

What went wrong with in the AWG?

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The recent rejection of anarchism by the Anarchist Workers Group (AWG) is, to say the least, disappointing. Undoubtedly, it came at the end of a long process in which a considerable number of activists have been alienated from both politics and anarchism. It does, for the present, mark the end of any significant “Platformist” presence in the British anarchist movement. This cannot be good.

Notwithstanding the above, however, it is clear that there were major problems not attributable to the efforts needed to begin a new organisation with limited and scarce resources. Clearly these problems are underlined by the committed nature in which the AWG initially set out with the express aim of taking anarchism forward.

What then went wrong?

Problems and a solution

In their emergence from the Direct Action Movement (DAM) in 1987/88 the AWG were quite rightly critical of the anarchist movement around them. Then as now (I suspect) it was marked by a political incapacity to match what the rest of the left took in its stride – an organised and coherent portrayal of its ideas and their practical relevance.

This incapacity is characterised by what I will call, for the remainder of this contribution, problems of organisation (PO). Problems of organisation have three related aspects:

1. A general lack of organisation in the anarchist movement.
2. Its poor quality where it does exist.
3. Confusion over the role of the anarchist organisation.

To the AWG, being in the tradition of the Platform, these problems were near and dear to its heart, and in the context of its own formation sought to deal with them early on. At their national conference in Manchester (July 1989) the AWG adopted the Cadre Organisation Document (COD) as their solution.

What is the cadre?

The cadre, as a political idea, gained currency and eventually institutional standing in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) during the ascendancy of Lenin at the beginning of this century. It was originally a military term used in the bourgeois armies of the day. It denoted an officer rank with professional and permanent status around which an effective army could be built. Lenin in his characteristically imaginative way borrowed it for use in the “class war”.

The aim of the cadre in political change does not differ substantially from its military origins. Essentially that aim is to solidify and expedite organisational growth around a given set of ideas. The cadre is then, by definition, an organisational framework or tool. Secondly, by definition, the cadre always pre-supposes a non-cadre level or, more generously, a cadre-elect.

Where does it come from?

Like all organisational form, the cadre is a reflection of more deeply rooted ideas. It does not appeal to just anyone. Instead, in regard to its role in political change, it is indicative of a certain conception of that change, how it will occur and what responsibilities different sections of society will have in bringing it about. The defining feature of the cadre organisation is the crucial role it ascribes to its own ideas and position. Take, for instance, Trotsky's classic summary which he bequeathed to the Fourth International. "The world (revolutionary) situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis in the leadership of the proletariat".

Translated, this reads: the set pieces for the transformation of society are in place, the problem is those leading the working class. The aim of the cadre is to supplant those leaders and their influence, and to take things from there.

Implicit in this analysis is the cadre's belief that its own ideas are "essentially correct" and that implementation of its analysis is the "required" next step. This, for instance, is again borne out by Lenin who essentially saw the revolutionary task as "implementation" of the ideas of Marx – Engels. To Lenin these two had elaborated fundamental laws. The point was not, and he took Marx literally in his respect, to discuss these laws but to make them a reality. That is why he wanted a primarily efficient organisation in which democracy played second fiddle, if at all.

The cadre organisation in operation

The cadre organisation is particular type of organisation and as such has characteristic features in operation. Two of these are particularly familiar on the left:

- a. To the cadre organisation the key battle of ideas in society is within and between the left. It is not between the worker and boss. This follows from its conception of revolutionary situation a la Trotsky. The most important result of this aspect is an over concentration in actual organisational efforts on what is happening with the left (to the detriment of shop-floor work), where it believes rightly – though for wrong reasons – that its future cadres are to be found. In practical terms, and over the long-term, the cadre organisation can drift away from a day-to-day understanding of where real class politics are at.
- b. The cadre organisation has particular problems of analysis when its success at attracting new members or its growth in influence doesn't match its expectations. How does it analyse its failures? The cadre organisation, because of its skew towards implementation as well as the sway of the actual cadres, tends not to object all its ideas to analysis or re-examination in the light of experience. For them core ideas (which are "essentially correct") need not be re-examined as part of the overall learning experience that building an organisation entails. Instead analysis of failure tends to point to the need for more finely honed presentations, redoubled efforts. Tactical errors of a minor sort can assume gigantic proportions. Accordingly, those who commit them – it can be implied – are unsuitable cadres, holding different under standings of core ideas. In practice the effects of this analysis, for good reason, can drive people away. Numbers shrink, leading to further, more skewed analysis. For a combination of reasons, this can, in the long term, lead to an irreversible degeneration into sect.

The cadre and its theoreticians

In an anarchist organisation we would expect that the role of theoreticians (or thinkers, if one wishes to call them that) in society as well as in the anarchist organisation would be analysed as a matter of course. This should not follow from any antipathy but rather from a recognition of how capitalism presents such specialists to us, as well as the nature of the revolutionary transformation ahead.

Briefly, capitalism regards intellectual labour highly, manual labour low. But more crucially, since capitalism is a necessarily authoritarian form of organisation, it breaks the unity of thought and action that is part of all human activity (particularly in the economic sphere). This is the central act of dehumanisation. As anarchists we would argue that a revolution of the working class must end this separation if it is to succeed as well as survive. It is, to say the least, a matter of paramount importance and our approach to the role of theoreticians must be seen in such a light.

The position I believe anarchists should take is firstly to recognise that theoreticians, to greater or lesser extents, exist in all organisations — including anarchist ones. Secondly, within the anarchist organisation — while such specialisation is recognised — it is not accorded any special value or powers. It is seen only as another part of the functioning organisation. In practice, the issue of theoreticians could be left at this if it were not for the fact that we believe that the role of the anarchist organisation, in a revolution, is to argue against the emergence of a “sovereign vanguard”. In this context, we have to go further in our overall position and recognise that history shows that intellectualism can be the basis of a new elite emerging in a revolution. Such an intellectual elite could also emerge from within a revolutionary anarchist organisation. So clearly there is a need to be vigilant.

How did the AWG address this issue? Firstly the role of theoreticians in its own organisation, and as an issue of importance to anarchism, was not recognised. Consequently it was not addressed. The cadre was not recognised as stratum of knowledge specialists (which it is) except in the very literal and self-serving context that such a stratum could only be a good thing for anarchism. Importantly, in the history of the AWG the adoption of the COD marked the point where the ‘cadre’ in the organisation institutionalised its position at the top, ascribing to itself a special role and guiding power. Most striking, in hindsight, is the fact that this was seen as enhancing the revolutionary nature of the AWG and not as we might expect, the opposite.

The implications of what the AWG did when they adopted the ‘COD’ completely escaped them. It is worth our while to look at its underlying assumptions so that their mistake is clearly understood. In adopting the ‘COD’ and thus constituting themselves as a cadre organisation the AWG believed they were making a move devoid of political content with respect to their anarchism. In other words the reconstitution of the AWG from a democratic state (pre-early 1989) into one, after that, which was composed of a cadre and a cadre-elect would not in any way affect the politics of the organisation. It would not affect the thinking of either the cadre or the cadre-elect, nor the democratic exchange of ideas between the two groups or between the membership as a whole. Clearly these assumptions were made and they are absurd.

The issue of internal education

In fairness, it should be pointed out that one important issue did arise in relation to the adoption of the ‘COD’. This concerned members of the AWG who were not yet cadres (particularly those who had only recently joined out of a basic interest in class struggle anarchism). What was to be done with them?

The AWG’s answer to this was internal education – in essence a fairly elaborate programme that would rectify the balance of knowledge/expertise in the organisation. Apart from the fact that, from a resource point of view, they were totally incapable of fulfilling the demands of this plan (an issue in itself!), what is the validity of this ideas as a means of shoring up cadrism.

Even if we were to look at the best possible situation – where what constitutes a cadre is tightly defined and the stages of political maturity to full graduation as a cadre were set out (not that this was done by the AWG)- the fact remains that some people won’t ever reach the position of cadre, no matter how much internal education they get. To me the deciding issue in this regard is interest, which varies widely in any group of people and even within the very self-selected group that gets together to set-up a revolutionary anarchist group. Interest is always the key to whether education is successful or not. For those with a minimal interest in history or the ins and outs of the Russian revolution but who identify themselves as class struggle anarchists and will fight for it – where do they fit into the cadre organisation; where do they fit into the anarchist organisation?

It seems to me that an anarchist organisation has to be, in practice, a very democratic environment. There can be no room in it for those who, for whatever reason, including expediency, create an atmosphere that is intimidating for people to speak in. Such a situation is, in every respect, given what we are fighting for, a disaster.

What went wrong in the AWG?

To me the AWG adopted in the ‘COD’ a position that had a number of principled contradictions to anarchism. It was inevitable that these contradictions would play themselves out in the history of the organisation. Since the AWG started out as a committed anarchist organisation, two conclusions seem to follow:

1. There was not in AWG at the time that the ‘COD’ was adopted an understanding of what constitutes anarchism in terms of philosophy and its implications. This accounts for why no real objections to ‘COD’ were raised in the lead up to and during the Manchester conference (1989). On the whole, at that conference, the ‘COD’ was not regarded as contentious in regard to the anarchism of the organisation, and in fact only a small number of reservations were recorded. It was adopted unanimously.
2. The ‘COD’, I’ve argued, entails in terms of political philosophy a lot more than just a type of organisation, as many in the AWG seemed to think it was. There was not, in other words, an understanding of the basics of cadrism. As with all organisations, it reflected an underlying philosophy: this was not recognised.

The degree to which the above two points are correct, combined with the actual operation of the cadre organisation – which I’ve argued in terms of analysis is degenerative (i.e. it graduates

towards sectism) — go some way towards explaining what happened with the AWG. It is important to recognise that while cadrism has much in common with Leninism, it is not in itself Leninist. That entails a lot more, which was not to my knowledge (up to November 1990) present at any stage in their ranks.

The most important issue in relation to the AWG, however, remains — problems of organisation. To the AWG such problems could be “organised” away. This, in essence, is what the cadrist idea was adopted for — to create efficiency and expedite growth. The cadrist idea, in its adoption by the AWG, was a reaction to the broader (disorganised) anarchist movement that was about them. It was a crucially wrong reaction, failing to ask (and to deal with) the main issue — why do problems of organisation exist in the anarchist movement in the first place?

Here to go from here

Left unsolved, problems of organisation will continue — as they have in the past — to have a debilitating effect on the anarchist movement. This is made worse by the fact that a new revolutionary era is now opening up, one that sees for the first time in one hundred years a new openness to our ideas. The degree, however, to which we solve problems of organisation will, I believe, measure how successful the anarchist movement will be in the years ahead.

That said, solutions based on expediency or primarily motivated by impatience with the anarchist movement around us are no solutions either. The AWG experience tells us this. The solutions must resolve theory and practice, ideas and organisation, and means & ends.

In looking at the issue of organisation it is important to see that it is part of an older and bigger problem. In so much as organisation has been a problem for anarchists, so also has been the reception that the basic anarchist idea has had. After all, who isn't familiar with the accusation that organisation is intrinsic to anarchism?

Anarchists are right to point to the large amount of disinformation that has been visited on our ideas in this regard by both the left and the right. But does that account for the whole problem? Hardly, I would argue. Central to doing that is, I believe, a recognition that anarchism does not constitute a developed political philosophy in its own right. It exists as a general set of principles, which to a point is fine. But when, as is most often the case, we want to go beyond that there is confusion.

For instance, the idea that anarchists should not take the lead in struggles (since it is asserted that to do so would be authoritarian). What lies behind such an impractical position other than confusion over anarchism, over authoritarianism, and over what change involves. Or take the position of the CNT-FAI in squandering the revolution in Spain. Here in practice was borne out the theoretically confused assertion (made in 1922, in Berlin, at the founding conference of the anarcho-syndicalist IWA) that political power could not be compatible with a libertarian workers revolution. Whereas, in actual fact, it is.

Problems of organisation and what I would argue is their basis — confusion over anarchist theory- are a historical legacy. It is important that we see this and its influence. For instance, to the degree that Marxism was a movement of ideas whose time had come in the 19th century, so anarchism wasn't. To the degree that Marxism developed early from almost the work of two people, over a short few decades, so anarchism emerged much more piecemeal. To the extent that Marxism was seen as intellectual and theoretical, many anarchists portrayed anarchism, for

wrong reasons, to be the opposite. The overall problem was compounded by the apparent success of the Russian revolution.

Political anarchism, in the history of the anarchist movement, is that tradition which tries to understand this overall process. It holds that anarchism is a philosophically complete set of ideas — providing the framework and organisational methods to bring about a non-authoritarian society. Crucially, in its most fundamental break with the rest of the movement it asserts two things:

1. Political power must be held by the revolutionary movement of workers as the basis for its re-organisation.
2. Holding political power is compatible with a libertarian workers movement. There will be no “inevitable corruption” of the revolution once a self-confident working class approaches the problem from the aim of self-management.

There comes a point, however, when asserting this is not enough. We need the positions set out that explain what our political theory is. This is so we can relate to more in society around us and in a better way. But also, and just as importantly, so that we don't do what the AWG did and adopt positions contrary to our fundamental philosophy.

Obviously this is not a small undertaking nor would what we require be developed, even with the best of intentions, in a short period. But the WSM has already moved in that direction with the ‘Role of the Anarchist Organisation’. This needs to be continued and extended.

In the longer term how successful we are at setting out these ideas of anarchist theory and philosophy will, I believe, have a major bearing on whether we eventually grow into a large movement. Anarchism today i.e. a set of principles and insights but what it says is not linked together in any coherent, extensive way.

It is inevitable in such that confusion about how to act will prevail. How to act or how to organise — one and the same thing — suffer when those principles are unsure of what contradicts these ideas. They hold back (which is a long-standing characteristic of the anarchist movement). But equally problematic is the situation which occurred with the AWG, where impatience sees the adoption of a position which does not integrate means and ends. Equally, in this case the dearth of theory comes home to roost.

Synopsis of position

1. The Cadre Organisation Document (COD) was an attempt by the AWG to deal with problems of organisation in the anarchist movement. These problems made-up of the lack of organisation, its poor quality and confusion over the role of the anarchist organisation are ongoing, endemic problems in the anarchist movement. The COD was a failure, leading to the demise of the AWG as an anarchist organisation, for two reasons:
2. The COD was an attempt to “organise” away the problem of organisation. Its principal aim was to “introduce” efficiency, since its view was that inefficiency in the anarchist movement's attitudinal. As such the COD dealt only with symptoms. Problems of organisation have as their underlying cause confusion over anarchist political theory. Unless this is

addressed as the core problem, a solution will not be achieved — as was the case with the COD.

3. Specifically, however, the COD is a direct contradiction to basic anarchist principals:
 - a. The COD makes the assumption that constituting an organisation into a “cadre” and a “cadre elect” is a politically neutral act which will not influence the political thinking of member, the organisation as a whole, or the exchange of ideas. In contrast, it is fundamental to anarchism that structure and organisation are political. They affect both the ideas and politics of those involved and must only be mediated by participatory democracy.
 - b. The cadre organisation is exclusivist — it exalts political knowledge and sets a high level of same as a condition for full membership. In effect it limits some people’s membership, excludes others — particularly those who may have other specialisation’s or none.
4. The COD, in the historical context, is an amplification of the idea found in both the “Platform” and the Friends of Durruti that “anarchists need to get tough on organisation” and can “since they have the right ideas” accommodate some authoritarianism within its ranks and organisation. It is fundamentally important that this notion is rejected. The tendency for anarchists to argue for a compromise on means & ends, as a solution to the failure of the movement historically to win in revolutionary situations, reflects nothing more than a failure of analysis.
5. In the short term we need to recognise:
 - a. Our political philosophy and theory are not fully developed and established.
 - b. There are historical reasons for why this happened. It is not a reflection of any “intrinsic” problem of anarchism.
 - c. Theoretical confusion lies at the base of problems of organisation.
6. In the longer term we need to develop two main positions papers:
 - a. An extensive position on anarchist political theory — its basics and implications.
 - b. A position paper on the historical context that anarchist ideas have developed in. This would explain to some degree what gave rise to the current situation, and what mistakes it has led to in the past. In principle, this would stand as a review document — in the political anarchist tradition — on the movement as a whole which centrally would have to deal with the successes and failures of anarcho-syndicalism.

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