

# **The WSM & fighting the last war**

**A reply to James O'Brien**

Andrew Flood

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# PART I

# I.

The left is fond of military analogies so I want to open this piece with the observation that poor generals plan for the last war rather than the next one. Those militaries that planned for World War Two by perfecting the trench systems that dominated World War One had their powerful & expensive fortifications quickly overwhelmed in the opening weeks of the war through blitzkrieg. And in turn by 1943 Blitzkrieg was defeated though defence in depth at Kursk.

Generals who stuck to a set of tactics that were the best at one moment in history are defeated by those using new tactics made possible through technological improvements and changed circumstances. There is no 'right answer' that remains fixed throughout time. There is no 'right answer' that allows for the specific circumstances in which you operate to be discounted.

For most of the left in Europe the 1917 Russian Revolutions and in particular the October revolution remains the winning tactic that must be studied to win future victories. That revolution, from the era when trench warfare ruled, sets a tactical guide that is every bit as outdated as the digging of complex trench systems to contain an invading army would be today. This is not simply an analogy, trench warfare was characterised by rigid top down discipline in the implementation of complex plans that remains broadly similar to the way Leninist & other organisations of the left organisations model themselves and see as the ideal.

For anarchists the situation is a little more complex. We are still prone to look back to the methods of the 1910's but for us the Russian Revolution ended in a rapid defeat – one internal to the revolution as the Bolshevik party liquidated workers democracy completely by early 1921. We are far more prone to take our lessons from a later defeat, that of the Spanish revolution in the 1930's, but actually although military and political / organisational tactics had advanced that revolution is also long past and really not much of a guide for the present.

## **The changed terrain**

Capitalism has advanced massively in terms of how it imposes control and as significantly creating consensus since either of those revolutions. Mass economically based workers unions, even as in Spain with a revolutionary tinge, have been long contained by a range of weapons from social partnership to Human Resource manipulation. The space for radical newspapers has been swamped by mass media outlets using cynical but populist methods to limit the imaginations of the masses or as with the Sun, Daily Mail or Fox to channel their anger into entirely counter-productive terrain. For western workers Popular Education with its radical base has been largely swamped by state & private funded 'education for life' designed to only shoe horn us better into workplace needs.

These provided three of the key building methodologies for the left, including the anarchist movement, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Union membership, the radical press and popular education were the entry point into the workers movement and into revolutionary organisations. All three

are largely closed off yet far left organisations remain wedded to them, constantly trying to imagine a better horse drawn buggy as they are sprayed with mud by passing motor cars.

For revolutionaries in the current generation, sometimes as in Ireland facing the demoralisation of five years of crisis and the roll back of working class organisations, where are we to find the equivalents that will enable us to form a rearguard for this battle and win the next? On the European level we have no victories or even bitter defeats (where substantial resistance was overcome) in recent decades. The end of the military dictatorships of Spain, Portugal & Greece in the 70's or the Italian 'red years' that closed same decade being the most useful. But these are over 30 years old and in any case contained by the neo-liberal direction that capitalism took at the end of the 70's. Digging through the historical relics of Lenin's State & Revolution or Trotsky's 'History of the Russian Revolution' is as relevant (and as counter productive) as studying up on whatever Haig wrote about trench warfare tactics.

This means when it comes to the challenge of building revolutionary organisation that can win today most of our effort must be to examine in detail the small struggles of our time, the defeats that were easily contained, the movements that failed to develop, for whatever lessons can be gleaned. Well not quite all our efforts, I've been careful above to refer to the European left, while what I say would also be mostly true of the North American left this is not true elsewhere. There is much we can learn from the struggles of Southern America, including Mexico and those of north Africa, in particular Egypt. But that is not what this article is about, rather its a response to a partial history of a small organisation of which I happen to be a member.

James O'Brien's history of internal debate within the Workers Solidarity Movement in the first decade of the millennium is a detailed example of a look at a movement that were easily contained. It's a substantive piece of work that is largely free of the bitter snipping that similar pieces by ex-members of organisations they have left / been expelled from tend to be dominated by. But it is also just one person's memories and interpretations of what were often complex and nuanced debates. Memory often plays tricks on people, in particular when it is memory of fragments of a larger whole and where the writer has a very strong point of view that inevitably effects what they most remember.

Although what is covered in his account of the WSM is so minor in the scheme of global revolution as to seem irrelevant there are perhaps still general lessons that can be understood from the interventions by one small anarchist organisation in the minor struggles on a small island off the west coast of Europe in the first decade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. In any case it's a set of lessons I can talk about as 'I was there too' and as we shall see my perspective and the lessons I drew are often at odds with those James presents.

I'm not defending any sort of orthodoxy in this piece. James's break with the anarchism as practised by the WSM led him to the heresy of electoralism, the ULA and most interestingly looking back to Kautsky and the mass party. My own journey is following a different path towards a different destination but also based around a sense of the left as we know it having run its course. He tried to bring WSM with him and failed, I'm still trying because that offers a collective process and core around which a new left, which we are only beginning to imagine, can be built. I say this here because as will probably become apparent my vision of that new left lies almost at polar opposites to his even if we both claim to base it in part on the same experiences in the same tiny organisation.

## The limits of what follows

I joined the WSM in 1991 and remain a member today in 2013. I was absent for a year in 2007/8 as I was living in and touring North America but otherwise I went through the same debates and discussions that James did. He mentions me often in his text, most commonly as the loudest voice of what he perceived as the opposite pole ('the majority') of a series of disagreements. In this reply I want to do two things.

- A. Correct factual errors in some of the key interventions & debates that James details or in other cases provide more balanced examples than the extremes James has presented as typical.
- B. Offer a very different interpretation of how this decade of experience should be interpreted and what lessons are to be drawn from it.

In terms of building revolutionary organisation in the modern age it is the second section that is key. But it is hard to ignore what I consider errors of fact & interpretation in the text and it would be next to impossible to build an alternative analysis leaving such errors unchallenged. Therefore the first section of this piece will be a somewhat tedious but I hope useful counter-narrative to James versions of WSM activity & debates. In many cases I will build around not just my memory but a re-examination of internal documents, in particular minutes and debate pieces from the period in question. In other cases I've simply linked to material published at the time and in a couple of cases, as part of the process of preparing this piece, I have sought out my abandoned drafts of particular histories and finished them off in order to allow considerably more detail than what would be suitable in this article to be more generally available.

But from the start let's be clear this is not written as a history of the WSM and not even a history of the WSM in the period James covers. For better or worse this text arose as a reply to his piece and so for the most part covers the areas of activity he chose to cover and even within those areas concentrates on the aspects he considers most relevant. Substantial areas of activity are missing from his account (e.g. our pro-choice work) and haven't been added here, you will find some material on the WSM web site covering this and other areas. If I was to start from scratch I'd probably write something quite different to what is here, this piece is really more about polemic than history even if I hope the combination of both pieces offers something of a step towards a history where none other exists.

This version of the piece has taken a considerable time to prepare but should be viewed as a first draft. I point to factual errors in James piece, it is entirely possible there are some in mine, despite my best efforts to check against what documentation exists. It's also very possible that in sections of what follows I assume far too much from the reader and thus fail to explain aspects that are obvious to me because of decades of immersion. So I'm going to publish this version of the reply in sections over a week or two on Anarchist Writers – my archive & blogging site – and use your feedback in the comments section to prepare an improved version for the WSM site. This version and comments made will be left up as a record of that process.

*It is far from perfect but something of a more general history of WSM for most of that period is contained in this recording of a talk I gave at a conference in Chicago in early 2008 as part of a 44 city speaking tour.*

## II. Before 2000

My involvement in the WSM started in 1991 although the group of us who effectively refounded the organisation that year had contact with the two remaining members (Alan & Kevin) for a couple of years previously. We had formed a small but hyper active student group on discovering each other in the student struggles of the late 1980s, struggles which were characterised by their relatively extreme militancy. The Anarchist-Communist Group as we called ourself drew its experiences from student occupations, pro-choice activism, anti-fascism and, from the summer we worked and lived together in London, anti-imperialism, squatting and anti-Poll tax organising.

We published one issue of a magazine, Anarcho-Communism in Dublin, and a 'Troops Out' leaflet while we were working in London. As we were young students we were targetted for recruitment by a number of the existing left organisations and so had debates with the Socialist Workers Movement and the Irish Workers Group in Ireland and (more informally) the Spartacist League in London. Also while in London we attended 3 or 4 internal meetings of the then Anarchist Communist Federation (now the Anarchist Federation).

It's useful to understand these origins in understanding our first decade of involvement in the WSM as these experiences were quite intense both physically and intellectually and therefore created a strong bond of solidarity and a high expectation of what an anarchist militant should be. Our activity started in the closing years of the republican military struggle in Ireland which meant regular contact with people who had served significant prison sentences for their political activity and almost immediate contact with the Irish secret police (Special Branch) who were quick to question anyone new on the scene. All of this tended towards taking ourselves very seriously despite a reality of being a handful of people barely out of their teens with hopelessly marginal ideas.

We were delighted to discover the WSM and after a couple of formal meetings decided to short cut the ongoing discussions by offering to dissolve the ACG and join the WSM. In refounding WSM (although this was not the term used at the time) a document drawn up summarising the first three years of the WSM was extremely influential.

There is perhaps a minor inaccuracy in James text at this point at he claims the first wave (pre 1990) of WSM grew to a "few dozen" whereas I understand it peaked at around 15. This is of some small importance as my understanding of subsequent internal organisational history is based on the struggle we had to break beyond 15 to reach "a few dozen" a number only achieved in the early 2000's. Much of the discussion about the role of Delegate Council is relevant to that specific problem.

The early 1990's of the WSM were characterised by the de facto formation of a cadre organisation although formally we rejected that particular term. Cadre is another military term the left is fond of borrowing and basically refers to the disciplined core around which a mass army is built. In our context cadre formation meant that a huge part of our effort went on internal education & debate. Despite, for a good part of that period, there only being 5 of us in Dublin we managed to prepare an educational almost every week without fail, something the organisation



proved incapable of doing with 6 times that number a decade later. We more or less expected members to put the organisation first in their lives – although we would have denied doing so – and we placed almost no priority on recruitment. In fact the few people who did join in that period pretty much had to stalk us to do so and were all recruited in the basis of 100's of hours of contact with WSM members.

This attitude along with our exemplary involvement in key struggles like the X-case demonstrations and the Water Tax campaign gave us an impact and visibility way beyond our tiny numbers. The effort we put into publication added to this and in particular with our very early use of the internet quickly gave us an international reach and reputation that was completely out of scale with what was our reality. While all this can be seen positively it is also true that this is frequently the recipe for the foundation of small, rigid and sectarian sects that are so impressed by their own wisdom they fail to notice that no one outside the tiny circles of the radical left even notices them. This at least partially applies here so nostalgia for those days of coherency need to be balanced against the reality of having no influence outside the tiny circle of left activists paying close attention to us.

A further note is needed here on the cadre organisation concept. At this point in time much of our international contact was with the Anarchist Workers Group in Britain – we attended their conferences and they attended ours as well as exchanging internal bulletins. They openly proclaimed they sought to build a cadre organisation and after their disintegration Kevin Doyle published an analysis arguing that their Cadre Organisation policy document lead “to the demise of the AWG as an anarchist organisation.”

You can read this, my analysis of their collapse and several of the AWG articles but what is of interest here is that in accepting Kevin's analysis (which is accurate enough in terms of an analysis of the AWG version of a cadre organisation) we made the mistake of making it harder to understand the aspects of cadre organising we also had in reality adopted. Unlike the AWG we saw mass struggle and addressing arguments outside of the existing left as important. But a huge amount of the time we spent on self education was on the minute detail of anarchist and left history and only makes sense in the context of an organisation very much directed at arguments within the existing left. It's also relevant because I think James concluding arguments are very much for a cadre organisation.

In his account James sees a quite sudden departure from WSM's early 1990's direction around the year 2000 but as I recall it the shift was in fact gradual and ran over five years from 1994 to 2000. 2000 was when the key decision to turn Workers Solidarity into a free newspaper was made.

There were three key elements to this shift

- A. **Zapatista solidarity work** – we had started covering the Zapatista rising shortly after its outbreak in 1994 and I had significant involvement with the Irish Mexico Group including visiting Chiapas in 1996 & 1997. This exposed us to a wide range of revolutionary ideas that were either libertarian or representing libertarian shifts within previously authoritarian organisations. The methodology of the Zapatista's also proved to be an entry point to considering anarchism for a very large number of solidarity activists and very much laid the basis for the radical end of the alternative globalisation movement.
- B. **A study of modern revolutions** that was the basis for talks and a dayschool in 1996 – see for instance my talk *Modern Revolutions Or Is Revolution Still Possible?* for an early

version of the debate James presents as starting 6 years later in 2002. This section towards the end of my talk captures this in *“The speed at which ideas now flow, exemplified perhaps by the speed of the reaction to the Chiapas rebellion in Mexico make change very likely to be quick.... A couple of truly significant victories internationally could change the mood here almost overnight. In this sense there is enormous opportunity ahead.*

*Having said this we are in a weak position to take advantage of it. Unless anarchist ideas are dominant it is likely a revolution will be turned down the dead ends of reformism or re-vamped Leninism... But we do not have the numbers to assert that dominance. That is why we need to take growth very seriously anarchists cannot afford to remain as tiny propaganda groups we must grow to organisations of thousands and tens of thousands.”*

Some of the core ideas were in fact first publically argued in the first edition of Red & Black Revolution published 1994 in the articles on “Has Socialism A Future? The Left – Ashes To Phoenix Part 1” . And the creation of Red & Black Revolution in general involved collectively identifying an audience that went beyond the traditional left.

- C. **A break from traditional revolutionary organisational methods** in recognition of the huge impact technology was having on the way ideas were being spread. This was a drawn out and often informal process but had two key components, our increasing use of the Internet for the publication of our ideas and then at the dawn of the millennium our abandonment of the standard model of ‘selling the revolutionary paper’ as an organising tool for the free and large scale distribution. Given the way ‘The Paper’ is put at the centre of most projects of revolutionary organisation, including the formative years of the WSM, this is much more significant that may be immediately obvious to some readers.

There is a significant difference with the narrative James presents which is one of a return to Platformist orthodoxy with the refoundation in 1991 for almost a full decade before some sort of break towards ‘activism’ took place under the pressure of disappointing results. My version doesn’t quite fit into the story James needs to tell to reach his conclusion but as shown above it does appear to better fit what we were saying in public in those years. Importantly we didn’t so much react to the alternative globalisation movement – rather we were a part in the story of its formation through the Zapatista encuentro’s. (see Where did the Anti Capitalist Movement come from) And the turn to ‘activism’ had existed from the start, in particular around our involvement around Dublin Abortion Information Campaign which is where the bulk of our recruits in the 1990’s actually came from.

### III. False divisions – Summit protests or unions?

In James account the collectively driven shift over time in outreach & recruitment of the 1990's becomes instead an internal debate in 2000. He presents this shift as

*“Andrew was the leading supporter of increased co-operation with non-WSM libertarians who were emerging thanks to the influence of the Zapatistas, disillusionment with the Green Party, anti-globalisation and so forth, while Alan remained an advocate of the classic union-oriented Platformist strategy that had guided the organisation for two decades. Alan tied the fortunes of the WSM to the wider fortunes of the working class: in the absence of the radicalisation of the class there was no prospect of the WSM of growing significantly. Nor could a tiny organisation like the WSM radicalise the class. If anything, Alan thought the idea absurd. Andrew viewed this as an anarchist version of Kautsky’s so-called “actionless waiting” and advocated increased attempts to engage with other non-Leninist anti-capitalists with the hope of developing a radical alternative”*

Now all this is semi qualified with

*“reality is always messier than this neat little division. The tendency that considered an orientation towards unions as overwhelmingly important did not suggest non-co-operation with other Anarchists; the pro-anti-globalisation tendency didn’t advocate ignoring union activity.”*

I’d suggest however that the polarised debated presented by James above didn’t actually exist when he suggests it did. Rather his account is reading history backwards by imposing the divisions & debates of 2008–10 onto what was in reality a policy reached mostly through consensus in the period before 2000.

I would present our policy in that period in terms of a collective understanding being reached that at a time of massive economic expansion and social partnership the scope for activity in the unions for almost all of our members was very limited. This is because with everything but individual cases being dealt with through national negotiations there was very little reason for any local union activity in this period. My section which has around 700 members on paper met once a year at lunch time for an AGM throughout this period. Only 50 or so members attended and the AGM’s main business was making sure there would be a committee for monthly meeting with management the following year.

This wasn’t that new a development, it was more or less the situation that had existed from the first round of social partnership, which was why even in the early 1990’s with the exception of the water tax campaign the bulk of our activity had involved ‘activism’ around pro-choice struggles.

A serious effort had been put into trying to build a network in SIPTU in the years 1997–2000 through our involvement in the SIPTU Fightback publication but by 2000 it had become clear that while up to a couple of hundred union reps were interested in consuming the publication there was little possibility of getting more active involvement.

Our collective understanding was that social partnership & the boom would end at some point but that before that point we needed to find ways to build up a layer of militants who would be ready to take advantage of the crisis that would arise. The attempt to do this through the unions via SIPTU Fightback hadn't borne results, despite a very serious effort, and the complete lack of activity at the base of most unions meant that the opportunities to reach potential militants simply were not there.

We agreed a collective analysis of this in our position paper on the unions in the following section which was added as early as May 2006 (the exact date is unclear, that date is the earliest version of that position paper I found which includes the text).

*“12.3.1 The long years of social partnership and the low level of struggle have devastated rank and file organisation in most unions. Branch meetings and AGM's are badly attended and rank and file positions from unions reps to branch committee are often given to whoever is willing to do the work rather than contested. In the private sector union membership has drastically declined with many new companies being effectively non-union... This means that very few of the new generation of political activists have any experience of union activity. Encouraging involvement in unions is no longer a simple question of encouraging people to attend meetings or stand for union rep. Done in isolation both of these experiences can be demoralising. And most young workers now find themselves in non-unionised workplaces. Advocating joining a union to this layer can seem like a pointless strategy when all they hear of is unions that are toothless and long drawn out recognition disputes that are seldom seriously fought by the union side and which end in defeat or Pyrrhic victories.”*

To add a section to our existing papers it has been circulated to all members in a written form at least 4 weeks before conference giving them a chance to read it and suggest amendments. There is then a debate slot at conference at which any member can speak and the proposal then only passes if 50%+1 of those present vote for it. I don't remember any controversy about that section at all. There would have been differences in nuance between myself and Alan on the union questions but not really the sort of significant disagreement and debate suggested by James's account.

Here I think James is also 'preparing for the last war' in a way that would have delivered less than the actual strategy we followed. Our understanding of the limitations of the new methodologies of Social Partnership imposed on opportunities for radical workplace organisation were with hindsight under rather than overstated. And while we were right to imagine Social Partnership would 'end' when a crisis hit, we were wrong to imagine that this would see the unions leaders forced to accept a return to struggle in which radical ideas would inevitably unfold at the base.

The second point here is that for revolutionary organisations to survive – never mind expand – they need to adapt to the actual situation they find themselves in rather than acting as if there were somewhere else. The 1999–2004 period in Ireland was one where there was little or no

significant workplace struggle and little or no activity at the base of the unions. But it was one where thousands of mostly young people were being drawn to a broad anti-capitalist politics by international events, in particular the summit protests. Many of these people were either already self-defining as anarchists or adopting broadly anarchist organisational methods – in short they were a willing audience for our ideas.

One measure of this being that increasingly we would describe ourselves as ‘anarchists’ on first contact with people rather than ‘libertarian socialists’ – previously it was the case that anarchist was either a meaningless term to people or one they associated with punk music rather than politics. So rather than chase a disinterested audience we had few mechanisms for reaching it made sense to engage those who were interested and self-identifying as being close to us and try and convince them of our politics and organisational methods.

Again in hindsight the under-theorised and limited work done in this sphere was much better preparation for the reality of 2008–11 where the high points of radicalisation would not be old style mass strikes but rather the radical street movements of the ‘Arab Spring’ & Occupy. Only in the first case did mass strikes play any part in the emergence of the movement (although union support was important for Occupy). Sadly although our work in this period was interesting we failed to either develop the theoretical or tactical tools required to take full advantage of the Occupy moment, even if perhaps we were the most successful of those who tried on the Irish left.

At the same time we massively stepped up efforts to speak to the working class in general though shifting our newspaper from a 3–4 times a year sold format with a limited circulation that seldom reached past the left to a 6 times a year free format that was mostly delivered door to door where our members lived. In terms of time spent writing and distributing and in terms of financial resources our paper Workers Solidarity used by far the lion's share of resources from 2000–2010. It's hardly mentioned in James' account at all, presumably because it really doesn't tie into a narrative of an organisation that supposedly shifted focus away from trying to reach the mass of the population.

So the major problem with James's account of this period is that the areas he selects to talk about doesn't reflect the sum of what we were actually doing and trying to do. As another example the annual Dublin Anarchist Bookfair is also unmentioned but would be our second biggest expenditure per year after the newspaper. The bookfair is explicitly run to provide a easy entry point for finding out about anarchism to the general population and attracts up to 800 people.

Failure to at least examine a representative cross section of WSM activity in the period means his account if taken as representative can be quite misleading and so lead to a seriously skewed analysis. Not least because while organisationally we strived to maintain a careful balance between ‘activist’ orientated and ‘popular’ engagement that balance has entirely vanished in his account.

## **Ideas or terminology**

Sections of his account suggest that James sometimes didn't really fully grasp the nature of the work we were doing. In relation to the discussion on ‘activism’ central to his misunderstanding is the sentence reading

*“One of the arguments against old fashioned class struggle Anarchism was that it carries the alienating baggage of a century of socialism with it and the advantage of chucking that baggage overboard was a recurring theme over the next decade. ”*

In 2000 it was not the actual ideas of socialism / communism that many activists found alienating, it was the rather stale traditional language and imagery that much of the left used to express them. The language was in fact such a barrier that people simply turned off and didn't listen to the explanations of what we really meant by such terms and how it was different to what the Communist or Labour Party meant when they used similar language.

We recognised this when we began the process of forming the Grassroots Gathering and simply reformulated the traditional concepts of the libertarian left in language that did not immediately produce such a negative effect. In 2011 the emergence of Occupy saw a similar creation of a new terminology in order to describe class divisions & power because the old terminology was felt to be more ideological than explanatory. Very much earlier the dozen Grassroots Gatherings that were held over the first decade, and which probably over 1,000 people attended, were all based on agreement on the principles below.

*“The Grassroots Gathering aims towards a network which would:*

- 1. Be based on the principle that people should control their own lives and work together as equals, as part of how we work as well as what we are working towards.*
- 2. Within the network this means rejecting top-down and state-centred forms of organisation (hierarchical, authoritarian, expert-based, Leninist etc.) We need a network that's open, decentralised, and really democratic.*
- 3. Call for solutions that involve ordinary people controlling their own lives and having the resources to do so: the abolition, not reform, of global bodies like the World Bank and WTO, and a challenge to underlying structures of power and inequality.*
- 4. Organise for the control of the workplace by those who work there.*
- 5. Call for the control of communities by the people who live there.*
- 6. Argue for a sustainable environmental, economic and social system, agreed by the people of the planet.*
- 7. Working together in ways which are accessible to ordinary people, particularly women and working-class people, rather than reproducing feelings of disempowerment and alienation within our own network.”*

These (in particular 4 & 5) are not a rejection of the concepts of the libertarian left but a restatement of them. They also represent a revolutionary break with the reformism of the mainstream of the alternative globalisation movement on the one hand and a libertarian break with the top down methods of the trotskysts on the other. That second point is important because the Gatherings represented for the first time in Ireland an ongoing libertarian structure that was capable of reaching beyond the tiny handful of committed ideological anarchists and thus organising events that carried discussion of anarchism into the mainstream media.

The second issue with James's presentation of this period is that in describing what were some problems with the Grassroots milieu he refuses to recognise that it is the role of a revolutionary organisation to address such problems. We are not going to magically find some section of the population comprised of close to perfect revolutionaries waiting to have anarchist ideas dropped into their heads. Different oppositional movements will have different problems but the point in particular here is that for much of the 2000's there were no mass economic based opposition movements in which we might have hoped to find developed class politics. The one example of where there was (the anti-bin tax campaign of 2002/3) was one where at its peak we dropped almost all other activity to concentrate on just as today the campaign against the household tax takes up the bulk of our organiser time.

There may have been a limited truth in the idea that many involved around the Gatherings were "*fundamentally uninterested in winning over the population to radical left-wing ideas*" but this can be said of any oppositional youth movement in conditions similar to the Celtic Tiger years. James skips over our success at countering that tendency and at winning the arguments to structure activities in ways that reached out to the general population. There are many examples that can be given but perhaps the single most demonstrative is convincing the Gathering in the build up to the Mayday 2004 summit protest that rather than put energy into attracting and providing accommodation for 'international activists' we should instead put the resources into trying to explain the issues to and mobilise the population of Dublin.

This was quite unusual (perhaps unique?) in the summit protest period globally and meant that a lot of effort was put into media work and more importantly the production and distribution of 50,000 leaflets door to door mostly in the areas of Dublin where our protests would take place. It's worth quoting the conclusion of this leaflet as this makes clear it was very much about "*winning over the population to radical left-wing ideas*"

### ***"What Sort of Europe do we want?"***

*The groups and individuals involved in this Grassroots Network are united by a vision of a better future, one without bosses or governments, be they in Dublin or Brussels; one in which all local communities are directly run by the people living in them and all workplaces by the people working in them; a future in which everyone has control over their own lives and an equal say in the decisions that affect them.*

*We are talking not just about receiving an equal share of what is produced, but also transforming the quality of life, doing away with long working hours and increasing free time. We struggle for a genuinely sustainable economy and an end to environmental policies in which every 'solution' must be corporate-led and profit-driven.*

*People like you all over Europe are fighting for the same things. We are taking to the streets not only to build our resistance in Ireland but to forge links throughout Europe. Tens of thousands of people in Ireland have already been involved in resisting the race for wealth that is capitalism, which robs so many of us of our voice, our dreams and our aspirations."*

Agreeing the text did involve convincing some grassroots activists that this was the right approach but the mass distribution despite state intimidation shows that this argument was won. It is also the case that at a time when similar movements elsewhere were refusing to talk to the

mainstream media the Dublin Grassroots Network (formed out of the Gathering to work on the EU summit) did this so well that we got our spokesperson on the Late Late Show. All this considerable and effective work carried out by the DGN with the express purpose of communicating with the population are simply invisible in James account but in reality consumed the bulk of DGN's collective time & funding.

In James account convincing Grassroots activists to carry out activity aimed at addressing the general population is assumed to be either impossible or perhaps not worth the effort. Our actual experience was that yes while we needed to make the argument it was not hard to convince the majority that this was the best way to proceed. And that in doing so we greatly expanded the reach for the arguments that were being made, the WSM at the time could neither have distributed 50,000 leaflets nor got onto the Late Late. After the Mayday 2004 protests we even recruited a some of those who had favoured the more traditional 'international riot bloc' approach but who were convinced by the success of the popular approach in bringing out 1000's of people after the cops had announced a de facto ban on the march.

It was our very success at making these arguments and leading on their implementation in the 1999–2004 period that was responsible for the large and sudden growth in numbers that took place at the end of this period. With person after person who joined the reason given for doing so was because they had been working alongside us and observed how we were able to collectively pull together to make sure that what needed to be argued and done to build the movement was carried through.

The real challenge – which is only clear in hindsight – is that the 1999–2003 period was a new situation where quite large numbers were radicalised by very radical politics in a time of prosperity and social partnership by international events. In most places this period ended in 2003 with the US invasion of Iraq – the very success at mobilising millions to march against the war just before it broke out served to demoralise the same millions when it turned out marching was ineffective at preventing war and that the leadership of the anti-war movements had no implementable alternative. The wave lasted another 14 or so months in Ireland because we were able to bring together a significant enough group of people to briefly provide a counter strategy for the anti-war movement around direct action at Shannon and then as that became marginalised to carry those people into one last effort around Mayday 2004. But the tide had retreated and it was only a question of time before we would be stranded, our real failure, and perhaps in the circumstances it was inevitable, was to prepare those new members for the low period of routine activity that was to come.

## **One, two many networks?**

There is a second serious inaccuracy that needs to be challenged in James account at this point and this is that there were a sequence of projects that “flared up and faded away only to be resurrected under a different name.” This simply isn't a correct understanding of what the projects were that James names and how they related to each other. Rather the Grassroots Gathering remained the main network from 2000 to 2006 (and still has an existence today – one was held in Galway in October 2012). The Gathering spun off different projects to deal with specific issues and events, this was the reality of what the Grassroots Network Against War (GNAW) was and the Dublin Grassroots Network (DGN).



GNAW was the national network which existed to organise action against the US military use of Shannon airport. DGN was limited to Dublin and existed to organise the 2004 Dublin Mayday protest and very briefly afterwards. Neither was a reincarnation of the other (indeed they actually overlapped in 2004) nor were either a reincarnation of the Grassroots Gathering itself which after all continued to meet and was the 'parent' network for both.

All these organisations were in fact a long running and somewhat successful experiment in the new form of organisation that more clearly emerged in the revolts of 2011, loose but broad networks. In terms of 'preparing for the next war' it was precisely that sort of organisational methodology that revolutionaries needed to be seeking to understand rather than the older more centralised forms that did exist in previous class wars but which had little influence in the 2011 revolts.

The argument can weakly be made that some four years later the Social Solidarity Network had some aspects of DGN but only if you ignore the time limited basis of what DGN was set up to achieve and the fact that the DGN was very successful in that limited goal. James also suggests the 1% Network belongs in that category but the 1% Network wasn't set up to be libertarian at all but rather as a project between WSM and the left republican group *éirigi*. The only aspect of resurrection being perhaps that both the SSN and 1% Network also aimed at involving RAG & Seomra initially but they were such a minor component of the 1% Network that really it's not a claim that holds. The idea that the 1% Network, the fourth organisation James named in this section can be described as the "the fourth or fifth iteration" of the same thing thus makes little sense when you pay any attention to the detail of the very different goals each had and the significant structural difference between the 1% Network and the rest.

Perhaps from the point of view of a less than interested outsider all these things looked similar enough to each other but that is to not understand what forces they involved and what purpose they had. When it comes to his failure to distinguish between the 1% Network, the SSN and DGN I think James is showing one of the major problems both of the text and his internal contributions at the time. The tendency to assume that he already understood what was being argued and to jump straight to offering a cogent but pretty irrelevant counter argument to his own misunderstanding. This becomes particularly visible when we examine the discussion of the 1% Network.

## IV. Debate and the SSN

James account pivots around the first couple of years of the crisis and in particular around the short lived Social Solidarity Network (SSN) and the 1% Network. He presents a 'majority' position of engaging with the libertarian movement as winning out over a 'minority' position of working in the unions. I think the 'majority' 'minority' labels are intended as a witty if somewhat obscure reference to 'Bolshevik' 'Menshevik' divisions at the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) congress in 1903.

As I recall these discussions there wasn't really clear factions on these questions and those who agreed or disagreed on particular debates seldom did so for the same reasons. There were certainly no declared formal factions. The labels are perhaps useful only for the purpose of polemical argument but here I think it has the negative impact of simplifying complex discussion in a way that leads to a rather weak parallel with what WSM activity in that period amounted to.

The appearances of James piece prompted me to go back and finish a review of the SSN that I had prepared a couple of years ago but abandoned. It describes what little the SSN amounted to in considerable detail.

But to start with the majority / minority positions sketched out by James is in itself a poor description of the reality of the internal debate. In fact the WSM Spring conference in 2009 had debated trying to get a national libertarian network similar to the Grassroots Gathering going to organise resistance to the crisis but that proposal had actually been voted down! At that point in time the 'majority' was the 'minority'.

It was some time after this conference that the idea of a Dublin only network emerged, from the Dublin branch James was part of. But as is clear from the history of the SSN linked to above this never amounted to very much. A leaflet, a badly executed protest and a poster for that protest along with 3-4 meetings over four months was the sum total of the SSN. WSM involvement was pretty minimal for most of that time with only a bit of a peak around the SSN participation in the ICTU march on Nov 6<sup>th</sup> 2009. But even this amounted to no more than helping to distribute the leaflet and half a dozen members at a post march public meeting attended by about 30 people.

This is important to establish because the SSN certainly didn't suck in all available energy & resources from all 3 Dublin branches never mind the organisation nationally. It wasn't a strategic direction coming from conference or even delegate council. Rather it was a minor initiative that emerged from one branch, was very experimental in form and only ever really involved much effort from a couple of the 30+ members on the books in Dublin at that time.

It is almost certainly the case that in the year in question Dublin members of WSM put several times the work that went into the SSN into workplace activity. Quite probably more WSM effort went into organising for the ICTU demonstration of February 2009 than went into the SSN in total. And certainly more work went into the organisation of the 24 November National public sector Strike where all of our members working in the public sector played significant roles in their branches.

As a crude measure there were 9 articles on the WSM site covering the Nov 24<sup>th</sup> strike and only 3 on the SSN in its entirety. I'd expect if you were to count workplace related articles for 2009 on the WSM site there would be between 10 and 30 times the figure for the SSN and that this is a reasonable picture of the ratio of actual effort that members put in. Arguably this effort went into preparation to 'fight the last war' – it was the lack of outcome from the union work that is more deserving of analysis rather than an overly long critique of the poorly resourced and minor attempt at innovation that was the SSN.

James then moves on to the discussion of what he perceives as the internal debate around the SSN. Here perhaps there is a clue to where these mistakes come from. He is keen to defend Alan *"assuming the role of Cassandra within the organisation."*

He goes on to say

*"Alan developed a reputation for negativity; ... Moreover, he was direct and he upset people who perceived his attitude as personally antagonistic. On occasion he probably did go too far but for the most part his interventions were remarkably political... Alan developed a reputation for being a bruiser and the more he was perceived as such the more his political questions were side-stepped and his objections treated as a case of him being personally obstreperous. In retrospect, I am of the view that however direct Alan's debating style was, he focused on political questions and that, ironically enough, his opponents tended to personalise the issue by focusing on his tone."*

Now the SSN proposal emerged from the branch James & Alan were members of and I think here we are seeing an illustration of how a lack of concern with the process of discussion and a sole focus on the political positions being advanced can lead you to some very wrong conclusions. An insistence on bringing up the same basic questions week after week and seeking to polarise discussions between extremes ('majority' 'minority') can very often have the effect of making a somewhat irrelevant sideshow take up a huge percentage of time at meetings and worse still suck in a large amount of people's energy.

In this case not only did it disrupt the ability of that branch to carry out activity to the point where it was being gossiped about nationally but it also obviously created an incorrect impression of what the organisation as a whole was debating and working on. In my opinion it is very probable that a less polarised and more respectful internal culture in that branch at that time would have seen the relative balance between the effort going into the SSN (very little) and workplace organising (a lot) being much more visible. This in turn should have led to an emphasis on the important failure of this period, the ease with which the strike movement that closed 2009 was contained.

It's another topic but organisationally we failed to deal with the awful dynamics in the branch until eventually it got to such a crisis point that the branch itself had to perform an intervention. It is probable that the failure to intervene earlier led to the resignation of at least one member from the WSM (who said she found the atmosphere too distressing) and at least 3 members of that branch invented excuses for why they had to transfer to other branches. Others stopped coming to meetings for a period. It's really quite odd to see those dynamics held up as some sort of model.

One of the problems with the old left model is that idea that what is important is getting up and saying something as an end in itself. Internal debate in the WSM has generally avoided

going down that road. Elsewhere at extremes it leads to the sort of unhealthy interventions all too common at public meetings and campaign organising meetings where 6 or 7 members of the same organisation will deliver what is basically the same point over and over. The method can achieve results in the sense of making it appear that whatever point the party concerned wanted to make was popular. And it can browbeat those who are not sure of the idea into silence. This can lead to bad decisions being adopted and will demoralise those who felt too intimidated to raise objections.

Anarchists with our recognition that process is often as important as the result reached should strongly discourage this approach to political discussion. The intervention model we need to encourage should be based much more around first listening to what people's concerns are and then only once we are sure we actually understand them seeking to address those concerns.

## V. 'Scuffling with the cops' & the 1% Network

The description of the work around the 1% Network shares many of the problems with the discussion around the SSN. The origins of the 1% Network are as James's describes in the occasion when there were scuffles with Garda at the end of a SWP/Right to Work demonstration.

His presentation of this is however a little odd. He writes *"The Guards whacked a few of them on the head and the incident got a fair amount of publicity in the media. So far, so ordinary. The SWP periodically engage in such stunts"* Well no actually. The SWP would certainly not have had any sort of reputation for scuffling with the guards (indeed apparently there was major internal displeasure in the SWP over this). But far more to the point the use of batons by the Garda at Dublin demonstrations was anything but routine and this was the first occasion in a long while that it had been directed at a 'mass' demonstration. The following Saturday the police attacked an eirigi occupation of Anglo Irish Bank, again with batons being used. These two incidents within days of each other were a significant break with Dublin policing methods which was why I thought it important we organised to demonstrate against police brutality at the follow up Right to Work protest.

The bulk of the Dublin WSM membership were not keen in taking part in Right to Work demonstrations because it was seen to add credibility to yet another dead end SWP front whose only real purpose was recruitment to the SWP. They also thought the demands of Right to Work were pretty poor. And initially it wasn't clear how 'official' the attempt by the SWP members to 'storm the Dail' had been. Members were not too keen on accepting SWP stewarding where we felt that they were inexperienced and unpredictable in that sort of confrontational situation. All three reasons led us to put out a call for an 'anti-capitalist bloc' which would show solidarity in the face of Garda aggression but also allow us to be distinct from the Right to Work/SWP program and methods and not be obliged to be under the direction of their stewards.

We put out the call for this with Seomra with less than 36 hours notice. The call read

*"Last Tuesday Gardai used extendable steel batons against the heads of protesters trying to enter the Dail carpark resulting in at least five head injuries. On Saturday they again attacked an occupation of Anglo Irish Bank by eirigi. We've seen the state react in a similar fashion to resistance in Rossport, Mayday 2004 and Reclaim the Streets. It's time to say Enough."*

What I would estimate as about 300 people took part – including just about every libertarian activist in Dublin, eirigi members and a large number of dissident republicans. In what seemed to be a confirmation that the nature of policing had changed the Garda (including the mounted unit and the helicopter) attempted to stop us marching – this is pretty much unheard of. They were unsuccessful in that attempt and after pushing through the badly organised Gardai cordon we had a short rally outside the Anglo Irish Bank HQ before marching down to join the main static demonstration at the Dail.

We held a second 'Anti-capitalist' bloc the following week, this time for logistical reasons called with eirigi alone, in part to demonstrate that we were not going to be intimidated into silence by this new policing. That was uneventful in that the Garda appeared to have abandoned their new aggressive tactics and when the SWP called yet another RtoW demonstration the following week we decided not to mobilise for it. It was small and passed off without incident.

Whatever was up in these weeks it was certainly a break with routine policing and one that needed the sort of measured response that the anti-capitalist bloc provided. A demonstration that we were not simply going to be intimidated off the street that did not make the mistake of becoming a mini riot between the tiny forces of the anarchists & republican left, and the police. It could have been that this was precisely what the Garda hoped to provoke in order to effectively isolate us from any potential mass movement. It was very noticeable throughout this period that the level of undercover/secret policing had increased, culminating in the ICTU march of December when the Garda had secret police disguised as demonstrators among our ranks.

Retrospectively the question of just what the Garda were up to in that period is interesting. It is possible that the relatively aggressive response to the eirigi Anglo occupation and the first anti-capitalist bloc were no more than the implementation of an order to 'put manners' on the left after the scuffle at the Dail gates. It does appear that in that period the state expected much more resistance to the cuts than emerged, stories were planted in the media about the riot squad training with petrol bombs being thrown at them etc.

The news story I wrote describing the 3<sup>rd</sup> RtoW event ended with

*"However we have to be wary of simply looking at building resistance as a question of moving from one stunt to the next. The capitalist assault is massive and can only be turned back by an organised and united working class response involving hundreds of thousands if not millions, most probably in the form of a general strike. The trade unions leaders have demonstrated they will argue and organize against such a response so building towards this requires a genuine united front, not just of the left but also of union branches, community organisations and campaign groups united around struggle and a desire to make the rich pay. It's unfortunate that to date the left parties and individuals have only been interested in building fronts that they can control rather than building towards the eventual launch of such a united front at the point where it would be a real power rather than a paper tiger."*

It may be worth re-reading that paragraph a second time. In his account James presented me as the main voice of a 'majority' that wanted a turn to stunts performed by the libertarian movement rather than mass work. That paragraph clearly says something else all together. This wasn't a one off, a couple of weeks earlier on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May I submitted the following amendment for WSM National Crisis to be inserted into our 'Capitalist Crisis' position paper

*"We will argue for the construction of a genuine united front of struggle against the cuts on a non electoralist basis that involves left organisations, union branches, community organisations and campaigning groups. This should be based around a common set of slogans against and to reverse the cuts. We will proceed by getting such individuals and organisations to sign up to a call for a founding conference of such a united front which will be open to all who agree that the wealthy rather than workers must pay for the*

*crisis. Such a conference should only be held if and when it has achieved substantial backing from a range of organisations.”*

In order to ignore what was actually being argued for in this period James uses the 1% Network in a similar fashion to the way he earlier used the SSN. Like the SSN the 1% Network was a fairly minor set of events aimed this time at exploring the possibility of common work with the section of the republican movement around eirigi. A number of us had worked in Shell to Sea with some eirigi members for a couple of years and had developed good working relations with them. We shared a similar approach on the questions of direct action v passive protest and confrontation (although eirigi as a whole was a little prone to stunts).

Politically eirigi was interesting to us as alone among the republican splits from Sinn Fein they didn't simply seek a return to military conflict or just see the mistakes of that movement coming from bad leaders. Instead they saw the first task as building mass opposition and saw the top down leadership methods of the IRA and Sinn Fein as a problem. Clearly this opened them up to the anarchist critiques of leadership and in Ireland where the republican movement rather than the far left has tended to be the source of mass upheaval it made sense to encourage developments in that direction.

In the aftermath of the anti-capitalist blocs a few WSM delegates sat down with a few eirigi representatives to discuss the possibility of more formalised joint work. Out of this meeting came the proposal for the 1% Network. From reading James's account it becomes very clear that he simply wasn't listening to the internal WSM discussion about why we should do this. In his account James says he wasn't keen on this work because what he terms the minority “thought it an utter waste of time: it was isolationist: the only people who partook in it were dissident republicans and libertarian sympathisers, possibly the two groups in Ireland least likely to engender a positive reaction from the public. And insofar as the public even noticed its existence we thought it likely to alienate them; the only way it could gain publicity was through scuffling with the Guards”

Yet these were the very reasons why we moved from the anti-capitalist bloc with its emphasis on Garda generated confrontation to the 1% Network whose emphasise was purely on imaginative propaganda. We understood that it was easy for the state to isolate the elements involved in the anti-capitalist bloc and in particular we wanted to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and the 32 County Sovereignty Movement. We'd no interest in small scale scuffles between us and the Garda, indeed we discussed and looked at ways to minimise that possibility. Our mission was very simple – to try and do what we could to move public discussion of the crisis away from the idea that ‘the unemployed’ or ‘public sector workers’ had to pay to the idea that the richest 1% had to pay. This we thought was a very simple concept that if taken up on a popular basis would transform public understanding of the crisis.

At the start one of the WSM members (possibly Mark) suggested that maybe the 1% Network was the wrong name. It had been taken from the headline item of a Bank of Ireland report that stated that 1% of the population owned 34% of the wealth. Mark thought that maybe instead our name should refer to the other 99%. We didn't go with that idea but in retrospect it is very clear that rather than being an exercise in self marginalisation as James suggests we'd sort of stumbled across the core popular message that Occupy built around a year later, that of the 99% and the 1%. A message that in its 2011 expression saw some 2200+ camps being set up across the globe.

Internally the 1% Network was never seen as an alternative to the United Front or indeed as something that could become it. Rather it was simply a way of mobilising more than our limited numbers to get out the core 1% / 99% message while we identified organisations and individuals who could initiate a United Front. The network was quite successful at what it set out to do, getting a good bit of media coverage of the core message and bringing increasing numbers out culminating in as many as 700 people marching with the 1% Network at the massive ICTU demonstration in December.

Unfortunately we were unable to build on this as this was also the period in which the bubbling crisis in the WSM dragged the organisation into paralysis. My request that we put an article in the paper arguing for the United Front was not acted on. Much to my surprise Workers Solidarity 116 instead published that July what read like a thinly disguised critique based around the misunderstanding of the Anti-Capitalist Bloc under the title 'Thinking About Anarchism: Storming the Dáil' complete with a picture of the bloc.

The 1% Network like the SSN before it only lasted a few months – its last activity being the large bloc mobilised for the ICTU march in December. There were a few reasons for this, but principally the WSM saw a spate of resignations, including those of 'the minority' that prompted months of internal soul searching and reconstruction and eirigi switched tack back to a very traditional nationalism of trying to build opposition to the visit of the British Queen that May. This was also the period in which the Croke Park agreement was debated and voted for in the unions, really the moment at which the faint flicker of the possibility of mass resistance was extinguished. In the context of the emergence of Occupy around half a year later there is a 'what if' that hangs in the air here which again points to an organisational failure of being not innovative enough than the reverse.



## VI. Mass struggle in a small space – Shell to Sea

Let us now move on to James's discussion of the WSM and 'Direct Action'. This whole section seems dominated by James arguing against his own misunderstandings. Here he takes problems that exist in the anarchist movement elsewhere and assumes that because some things that happened in Ireland have some resemblance to those problems that therefore they are those problems reproduced by the WSM in Ireland. In particular the idea that 'direct action' means tiny groups of activists performing stunts.

This is encapsulated in the sentence *"The most minor stunt (holding a banner on the roof of Shell's headquarters; chaining oneself to a stairs in a government ministry) was interpreted as direct action."* To unpick this bit by bit. Firstly the two examples he chooses are not as presented by James typical but rather two isolated stunts separated by a few years. Both were in connection with the same struggle – that around Oil & Gas Exploration and the imposition of the pipeline on the community at Rosspport. This was a major area of activity for the WSM for several years from 2005/6 and an area that James and other members of the 'minority' were never very keen on. Interested readers in a balanced picture of what has actually happened in that struggle can consult the vast archive (120 articles) of WSM analysis and reportage.

The problem here is that in this fragment James's both misrepresents how these particular protests were reported on by the WSM and by implication suggests they were typical of the broader Shell to Sea campaign. Neither of these protests were seen as 'Direct Action's' but rather as stunts designed to draw press attention. These are not just errors of detail but show a fundamental misunderstanding of both the internal dynamics of a campaign that was central to WSM activity and even stranger a failure to recognise an implementation of WSM strategy in relation to that campaign.

The first of the referred to stunts was the brief occupation of Corrib House carried out early in 2007 involving WSM & eirigi members. It was designed to publicise what came to be called 'The Great Oil & Gas Giveaway'. Our reportage at the time didn't *even* use the term Direct Action once. This particular example in fact shows the opposite of what James presents. It was aimed at making the Shell to Sea struggle more popular with the general population by expanding the issue from the injustices being imposed on the small community in Rosspport to the loss of 100's of billions in oil & gas revenue that could have been used to fund all our health and education.

The second event James refers to happened over three years later in October of 2010 and was again not referred to as a 'Direct Action' anywhere in our report. It was a small Shell to Sea stunt designed to get media coverage of the 100<sup>th</sup> day local fisherman Pat O'Donnell was spending in prison. It achieved that objective but its a very strange minor event to single out for mention.

In terms of the larger narrative of wishing to prepare for yesterdays wars rather than tomorrow he also ignores the important role PR stunts have come to play in shaping popular consciousness & overcoming standard mass media barriers. Whether or not you like that reality

small group stunts that transform public opinion have become a central part of what changes mass consciousness whether that be Greenpeace anti-whaling voyages, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi that kicked off revolt in Tunisia or indeed an initially small group of activists camping out in Tahir square.

Of the three only Greenpeace anti-whaling has a remote resemblance to genuine direct action – and only remote because while the Rainbow Warrior could limit the operation of a single whaling vessel all the others could work. It is best understood instead as part of the process of transforming the public image of whales from the feared beast of Moby Dick to something you'd bring your children out in a small whale watching boat in the hope of getting alongside. A transformation between such extremes is no small feat.

James presentation of these two consciousness shaping events as false 'direct actions' is all the stranger when you consider the history of WSM argument within the Shell to Sea campaign on just this issue. We went into it fully aware of the dangers of small groups of activists substituting themselves for a mass campaign through pulling stunts and calling them direct actions. We successfully argued against just such an approach from the start of our involvement. We argued instead that the role of activists was to encourage the community to take mass direct action and to aid them in doing so.

This is another argument that was won – the numbers of people living in the area is small but the road blockades etc we actually reported on as direct action as the struggle peaked in 2007 involved a large percentage of people from the local community. It was really only much later, after prolonged repression had beaten most of the local community down, that the tendency to substitute small scale solidarity activist direct actions for mass ones came to the fore. This was probably inevitable in the circumstances but it is entirely false to claim the WSM advocated such a strategy from the start when in fact we argued against it.

The long, complex and not yet concluded Shell to Sea campaign can not be covered in detail here. There were certainly mistakes made and things that could be done better. But in this section James is entirely unjust to the WSM members who put considerable efforts into arguing the exact opposite of what he claims and who successfully convinced people of those arguments. For seven years WSM members in the campaign have been found promoting mass direct action and emphasising mass communication through exposing the Great Oil & Gas Giveaway in order to convince the broader population. Again I don't think James is being dishonest here. He was never very keen on Shell to Sea and as elsewhere this translates into not paying attention to what WSM members were actually doing and saying.

But he is doing a massive disservice to the WSM and individual WSM members with the inaccurate picture he presents. He writes for instance that *"What was notably absent from our aims in of these campaigns was the desire to win over large numbers of people, or at least the willingness to do the type types of things that might make such an aim remotely likely."* Here he not only misunderstands the roles of stunts in doing just this he also ignores the central role we played in arguing for and helping do the work of creating the 120,000 plus copies of 4 page leaflets that described in detail what the Oil & Gas Giveaway was and which have been distributed by Shell to Sea activists all over Ireland. If that is not *"the type of thing"* which *"might make such an aim remotely likely"* it is hard to think what is but it is entirely absent from his account. Instead two minor stunts are given a prominence that in any objective history of the campaign might not even be footnoted. And without any realisation of the positive role such stunts play in the

current & future wars where a single image going viral on Facebook can reach vast numbers of people that a leaflet would not.

The Shell to Sea campaign is drawing towards a close and it will be important that the WSM produce a detailed analysis of that that struggle and our role in it. But that analysis will only be useful if based on what was actually done and what was actually argued. It is far more useful to examine why the right approaches on the direct action and mass communication work may not have delivered quite what was hoped than to pretend they were never attempted in the first place. And as with the previous examples there is perhaps an argument that we were being too 'last war' in what we were arguing.

## VII. Beyond the call for the general strike

James opens his section on the unions by suggesting the WSM union activity in the 2008–2010 period consisted of “criticising the union leadership or putting up posters calling for a general strike”. As elsewhere this is a very selective picture that might be good for polemic but does not reflect reality. The “posters calling for a general strike” were presumably either the ‘*Organise Your Workplace: Strike to win*’ posters produced ahead of the March 30<sup>th</sup> demonstration or the single one off sticker run done in advance of the mass ICTU demonstration in December. The first was a run off less than 200 stapled up around poles (a couple of hours work), the second was the night before the demonstration when all of 400 stickers were put up. Half of them read “*ICTU WON’T WORKERS MUST! Organise for a general strike*” the other half reading “*General Strike Now*”.

About an hours work by three members was required for either of these activities, probably less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> of time that was spent in any month by Dublin WSM member at local union meetings in this period. The context for the use of that slogan was the political understanding that the depth of cuts that were coming could only be fought (at the very least) by a general strike. This was identified as one useful concept that a group with 40 or so active members could try and inject into the demonstrations of 60–140,000 of that period – a way of making an argument reaching beyond their immediate local union meetings but hardly as a substitute for those meetings. As is clear from the slogan (ICTU won’t etc) it certainly wasn’t a demand directed at the union leadership – rather we argued that workers themselves needed to ‘organise your workplace’.

So its simply not good enough to suggest that saying that workers would need to organise a general strike to defeat austerity was either our main activity with regard to the unions or even our strategy. In reality the poster & sticker were both more in the realm of making an argument than organising at all – hence the general method of distribution. This general message that a general strike would be required to stop austerity but that workers would have to organise this through the unions rather than calling on ICTU to do so was repeated in numerous articles in Workers Solidarity and on leaflets.

To make the mischaracterisation of activity worse James then writes of the ‘minority’ that “*Following Alan MacSimoin, we certainly didn’t think that the union base was radical nor that the union leadership were selling them out*”. This sentence is clearly intended to suggest this rather obvious position was not the position of the ‘majority’.

Yet in fact this was and is the position of the WSM as a whole and has been for as long as I’ve been a member! We have never had a position that the leadership of the unions were holding back a membership constantly keen to take militant action. In general we recognise that most of the time the leadership are to the left of the membership – a membership that after all mostly voted for Fianna Fail. Of course this is a simplification, the radicalism of the leadership is the radicalism of singing Joe Hill after a few pints have been downed. And the conservatism of the

membership may well be swept aside by the reality of entering into struggle. A full exploration of those contradictions is beyond the scope of this piece.

Critiques of the leadership were necessary for the opposite reason. They were needed because the membership tended to assume that the leadership were going to be too militant and lead them out on pointless strikes. This might run against standard left rhetoric but given how little contact most members had with their unions before the crisis and the way most of the media portrays unions it is not perhaps so surprising. Locally I remember our branch official at our first union mass assembly of this period going to considerable lengths to reassure the membership that the leadership were not going to call a strike on a whim – that they could be trusted to be sensible.

The reality was that ICTU was desperately trying to get any deal that could see a return to partnership. This unfortunately was all most union members also hope for – the November 24<sup>th</sup> strike was unpopular in many workplaces because of the loss of a days pay. This was of course a very short sighted attitude considering that the pay cuts already imposed at that point in time amounted to the equivalent of 18+ days pay a year for most members – but still it was an attitude we constantly ran up against. Criticisms expressed of the union leadership by union members were almost never that they were too cautious, rather it was that their negotiation or PR skills were not up to scratch,

The portrayal of WSM union activity and what we advocated reflects none of the depth of our experiences in this period. A casual reader could be forgiven for coming away from James's account with the idea that our activity consisted of most of us going around shouting in the streets about a general strike while Alan and Gregor alone were involved in branch activity. In the period under question this is a very, very long way from reality.

The crisis meant that from late 2008 until the voting through of the Croke Park Agreement in early 2010 a brief window opened in the public sector. The collapse of partnership and the depth of the cuts meant that in many places the grassroots of the unions were forced back into life by these circumstances. In Dublin this space allowed at least another 6 members to play significant local roles in that burst of activity. At least 4 of those 6 ended up on branch committees, and in one case that involved the recall of the entire previous branch committee and its almost complete replacement. In other cases inactive branches had to be first brought back to life. Croke Park put the cap back on the bottle but even so we saw a number of members reach positions of local influence. It's no exaggeration to say this was true of pretty much every active WSM member who was a public sector worker in Dublin.

There are many interesting lessons to be learned about what we actually did in that period, what worked, what didn't work and where the gaps were in our preparation. For instance it is often assumed that influence in a workplace can only be earned through a long hard slog of routine work over years. But actually lack of activity at the base of the unions meant that many union members assumed those with positions had the same line as the leadership – even when they were in fact far left militants who did not. But James doesn't even attempt to pull together such lessons, he just presents the 'majority v minority' position described above that seems to owe more to lazy stereotypes of 'typical lefties' than our actual.

Towards the end of the period under discussion I tried to pull together the lessons as I saw them in the article "Capitalist crisis and union resistance in Ireland" published in the 1<sup>st</sup> issue of the Irish Anarchist review. That piece is pretty self critical of our actual preparation pre crisis without resorting to the same level of parody. The argument about the advantages & disadvantages of a 'long march through the unions' in times of quiet as preparation for such times of crisis is

something I want to return to. Retrospectively I think that piece is too conservative and guilty of arguing the case for better trenches, it is only in researching this that I've gained a fuller understanding of how much progress was made in the brief period available. Our problem was much more the problem of our small numbers, and the small numbers of the radical left in general, meaning that this influence was gained in far too few union branches to have any real hope of influencing the direction of the union movement as a whole.

A final note. Entirely absent from James's account is any mention of the Independent Workers Union (IWU). This despite the fact that for much of the period covered it has been a major focus for the WSM with members playing central roles in the organising of the IWU nationally, in Cork and in Dublin. I don't go into the detail of that here as my involvement was minimal to non-existent but that work has involved hundreds if not thousands of hours, certainly very more than that brief poster & sticker run James presented as typical.

## VIII. Tests of Membership

James' presentation of the recruitment debate is another example of how he seems to have assumed in advance what the counter arguments would be and as a result didn't pay that much attention to what was actually said. The core of my objection had no connection with a fear of a "*more old-fashioned interpretation of Platformism*" – I'm not even sure what that might mean. Rather it was that the issues James put forward as the key tests for suitability for membership were all ones based around an intellectual understanding of obscure historical events and theory.

Aileen, myself and others felt that the ability to implement organisational methods internally and in external campaigns should be given a high value if we were to avoid the obvious trap of only recruiting geeky intellectuals with a strong interest in arguing aspects of the Spanish revolution or Russian revolution. As those with such interests are disproportionately university educated males our concerns were in part based on a fear of making the organisation less reflective of the working class.

So we wanted any test of membership suitability to account for practical organisational experience. Such experience is every bit as valuable for an anarchist organisation but can indeed be better understanding how anarchist processes work and what the dangers of authoritarian processes are. Perhaps most importantly of all people whose experience is gained in this manner rather than mostly through book learning will often have the skills to do a much better job at convincing others of the reasons to use anti-authoritarian methods in struggles.

As far as we were concerned any membership suitability tests had to measure a range of skills that were useful to the WSM and the more abstract intellectual stuff should be part of a post-membership education program rather than a pre-membership requirement. It's useful for an organisation like the WSM to contain members able to argue the intricate details of the 1921 Kronstadt insurrection or the 1937 Maydays in Barcelona with others on the left. But such detailed knowledge is not something that should be a requirement for joining. In effect it would have moved us back towards being a small cadre organisation directed at making arguments to the existing left.

It also has to be said that unless carefully guarded against historical knowledge will tend to strongly produce a 'planning for the last war' attitude. Everyone tends to read things along their lines of expertise. The tactics of the next war will almost certainly be clearer for someone involved in the small skirmishes of today than someone with an exhaustive knowledge of how the CNT of 1936 was created. Detailed knowledge of old battles can encourage the tendency to apply outdated arguments in new situations. In reality full realisation of what is needed for the future requires a rather skillful combination of both the major but dated lessons of the past and the best practise of the present. Brought together in a way that is almost certainly only possible though a collective discussion of a large and varied enough set of people to encompass the knowledge and experiences required.

Another female member was very concerned that the proposed process (something that sounded more or less like a job interview) would strongly select for people who were less

intimidated by such a selection process – again a tilt towards university educated males. I’ve no memory of James ever making any attempt to address these concerns people had about the effects implementation of his proposal would have on the make up of the WSM. Instead supporters of his proposed changes focused on anecdotes about members they considered unsuitable. Two of the three examples they used had left WSM by the time of this debate but it was noticeable that while only 15% of our membership at that point in time was female 66% of these supposedly unsuitable members were women. Confirming not some sexism of those making the arguments but a possible end result of valuing some skills more than others.

## **What does the word socialism mean?**

James actually repeat’s one of these anecdotes about the one of these three who remains a member today when he writes “*one member notoriously snorted “We’re socialists?” at a branch meeting.*” In reality this was simply another example of what happens when you don’t try and understand why people are saying something and just assume knowledge based on history. In this case the member wasn’t using the term ‘socialist’ in the way James assumes, that is to mean the broad body of the left that anarchism was part of from the 1860’s, but rather in the more narrow but not uncommon use of the term today to mean the likes of the old left Labour, Communist and Trotskyist parties. Such usage is not that uncommon amongst activists who have come to anarchism through paths other than the left parties or reading anarchist history.

It is true that there was also nervousness about the idea of a single gate keeper who would judge all such prospective members. But here too this nervousness was based on the realisation that most people are good at communicating with those that are similar to them and not so good at communicating with those that are different. A single gatekeeper would have the result of selecting people who were like the gatekeeper as being suitable for membership and rejecting those that were not.

Most of all though many of us thought the existing membership system wasn’t broken, and that even with the anecdotes there was only a genuine problem in one of the three stories – which was in any case rapidly dealt with. In the period we are talking of around 100 people joined the WSM, one mistake is not a significant problem. Trying to create a system that is water tight in every single case will almost always introduce negative consequences that are considerably worse in impact than the occasional unsuitable person becoming a member for a brief period.

Some time after James had resigned the changes he had introduced were scrapped (leading to the return to the WSM of another member who had resigned on their adoption) and an entirely new departure taken on the entire membership question. Retrospectively not only do I feel James position was wrong but that it was answering the wrong set of problems / question. In effect it sought to return us to the undeclared cadre organisation of the 1990’s and preparation for the last war. What is needed is something significantly different.



## IX. Planning for the future?

So if the answer is not the equivalent of a 'build better trenches' preparation for the last war what is it? I've been exploring that question since the mid 1990's, most often on the basis of looking at what seemed to be the most significant experiments currently available. In the mid 1990's that was the Zapatista's, from 2000 to 2004 it was the networks that emerged around the summit protests. In the early years of the crisis to 2009/10 it was a return to more traditional union organisation and the attempt to generate a general strike, by 2011 it was the emergence of the new politics of camp based street protest in the period from Tahir to Occupy. As I have already suggested understanding these moments may be more important in preparing for the future than an understanding of the minute detail of the Russian or Spanish Revolutions. Which is not to dismiss the importance of those, just to recognise that they happened a long long time away in conditions very different from those we face today.

Apart from the articles I've written on the topic of revolutionary organisation over the years I've also pushed a number of initiatives internal to the WSM – some of which either have or had the potential to transform our practise. The reality of such schemes is that they are easy to formulate in the abstract but far harder to make concrete and in particular to move from the situation where you can win a vote at conference for their implementation to where you also have sufficient 'buy in' from the membership to implement. The nature of our organisation is that most of the time there is far more potentially useful work to be done than we have the time to do it which means we tend to over commit and in such circumstances individuals are more inclined to first perform the familiar tasks they know they can do well.

In 2008 one of these proposals was passed at conference as a new section of the Our Perspectives policy to be titled '10 year goals'. James in a sentence that almost seems designed to make it sound ludicrous mis summarises these as

*"It was proposed by Andrew and adopted with some debate at our Summer Conference in 2005 and entailed a series of ambitious goals to be achieved by 2010, including the establishment of some 80 WSM branches(!), many libertarian social centres, libertarian union networks and more"*

There are a couple of important factual errors here, the motion was passed in 2008 and not 2005 2005 and not 2008. And it was a 10 year goal looking forward to 2018 rather than a five year one ending in 2010. At the time in 2008 we had five branches so the idea that we could double that number every 30 months seemed like an ambitious rather than crazy goal. Today after five years of the crisis things look rather different but that is the nature of all organisation – you surge forward for a while and then get knocked back and have to build anew.

The first error probably arose as I'd been making the argument for setting such goals for some time, back in 2005 I raised the idea as part of an educational at one of the Dublin branch meetings and explained why in a follow up post that read in part

*“We need a five year plan because we need a collectively agreed document that we can then judge all our political work against. Pushing papers through doors makes a lot more sense if it is part of a collective plan to build a branch in an area, a plan that also includes local meetings and activity. And if that is the first step in a wider collective plan to establish a number of such branches then it makes more sense still. What’s more you also have some sort of measure that means at the end of a year or two we can collectively step back and ask ‘well did that actually work – was it worthwhile?’”*

What was actually passed in late 2008 carried the concept of goal setting (I still consider this useful for the reasons outlined above) but very much in the context of trying to understand and begin experiments with the new network forms of organisation as applied to the workplace and to the neighborhood. Note I deliberately used the geographic terms neighborhood rather than the more familiar but imprecise term ‘community’.

Retrospectively its a pity we didn’t adopt these at the end of the summit protest period in 2004 as it appears quite likely if we had pursued them we would have established the first workplace networks and neighborhood centres by the time the crisis appeared in 2008. We would now have some evidence as to whether or not such methods would have shifted the balance in either the unions (where an education sector network was probably realisable) or a little later with regard to the household tax in neighborhoods. As it was without this preparation we found ourselves relatively powerless to influence the direction of struggle outside our own union branches beyond putting out the ‘*ICTU Won’t, Workers Must Call a General Strike*’ calls that James focused on in his discussion of our union activity.

Rightly or wrongly the collective decision that was taken in the aftermath of being able to do little about the crisis was to scrap the entire short term section of our perspective and replace it with a description of what had happened – which means the concepts of the goals will now need to be re-debated. We also however agreed a new membership structure and methodology of engaging with our broad periphery although once more with this there is a significant gap between getting something passed and getting enough ‘buy-in’ for its implementation. That sort of shift is however one of the radical changes we need to make in breaking with the traditional way the left approaches organisation.

## **X. Some internal details**

### **Mass organisation or platformist minority**

I think James mischaracterises the proposals around the 10 year plan and informal shifts in practise because he is looking at them through his 'last war' lens and sees poles labelled 'mass organisation' and what he terms a 'Bakunist strategy/Platformism'. As an aside I think he misunderstands Bakunin's views on that organisational question. I would present this shift as a reality of the networked world which has so transformed that polarity that it no longer describes what it once did and its hard to debate using those old terms without confusion.

The new reality is a long discussion I've explored elsewhere but in brief I think the new form of revolutionary organisation will be one that continues to have a smallish core of militants but very much more porous barriers between members, supporters and contacts. You might call that 'Platformism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' and you can argue it is actually quite compatible with the organisation methods Bakunin argued in the 19<sup>th</sup>. But I'm not sure of the value of involving ourself in the argument in that manner as opposed to making the case from current experience and first principles.

Using the old terminology for a moment though I'm not aware of any WSM member who suggested that the WSM should or could become a mass organisation – that is a trade union or federation of community organisations. Nor did anyone even suggest that we should simply become some sort of libertarian network, the sort of transitional organisation even Bakunin advocated should exist to allow the small anarchist nucleus an influence multiplier in the mass organisations of the class. Despite having quite a long section asserting this to be the case James provides no actual examples of that argument being made.

I suspect his misunderstanding must flow from his concept of what made a 'good member' that we have already discussed above. That is James views the core of militants as being ideologically determined through study and so saw the concept of including those whose views had primarily been formed through struggle as a shift towards wanting to turn the WSM into a mass organisation. In practise though we have seen those whose ideology was formed through study far more likely to shift away from anarchism (and we are about to see why) while those whose anarchism was more experiential have tended to both remain anarchists and WSM members.

But as above I'm not sure how useful it is to conduct a defence of the WSM based on these old organisational terms – terms whose time has at least to some extent passed. Not am I 100% confident that it makes more sense to try and retain the WSM as an organisation while transforming our methodology to the new methods. We could instead decide to use our resources to bring together those already using these methods to launch something new that will reform a core based only in a small part around our existing collective skills. The WSM has a proud history but the organisation is not an end in itself. We could decide, as other organisations have in the past, that a process of dissolution and reformation makes more sense than keeping this particular brand alive.

## Delegate Council

James starts his discussion on what he saw as the problems with WSM delegate council right after he explains why he had resigned from the WSM. This makes a lot of sense in that his argument in this section is not so much that DC didn't do what the WSM as an anarchist organisation wanted it to but more that it didn't do what he thought it should. He wanted it to be a sort of officer board setting the political direction of the organisation. We saw it more as an administration body supervising what he terms "trifling administration issues" and also being the point at which decisions that needed to be made between conferences could be made on the basis of mandated and recallable delegates.

I'm not claiming that DC works perfectly and it certainly took some time to get going but really it continues to fulfill the role we desire of it – oversight and short term decision making. Beyond that I'm not at all convinced that the old concept of centralised decision making across all topics and areas of activity in a single body makes sense in today's world but lets return to that later.

In my opinion, and he may well agree, the real source of James's frustration was that he was on a political trajectory that was taking him away from anarchism and the vast majority of the rest of the organisation were not interested in following him. That trajectory becomes clearest in this section, no where clearer than where he talks about who was a DC delegate and says

*"many did not have a particularly good capacity for considering questions of general political strategy abstracted from day-to-day concerns and issues that were particularly emotive for them .. Some people just weren't as good at thinking politically as others .. the intellectual quality of the delegates wasn't supposed to matter all that much. Eventually I came to the conclusion that it did matter."*

It's almost impossible not to read into this an intellectual acceptance of the division of people into order givers and order takers that lies at the heart of class society. Which in its left form leads to authoritarian organisation on behalf of the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' who, as here, are supposedly incapable of political decision making. It's perhaps no surprise that in the final couple of paragraphs that follow this James proceeds to write off anarchism. This attitude after all is exactly what divides anarchism from the rest of the left.

## PART II

# I. Surfs up Dude

Revolutionary organisations can shape the direction of class struggle but for the most part that do not create it. There is not some flat terrain on which the arguments within and between revolutionary organisations play out until eventually one discovers the right answer and moves forward. Events are not the back drop against which these arguments are played out, rather what arguments occur and which win out are largely determined by events.

At this point I want to pivot away from the error correction and alternative interpretation portion of this text. It was necessary to write that section as otherwise James's account is liable to be treated as a history of the WSM from 2000–2010 rather than his subjective recall and interpretation. As part of that it gives a lot of space to very minor initiatives and no mention of major ones. The SSN receives a lot of space, the IWU none. If we ever get around to producing a history of the WSM I doubt the SSN would receive much more than a passing mention.

There is a second and more fundamental problem that is fundamental in understanding what I want to move on too. That is that James's account is quite ahistoric. The events of the period from 2000–2010 are no more than a backdrop against which James has the various actors deliver their lines. It is the lines that determine the history of the WSM, this alone makes possible the central aspect of the SSN as a pivot around which his story is made to turn.

This is I think the wrong approach. In my opinion our history is understood better by moving the history of the period itself to the foreground. Rather than being a history determined by 'who said what' it is a history that opens with the summit protests in Prague, Genoa and elsewhere, protests that like it or not that shaped a new generation of activists. It is a period which closes with the crisis and (lack of) resistance that saw many of that generation drop out of consistent involvement in struggle or in a minority of cases rapidly shift their political and organisational views. The main story of 2009 is not the sideshow of the SSN but the build up to the 24<sup>th</sup> November strike and the subsequent retreat in 2010 to the Croke Park Agreement.

If we think of struggle as waves approaching a shore line then we can say struggle, like the waves is always there but also that it varies considerably and is not particularly predictable. There are of course calm days and there are storms but even on a calm day some waves may be considerably greater than others. Storms can't generally be predicted years in advance even if we strive to understand the conditions that give rise to them. And sometimes massive storms can blow up suddenly, seemingly from no where.

The revolutionary organisation has a resemblance to a new surfer who finds themselves unable to resist the call of the sea. In the periods of calm they have to make the best use of the small waves that they can, aiming to choose the biggest of them to launch on, building up to the skills needed to stand for at least a few moments and to be carried as far into the shore as possible. The game in those times is choosing which of the waves to try, not because you think one of those tiny waves will suddenly grow into a monster but because that is the only way to move from theory to practise, to gain the sense of balance and timing that will be essential for success in a

heavy sea. You can't learn to surf through reading on the beach, you have to experience being tossed around by the waves.

On such a calm day the observer on the beach will probably see the surfer and not the sea as the spectacle. The attempts to stand on such small waves, perhaps followed quite soon by a fall, will be the point of interest in the scene. Our surfer may well appear something of a pathetic figure, all toggled out with wet-suit and board on waves that a nine year old child might well jump through. People strolling the beach might well point and laugh at a character who appears to be taking themselves far too seriously. But whatever they try our surfer cannot simply wish big waves into existence, they can only work with what is there, hoping that the skills honed will have some relevance once the swell transforms.

Surfing movies often climax with a scene where our hero tries to take on some impossibly big wave, something as big as a couple of houses that rushes towards a rock lined shore with impossible pent up energy and fury. Like our surfing hero the revolutionary organisation waits decades for the arrival of just such a wave. When it arrives it is a question of taking whatever skills have been picked up and trying like hell to gain the crest of the wave and stay on it as long as possible.

Or we might decide we are not yet ready to take on such a monster and paddle back to shore, disillusioned by the knowledge it will be a long long time, if ever, before we see a wave so big again. We may be desperate and throw every skill we have learnt and every ounce of energy we have built up into trying only to fail and get wiped out in the process. But we can't choose when the big wave arrives, we can only keep on eye on the forecasts and aim to be ready when it does.

James's account reduces the problem of how to be ready for that wave to who said what during a discussion on the beach about what the best board might be and what thickness of wet suit is required. The huge storm that hit with the collapse of Lehman Brothers Sept 15 2008 and which sent out Tsunami level waves across the world's ocean is a minor backdrop in his account rather than the main event. Those waves hit different parts of the world at different times, in many places 'the big one' arrived in 2011, and in some, at least for a while revolutionaries managed to surf them and huge changes happened. The disappointment of James's account is the failure to make the pivot the arrival of the biggest wave in Ireland on November 24<sup>th</sup> and to instead focus on the various arguments on the beach prior to that point.

That is in terms of a good critical history of the WSM in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the key question is how could the organisation have failed so badly as to almost not notice the size of the wave bearing down on it and worse still be distracted by trivial debates about 'activism' or 'lifestylism'. Most members in 2009 were very resistant to the proposal that the organisation might need to move onto a war footing, just as most people at the 2008 Grassroots Gathering in Cork had been similarly resistant. The few voices that cried 'shut up and look at the size of the fucking waves' were ignored or perhaps quietly sniggered at.

In retrospect it's clear that in any case neither the WSM nor anyone else on the Irish left was remotely approaching the level of preparedness needed to have a hope at successfully surfing that wave in to the beach. Almost certainly if we had made a serious attempt at doing so we would have been wiped out. Those of us who had taken to the water quietly paddled back to the beach once we had realised this.

The 10 year goals discussed in section 9 were intended as a training guide that could take the organisation from the level of skill & fitness with which we could competently surf the waves of a small swell to the monsters we would need to deal with when that 'once in a lifetime' storm of

class struggle broke out. It was an early attempt to study the new emerging network forms of organisation and imagine how a revolutionary organisation like the WSM might study, interact with and prepare these for the moment when transformation becomes a possibility.

A year would never have been enough so even in terms of alternate realities it matter little at the end of the day that the 13 months before Nov 24 2009 didn't really see the organisation seize on these goals and start to build towards them. In 2009 we face the same problem we would have faced in 1969, 'If I was trying to go there I wouldn't start from here.' But nevertheless there is a lot to be gained from an analysis of why we were not ready, what weaknesses we suffered from and what, along with the successes elsewhere, this tells us about what a modern revolutionary organisation should look like.

That is the real challenge of James's text. The errors in his account are sufficient to make any direct reading of his lessons suspect. The route out is not the neo-electoralist reformism of the ULA, which at best to my mind follows the 'first time as tragedy, second time as farce' route of the Scottish Socialist Party. The challenge is in the more fundamental underpinning of his text, the sense that our experiences demonstrate that the methods of the WSM and perhaps anarchism in general cannot achieve what we set out to. Here, in these most broad terms, he is I believe correct. If so far I have seemed to defend the actions of the past it is solely to establish an accurate base from which to critique those same actions – one that can be used to start to uncover the real outline of what a revolutionary organisation should look like in the modern networked age.



## II. A return to the cadre?

Looking back to a supposed golden years of the WSM in the 1990's when a small undeclared cadre was able to have an impact way beyond its numbers on the left in Ireland, in social struggles and on the international anarchist movement has, as we have seen, the problem of missing the negative side of that organisational structure. Which is why I'd reject any idea of the WSM in its current form seeking a route back to that unstated cadre form of organisation.

But the shift from a form of organisation based on a requirement of a deep understanding of anarchism and the platformist tradition prior to membership and a considerable commitment to a constant and intense level of activity and self organisation after membership came with significant costs. It is quite probable that a WSM that continued on that older organisational model would have offered a very much more coherent reaction to the crisis. It is unlikely it would have been any more effective in getting this taken up, in all probability it would have been less effective because its reach would have been every more limited. As I have argued here and elsewhere it was our lack of reach beyond a handful of union branches that made us ineffective more than any other factor.

The post 1994 structure of the WSM was one that went through a period of transformation as a membership that was mostly recruited on the basis of that older informal cadre expectations increasingly became a minority in an organisation most of whose members had a much lower if still substantial level of commitment and knowledge about anarchism. Our collective major failing was that this was not something that was ever really formally tackled except in two ways

- A. The idea that each new member should have an existing member as a mentor. This was only sporadically implemented, under theorised and in any could only ever have been a very partial solution.
- B. That we should have some form of internal educational process for new members to enable them to acquire the basic but detailed knowledge required to fully operate as a militant. Although we agreed to do this on several occasions in practise these initiatives were very sporadic, characterised by a new people on the role of education officer having an initial burst of enthusiasm, organising one or two events and then lapsing into silence and inactivity.

Alongside this coherency of activity became more and more disrupted because there was no formal way of distinguishing between members who intended to have the sort of commitment of the pre-2000 WSM and those whose expectations were more formed by the post 2004 WSM. Previously when someone took on a task it was just about always done and if not they were present at the follow up meeting where the reasons why something hadn't been done were discussed and the task either dropped as not practical or re-committed to. Post 2004 a growing problem was that a higher and higher percentage of tasks that were taken on were not completed and atten-

dance at subsequent meetings was often not complete enough for it to be clear that something had not happened.

Complex operations require tasks to be split between several people and if one or more of those people fail to complete what they were allocated then the whole thing can well fall apart. If over time this becomes common then there are several negative effects

- Projects that require complex co-ordination never come to life, why propose what you know will fail.
- Those who care about a project start to find ways of self selecting who will be involved and if someone they think is flaky steps forward find ways to build around them from the start.
- Moral is badly damaged as members start to resent each other and in the absence of any formal mechanism start to use grumbling as a tool to try and introduce / enforce collective discipline.
- Members prone to flake out on tasks learn there are no formal negative consequences of doing so and so there is no feedback loop that results in them restricting either the quantity or quality of what they put themselves forward for
- As the same dynamics apply to the involvement of WSM members in external struggles the reputation of the WSM is negatively impacted and the tendency to see WSM members as acting as individuals rather than as members of a collective organisation is increased.

There are parallel problems with political education & discussion which result in a greater and greater collective divergence from the core agreed politics of the organisation. This in turn means that discussion and agreement of what those core politics are is increasingly seen as pointless, abstract and uninteresting. Members will tend to start voting for proposals out of misguided politeness and in a mirror image of this problem sink into protracted rows about issues that are minor in the overall scheme of things.

As of 2011 the process of dealing with these issues began with the division of membership into two types rather than a single one size fits all. Unfortunately the first attempt at this was too loose and overly complex. Membership was divided into Activists and Organisers, with the second category volunteering to have double the financial and time commitment of the first. In Dublin it was expected the while Organisers would attend every branch meeting in the month Activists would only be required to attend two, but would at least do this consistently.

In practise members found the work allocation system too complex, boring or alienating which meant it never contained enough useful information to be used to allocate work. And the distinction between branch meetings was never really implemented with the exception of the monthly supporters meeting. This may be part of the reason why Activist members failed to consistently attend the two Activist meeting a month but instead continued on the existing pattern of randomly attending one or more of the meetings each month.

Although in the first form this has not worked it is my opinion that it does suggest the right direction. That is an organisation with a core of highly committed and formally identified Organisers who will take on the essential tasks required to keep both the organisation and its external commitments effective. And a second layer of looser but still committed Activists who will take

on less central tasks and whose activity will vary much more strongly according to their motivation and circumstances at any particular moment. Part of the role of the Organiser layer being to monitor, discuss and engage the work of the WSM and its supporters as a whole.

That is to formalise the actual mechanism that has kept the WSM running on a reasonably effective basis in the belief that by making this more formal and visible the motivation to engage and train members to the Organiser level will be found. This is a concept that the 1990's WSM explicitly rejected but the experiments of the 2000–2010 suggests that this was a mistake. As with the 'Tyranny of Structurelessness' a refusal to formally acknowledge that something exists does not do away with the problems caused by its existence. Quite the opposite, because those problems cannot be named or pointed to without risking a major falling out their impact over time grows.

In short as with other areas I don't see a solution to these real problems coming from looking back to a period with problems of its own. On a more general level it is almost impossible to see how an organisation can grow beyond an active membership of 50 or more without both a highly committed core to build around and one or more full time workers to ensure the mundane but essential administration tasks are completed. That second point is something of a heresy for many anarchists arising from the obviously false myth that the 1930's CNT only ever had one full time worker.

On the other hand we have the frankly disastrous experience of the trotskyist left where the political leadership and best organisers were given full time paid positions in the organisation. Combined with a 'democratic' centralism that gave this same group decision making power meant that organisational policy was decided by a group of people removed from the workplace whose future wages depended on the decisions they made. It is hardly surprising that many of these organisations became little more than organisations that were very good at recruiting enough members to stay in existence but ensuring those members lacked the power to force major changes in direction (or more importantly staffing).

I think a strong dedicated core is essential but that there has to be a sharp divide between decision making and full time administration. The public face of the organisation and its internal policy motor must be comprised of people who, like those they seek to organise, are dependent on wages from outside the organisation. The few full timers that are required should have no say in decision making, formal or informal, beyond that of any member. Because of their position at the centre of operations they will develop knowledge and network connections that gives them informal power but on a collective level this must be organised against rather than welcomed and promoted as is the case in most left organisations.

All members should have an equal say in the decision making processes of the organisation but there is a need to have variation in the minimum level of commitment required. An organisation that is just composed of Organisers will lack the perspectives of those unable to make that level of commitment – I.e. it will be dominated by the young, childless and those either able to get by on nothing or with some sort of non-work income. Even leaving that aside the sort of people who think it a reasonable thing in normal times to dedicate a very large chunk of their lives to political activism are probably something of a psychological subset of the human spectrum. A subset that is probably essential to making a mostly volunteer organisation function it is true, but one in constant risk of losing its ability to communicate effectively with those outside its immediate ranks.

That membership as a whole then needs to develop ways of engaging with a very large number of people most of whom may never take on a membership commitment except in revolutionary situations. Back in the day before cable TV, Facebook and a million other distractions, back when we worked in mass workplaces and lived near those we worked with there were model of political organising based in large part around filling the needs for entertainment and distraction. It was said that a member of the German social democratic party could spend their whole (non-work) life in the party, in party walking groups, debating societies & choirs. It seems very probable that this is a model that is no longer workable.

Today who we hang out with, what we watch, even where we go on holidays is highly dispersed and it is likely will remain so. Political events need to compete with the X-Factor and a lot of the time they will lose that competition – our meetings are seldom that interesting outside of times of opportunity or anger. The challenge then is to develop and maintain engagement with very broad layers who may enter radical politics just briefly during one or the other high point in struggle.

The very technologies that created the dispersal have also brought about the means of engagement, eg Facebook, Twitter, email and SMS. But as yet our understanding of how to use those tools is very limited and most of the left continues to simply try and use them as bolt ons to traditional membership recruitment and press release circulation. It's probably because we have been more experimental than most that the WSM Facebook is the largest of any political party that has been in government in southern Ireland and the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest of every political organisation on the entire island. But so far we have not modelled ourselves around the realities of these new technologies in the way revolutionaries previously modelled themselves around the technologies of the printing press and the mass factory.

### III. Seeking rupture

We have the goal of a global revolution that will transform economic & social relations on the planet and as a central part of that process destroy the accumulated detritus of centuries of racism & patriarchy. There have been previous revolutions – none have been so ambitious – none have remade what it is to be human on this planet as we intend to.

But how do we get from where we are now to where we want to get to? If we tried to think of a picture of that revolutionary moment what might it look like? For most of the left the answer to this is probably a still from Eisenstein's *Storming of the Winter Palace* (above). There is a lesson there in itself as even that image is 'from the last war' of that time, an imagined mass frontal attack on a strong point that was in reality taken through infiltration by small groups into the cellars. The idea that thousands of revolutionaries charged & overwhelmed machine guns was a fantasy first created three years later when Lenin & 100'000 spectators watched a 're-enactment' involving thousands of Red Guards.

Whatever about the fantasy version of the Russian Revolution today in the age of the helicopter gunship firing 10 x 30mm rounds per second we are not launching mass frontal attacks on any fortified position. When we think of military technology, war against imperialist armies today is all about the grimness imposed by asymmetrical warfare. Suicide bombers on the one hand and Predator drone attacks on the other as entire compounds are wiped out by robot aircraft controlled from thousands of km away. Saddam's fantasy of pitting his mass centrally controlled conventional army in a pitched battle against US forces with vastly superior technology failed completely but that same US army took years to wear down insurgents whose most effective weapon was the IED, a homemade landmine.

But the development of military technology, of command and control as well as weapons is paralleled by the development of the technologies of human control. From Labour Courts to CCTV to Human Relations Management to Focus Group Politics dissent is hemmed in, controlled and channeled into the sand in a way that was unimaginable when the Winter Place fantasy was being acted out. Capitalism learnt that provoking head on confrontations with the working class was a dangerous game. Far more sensible was the deployment of specialists to poke & probe and to calculate the minimum required to pacify the masses. Conceding more if need be at high points of struggle like that of the late 60's and 70's and only later rolling back those gains as we have seen under neo-liberalism. The huge growth of the state since 1917 is partially the story of the growth of these mechanisms.

The current crisis underlines the fact that the crushing of raised expectations no longer spontaneously throws up militant mass movements as it did in the past. It is only where the structures of control were under developed or ossified as in Tunisia and Egypt, that we have seen the emergence of the sort of semi-spontaneous mass movements that once we would have expected everywhere in these conditions. Even in Greece dissent is being successfully channeled into the electoralism of Syriza while in the wings Golden Dawn is being prepared 'just in case'.

In particular one of the skills capitalist rule has developed is incorporating radicals of one generation and using them to pacify the struggles of the next generation. The anger with the political system in Ireland that showed some chance of erupting in late 2009 was contained when the trade union leaders sold the Croke Park Agreement to enough Public Sector Workers to finish off resistance from that quarter. This was then cemented in early 2011 with the election of a new government that included almost all of the TD's who rose within the ranks of the Workers Party in the 1970s', the largest left revolutionary organisation that Ireland has seen. A comedy version of the same process had been played out in the previous government when the Green Party ditched everything it stood for in order to get its fingernails into power.

Many on the left have understood the power of these new methods of maintaining capitalist rule and made the colossal mistake that the answer is somehow to fight back with the same methods. So the likes of the Independent media group are to be countered with a paper funded perhaps by the unions, our messaging must be 'focus grouped' and carefully controlled to push the same psychological buttons as theirs and we must slowly and carefully develop a mass base through either electoralism, unions or community organisation. The ruling class will, we are told, make a mistake, we just have to wait for that moment.

Of course there is something in all these ideas but in their pure expression they lead to a politics that is both elitist and doomed. Elitist because the requirements for psychological button pushing and focus group dressing up of positions is that the masses don't understand what it is you are trying to do to them. And doomed because it is playing a game that depends on vast quantities of resources (skills & more importantly finance) for a conventional between those of us of have little or no access to such things and a system that has almost unlimited access. As I finish this section off I noticed a George Monbiot article in the Guardian revealing that in the US the ultra rich have channelled 311 million dollars to two organisations who in turn have funded 480 climate denial fronts. Are the tiny resources of the left really capable of symmetrically replying to this. I'd argue that those who think so are guilty of the same sort of self-indulgent wishful thinking that led Saddam Hussein to draw lines in the sand before the invasion of Iraq.

To my mind what needs to be understood from this is the possibility and preparation for moments of potential rupture rather than which method of building mass organisation may work best. Mass organisations built during times of peace under modern capitalism just end up requiring the same transformative ruptures in crisis whatever the politics of those who built them. Indeed the evidence suggests that sending the best of the left of one generation into a long march through the institutions simply ensures that those controlling the next generation are far more skilled..

Revolutionaries must fight capital like insurgents and not as a regular army. We must avoid any symmetry in the class war, any attempt to match our resources against theirs. Our work in mass organisations is because it is there we find a potential audience and a space where ideas can be discussed and not because we imagine that we can come to control the levers of power. That approach has been done, the radical left led the British miners in the last 1970s and the state adjusted, focused on a set piece battle and first isolated the miners and then pulverised them in the 1984 strike. There is no long march through the institutions that can lead to anything other than pulverising defeat or incorporation into a system we set out to fight. Instead we build networks across the working class, in the broadest use of that term, using what possibilities exist in any particular moment. When capital or the state is slow to respond to crisis we insert ourselves into the gaps that develop to build in those moments but with the

understanding that this is not a long term emplacement. Like an insurgent force our aim is to build widespread discontent and widespread experience of organisation so that each time a crisis arises more and more of the population have the skills and vision to push. This is not an argument for underground organisation, in almost all conditions outside of military conflict underground organisation is counter productive, its costs are many times greater than its benefits. It is an argument for valuing broad, loose and open networks over capturing institutions of power whether those institutions are council seats, union officerships or full time community staffer positions.

## IV. We have been doing what we do for a while

I wrote what I recognise is a long and rambling piece over the six months between when James published his history and when on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February I am writing this conclusion. I wrote it in sections, some of which were published as I went along for the comment of WSM members on our internal site. And then I redrafted those sections for publication here on Anarchist Writers. My own opinions on revolutionary organisation have never been static and have probably undergone more change in the 2011-to current period than at any time before. I suspect this must be reflected by contradictions in this text but the answers I seek will not be found here or indeed yet.

Despite the feedback received this is very much an individual piece rather than the outcome of a collective process. This means it is weaker than it should be but this is inevitable in the circumstances – just as my opinions are in flux so too is the collective opinion of the WSM. It could be said to reflect my understanding of the internal discussions of the last 24 months but as much of part one is a criticism of the weakness of individual recollection consider yourself warned in that respect.

This makes a conclusion difficult to write. What I can offer though is perhaps the next best thing available. As I posted the last parts of the first section of this reply I also prepared a last minute discussion document for the WSM National Conference that took place Feb 9<sup>th</sup>. In it I was trying to steer the discussion session that traditionally opens up all our national conferences into a deeper consideration of where we might begin to discover our future in a collective fashion.

What follows is the document as submitted to conference without modification. It is only a single contribution to our internal debate but because of what the document is the reader can assume that it is an honest impression of exactly where we are and where we might go – or at least my honest perspective. You will notice that towards the end I ‘put the gun on the table’ in suggesting that one possible outcome – in the short term – is a decision to liquidate the WSM.

The greatest strength of the WSM has always been the maintenance of an internal culture where regularly, and sometimes it feels far too regularly, we realistically confront our failed expectations, take stock and adjust what we are doing. To observers coming from sections of the left where self criticism never occurs outside of a narrow leadership layer this is something of a shock, but a shock which has sometimes resulted in them deciding that the WSM is the organisation for them. It is precisely that record that leads me to conclude that the WSM is central to any collective discussions about what the new revolutionary movement will look like even if perhaps we are to be its midwife rather than that movement itself. For now though we offer the structures, experience and resources around which those who are determined to examine these questions while resisting capital can organise alongside us and join in our discussion, experimentation and mistake making..



## **V. Crisis of Capitalism – Crisis of the Left – Crisis of WSM – Contribution to the perspectives debate**

Crisis is one of those words that the left overuses but today I've no problem saying we find ourselves trapped between two crisis. One of those is the crisis of capitalism, now dragging into its 6<sup>th</sup> year without any end in sight. The other the crisis of the traditional left, the parties, the unions and the formal anarchist movement that have found ourselves unable to respond in a meaningful manner to the capitalist crisis anywhere. Which has meant all left organisations, including our own, have plunged into internal crisis.

The predictable result of both crisis is demoralisation on the one hand as we seem to be able to do nothing to build a meaningful fightback leading to the loss of militants and on the other living in a society where the consequences of that failure become more frightening by the day. From the rise of Golden Dawn in Greece to the roll back of abortion rights in the US the inability of the left to organise against the crisis in capitalism is creating a world that will become grimmer year by year and not just because we have less money in our pockets.

Yet we have also seen revolutionary transformation sweep Tunisia & Egypt (where two years on mass protest and organisation continues). We have seen the almost spontaneous Occupy movement spread in weeks to 2200+ cities around the message that the problem was the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the 1%. But the traditional, organised left has been able to do almost nothing with such movements. The reason I think is because that left, our left is stuck in the methodologies & slogans of the early twentieth century – both developed at great cost in a world of limited communications, restricted travel and industrial workers that no longer exists.

I think its easy for us to lose sight of that big picture and instead only see the battles within the household tax campaign or the pro-choice organising around Savita's death. I think its also easy to use the importance of that work to avoid us facing up to our own internal crisis and the fact that we are failing as an organisation to reproduce ourselves or to give newer members the skills that have been accumulated over decades by our more long term members. Momentum alone allows us to continue to exist as an organisation with regular meetings, an office, a bookshop, a newspaper, a magazine, a web site and the anarchist bookfair. But unless we address our internal crisis we will lose all of that as well as remaining incapable of aiding in the creation of the sort of mass movements that could take the fight to capitalism.

That is why at this conference I am arguing that for the next year we make the question of organisational restructuring including external engagement our central and main priority, For 6 years our priority has been to throw ourselves into every opening of the crisis to try and force wider gaps out of which mass movements might emerge. The cost of that has been the failure to address the internal crisis due to a lack of resources to do so. I'm not arguing that we should drop

our existing external commitments but I am arguing that for every member for the next year the question of internal reorganisation and developing systems of external engagement should be our first priority.

- This means every member starting to implement our engagement process and looking at every activity as a way of engaging our contacts Properly applied this should mean our external work becomes very much more effective as rather than trying to carry out every task ourselves we instead organise contacts to carry out that work and more. This is also why we won't be dropping external work – what we need to understand is not something that we can simply read about.

- This means us looking at every aspect of our current work and considering what would be the best way to achieve the aimed for result if we were to start today rather than adopting the passed down methodology we have inherited. In terms of the left in Ireland & internationally we have been innovative in adopting our practises to the modern world but that is not saying much and to an extent we have been old technologies onto new ones rather than redesigning from the ground. The first motor cars tended to look like horse buggies with an engine where the horse used to stand. Fear of the speed of motor vehicles meant in some places it was required that someone with a red flag walk in front of them. We have perhaps handled the possibility for online decision making in the same way.

- This means that the national officers we elect at this conference should be elected with a mandate of recreating a culture of internal discipline. A culture where to remain a member people get to the meetings they are required to and implement the tasks they have taken on to implement. This means encouraging those officers to track that information and to remind us, as often as necessary, of what we have committed to. And this needs not just to be a national process but also a branch process

- after conference branches should hold an AGM and ensure that their branch officers are also mandated to play this role.

That is the minor step because the root of our problem is not the lack of organisational discipline that has become increasingly visible. But we do need to do this to create a dynamic process that will drive us on and that won't simply join the list of things we intend to get to when there is time.

We need to regenerate our internal culture not to restart the dead engine of the traditional left but because in the context of Ireland at least we represent a core of experiences, skills and resources around which we can start to collectively analyse and develop what a revolutionary organisation should be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The problem is that we are caught between the old world illustrated by the failure of the traditional left to generate resistance and the new world of the failure of the revolts of Egypt, Tunisia and Occupy to generate the new revolutionary organisations that can challenge capitalism.

Collectively is the key phrase above – there have been many individual attempts to do this but the changes are so complex that it is only through a process of collective discussion and experimentation that answers may be found. We need to develop our external engagement process both because time is not unlimited and also because there are many, many people currently outside the WSM who will have key inputs into answering that question. I'll be honest – I think our existing model is so dated as to be possibly past recovery. This process we are entering might even see us deciding that the goal is best served by liquidating the WSM, its experiences and its resources into some new formation.

That is what I want us to focus on for the next year with the aim of developing the model of revolutionary organisation not just on the local level but also as an international example. When expressed like that a year sounds like a very short time but that would be to mistake the journey we need to start for the end point we aim to reach. Our goal is global revolution – a goal that is ambitious enough that spending a year producing the rough sketch of a map seem reasonable enough.

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Andrew Flood  
The WSM & fighting the last war  
A reply to James O'Brien  
February 20, 2013

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