working within bourgeois institutions. This, they argue, will lead to reformism and the co-opting of the labour movement into capitalist society. Ironically, Behan had already implicitly admitted that the syndicalists were right by noting two pages previously how the PSI (like all socialist parties) had become reformist. (p. 11) Likewise, the role of the Socialist Party and Trade Union bureaucrats during the *biennio rosso* confirms the syndicalist analysis (as it had confirmed Bakunin's).

The Failure of Marxism

It is understandable why Behan should rewrite history so. After all, his book shows the absolute failure of Marxism (in all its guises).

Looking at the Italian Socialist Party, it is obvious that it proved Bakunin right, not Marx and Engels. The latter had proclaimed that "political action" (i.e. electioneering) would result

[52] Bob Holton, **British Syndicalism, 1900–1914**, pp. 21–2

to being weighing up the situation when it called the occupations off. Ultimately, Behan's praise for De Ambris shows the weakness of hierarchical organisation.

Lastly, Roberts indicates what this *"long term vision"* actually meant: *"All syndicalist literature [during the biennio rosso] ... constantly stressed ... [that] the Italian proletariat was simply not mature enough for a real socialist revolution."* An *"antirevolutionary"* message, in other words.[64]

United Front

While Behan argues that a united front was essential, he does not discuss in any detail that this idea had been raised during these struggles. Perhaps the lack of discussion is prompted by the fact it was the anarchists and syndicalists who were arguing for it consistently from the start of 1919 onwards. In January, 1919, the USI congress *"called for strong action in workers' unity"* and in April Armando Borghi, anarchist secretary of the syndicalist USI, proposed a *"united revolutionary front"* formed through revolutionary committees of the PSI, the CGL, USI, UAI and the railway men. The CGL was *"totally opposed."*[65]

This second call, significantly, came two days after nationalists and fascists burned the offices of Avanti (the PSI newspaper), yet Behan does not mention this or the PSI response. Williams, one of Behan's sources, considered this *"a critical moment"* (although it *"remains obscure"*). In spite of May Day meetings in Turin and Milan greeting *"the proposal with enthusiasm,"* it was *"during May and into June"* that the PSI *"turned away from any alliance with the syndicalists."* It was the socialist leader Serrati who, according to Williams, *"played a key role"* in this. Serrati thought that *"with the exception of a few big areas in North Italy, some areas near Bologna, and to some extent*

[64] Roberts, **Op. Cit.**, p. 156

[65] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, pp.77–78, p. 81 and p.195

was prepared to retreat" rather than *"always trying to call and sustain the most radical action without assessing the balance of forces, or suddenly unleshing a spontaneous general strike."* He contrasts him *"with other syndicalists and anarchists."* (pp. 77–8) To support his claims on De Ambris versus the *"other syndicalists"* Behan references page 74 of Roberts' book. Sadly, this page says the exact opposite, namely that the *"syndicalists simply did not share the anarchist belief in the value of spontaneous popular uprisings."* Ironically, Roberts notes that *"[s]tudents of the movement" failed "to distinguish syndicalism from anarchism."* You do not have to subscribe to the syndicalists evaluation of what anarchists believe to see that that Behan summary is at odds with the source.[63]

Then, of course, there is the contradiction between the idea of "working class power" with the fact that De Ambris (to quote Behan) *"called off the general strike ... after just two days."* (p. 78) And why did De Ambris do this? Because, according to Roberts, *"the movement in Parma began to get out of control with stone throwing and violence."* Surely, if *"working class power"* is to mean anything, such a decision should rest with the union's membership rather than a few leaders?

Moreover, Behan himself noted that the *"country exploded"* during the "Red Week" and presents a description which confirms anarchist hopes in it (p. 16). Ironically, the reason why the struggles of 1919–20 were also defeated was because the *"PSI leadership would do nothing to take the movement forward"* and the trade union bureaucrats acted in exactly the same way as they did in 1914. In 1920, the CGL leadership also claimed

[63] That the revolutionary syndicalists distorted the anarchist position can be seen from Malatesta arguing that the *"though we could not yet have the revolution for the lack of necessary preparation and understanding, the movement would certainly have assumed larger proportions and a much greater importance."* He correctly called the decision by the reformist trade union leadership to call off the strike an act of *"treachery"* and *"betrayal."* [**Malatesta: Life and Ideas**, p. 218]

in socialism. Bakunin predicted it would deradicalise the workers' movement and result in reformism. Behan's book shows how right Bakunin was.[53] The Italian socialist movement was bureaucratic and reformist. Sadly, while he notes that this had *"happened to similar parties, such as the Social Democrats in Germany,"* he fails to discuss whether Marx's tactics can contributed to this process. (p. 11) So when Behan quotes Giolitti (the Italian Prime Minister) as accurately describing the PSI as having *"sent Karl Marx up into the attic,"* (p. 11), when he notes that the Second International had been *"discredited when nearly all its members ... had voted to support 'their' governments in the slaughter of the First World War"* and that there was *"a general lack of experienced revolutionary parties"* (p. 99) in Europe at the time, Bakunin can feel vindicated.

Behan usefully exposes the betrayal the PSI of the anti-fascist struggle. He recounts the total and bloody defeat of the fascists in Sarzana by the local AdP in July 1921. (p. 63–4) With 18 dead and 30 wounded fascists, the next few weeks saw Mussolini purpose a "peace" pact with the Socialists. The latter signed up to the pact, denouncing the AdP and declaring itself "unconnected" to it.[54] It seems that Engels praise for the Italian socialists turning their back on anarchism was unwarranted.

Behan also (implicitly) acknowledges that Bakunin had been right to attack Marxist emphasis on the industrial proletariat be

[53] Behan cannot make his mind up about the impact of vote chasing on the fate of the PSI. On one page he argues that *"moderation"* by the leadership *"was undoubtedly one of the reasons behind the fall in the PSI vote in the 1904 election."* (p. 11) A few pages latter, he argues that the Giolitti *"won an increased majority because progressive middle-class opinion had been frightened by the general strike."* (p. 15) As there was restricted suffrage at the time, the second explanation is obviously closer to the truth.

[54] As regards the Communist Party, they were equally as hostile, but for other reasons (as Behan discusses). It should be noted that they expressed hostility to the AdP before the events in Sarzana, not after as Behan implies (p. 67).

admitting that *"in this period the vast majority of Italian working people still lived in the countryside."*[55] While being totally wrong in implying that Bakunin's *"strong following"* was in the peasantry, Behan is right that to state that Bakunin was right to try and *"gain support among poor peasants"* and that this was *"something that the emerging socialist movement systematically failed to do."* (p. 6) Yet Bakunin's awareness of these obvious facts have never stopped Marxists attacking anarchism as being "petty bourgeois" for arguing that no revolution could succeed without a movement of workers ***and*** peasants!

Then there are the negative effects of the hierarchical structures favoured by Marxists. He denounces the *"Socialists' inability to provide strong leadership,"* (p. 41) yet he fails to see that the failure was that the socialist rank and file could not take independent action themselves. This suggests that hierarchical leadership so beloved of the SWP fails when it counts. This analysis was raised in Italy at the time. After the April 1920 strikes, the anarchists *"accused the socialists of betrayal. They criticised what they believed was a false sense of discipline that had bound socialists to their own cowardly leadership. They contrasted the discipline that placed every movement under the 'calculations, fears, mistakes and possible betrayals of the leaders' to the other discipline of the workers of Sestri Ponente who struck in solidarity with Turin, the discipline of the railway workers who refused to transport security forces to Turin and the anarchists and members of the Unione Sindacale who forgot considerations of party and sect to put themselves at the disposition of the Torinesi."*[56] Sadly, this top-down "discipline" of the socialists and their unions would be repeated during the factory occupations, with terrible results. Rather than ponder whether hierarchy works, Behan simply calls for better (*"strong"*) leadership (the

[55] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, pp.77–78, p. 81 and p.195

[56] Williams, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 81–2

as Behan likes to imply, then why was he not evicted by the membership?

So the fatally wrong decisions by the leadership of the PCI do not make Behan raise questions on the validity of "democratic centralism." No questions are raised on whether it is democratic or whether centralism is actually very efficient. For obvious reasons. Behan does mention the problem of Bolshevik centralism when he discusses the fact that the AdP did not have political factions within the organisation due to members having to follow its discipline. (p. 60) He states that this difficulty *"could have resolved if the party hadn't had such a rigid sense of discipline."* Yet this goes against the whole Bolshevik tradition which placed (at least theoretically) party discipline above all else. Nor, as Behan asserts, did the "united front" policy by Lenin and Trotsky resolve this issue as party discipline was still the basis of any such front. Indeed, Behan quotes Trotsky stating that the CP would be an *"independent detachment"* (p. 105) in any front, making unity in action dependent on the leadership of the party rather than the decisions of the AdP membership. The refusal by the AdP to allow political factions would, undoubtedly, have made it unattractive for a Bolshevik perspective.

Ironically, therefore, given the role of the PCI, Behan states that *"to add to their [the industrialists and large landowners] problems, the Communist Party was born in January 1921."* (p. 39) If anything, this event helped the ruling class immensely.

Workers' Power?

Anyone familiar with SWP books know of the usual misuse of references associated with them. Behan does not disappoint. For example, he talks about the syndicalist De Ambris having *"a long term vision of the development of working class power"* and so *"weighed each situation up specifically, and on occasion*

> *and extraneous are the factors which come into play, the more considerations of prestige and retrenchment supplant creativity, imagination, and a disinterested dedication to revolutionary goals.*
>
> *"The party becomes less efficient from a revolutionary point of view the more it seeks efficiency by means of hierarchy, cadres and centralisation. Although everyone marches in step, the orders are usually wrong, especially when events begin to move rapidly and take unexpected turns — as they do in all revolutions."*[60]

Given the obviously undemocratic nature of the PCI (how else can the apparent divergence between the leadership and the membership be explained?) can it be unsurprising that its leadership *"committed mistakes on a grand scale"*? (p. 95) Moreover, Behan fails to explain how the leadership remained in power. After all, at its 1922 congress *"Bordiga's theses were carried by an overwhelming majority"* and that only *"a minority of the party expressed complete solidarity with Zinoviev."*[61] Given this, Behan has two possibilities. Firstly, either the PCI was simply incredibly undemocratic (and where does that leave democratic centralism?) or that the membership of the PCI were, on the main, as sectarian as their leadership (and where does that leave Marxism?). Needless to say, Behan fails to note that the leadership of the PCI was not changed by its membership. Rather, it was the Comintern that did so.[62] If the policies of Bordiga were so at odds with the actions of the membership,

[60] Murray Bookchin, *"Listen, Marxist!"*, **Post Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 197

[61] E.H. Carr, **Socialism in One Country**, vol. 3, p. 158f and p. 164

[62] *"From this moment [the 1922 Italian congress] it became clear in Moscow that the only hope of gearing the PCI to the comintern line was t oust Bordiga from the leadership,"* which they did. [E. H. Carr, **Op. Cit.**, p. 158]

irony of so doing in a book about resistance to fascism seems to be lost on him!).

From Marxism to Fascism

Talking of which, while Behan dismisses Mussolini as little more than a *"demagogue"* with *"superficial radicalism,"* (p. 12) the reader has to wonder how such a person managed to rise so far in the Socialist Party to begin with. Surely some awareness of Marxism would be required? And why did the PSI leadership not notice? And what of the membership who placed him in that position? Perhaps it is easier for a Marxist to suggest that Mussolini was never one than subject Marxism to any form of deep analysis.

Perhaps this explains why Behan forgets to mention the Marxist origins of the intellectual revolutionary syndicalists who became nationalist and pro-war in 1914? After all, that a leading left-wing socialist like Mussolini became a fascist is bad enough but that a whole host of left-wingers became nationalists is deeply embarrassing. While Behan notes that Mussolini *"found common ground with a surprisingly large number of revolutionary syndicalists"* (pp. 17–18) he fails to inform his readers of a few pertinent facts.

Firstly, as David Roberts (one of Behan's references) notes, *"[i]n Italy, the syndicalist doctrine was more clearly the product of a group of intellectuals, operating within the Socialist party and seeking an alternative to reformism."* They *"explicitly denounced anarchism"* and *"insisted on a variety of Marxist orthodoxy"* The *"syndicalists genuinely desired — and tried — to work within the Marxist tradition."*[57]

Secondly, most syndicalists did not become pro-war: *"The vast majority of the organised workers failed to respond to the*

[57] **The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism**, p. 66, p. 72, p. 57 and p. 79

syndicalists' appeals and continued to oppose [Italian] intervention [in the First World War], shunning what seemed to be a futile capitalist war. The syndicalists failed to convince even a majority within the USI … the majority opted for the neutralism of Armando Borghi, leader of the anarchists within the USI. Schism followed as De Ambris led the interventionist minority out of the confederation."[58]

Clearly, therefore, Behan should have said that a "surprisingly large number" of Marxist revolutionary syndicalists "found common ground" with the Marxist Mussolini while the anarcho-syndicalists remained true to their libertarian ideals. That Behan fails to do this is unsurprising. It would raise far too many questions about the "revolutionary" nature of Marxism and its ability to attract such people to it.

The Failure of Bolshevism

It will be objected that this is not ***real*** Marxism, as expressed by the Bolshevik tradition. Sadly for Behan, his book also shows the failure of Bolshevism as well. Behan, perhaps unknowingly, presents much evidence against Bolshevik ways of organising.

While Behan deplores the actions of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its leadership, he never asks himself basic questions about the validity of Bolshevism as a revolutionary theory and strategy. Why, if the Bolshevik model of organising produces the most democratic party ever, did the PCI pursue its policy against the wishes of its members, as Behan implies? For example, Behan states that *"many PCI members used their common sense and joined the AdP"* against their party's wishes (p. 68) and the despite *"feedback from below"* the *"PCI Executive Committee dug its heels in."* (p. 69) This is hard to reconcile with attempts to present "democratic centralism" as being even slightly (never mind highly) democratic. Similarly, Behan

[58] **Ibid.**, p. 113

notes that the Comintern's "understanding of events in Italy continued to suffer from distortions and inaccuracies over the coming months." (p. 106) While this is to be expected in a centralised structure, it does not bode well for defences of centralised organisation as being inherently more efficient.[59]

Behan also notes how the leadership hindered local action. Bordiga, for example, "told the Rome branch [of the PCI] that the party needed to take a position on the AdP nationally, and that until happened branch members had to curb their enthusiasm for working with the AdP." (p. 67) Yet this is a core idea of democratic centralism: the higher organs of the party have the right (even duty) to override local ones. That this method of organising fails massively is a recurring theme in histories of Leninism (and 1917 is no exception).

Behan's account, therefore, provides more evidence for Murray Bookchin's summation:

> *" The local groups, which know their own immediate situation better than any remote leaders, are obliged to subordinate their insights to directives from above. The leadership, lacking any direct knowledge of local problems, responds sluggishly and prudently. Although it stakes out a claim to the 'larger view,' to greater 'theoretical competence,' the competence of the leadership tends to diminish as one ascends the hierarchy of command. The more one approaches the level where the real decisions are made, the more conservative is the nature of the decision-making process, the more bureaucratic*

[59] Ironically, Behan states that the new PCI was *"a highly centralised party, and ultimate control lay with the five-man Executive Committee"* without questioning what this has to say about Bolshevism. (p. 44) Perhaps Behan's opposition to excessive centralism may be that of Lenin's, who opposed it when ***he*** was in the minority. After all Behan seems to imply that the problem was due to the "wrong" leadership being elected (he states that the EC was made up of *"followers of Bordiga"*).