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Interview: Impressions of the North American anarchist movement

Andrew Flood

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An interview with Andrew Flood about the impressions of the North American anarchist movement he formed during his 2007/2008 44 city tour of the US and Canada. The interview ends with questions about the comparison of the movement in Ireland with that in Britain and the promotion of anarchism via the internet. This was submitted and published in Black Flag.

Q. Which places did you visit in your tour? Did any local anarchists groups host events? If so, which ones?

In total I spoke in 44 North American cities scattered across 2 Canadian provinces and 18 US states. These were on the east and west coasts and from the east coast across the mid-west as far as Minneapolis-St Paul's.

There were lots of organizations, infoshops and organizations in formation involved on putting on the dates. Around one third were organized through the North East Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC) while some local groups just organized a meeting in the one city they were active in. In

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the vast majority of cases I'd never met any of the organizers, everything was done over email, the entire Florida tour for instance was initiated by one student who was on the Crimthinc mailing list and saw an announcement for my tour which was apparently posted there. He contacted me and then proceeded to contact email addresses he found in Florida and managed to get four dates together that way.

Q. Were the meetings well attended? Does there seem to be much interest in libertarian ideas?

Attendance varied from around 60 to around a dozen, perhaps giving a total close to 1400 people who attended a meeting during the tour. In quite a few stops it was the first public anarchist meeting organized in quite a while so apart from city size and local politics there would have been a good deal of variation in how experienced the local organizers were at putting together and promoting events like these. The people who turned up certainly seemed to be interested but they were rather a small fraction of the local population.

Q. What was the theme of the meeting? Were they well received?

The theme was 'Building a Popular Anarchism in Ireland.' Basically I was telling the story of the growth of the Irish anarchist movement in the period from 1997–2007 and in doing so making an argument for an outward looking, organized movement capable of working in alliances. Generally there seemed to be a very high level of interest, it was a great help that the subject matter contained loads of interesting anecdotes that reflected a decade of positive anarchist organization in Ireland.

Q. What is the US movement like from a class-struggle perspective?

Better than I expected. I think on arrival in North America I shared any of the prejudices that you find in the British anarchist movement towards North America, prejudices that are often based on a failure to try and understand conditions there. I expected a lot of North American anarchists to be liberal idiots

As of now I'm starting to expand the number of people with accounts on the site, basically through offering accounts to people I know and those who agree with the Anarkismo statement. So over time the site may build to quite a useful resource in its own right. But it also functions as training for me, I may work in IT but I've never done any formal training outside of the equivalent of a YTS course, I tend to learn new stuff by starting off a project that I think should exist and pick things up as I go along.

Q. Any final comments or suggestions?

We'll build a successful movement by always looking outwards, taking risks and trying new things. Traditionalism and too much concern with purity are a recipe for inaction.

atives to that, people are probably reading a lot fewer book length texts for instance. The growth of indymedia here in Ireland, which we played quite a central part in, was extremely useful to us. It got our ideas out to huge numbers of people who may never have visited our own site. And it generated a very useful debate, particularly at the time of the 2002/3 anti-war movement. But the internet has changed a lot in the last few years, the indymedia model may well be on the way out and we need to keep looking at how we can turn aspects of the new stuff to our use. Anarchists are nervous about stuff like Facebook, and rightly so, but remember the origins of the internet lie in the military wanting a common and control system that could survive a major nuclear war, if that can be used for good anything can

Q. Can you tell us something about your latest project, Anarchist Writers (anarchism.pageabode.com/)?

I'm terrible at managing to file anything I write so for years I've used the internet to store my public writings and often as not I use google to locate old stuff. For years this was on a variety of manually edited pages but these are a lot of work to maintain. When I moved to Canada and became involved in Common Cause we needed a web site and from the start we wanted to make this a collective project. So along with someone else I forced myself to learn enough Drupal (an opensource CMS system) to put it together.

When that was done I realized that creating a new site would be an easy way not only to store my own material but that it would also be almost no extra work to create accounts on it for other anarchists to do the same for theirs. Then when I was organising the tour I realized creating a blog on the site would be an easy way for people (including my parents) to keep track of how things were going. I found I quite liked the freedom of blogging (as people don't expect the same level of editorial care as they do with articles) so I've kept going.

but the reality I found was huge numbers of people doing quite solid local organizing, in particular when you considered their weak numbers and relative lack of experience. And a good few of the positions that seem a little odd from Europe make a lot more sense when you can put them in the context of local conditions and North American history.

Q. What are, if any, the tactical and political priorities/differences in the US compared to Ireland/UK?

Actually from my experiences I'd say the movement in Britain is closer to the movement in North America than either of those movements is with Ireland. Chiefly compared to the number of self-declared anarchists the level of national or regional organization is very, very weak in North America and Britain in comparison with Ireland. Beyond that there are people who like riots and people who like workplace organising there just as there are in most places, there isn't really a single tactical direction

Q. Did anything in particular stand out and impress you about the American movement?

I think the sheer number of people involved in local projects was very impressive. At a simple level about 2/3 of my meetings (about 30 of them) took place in radical social spaces of one form or another. And I probably visited at least another twenty or more. That is a fair greater level of infrastructure (and the commitment that implies) much more than I had expected to find.

Q. And on the other side of the coin, did anything stand out and/or depress you about it?

The acceptance of primitivism as a legitimate part of the anarchist movement and even the left in general. I was amazed for instance to discover that some union locals had sponsored the speaking tour of Derick Jensen whose primitivist writings amount to an argument for mass murder. He was charging in the region of 2000 dollars an appearance in Ontario, it was

quite extraordinary to me that unions would spend their members money on such a huckster.

Q. What are the major tendencies in the American movement? Which ones seem to be growing and which ones declining?

My tour coincided with and fed into a wave of anarchist communist organizing across many of the regions I was visiting which meant I got to play some role in the formation process of five or six new organizations. But I wouldn't overstate this, as is true of the North America in general these organizations are tiny in comparison with the population of the areas they operate in. The positive news on the primitivist front is that apart from the couple of celebrity gurus who are very visible on the internet there is very little primitivist organization anywhere, even in Eugene, Oregon. I have the general impression that many of the people who might formerly have been primitives had drifted into some form of insurrectional anarchism although again there are almost no organizations (formal or otherwise) outside of a couple of cities. Some of the insurrectionalist stuff is really stupid, taking no account whatsoever of local conditions and acting out a weakass version of what is seen on Greek youtube riot porn. But there is nothing uniquely North America there either

The IWW remains by far the largest network for anti-authoritarians in the US but it didn't really strike me as having any real existence as a union outside of what were pretty small struggles in a couple of cities. Many social anarchists join it as a way of meeting up with like minded folk and of distancing themselves from the nuttier end of the local anarchist scene.

Q. What do you think are the main problems (internally and externally) facing the growth of anarchism in America?

Internally issues like the high rate of transience which means it's hard to accumulate collective experience in any city as people are always moving in, in particular when organizational problems are encountered. Related to this is the very low level of intergenerational contact which means

would seek to learn from although the question of what can be transferred to the different conditions here is not always an easy one. And of course we nicked the idea of doing a bookfair and that has been a strong success, the Dublin one is around ¼ the size of the London one now which is pretty good given the population difference.

Q. The WSM always have a stall at the London bookfair. Do you think it, and by extension, the British movement changed much over the years? For the better?

I'm not sure it has changed very much, at least it hasn't changed in any consistent direction over those years but ebbed and flowed throughout the period. Even apart from the bookfairs many of our members have lived in Britain for periods and been active in the movement there, from the late 1970's to the current day. The bookfair itself seems to have changed for the better, not only is it bigger but it's a lot less counter cultural than it used to be.

Q. The WSM was at the forefront of putting an anarchist presence on the net, starting back in the 1990s. Do you think that has paid off?

No question about that although really it was an individual rather than an organizational effort up to the late 1990's when the internet really started to take off. I worked in IT from the early 1990's and basically just grabbed electronic versions of anything we printed, for most of that time I think the others were inclined to view my online activity as a rather odd and nurdish hobby. Nowadays we are working on lots of ways of developing a collective online presence and probably a dozen members are actively involved in that in a regular way, in the last months we've been putting a lot of video and audio online as well as working on social networking sites like Facebook.

Q. How has the internet changed how anarchists get their message across? Has it affected how the WSM work in Ireland?

Obviously the net is now far more important than the scattering of local radical bookshops used to be. But there are neg-

Nope – I only hit that smell once, in DC. There is a fringe of lifestylist types, very often students, for whom smelling is something occasionally adopted to give them kudos. It's really not very important even if on that one occasion it was annoying. Most of the anarchists I met were ordinary folks that only differed from the people around them by their politics.

Q. You are now back in Ireland, have things changed much during your time in the states?

Ha. At the time of writing they certainly have. I left the Celtic Tiger and returned to an economy that has collapsed month after month since my return. Now that is a long story and one that is far from over. But I first saw the collapse when I arrived in Miami around the start of April, loads of condo skyscrapers had been abandoned after 20 floors of construction after the banks had stopped loaning money to the developers. Crossing the Atlantic was a bit like getting a flight that was running a little ahead of the sunset, you had seen what was coming.

Q. How do the Irish and British anarchist movements compare in terms of struggle and organisational?

The Irish movement is smaller both because the island has a 1/5th of the population and in real terms. But for its size it's a lot more organised. I would guess there are 3–400 anarchists in Ireland who have some level of activity and 20–30% of these are in one of the two national organizations, mostly in WSM. I'd guess there would be maybe 4,000 anarchists in Britain but only 4–8% of that number are in national organizations. Anarchism here is also pretty much always class struggle in flavor even if a particular struggle happens to be one around what might be seen as environmentalism.

Q. Has the Irish movement got anything to learn from the UK, and visa versa?

Try to avoid extreme sectarianism positioning the ability to work together although in reality that is easier to say than to do. On the local level there are loads of things we see and

the movement today which is mostly under 30, if not 25 doesn't easily benefit from the lessons learned the hard way by the movement in the 60's, 70's and 80's.

Externally the North American cult of the rugged individual and the American dream not only make popular organizing difficult but seeps into the anarchist movement like a poison. Couple this with the historic success of the US state in smashing radical oppositional movements in all their forms and the current high degree of repression of anything that steps over the limited boundaries of protest allowed and you have a very difficult atmosphere in which to build anything that goes beyond lobbying. The number of police are extraordinary, their constant use against the 'civilian population' is striking, I saw more people being arrested on the streets in the 16 weeks of my tour as I have in nearly 40 years outside North America. And finally in the US in particular there is an extraordinary level of state infiltration and the use of agent provocateurs to tempt fresh young activists into doing stupid stuff that can lead them to very long jail sentences.

Q. What do you think are the main good points (internally and externally) for the growth of anarchism in America?

Class divisions, although sometimes camouflaged by race are very, very visible in the USA and almost as visible in Canada. Workers, particularly outside the coastal cities, are being fucked over in a very, very visible way. So 'rugged individualism' aside North America should be fertile ground for class struggle politics, it certainly has been in the past. Also the left does not really exist, the few far left groups that exist are much smaller than their equivalents in Britain despite the much greater population, they don't really exist outside a few colleges in a few towns. With the exception of Canada there is no social democracy and no viable green party. In short it would not that hard for anarchists to become 'the' opposition.

Internally there is actually a huge amount of individual experience of grassroots organising within the anarchist movement. If you had the emergence of a coherent movement this individual experience could be turned into some pretty powerful collective organization.

Q. How do the American and European anarchist movements compare in terms of struggle and organisational aspects?

The US and Britain are very similar in that most anarchists are not part of region wide organizations or often even local organizations. The region wide organizations in reality really only exist as more than isolated individuals in a very small number of cities although they often have a scattering of individual members outside of these.

This means that in terms of struggle the vast majority of activity is around individual anarchists involved in local community, environmental or workplace struggle as militant individuals who happen to be anarchists rather than as part of a collective anarchist effort. From time to time there are a variety of social / political gatherings at which people can exchange experiences but which apart from the occasional spectacular event like summit protests these don't formulate collective action. As with Britain the biggest of these are bookfairs but the sheer scale of North America means there is no single equivalent to the London bookfair but rather a range of bookfair and conference events across the continent.

There is no equivalent to the anarchist influenced revolutionary unions on the European mainland. The IWW would like to be that but the reality is that its membership density is less than that of the WSM in Ireland so its more of a network of anti-authoritarian workplace militants that occasionally tries to act as a union when the opportunity arises at a particular location or at a particular time. There are no also equivalents of the sort of regional anarchist political organizations that are found in some countries that have a real presence across a large number of cities but this is a product of the small size of the

movement as well as not talking the organizational question seriously enough.

Q. Did you get much chance to see working class parts of America? How do they compare to what you see in the media?

I'd question this question. What exactly would be 'non-working class' America outside of very small strips of the super rich in New York, Miami, LA or the other global cities. The vast majority of the US population is working class so it follows that most of the urban geography is working class, including of those cities already listed. I guess this question may come from the way the US is portrayed in the TV that makes it over here, after all workers are pretty absent from 'Sex & the City' except when they are pouring drinks for or being targeted by the main characters.

Beyond that perhaps this is a question about the industrial working class? A good part of the trip was in cities that would have been associated with large scale industry, particularly those cities in the mid-west, places like Detroit. I saw 8-mile, Detroit seemed to be close enough to that but considerably more run down then at the time of that story. I've also seen all the episodes of the Wire and that seems like an accurate enough portrayal of life in Baltimore. Miami on the other hand was nothing like what is portrayed in CSS Miami, there is a very narrow strip of really rich folk but behind that, away from the beach are mile after mile of ordinary workers and patches of extreme poverty and deprivation. My New York didn't look much like that of Sex & the City or even friends, but then I was staying in Jersey city.

Q. Any anecdotal tales?

Dozens – I talk about some of them in my blog and I'm in the process of extending this as I have time. Riots in Olympia, broken down buses and the strange smell of an anarchist conference in DC all feature.

Q. Do American anarchists really smell that much?