

The experience of the Social Solidarity Network

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The Social Solidarity Network came into existence in the Autumn of 2009 in Dublin as an initiative of the Workers Solidarity Movement. It faded out of existence a few short months later and never amounted to all that much in the interim beyond a couple of meetings, a leaflet distribution at a mass ICTU march and a badly organised and executed protest at the Dail on budget day. Nevertheless there are some useful lessons (mostly of the 'how not to do it variety') to be taken from its short existence.

Origins of the Social Solidarity Network

The idea for what came to be called the Social Solidarity Network originally came from a member of the Jack White branch of the WSM in Dublin. The basic concept was to try and draw RAG and Semora Spraoi into activity around the crisis through the formation of a network that could then also pull in others from the libertarian milieu. RAG is the Revolutionary Anarcha-Feminist group, a small collective of anarchist women active in putting out an annual magazine (the RAG) and organising meeting and fundraisers in connection with this. Seomra Spraoi (Seomra) is a libertarian orientated social center in Dublin organised by a small group of people but with a very much larger number using the space in one way or the other.

The WSM had debated a proposal to launch something like the SSN based on the then defunct model of the Grassroots Gathering at a national level as part of the Capitalist Crisis position paper debate but that proposal was voted down at national conference. There had been a Grassroots Gathering in Cork in the Autumn of 2008 where WSM members first tried to raise the concept of a libertarian front against the crisis but little interest had been shown in the concept at the time. This had caused us to lose interest in the Gathering as most of those involved seemed unable to break from routine issues and recognise the extraordinary period we were entering.

The proposal to once more try to launch something similar to the Gathering was rejected in part because the Cork comrades felt that there was no potential for such an initiative in Cork. This didn't preclude a Dublin only initiative but we could perhaps have done with more discussion before floating the idea outside the WSM and hence more co-ordination once this happened.

Development of idea

At an early point the development of the idea fell to 1st of May branch, possibly because it was 1st of May members who made the first meetings to discuss the network formation. RAG & Seomra Spraoi were contacted and both indicated they were interested in the proposal. There were maybe three attempted planning meetings (not all of which were successfully held) that developed the idea of launching a network via a one day gathering in Seomra Spraoi. In hindsight a problem was that attendance at these meetings was pretty haphazard in terms of both RAG and Seomra, I'm not sure either sent a delegate to all meetings and the specific people who attended changed from meeting to meeting. This meant there was very little continuity of process from meeting to meeting outside of the WSM involvement. The decision was taken to go ahead with a one day event.

Launch

The initial gathering took place in Seomra Spraoi on October 3rd 2009 (see program in Appendix). Perhaps 40 people took part but there was a very low participation from either RAG or Seomra. However quite a large number of new faces and in particular Maynooth students turned up which meant there were just about enough people present to make it look like the SSN might be something that could be built into something worthwhile. This however was really the point that WSM should have reconsidered what a workable structure for the SSN could be as it had become clear that Seomra and RAG participation in the decision making process would not be significant.

From this launch one intention was to divide people into distinct sectors (students, unemployed, workers) and for each of these sectors to organise concrete outreach activity as part of building the network. Although plans were laid at the first meeting for each of the sectors I'm not sure any of these were actually implemented – except for the Maynooth student group.

Development and activity

There were probably three or four Dublin meetings of the SSN after this date (19 October, 6 Nov after ICTU demo, 1 December). With the exception of Maynooth the idea of organizing activity in 4 distinct sectors evaporated. The SSN did however agree the text of a leaflet and 7,000 copies of this were produced with 5–6000 being distributed at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions anti-cuts demonstration on 6th November – the demonstration itself attracted tens of thousands. Upwards of twenty people took part in the distribution on the day.

A meeting after this demonstration only really attracted those already involved and a couple of people who had been around the left for years, maybe a total of 30. The two subsequent meetings which were to discuss a SSN strategy (two WSM members had prepared drafts, see appendix) were poorly attended but did decide to call a protest for the Dail on budget day (see Appendix for announcement). The WSM paid for a couple of hundred full color A2 posters 100 of which were actually put up by two WSM members.

The event was attended by about 40–60 people who had probably turned up for that event but the SSN had not put any thought into what to do when that (small) number of people arrived so we just stood around for a while before heading to the pub. The Facebook event notice had 169 confirmed guests and 186 might attends which is quite a high number so there was no excuse in terms of thinking in advance that no one would come although this also made it clear that numbers would not be huge. The SSN planning, in so far as it had existed, had however assumed much large numbers – something of an angry mob. That things were allowed to (not) develop in this way was a huge failure on the part of the WSM which should have intervened to ensure that at the very least one or two speakers were organised for the night.

That was the last attempted SSN event called before the WSM called a meeting to discuss the future of the SSN in late February. 11 people attended, 4 WSM, 1 RAG, 1 ISN, 1 Seomra (plus 2 people involved in Seomra and one of the other groups already listed), 3 Maynooth (where they had built a group around FEE using SSN as a name as well) and 1 other person. No formal minutes were kept but basically 11 of us spent almost two hours discussing the Social Solidarity Network and a range of views about why it hadn't worked out as people imagined and what if

any future it had were expressed. There wasn't consensus on either of these, in fact there was a wide range of views on what it should have been as well as if and why it didn't function.

The decision we came to was that this meeting represented a phase change in the SSN, the point at which we acknowledged that the original plan for how the SSN would develop had not come about. The email list would continue to exist and people were free to continue to use the name / organise events under the SSN name. Two concrete ideas that individuals might pursue were to hold a regular social / information exchange and to use Seomra Spraoi to invite in speakers from (community) organisations to talk about their struggles.

In reality the SSN ceased to exist around this point with only Laurence V attempting to call a couple of follow on meetings which appear to have had a tiny attendance and out of which nothing came. In retrospect it might have made more sense to have a formal vote on winding it up but we (WSM) were reluctant to suggest this in advance of the meeting.

Analysis

With hindsight it's obvious that the original concept of the SSN as a network of groups was never a runner as neither RAG nor Seomra Spraoi had the commitment / energy to put in the time that would have been needed if it was to be more than a WSM 'front'. However enough people turned up at the initial meeting and at least one of the follow up meetings to make it appear that there could be the potential for the SSN to grow. Effectively this shifted it from being network to being a WSM initiated campaign, a shift we failed to acknowledge and take responsibility for. This was most visible in terms of the budget day protest. We failed to make sure something had been arranged for whatever number of people turned up, even at the level of a brief 'thanks for coming' speech. So although people politically close to us did respond to the promotion work and turn up the complete lack of anything happening reflected badly on us.

In general I think we fell between the two stools of not wanting to run the SSN but also not wanting to give up on it. We should have decided that either it didn't have potential or we should have come up with a collective plan for what it should do, argued this at the meetings and took on much of the responsibility for making sure these things then happened. Instead we did neither.

Also with hindsight a problem that existed with the initiative was that we didn't have any idea of what to do with people who were interested in it beyond telling them to turn up for the next business meeting. In campaigns that are intended to be broad initiatives this is a significant failure as many more people may be interested in working with the initiative but unwilling or unable to sit through regular business meetings in order to do so. This same problem can be seen in other broad campaigns we are involved in including Shell to Sea.

The feedback on the first draft of this text concentrated around my use of the word front in scare quotes above. Front has different meanings in different contexts but in Ireland it tends to be very negative, basically meaning an organisation that pretends to be open and independent but is really tightly controlled by one political organisation with the primary purpose of recruitment. The problem WSM had with the SSN was that although this was not what was intended there was a clear danger that the SSN could become a de facto front. Because members were rightly concerned about that they were very reluctant to drive activity in the SSN in a co-ordinated manner.

The following year we saw a variation of the experiment with the 1% Network experience where again attempts to involve Seomra and RAG resulted in only minor involvement, this was also the case with the ISN which was only slightly more active. This time around though the active involvement of eirigi prevented the de facto development of something that could have looked like a front. But more importantly the 1% Network was organised not on an assembly basis but rather as a committee of delegates from the groups involved (in practice just the WSM and eirigi). Eirigi are a socialist republican group that broke from Sinn Fein around 2004 and who have a critique of the top down command structure of the republican movement. WSM members had been working with eirigi members in Shell to Sea for some time at the point where the 1% Network was launched – a later article will discuss the experience of the 1% Network.

In the 1980's and the 1990's the WSM became used to broad work where we were one of a range of organisations involved and most often one of the smaller organisations. Since 2002 this has quite often not been the actual situation we faced, its quite often been more like the SSN experience where we are the only properly organised group. With the various Grassroots Gathering initiatives of the 2002–2004 this wasn't such a major problem because the WSM was numerically much smaller than the 'movement' forming the network so we'd seldom make up more than 20% of the people at any particular meeting. This gave enough potential for the emergence of a spontaneous opposition if we suggested something sufficiently at odds with everyone else so that we didn't have the fear of pushing particular ideas. In retrospect however in the Grassroots Gatherings both the major initiatives and the details of how these were carried out were mostly brought by WSM to meetings.

The effective end of the Grassroots Gathering saw the major focus of activity shift to Shell to Sea which initially was a return to the safe familiar ground of working in a broad coalition that involved much larger groups like Sinn Fein and even the Green and Labour parties and where we could play the role again of the combative minority. But this meant that when it came to return to libertarian organising we failed to confront in the meantime the problem of being the only organised poll. By the time of the SSN the WSM had grown considerably and the movement had shrunk to the point where we would spontaneously have a large percentage of people at assemblies being WSM members. Something we hadn't worked out how to deal with beyond being ultra careful not to dominate meetings basically by refusing to organise to bring ideas to those meetings after collective discussion.

In conclusion the SSN was largely a collection of negative experiences and failures but often you learn more from these than anything else. The process of formation was badly handled internally by the WSM and our intervention within the SSN was weak and failed to provide the essential support that was needed at particular moment, in particular the 2009 Budget protest.

Some key questions that arise for the WSM from the SSN experience include

1. How such initiatives are agreed internally and once agreed how we mobilise our own membership and resources to support them.
2. How we deal with situation where we are the major pole and a significant percentage of the membership of such initiatives. This is likely to be the situation with any libertarian initiatives we launch.

3. What sort of organisational structures should we advocate that allows for democratic decision making, reliable implementation of decisions reached and engagement possibilities that can reach beyond those people with massive commitment to an issue.

There are also significant issues here for those we work with around recognition that the WSM is often the motor that can drive new initiatives but that if we do so there is a danger of that role being resented as being controlling. It's useful that everyone be aware of this as an issue and also aware that the light touch approach we adopted in relation to the SSN did no one any favours in the end.

(A note on this text: This is very strongly based on a draft internal report on the SSN published internal to the WSM in late 2010/early 2011. It has been slightly modified for external publication in August 2012)

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