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# **An Irish Anarchist in the Northeast**

**Reflections on the North American Anarchist  
Movement**

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2002

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In May Chekov Feeney of the WSM went on a speaking tour of the NE US and SE Canada for the North East Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC). These are his reflections on the tour as published in their magazine; *The Northeastern Anarchist* Issue #5, Fall/Winter 2002.

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centers of the region. Their example has inspired attempts to form similar organization in other parts of the continent. Their militants are without doubt among the best, most dedicated and serious activists of the American anarchist movement. Within their ranks I am confident that they have people with the ability to create the ideas and actions to surmount their problems. If they can succeed in involving themselves in working class and community struggles, their potential for growth and influence is enormous.

North America lacks many of the social democratic elements which tie European workers ideologically to the system. It often relies instead on an expertise in the repression of radical movements. This is surely one of the great challenges they face, since the state will certainly not sit back and let them organize. This is why they need to make haste to cement NEFAC into a strong and democratic organization with real links in their communities, with the power to withstand the repression they will surely face.

Finally, I cannot end without thanking all of the NEFAC members and other anarchists who showed me such hospitality and solidarity. In the course of my whirlwind tour I encountered a rich variety of new experiences, and had a chance to take part in many actions that were new to me. From marching with Boston's black bloc to drinking in the revolutionary bars of Montreal; from stuffing envelopes for Mumia to demonstrating against the neo-nazi National Alliance in Washington DC; from painting banners for a housing occupation to traveling out to the suburbs of Boston to collect a cat, which thereafter chose to use my head as a trampoline whenever I fell asleep — the experiences have enriched me greatly. I can only hope that the NEFAC militants and those who came to the talks got some fraction of what I got out of the tour.

The other matter that I would identify as an organizational problem is the financial arrangements of the federation. Membership dues are tiny in comparison to most of the anarchist organizations that I am familiar with. Each member pays as little as \$15 per year as membership dues to the federal finances. This means that beyond paying publication costs, there is little left over for financing projects on a federal level. The amount paid is also, in my opinion, too low a barrier to ensure that affiliated collectives are serious about working as committed members of the broad organization.

Several of the NEFAC collectives that I encountered, particularly those that were newly affiliated, seem to have little real involvement within the federation. They operate pretty much exactly as they had before joining and their affiliation to NEFAC seems to be merely the expression of an aspiration to be part of a broader movement. It would be a much better system if members paid a small percentage of their incomes as dues and then had these shared out among the local, regional, national and federal union structures, in whatever way was most useful. A scheme like this would free up members' time so that they could concentrate on political activity rather than engaging in fundraising and would also have the effect of tying the organization closer together on all levels.

These organization problems are, however, certainly not insurmountable and it is quite possible that I am seeing faults where there is in reality only differences with the way I am used to doing things. Despite the problems, my impression of NEFAC was overwhelmingly positive. The organization is burgeoning with new collectives forming all the time. Among most of the groups that I encountered there was a real sense of dynamism and enthusiasm. They have succeeded in emerging from the ranks of a broad anarchist movement which had long been languishing in the theoretical swamps of egotistical individualism, idle philosophical speculation and hostility to organization.

In the three years of their existence they have spread across the Northeast and now have a presence in all of the major population

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plemented by the unions and collectives locally. Affinity groups are fine in terms of working groups, designed to implement collectively agreed strategy, but they are too prone to insularity and narrow political outlooks to be very useful as policy setting bodies. As for the status of individual members, it is difficult to see how they play any real role in the life of a coherent organization.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

One way in which this local fragmentation of the organization is expressed is in the proliferation of publications. The federation produces two quarterly theoretical journals, one in French (*Ruptures*) and one in English (*The Northeastern Anarchist*), and these are common to the entire organization. These are a good example of the potential for the sharing of resources among the constituent collectives. They are edited by particular collectives, but the contributors come from all areas of the federation. These publications show what is possible when resources are shared across the federation and they are streets ahead of any other anarchist theoretical journals on the continent.

However, when it comes to newsletters, or 'agitationals' as they are termed, the situation is much worse. Virtually all of the collectives have their own newsletter and while some of them are very good, the duplication of effort across the federation is immense. *Barricada*, which was intended to be the agitational of the entire federation, is still dominated by the (insurrectional) culture of the collective which produces it while most of the other NEFAC collectives concentrate their efforts on producing their own newsletters. So the federation as a whole produces perhaps up to a dozen newsletters every couple of months with circulations of a few hundred each, whereas it would be possible to produce a single agitational for the federation with a circulation in the tens of thousands and still cut down on the amount of work expended overall.

a tactic that might be damaging to the strategy of the housing action group.

In many of the cities where NEFAC has a presence there are multiple affiliated collectives. For example in Montreal there are three, in Boston there are now five, and in New York City there are at least two. It seems that personal problems between individual militants are often the cause of the proliferation of collectives and people coalesce in collectives with those people who they find it easiest to get on with. The problem of this is that it tends to go against the skill sharing and variety of experiences and outlooks that are the hallmark of a healthy organization. Militants can find it easy to stay within their 'comfort zone' and work only alongside those people with whom they have the most cultural similarity.

For example, some of the most experienced members of NEFAC are clustered within the same collective in New York City, it should be an absolute priority of the organization to get these people working with other less experienced members so that the benefits of their experience can spread throughout the organization as a whole. The reliance on affinity groups as the basic unit of organization makes this difficult in the extreme. In the cities where there is more than one NEFAC collective, there have been attempts to address this problem and there are regular 'local union' meetings of NEFAC militants on a city-wide basis. However it seems that these meetings are merely to facilitate co-ordination and that the important decisions as to what work will be done are still made by the individual collectives in a relatively autonomous way.

If NEFAC is to develop as an organization this matter needs to be addressed. Political decisions about local strategy and allocation of resources really should be made by the local union if they are to benefit from the broader analysis and range of experiences that exists in the area. There should also be a range of different national, regional, state and city-wide unions which take decisions on those issues that they deem most suitable which are then im-

Recently I was invited by NEFAC to perform a speaking tour of several cities in the northeastern part of North America where the federation is based. My tour started in Boston during the Festival del Pueblo (a five-day anarchist festival organized by an ad-hoc collective of anarchist activists), and then brought me north into Canada for engagements in Montreal and Quebec, then back south to New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and finally ending up in Washington DC.

Firstly I should say that I was quite impressed by the logistical organization of the tour. I was always well looked after. There was always somebody delegated to meet me at the bus station, and my accommodation and transport were well looked after by NEFAC comrades. This was no trivial feat considering the tour was run to a very tight schedule (8 speaking engagements in 7 cities in 13 days!) and the venues were mostly hundreds of miles apart with quite diverse political cultures and traditions. It is a sure commendation of the functioning of NEFAC's organization that they were able to coordinate the tour in such a seamless way.

For my own part, the exhaustion of covering such a large distance was offset by the excitement of meeting so many good comrades with whom I was able to see eye to eye on a political level almost immediately. I can honestly say that I look forward to working with many of them on an international level in the future and I was heartened at how much we had in common despite the great geographical distance that separates us. NEFAC's intention in organizing the tour was to show that their turn towards a more coherent, politically united organization is not happening in isolation in the international anarchist movement.

The North American anarchist movement has long been [justifiably! — ed] considered to suffer from a chronic lack of organization, which has meant that anarchist ideas have often failed to have much influence despite the numerical strength of the movement in comparison to other revolutionary currents. NEFAC's formation represents a fundamental break from the recent history of the

North American anarchist movement, and has been greeted with a fair amount of suspicion from certain tendencies. Therefore, the NEFAC militants thought it would be useful to have a foreign anarchist present a similar argument from within the anarchist movement, particularly a member of an organization like the Workers Solidarity Movement, which has been in existence for almost two decades and has participated in a number of broad grassroots campaigns in Ireland. They wanted a militant who could try to show that coherent anarchist organizations could work in practice and that they could help anarchist ideas to have a stronger impact in the broader struggles of the working class.

Whether or not my presentations had the desired effect is difficult for me to say, but I can at least comment that the talks were generally well attended, most having between 30–60 people in the audience, and the atmosphere in the discussions was always constructive. Almost everybody seemed genuinely interested in the organizational methods and practice of the WSM. Happily my fears that I would face a barrage of hostile and bizarre questions, born from the European stereotypes of North American anarchism, proved to be quite groundless and there was only one question in the entire tour that really threw me.

However, rather than dwelling on the tour itself, in this article I'll concentrate on some of the impressions that I gained about NEFAC as an organization. It should be kept in mind that I am far from being an expert on the history or internal organization of NEFAC, and my impressions are largely based upon those things that I found problematic, surprising and markedly different from the culture and history of my own organization. It is perfectly possible that, on such a whirlwind tour, I misunderstood much that I saw and didn't see much of the most important stuff.

However I did get to talk to members in many of the constituent collectives and got to see many of them in action (either on marches and demonstrations or else in organizing the meetings at which I spoke) and I think that my observations about the organization and

projects. These collectives affiliate to the NEFAC federation, although individuals can also adhere to the federation, on a probationary basis, without being members of a collective. Collectives and individuals can also affiliate as 'supporters', a sort of semi-member status. This federal structure is based upon the organization of the Anarchist Federation (Britain), and in my opinion this is whence the problems with the structure stem. There is little evidence of the AF structure working in practice — I know of no recent campaigns that they have been able to become involved in and have a significant impact as an organization across the country.

This is not to denigrate their militants, and I know that many of them do a tremendous amount of work locally, but there just isn't much evidence that their particular federal structure has allowed them to function effectively as a national organization. NEFAC needs to evolve a new structure that allows the federation to become more than the sum of its parts. In general the problem with a federation of collectives as an organizational structure is that, beyond a broad political agreement as a federation, the collectives pretty much do their own thing.

In a broad federation, involving groups that are thousands of miles apart, resident in two different countries and a dozen cities with different political realities, it is simply not possible for any detailed agreements to be made on a broad level. For example, although the federation can decide to prioritize anti-poverty work, they can hardly say that all of the collectives should get involved in a campaign to repeal a particular bit of legislation since they are operating in different countries with very different legislative set ups. So the decisions taken at a federal level are by necessity very general and open to a broad interpretation by the various collectives. For example, one collective could decide to prioritize housing work by getting involved in community based housing action groups, while another collective, based in the same city, could decide to implement the federal decision by agitating for a rent strike,

In general I'd say that it is much more important to try to change society's attitudes overall than to create a perfect equality within the organization. The anarchist movement is not an island; it is affected by the powerful forces that affect everybody else, so it is important to get involved in campaigns for abortion rights, child-care, against police brutality or wherever you can attempt to tackle the effects of racism and sexism as they affect society at large. This is not to say that we should be blind to the dynamics within our own groups, but involvement in these campaigns forces people to put their money where their mouth is and it is precisely this type of practice that leads to the challenging of prejudices within the movement.

Too often the North American anarchist movement has ignored this broader picture and concentrated exclusively on internal dynamics when addressing sexism and other forms of discrimination. However, I must stress that despite the problems of cultural isolation, relations with organized labor, and inward looking focus, NEFAC appears to be moving in the right direction and is, in general, streets ahead of the rest of the anarchist movement in North America. I have little doubt that as the organization gains more practical experience the problems will be tackled and dealt with. The organization is full of genuinely committed anarchists who have a realistic and determined approach to their politics. I don't see any of these matters as being a major problem in the long term since the group dynamic is healthy and forward looking. However, the one issue which does cause me genuine concern over the future of the federation is its internal organization

## INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

The fundamental unit of NEFAC's organization is the local collective. These collectives are modeled as affinity groups, that is groups of individuals who want to work together on specific

its practice may have some worth to both those inside NEFAC and to those outside who seek a greater understanding of its functioning.

## THE BLACK BLOC AND THE ORIGINS OF NEFAC

One of the most surprising discoveries for me concerned the origins of NEFAC. They formed out of a discussion network which came together in the summer of 1999 (a few months before the now famous Seattle summit of the WTO), and it seems that at least a few of the original members played some role in the militant actions which gained such notoriety in Seattle. It is worth noting the first official NEFAC campaign was to raise legal defense funds and actively support arrested members of the Seattle black bloc.

In general the international left has a condescending attitude to black bloc militants, often considering them to be little more than an apolitical bunch of rowdy youths looking for any chance to have a scrap with the police, with only the vaguest idea of the issues and political theory in whose name they are acting. This view is even current among some of the longer established European anarchist organizations that tend to equate the violence of the North American black bloc with the often-mindless violence that has become common on demonstrations in many European countries. However, the briefest inspection of NEFAC soon dispels this myth. Their theoretical journals, and many of their local publications, are full of long and detailed expositions of anarchist ideas and theory. Most of the militants whom I encountered were well versed in the history and theory of the international anarchist movement, and were very comfortable in discussing complicated and abstract theoretical points. Apolitical they are not.

NEFAC did not abandon the black bloc tactic after Seattle, and, in fact played a key organizing role in the 'Revolutionary Anti-

Capitalist Bloc' which took center-stage at the A16 protests against the IMF and World Bank in Washington DC. Although there seems to be a general federation move away from "summit-hopping" altogether, some of their members still maintain an organized presence within the militant sections at many of the North American protests against summits of global capital. To a large extent it is these mass illegal actions which provided the glue that held NEFAC together in its early years. It was only at these summits where the militants from far-flung cities had a chance to converge en masse. Some NEFAC militants remarked to me that their only personal encounters with other NEFAC comrades have been in the heat of battle while trying to fend off a police attack or break through their barricades.

The experience of fighting shoulder to shoulder against the massed forces of the State have injected the organization with a deep sense of solidarity and common purpose. This tradition of militant confrontation has also helped the organization to deflect the inevitable accusations of 'Bolshevism' and authoritarianism that have come from some of the traditional 'leaders' of the North American anarchist movement, wrapped up in their idle and useless philosophical musings, who saw the emergence of a practically focused organization as a threat to their positions as unofficial gurus of the movement. Since NEFAC has established some level of "street credibility" for actively taking part in the militant confrontations against the forces of the State on the frontlines of these summit protests, it has been much more difficult for the gurus to make the mud stick and convince the upcoming militants that the organization concealed a hidden Leninist agenda.

To many organized European anarchists the focus on this particular tactic, black bloc confrontations with the police, would be anathema at best, and indeed I must admit that I was taken back at first when I learned of it. However as I encountered more militants from different NEFAC collectives and observed various political actions, I started to understand more. This tactic is an expression of

unions. After years of declining membership and erosion of labor rights, many of the mainstream unions have started recruiting organizers from the radical anti-globalization movements that have emerged on college campuses across the continent, such as the anti-sweatshop groups. I encountered several people working in these positions on the course of my tour. Many of these radicals identify as anarchists and are genuinely fighting for the goals of labor within the conservative unions. However, they are generally isolated within their unions and are treated as pawns by the corrupt and conservative bureaucracy.

If an organization such as NEFAC could develop a realistic, coherent and effective strategy for working as radicals within the existing unions, they have the potential to attract a large swathe of these people to their ranks. The combination of these young radicals with the older, more experienced anarchists within the IWW could see an anarchist network, with real links to workers at the coal-face of production, develop within the unions in a short space of time.

Finally, I should mention one aspect of the North American anarchist movement which has always been a source of frustration to me. That is the tendency towards navel gazing, attempting to create a perfect and ideal dynamic within the movement at the expense of focusing on society at large. In fairness, the NEFAC groups that I encountered seem far less guilty of this than the rest of the North American anarchist movement, however on a couple of occasions I did encounter people who claimed that I was 'class reductionist', and in particular that my politics tended to ignore gender issues. This came after a talk in which I had explained that the major work of myself and the WSM in the previous few months had been campaigning in Ireland's recent abortion referendum. This was a thankless task whereby we spent many miserable evenings trudging through the working class suburbs of Dublin and Cork arguing for abortion rights for women.



## NEFAC AND THE UNIONS

The older and more serious anarchists who have remained active in politics have often found themselves working in the trade union movement, either in anarchistic groups like the IWW, or within the mainstream unions of the AFL-CIO. This highlights the crucial importance of the union question to the development of NEFAC's political strategy. Within NEFAC there is overall a very ambiguous attitude towards the unions. Some NEFAC members express reluctance to join unions and get involved in struggles within them.

In my opinion this attitude has a lot to do with the fact that many of the members have no experience of working in unionized workplaces and at least some, due to their youth, have no real experience within the workforce whatsoever. To some extent it appears that a pro-union line is gaining ground within the organization, spear-headed in part by the Baltimore collective (Roundhouse), which contains a few militants who are employed as union organizers and have thus gained a greater insight into the complexity and difficulty of organizing within the workplace.

The development of a coherent strategy for working in the unions across the federation could be the step that allows NEFAC to finally and irrevocably step outside of the bounds of their counter culture and into the mainstream of North American society. The IWW contains hundreds of anarchists who are active within their workplaces, however its strategy of building a pure industrial union is locked in the framework of the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and this limitation has meant that it often functions as a nostalgia club for radical labor activists rather than a real fighting union. This situation is tacitly acknowledged by many IWW members who are 'dual carders' and in practice spend much of their time working within mainstream unions.

Another situation which has opened up a space for radicals within the union movement is the recent turn towards recruitment of campus radicals as union organizers by the big North American

an important difference in the political landscapes of Europe and North America. To put it simply, North America is far from being the land of the free. The level of repression used by the state against political activists and demonstrations is on a whole different level than anything we encounter in Western Europe. Demonstrations are policed to such an extent that, rather than being an expression of collective power, they often end up as an exercise in disempowerment and futility. Demonstrations require official permission and the demonstrators are generally herded into specially constructed 'protest pens', surrounded by metal barriers and normally located out of sight and earshot of their target. Once inside the pens the demonstrators can chant away to their hearts content.

Any attempt to step outside of the officially sanctioned protest area has a good chance of attracting a ludicrously over the top violent response from the masses of heavily armed police who are always on hand. It is common for activists to get beaten, arrested and then dragged through the courts for the most minor transgressions. NEFAC militants in Montreal recounted to me the recent case of a protest against police brutality where the entire demonstration (of over 300 people) was arrested despite that fact that it had been almost entirely trouble free. A startlingly large proportion of the anarchist militants that I met could boast of a long police record and a string of prosecutions and convictions for offences that would be routinely overlooked on demonstrations in most European countries.

Police surveillance and harassment of anarchist militants in North America also reaches a level that is almost on a level with that experienced by Republican activists during the 1970's and '80s in Ireland. And while in Ireland this coincided with an armed guerrilla war on the part of the IRA, the North American anarchists have so far done nothing more than smash the odd window or engage in the occasional scrap with riot police. Thus the emergence of the black bloc as an important tactic among the more serious elements of the North American anarchist movement

should be seen in the context of a political landscape where the only permissible demonstrations are terminally demoralizing and where any step outside this quickly leads to criminalization and fierce repression.

The black bloc allows militants to conceal their identities, making it harder for them to be identified from the footage on the police video cameras which are ever present at political actions. This anonymity allows them to step beyond the bounds of the permissible and engage in actions that have a chance of taking some form of direct action and maybe even of having some effect on the issues at stake. Perhaps equally importantly, engaging in these types of protests allows the militants to gain some sense of the collective power and potential for change that is so utterly lacking from the official protests.

The black bloc action in Seattle, organized by anarchists, was a fitting entry for NEFAC into the North American political scene. Although it was roundly criticized from all sides of the political spectrum, I believe that it was a well-timed and correct action. The blockade of the summit was a largely symbolic action by the various NGO's who were content to be arrested without any resistance. They probably would have been cleared away easily, allowing the summit to go ahead without disruption, had it not been for the actions of the black bloc.

One NEFAC member recounted to me their memories of the day: *"the cops were breaking up non-violent blockades and tossing around pacifists like rag-dolls without much resistance, then they came to a large group of us [black bloc anarchists]. We actively fought back and defended our blockade with bottles, sticks and rocks. They simply weren't prepared for this type of resistance"*.

The physical resistance of the black bloc to the clearing of their blockade was one of the initial sparks that set Seattle alight as others, such as the steel workers, joined in. This confrontation, combined with their later rioting in the commercial areas of downtown Seattle, sent a shot echoing around the world. If the smoothly oiled

## MILITANT CHURN

The fact that North American anarchism still by and large remains a movement of young people within a particular counter culture has been a serious impediment to the growth of the movement itself. While, on the one hand there is a constant stream of new members from the disillusionment and frustration experienced by young people in this extraordinarily alienated society, on the other hand there is a parallel drop off of members as they grow older and start to lose the sense of excitement and romance of sticking two fingers up at the establishment [psstÉ hey Chekov, it's one finger here! -ed]. Militants have tended to drop out of the anarchist movement when the counter culture of punk no longer appeals to them.

The stereotype of the ultra-radical anarchist punk who abandons politics and settles down as soon as he or she gets a job has some basis in truth and cannot be put down simply to flakiness on the part of the individual. Hanging around with a bunch of drunk punks and eating out of dumpsters rapidly loses its charm when you have kids to feed or hefty medical bills to pay. Unfortunately these drop outs, some of whom have years of experience, are exactly the people who the movement can't afford to lose and this churn of militants leads to a cycle where mistakes are endlessly repeated and experience only leads to disillusionment.

On my tour I came across several older people who had lost contact with the movement, not due to any shift in their personal politics, but because they no longer saw any place for themselves within it. However, this section of disenchanted activists represents a real opportunity for an organization like NEFAC. If they can succeed in expanding beyond their roots in the counter culture of punk they have the possibility of attracting a sizeable number of experienced, politicized and serious activists who could form the backbone of a powerful social movement.

‘the people’ during the protests, and this summit remains one of the high points of the global anti-capitalist movement of recent years.

## REACTION TO LENINISM

Another problem that has emanated from the cultural background of the North American anarchist movement is the tendency to react against the practices of Leninist organizations. Selling of newspapers and distribution of leaflets is strongly identified as a Leninist practice and so anarchists tend to shun it. This leads to ridiculous situations where, for example, on the Boston Mayday march, despite the fact that 95% of the marchers were anarchists, the only literature available was a couple of newspapers being hawked by Leninist groups. Even worse, there were no leaflets explaining the purpose of the march, the historical significance of Mayday or the politics of anarchism to be handed out to the large numbers of curious onlookers who observed us as we made our way through downtown.

I can only wonder what the ordinary people of Boston must have made of the sight of hundreds of black clad, masked young people marching in a tight disciplined block through their streets. Thankfully this problem is not universal and the Canadian groups seemed immune to it. At both of the meetings that I attended in Montreal and Quebec City there were well-organized literature tables, stocked with a good selection of anarchist propaganda and the meetings had been well advertised in advance through leaflets, posters and handouts. In this respect the groups south of the border have something to learn from their Canadian comrades.

wheels of the global capitalist machine could be disrupted at one of its greatest showpieces in Uncle Sam’s backyard then maybe it was possible for ordinary people to stand up to the triumphant march of neo-liberalism. The hundreds of thousands of people who have since turned out to march in Quebec City, Genoa, Gothenburg, Barcelona, Seville, and elsewhere are a direct consequence of the message of defiance and hope sent out by the Seattle black bloc.

In the aftermath of Seattle, NEFAC continued to focus, to at least some extent, on the tactic of the black bloc. However, things have changed in the intervening period in a way that has rendered the tactic less successful. Firstly there is the obvious fact that the police are no longer surprised by protestors who are willing to engage in physical confrontation and they have adapted their tactics accordingly. However, more seriously, since September 11<sup>th</sup> the political landscape has changed and there are now very few political forces outside the anarchist movement that are willing to engage even in the minimal direct action of passive sit-down blockades. This has left the black blocs increasingly isolated and much easier for the police to contain.

For example the black bloc which appeared on the streets of New York City during the meeting of the World Economic Forum in February 2001 was almost instantly attacked, and members were arrested by an overwhelming police presence. In these changed conditions NEFAC will need to diversify its tactics if it is to remain an effective force in the mass protests that have come to surround the major summits of global capital in North America. To some extent I got the impression that their militants appreciate this necessity however it will be difficult to come up with any alternative plan which will allow them to have a similar impact and profile.

The ongoing focus on the tactics of the black bloc, aside from the relative decline in terms of effectiveness, also reveal one of the abiding weaknesses and limitations of the NEFAC organization to date. Masking up to destroy property and physically confront the police

(or neo-nazis) is a tactic that is really only suited to the young and fit. Furthermore, while state repression may be extreme against young white men, it is vastly more so against minorities who engage in similar behavior. For a black youth with a previous conviction, it is simply way too risky.

Even if the tactic is used away from the showpiece summits in local struggles around bread and butter issues, it is asking a lot to risk a life sentence for a political action with an extremely limited chance of success in the short term. Similarly the option of engaging in such tactics is simply not viable for the old, the sick and handicapped and for those who have dependants and thus can't lightly run the risk of spending time in jail. Therefore, aside from the declining returns, NEFAC has a pressing need to broaden their scope and look for other means of engaging people in direct action. This is not to say that the black bloc tactic should be abandoned altogether, just that it should not be the main focus of anarchist activism.

## **NEFAC & ISOLATION AND YOUTH**

One of the things that struck me, in almost every city I visited, was the overwhelming youth of the anarchists in the movement. At 28 years old I am used to being one of the younger and less experienced members of anarchist groups, whereas in some of my North American speaking engagements, I felt like an old man! While this is a healthy sign of a growing movement, it creates a large number of potential pitfalls (one of which is the over-concentration on the black bloc tactic mentioned previously).

The current anarchist movement has much of its roots in the culture of punk, squatting and counter culture. It remains very isolated from the day-to-day lives of most working class people in North America. I participated on a Mayday march in Boston and, although I'm hardly old and dress pretty casually, I felt intimidated

by the fact that the marchers had an almost uniform dress code of black combats and masks. If, after almost a decade of participation in anarchist activity, I felt like a police spy and intruder on this march, how much more difficult must it be for an ordinary worker with little or no political experience to join such a march.

It is one of the challenges that the NEFAC groups must face in order to go beyond this particular counter culture and appeal to people of diverse races, ages and cultural backgrounds. To be fair to the NEFAC collectives, they do generally appreciate this problem and are committed to changing their focus away from the spectacular anti-capitalist convergences towards issues with broader appeal, particularly housing, workplace and anti-poverty campaigns. Still, many of them still appeared to me to be approaching these issues from the outside, intent on launching their own campaigns and it is only in Canada that the collectives have had any real success in implanting themselves as the radical wing of broader community organizations and working class struggles.

However, considering the youth of both the organization and most of its militants, it is hardly surprising that it is taking them some time to find their niche within the workers movement. One extremely positive development is that NEFAC has, in the last year or so, managed to attract a number of much older activists who have brought a wealth of experience to the organization. One of the collectives in New York City contains several activists who each have decades of experience of political activism within the workers movement.

Furthermore, some of the Canadian collectives have achieved a remarkable success in winning influence for anarchist ideas and methods within broader activist groups. In particular I'd have to single out the Quebec City collective (La Nuit) which played an instrumental part in the mobilization against the Summit of the Americas in April 2001. Through their participation and hard work in popular neighborhood committees, they succeeded in breaking down, to some extent, the distance between 'the movement' and