

Whatever happened to the AWG

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The emergence of the Anarchist Workers Group at the start of the 1990's was something the WSM welcomed. Most of the people involved initially with the AWG came from the South London branch of the Direct Action Movement. At least one founder member of the Anarchist Communist Federation (ACF) was also involved initially in the AWG. This meant they also had a branch in the North of England made up of people from Manchester and Liverpool.

Our welcoming of the AWG was mainly based on a number of reasons. Their experience within DAM had led them to reject Syndicalism, specifically as a rejection of DAM's policy of seeking to build revolutionary trade unions. They also accepted the basis of the Platform of the Libertarian Communists, i.e. they wanted to build an organisation which would have a high degree of theoretical and tactical unity.

On Ireland they took a firm anti-imperialist line, and actually took place in activity around this. No other anarchist group in England had done so at the time and if anything the other organisations have retreated on this issue since. On a more incidental level the AWG seemed not to be suffering from the Trot-phobia that prevents most English anarchist groups taking part in anything but their own fronts or local groups where no other left tendency is represented.

Now just over two years later the AWG no longer exists. In the course of those two years they published four magazines and grew from 12 to 30 members, before shrinking back down to 10. Last May the survivors changed the name of the organisation to Socialism from Below and decided they were going beyond anarchism. What I want to talk about is why this happened and what can we learn from this experience.

The WSM is in a unique position to do this as not only do we have the benefit of hindsight but we also have the advantage of having all their internal documents and bulletins. In addition WSM members including myself attended two of their national conferences. On two occasions a couple of their members came over to Ireland and in addition one of their members was an ex-member of the WSM who visited Ireland on a regular basis.

The AWG got off to a promising start although the first issue of Socialism from Below trod on many toes particularly in its excellent analysis of all that was wrong with British anarchism. Alongside it a pamphlet called *In place of compromise* set out a strategy for anarchists in the trade unions. This represented an advance of other anarchist positions at the time which either ignored the unions (Class War), attempted to build alternative unions (DAM) or rejected any participation in the unions (ACF). *In place of compromise* in fact shared many common features with the WSM policy on trade unions.

The problems of the AWG fell into two major categories, political and organisational. I will deal with the organisational end first. Throughout its short life the AWG never managed to regularly produce internal bulletins or keep the members informed of decisions made by the national committee. People had to be forced to act as national officers e.g. Treasurer and nearly always resigned after 6 months of half doing the job. As a result subs were never regularly collected from the members and money from sales of Socialism from Below was rarely recovered. Leaflets and publications were being constantly produced at the last moment, sometimes resulting in serious if humorous mistakes. One leaflet on abortion for instance included a call for *Free women on demand*.

This was a disastrous way for an organisation to operate and left many members confused and demoralised. Yet no real attempts were made to sort the mess out, instead at every conference new people would be forced to manage the mess. Any attempt to discuss solutions was brushed

off as *An organisational solution to a political problem*. There was a political problem all right, the failure to treat organisation as a serious task in itself.

The political problems of the AWG came from a number of sources, some to do with the background of the members some connected with the general climate at the time. I will deal with them one by one.

Anarchist Theory

The AWG was aware like ourselves of the fact that anarchist as a set of ideas is a bit impoverished. Its core ideas on the state, the Russian revolution and the role of a revolutionary organisation are the best on the left, if perhaps they lack development. However on imperialism, women's oppression, racism and a host of other issues there is either no theory or one that has been lifted from somewhere else in the hope that no-one will notice.

In addition most anarchist organisations do not seem to mind. Within all the British anarchist groups contradictory positions are held by different people and no attempt is made to resolve this fundamental problem. Instead blind activism is substituted in the hope that if you are busy enough the holes will not show. This is fine until you met up with another left organisation. In this case you bailed out and left it to them, this perhaps reached its high point with the anti-poll tax and anti-war campaigns. The anarchists incapable of challenging the trots on their domination of the existing groups or campaigns instead set up their own.

This was an obvious problem, the AWG's solution to it however degenerated from the comical to the dangerous. Initially a load of areas were pin pointed and commissions set up to develop theory in these areas. None of these commissions completed their however as most members were on two or three of them at once. They collapsed under their own workload. Individuals still had a strong commitment to theoretical work so it settled out that informal groups would meet socially and discuss a particular set of ideas. As there was seldom an internal bulletin there work did not reach the organisation as a whole.

This resulted in the rapid unofficial promotion of a small group of people to the *leadership* of the organisation. By June of 1990 this resulted in a National conference where almost all the motions had come from this small group and it was obvious to us that the rest of the membership could not follow a fair proportion of the arguments or realise the full effect of what was being debated. On at least one occasion a motion was passed despite their being serious factual errors in the argument of those arguing for it, errors that no one else picked up on.

Internal education

The AWG because it was not afraid to face the Trots on their own ground succeeded in winning over several members of other left groups, including at least two SWP branch committee members. These people had however come from a background where anarchists were presented as a group of middle class wallies without two ideas to rub together (If this sounds familiar it should) or as dropouts, incapable of dealing with modern society and wishing for a return to living on the land. Within the AWG however there was no formal educationals on the anarchist tradition but a fair few articles slagging off green anarchists

At the last conference I was shocked to discover that one person who had been in the AWG for over a year knew by his own admission virtually nothing about the anarchists in the Spanish revolution. Not surprisingly many of these ex-trots came to believe that the AWG must be a radical departure from anarchism for it seemed radically different then what they had been told anarchism was.

Other Anarchists

One feature which the emergence of the AWG demonstrated was that Anarchist groups are capable of being just as sectarian and childish as the mass of Trotskyist groups. Most other organised anarchists refused to communicate with the AWG. Members of DAM for instance made an attempt to disrupt an AWG meeting at the Anarchist Book fair in 1991. The distinguishing feature was the complete lack of serious argument, instead debate between the groups was restricted to nasty if funny cartoons and smart alekey articles along with a large measure of rumour.

This of course had the effect of making several members of the AWG who were anarchists into people who thought there was no hope of rescuing anarchism from its muddle headed swamp and they were better off striking out alone. After a while it also meant that the AWG gave up on seriously addressing itself to anarchists at all. The articles were still there in the paper up to issue 3 but in practise they claimed that after the Gulf War it was almost impossible to get any anarchists to listen to them at all. To us it was also clear that in London at least they were no longer trying.

In our opinion this sectarianism on behalf of the British anarchist movement towards the AWG was fundamental in the *going beyond anarchism faction* winning over the rest of the organisation. Far from being smug about the AWG's demise anarchists in England need to consider their part in convincing several long time anarchists that anarchism no longer had anything to offer them.

The current period

The short period in which the AWG existed was also a period of enormous change for the left. The collapse of the Soviet Union, its communist parties and of labourism happened in the space of a few short years. Anarchists for the first time in decades are finding that we can no longer define ourselves in opposition to the rest of the left alone. In one sense the existence of the myriad Leninist groups was a crutch for us but also a limit on our development. Anarchists could be sloppy about our attitudes to imperialism, women's oppression or the unions because we attracted people who were left wing but rejected the authoritarianism of the other revolutionary groups.

One effect of these changes on the AWG was in recognising that all other socialist ideas were redundant they also came to see anarchism as also being redundant. The prevalent view by the last conference was that we are in a new period of history. All the traditions that have gone before are redundant and the main task of socialists is to build a new set of ideas. For a small organisation, isolated from all but one other smaller organisation in another country such an idea has a certain attraction. We have however decided not to embark on that path, yes anarchism needs to be transformed but we are still anarchists.

The lessons for those of us in Ireland interested in building mass anarchist group(s) in Ireland should be clear. The danger of the collapse of the AWG is that it will make us overly cautious, that it will lock us into the same swamp that British anarchism is in. It has probably already driven British anarchists further into the swamp. The lessons they will probably draw from the AWG's demise is that its dangerous to go near the rest of the left, its foolhardy to try and do some original theoretical work and its irresponsible to suggest that anarchism does not already have all the answers that are needed or worse that some of its accepted answers are wrong.

The lessons we draw are somewhat different and are also based on the fact that we made many of the same mistakes initially and nearly met the same fate between 1986 and 1989. The first lesson is to make sure that people getting involved with us are not just joining because we are a good organisation but also understand that our politics and methods are good because we are anarchists. We need to constantly re-examine the anarchist tradition and educate newer members about what that tradition was and is.

Although we recognise that anarchism has its weaknesses in most areas of theory we want to walk before we can run. Development of theory will only be useful where it is based on the full understanding of the membership. We have no use for Gerry Healys (cult leader of large British trotskyist group). This means that such development will be slow and commonly frustrating. It must be constantly carried out and developed, we must never allow ourselves to fall asleep on a bed of old certainties.

We need to recognise that organisational work is at least as valuable as any other sort of work. The success of the WSM to date has owed something at least to the fact that a huge amount of effort goes into background work of maintaining a bookservice, communicating regularly with comrades overseas, distributing the magazine etc, etc. We still fall behind and fail to do stuff on occasion however but its this note I am going to end on. An organisation is only as good as its ability to get things done and this should never be put to the bottom of the agenda.

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