

Anarchism in the Thatcher years

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“As the global economic recession has taken its toll we have seen 10 years of a viciously anti working class government prepared to squeeze working people harder and harder, to protect the interests of its capitalist paymasters. The crisis of capitalism has been reflected by a crisis in the left, with the disintegration of the two major revolutionary forces – the Workers Revolutionary Party and the International Marxist Group of the 70’s and the continued rightward shift of Neil Kinnock’s Labour Party. One current that has remained strangely unaffected by all this, and indeed has begun to develop politically and grow in size and influence, is the anarchist movement. Here; SOCIALISM FROM BELOW examines the recent history, the political content and the way forward for anarchism after a decade of Tory rule.”

For the first time in years, the start of the decade saw a real increase in the number of people referring to themselves as anarchists. This growing movement of mainly young people was in no small way influenced by the rock group ‘Crass’ and the imitators they spawned. Their “anarchy and peace” agit-prop was in part inspired by the “do-it yourself” ethos of the punk-rock explosion, and in part hankered back to the pacifistic “alternative lifestyle” tradition that had become a major facet of what passed for the British anarchist movement in the previous 20 years.

Anarchism has always had, to varying degrees, its liberal wing. This is partly because terms bandied around by anarchists, such as anti-authoritarian, freedom and justice, are in themselves meaningless and open to a wide range of interpretations when divorced from their specifically anarchist context: the day to day realities of class society, and an understanding of capitalism and why and how it should be smashed. Going right back to the days of the First International. there were those anarchists who in contrast with Bakunin¹

“Abandoned the field of struggle of the working class in favour of a particular form of radicalised liberalism.”

In Britain in the 1980s anarchism was still tightly in the grip of a rot that set in during the heyday of the 1950’s peace movement. Many rank and file anti-nuclear activists (7% of the movement during 1958–65²) disillusioned with limitations, in terms of politics, leadership and strategy, of the CND adopted anarchism: in part as a reaction to this, and often not fully aware of the political legacy behind their new label, confusing anarchism “with a more militant liberalism”³. Their confusion was not helped by the sectarianism of the existing – and increasingly isolated – anarchist movement who made little effort to provide a political lead or a class perspective to the new ‘anarchists’.

Living in a state of blissful ignorance of class struggle, they promoted their ideas in “Freedom”, “Anarchy Magazine” and “Peace News”, taking on board and developing the ideas of pacifism, personal liberation and alternative lifestyle. The “punk anarchy” of Crass and their camp was but a continuation of this: a dressed up version of militant liberalism with electric guitars and a brand new haircut, but the same tired face

¹ “Putting the Record Straight on Michael Bakunin” Libertarian Communist Review 1976

² R Taylor, C Pritchard “The Protest Makers” Oxford 1980

³ A Meltzer “The Anarchists in London 1935–1955” quoted in P Kane “British Anarchism Surveyed” Virus No 7

Lifestylism

But it did catch on, striking a chord with the disaffected, young rebels – without a cause but on the look out for one. The small groupings of class – struggle anarchists “active” in the early 1980’s repeated the mistakes of the 1950’s by failing to acknowledge – let alone give a lead to – the new generation who were left to their own devices to “reinvent” “anarchy”. In this case it meant inventing a loose, anti-statist pacifist “movement” that left the theory question of class conflict to the trots, instead proclaiming that

“Anarchists believe that if each individual can learn to act out of conscience, rather than greed the machinery of power will collapse.”⁴

The small groupings that started to spring up around the country responding to Crass’s challenge were soon to be seen on CND demos clustered around their ragged black flags and handing out their leaflets and fanzines, telling the world;

“Don’t give in to the authorities, make them give in to you”⁵

but never quite managing to go so far as to suggest a way that this awesome task might be achieved.

In some of the literature of the time, however, the way forward for anarchists was spelled out a bit more clearly. And reading it, you would be forgiven for believing that the anarchist movement was less a political current, more a bizarre religious cult:

“to give back to life what we have taken from it ... understand the seasons, the weather, the soil .. reject the grey filth and shit”⁶.

It seems there was quite an obsession with shit. Stripping away the mystical nonsense we are left with naked personal politics: the revolution begins – and ends – within. There are, for those whose imaginations have perhaps been tainted by years of dealing with the “grey filth” some useful practical examples of how this discovery of self can be put into practise. And it’s the classic lifestylist romanticism of a small band of worthy converts struggling to build the society within the shell of the old with:

“housing co-ops or communes ... gardening groups to squat and farm disused land ... and grow medicinal herbs to cure each others headaches”⁷

All very commendable and laudable stuff, but about as revolutionary and “anarchist” as sharing your 1st Rolo with someone you love. Of course there is nothing wrong with being nice to your mates and eating a lot of organic garlic, the danger was that this was substituted for the more pressing and difficult task of developing and testing out a coherent and workable revolutionary strategy that could win people over to the struggle against capitalism. Bakunin asserted that:

⁴ P Rimbaud “The Last of the Hippies” in “A Series of Shock Slogans and Mindless Token Tantrums” Existence Press 1982

⁵ “Prisoners of War” No 1 1983 Page 7

⁶ P Rimbaud ibid

⁷ R Rimbaud ibid

“the serious realisation of liberty, justice and peace will not be possible whilst the majority of the population remains dispossessed.”⁸

However, the punk anarchists hadn’t cottoned on to this, and busily sought personal solutions to social problems. Therefore, the groups were little more than consciousness-raising rap groups existing in navel gazing isolation from the real world, helping their participants along on the quest for personal purity.

The movement in the early eighties displayed the worst kind of elitism – the politics of “if everyone was like me wouldn’t the world be a wonderful place.” The concept of working class mass self-activity didn’t get a look-in because there was no understanding – or will to understand the class nature of society. In fact the working class categorised as “grey-nobodies”, as people who were:

“in their willingness to bow down to authority ... the real fascist threat.”⁹

So count out the working class in terms of having any positive role to play in fighting. The action to be taken – aside from changing your own life – was to be taken by the anarchists on behalf of the class and amounted to little more than adventurism and propaganda by deed:

“jam up the locks of banks and of with superglue or cut down fences around government installations ... sabotage operations at work.”¹⁰

Aside from that, ever living for kicks you’d be more likely to find an anarchist a on a hunt sab than a picket line, at a free festival than a march against deportations, advocating shoplifting than fighting cuts in welfare provisions. After all, we’re trying to get away from the grey filth and we mustn’t forget that:

“boredom is counter-revolutionary militants are people for whom boredom is part of the struggle and being miserable and downtrodden is part of the revolution.”¹¹

This phase of modern day anarchism had its swan song in the “Stop the City” demonstrations in 1983–4. These were mass demonstrations of anarchists, pacifists and other members of the counterculture that took place in the City of London with the aim of closing it down for the day.

Little attempt was made to broaden them beyond the lifestyle ghetto and although they received national media coverage, they were not much more than adventures of the same type as the beloved super gluing expeditions, albeit on a larger scale. They were a spectacle, and a substitute, for the hardwork of building and organising the fightback, and there were those in the anarchist movement who were beginning to recognise this:

“If we are to build a meaningful anarchist movement we have to go beyond Stop Business as Usual and be prepared to argue our case in the workplace and the community.”¹²

⁸ G Maximof “The Political Philosophy of Bakunin” quoted in P Kane “British Anarchism Surveyed” Virus No 7

⁹ P Rimbaud ibid

¹⁰ P Rimbaud ibid

¹¹ The Beano No 3 June 1986

¹² Steve T “Anarchosyndicalism?” Virus No 7

The start of the upheaval that transformed the movement in Britain was the great Miners Strike of 1984–5 where the anarchist movement was forced to test its ideas out against a backdrop of genuine struggle. Those who did, found contemporary anarchism wanting. They started to rediscover the class roots of anarchism and realise how far the movement had strayed from them. From the Miners Strike and through to the end of the printers dispute at Wapping many were forced — in one way or another — to make the break and embrace the class struggle.

Not everyone in the movement chose to make that break. There were some who chose to distance themselves from the struggle of people who through lack of time, opportunity or inclination, had not reached the same dizzy heights of personal sanctity as they had. Thus we saw so-called anarchists refusing to dirty their hands in the Miners Strike, blithely dismissing them en masse as sexist and racist without making any attempt to get to a picket line let alone have any argument about the need to fight. Another way out was to blame workers for the effects of the industry they worked in: thus the miners were not worthy of support because they exploited the earth, as the ‘green’ anarchists were want to put it. This mistake was repeated over the Wapping dispute, where an anarchist paper claimed to support the printers but:

“I detest the racist and sexist shit they print ... many have said they are only doing a job like anyone else with no control over what they do. BOLLOCKS”¹³

It gets better. The author goes on to say, talking of the fight for better pay and conditions at work:

“Suddenly all our aims and dreams are thrown aside in the euphoria of class struggle ... playing the capitalist money game.”¹⁴

So the class struggle is reduced to an annoyance, something that gets in the way of the real task of building the anarchist revolution, once again in isolation by the anarcho elite on behalf of everyone else. Again it shows the complete and seemingly wilful ignorance of the anarchist movement about how exciting its is going to be making the revolution, and failing to realise that workers fighting back against the attacks of the boss class are far more relevant to the struggle than any number of obscure and turgid anarcho-rags.

There was however, a considerable section of the movement who saw the need to leave all this behind. Unfortunately some of them — seeing the need for political, tactical and organisational coherence — and seeing it to be conspicuous by its absence in the anarchist movement, ended up gravitating towards and in many cases eventually joining the various Leninist parties — notably the SWP — who were active during the Miners Strike and Wapping. The anarchist movement drove away through its own folly — good, active revolutionaries who wanted to fight and for whom the movement had nothing more to offer.

Most of the anarchists who did start to relate in some way to the Miners Strike found a voice in Black Flag. Up until this point the paper had in large been a pot pourri of prisoners news, investigative journalism and articles about various dubious European armed Leninist groups. However, throughout the Miners strike — and the Wapping dispute — Black Flag was almost entirely given over to the latest news from the front-line of the struggle.

¹³ The Beano No 3 June 1986

¹⁴ The Beano ibid

However, news was all it was. There was woefully little attempt made to provide any sustained anarchist analysis, still less a political lead or the tactics needed to win. Hence their refusal to criticise the NUM leader, Arthur Scargill, which is particularly pertinent as an anarchist rank and file workplace strategy should always incorporate a critique of the role of the union bureaucracy, especially the left bureaucracy.

In practise. Black Flag, and by implication much of the anarchist movement, as it looked to Black Flag for a lead, ducked the issues and chose to merely tailend the strike: selling a paper that reported but did not analyse; collecting money and joining support groups: and on occasion, joining picket lines to swell numbers. These activities are all necessary and should never be neglected, but for revolutionaries who have an understanding of capitalism, and why and how it should be fought, they are inadequate. What happened was that anarchists got involved in the struggle apolitically, as good activists but terrible revolutionaries. Their anarchism was rendered irrelevant.

The Direct Action Movement

The Miners Strike was good news for the existing national organisation operating at the time, the Direct Action Movement. Involvement in the strike, and a growing awareness of the futility of activity in isolation meant that there were those who had newly developed class politics and did not want to jettison the anarchist movement, who were looking around for an organisation to join. The Direct Action Movement (DAM), founded in 1979 from the remnants of the defunct Syndicalist Workers Federation was the British section of the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers Association.

Although without a doubt seeing itself as an, anarcho-syndicalist propaganda grouping, the Direct Action Movement (DAM) was not a wholly unified or coherent organisation. This meant it was able to welcome to its ranks a steady influx of new members. formerly liberal anarchists, from the Miners Strike through to Wapping, without fully challenging — and in some cases accommodating the residue of their lifestylism. Although it varied branch by branch, new members were not provided with a great deal of political education by the DAM and were often not challenged beyond a basic agreement with the aims and principles. This led later to some dubious practices such as DAM members advocating self managed health centres in response to NHS cuts- an abdication from the responsibility to fight for decent welfare provision. The central problem with the DAM, though was the lack of any unified industrial strategy until the national conference in 1988. This meant it could not until this date, argue with workers as an organisation, what tactics were necessary, in its view, to win struggles — an appalling state of affairs for an anarcho-syndicalist organisation which, by definition, should have its industrial strategy as a central plank in its *raison d'être*. Therefore during the Miners Strike and Wapping its role was reduced, in common with Black Flag to one of mere “supportism” where good work was done but anarchist politics were not on the agenda. For example, during the Silentnight Strike the DAM called for:¹⁵

“rebuilding the strike support groups and the various rank and file groups on an open syndicalist basis”.

¹⁵ Blackflag

without explaining what a syndicalist “basis” actually meant, how this task was to be achieved and what the point was in doing it. Instead it concentrated on calling for people to¹⁶

“continue to give financial assistance (and) send food parcels”

Of course financial support is crucial, but the blossoming of strike support groups during the Miners Strike showed that the problem was not one of support or the lack of it, but of politics and the strategies needed to win. The DAM never really seriously attempted to provide either.

DAM’s final adoption of an industrial strategy at its 1988 National Conference was the classic anarchosyndicalist idea of building a revolutionary union. It was a sure sign of an organisation seriously out of touch with the realities of class struggle in 80’s Britain. This decision was expressed in a change to the organisations Aims and Principles to include an extra clause¹⁷

“The DAM is resolved to initiate encourage and whole heartedly support the creation of independent workers unions based on the principles of anarcho-syndicalism”

A union is an organisation built by the working class to defend its interests under capitalism. The aims and actions of the union are determined by whoever is in control be it a bureaucratic caste, or in the case of a syndicalist union, the rank and file. For a syndicalist union to be revolutionary the rank and file would also have to be- it is not enough to merely have an anarchist constitution or structure. A union that accepts members irrespective of their politics is, by definition, not revolutionary. Yet to have a mass base and therefore be effective in day to day struggles it would have to be an open membership policy. To allow membership solely on the grounds of political agreement would be the other alternative, the one chosen by the CNT in France which is a good reason why the CNT only has 500 members and is not strong enough to fulfill its function as a union. It is an ideological faction masquerading as a union. The syndicalist approach is flawed because it attempts to combine the political role of anarchists with the economic form of a union and simultaneously grow into a mass organisation able to determine the course of the class struggle in the here and now. In practice, taking into account the high density of union membership in this country, what would probably happen would be that militant workers who joined the revolutionary union would become divorced from the bulk of the workers who remain within the reformist unions. This would, in turn lead to an abandonment of the essential task of winning reformist workers to the need to fight.

Anarchists should be seeking to unite, not further divide, the working class and unions, whether organised along trade line in this country, or ideological lines, as on the continent, are always divisive.

The boss class do a good enough job of dividing us as it is. without anarchists pursuing strategies that will make matters worse. Finally the example of Spain, where in July 1936, Catalan workers had economic power in their hands when they controlled the streets and factories, showed the failure of the CNT- one of the most militant unions ever- to destroy the capitalist state and establish working-class power. The lesson anarcho syndicalists have yet to learn, is that a revolutionary union does not guarantee a revolution.

¹⁶ Direct Action No 36 Jan/Feb 8,

¹⁷ Direct Action No 36 Jan/Feb 87

It remains to be seen. whether once the DAM have tested out their strategy in the real world, and observed its tragic short comings, they will cut their losses and jettison classic anarcho-syndicalism. It must be hoped they will. and that the good committed activists in the DAM will be released from the ideological prison of revolutionary unionism in which they have incarcerated themselves.

Class War

Meanwhile, back in 1986, with the Miners Strike having exposed many of contemporary anarchism's shortfalls and those young activists who were not of an anarcho-syndicalist bent looking for something more viable than banging their heads against a brick wall, something fresh was afoot in the ghetto. January 1986 saw the launch of the Class War Federation. Class War, as a paper, and a London grouping had already existed for over a year and had burst forth seething with scorn and contempt for the pacifists and life-stylists of the anarchist movement and preaching an uncompromising class hatred. "Murdoch you are scum!", "Behold your future executioners" "Rich Bastards Beware," screamed the headlines, so what went wrong? Class War played an important role in helping to turn the ghetto upside down, but no organisation can hope to maintain itself purely on sustained anger without degenerating into self parody. The Class War Federation did not develop viable organisation, coherent politics and clear strategies. A former member complained:

"Unity, coherence and democracy are something that revolutionary anarchist organisations are built upon, not something we are forced to establish."¹⁸

Class war- in the final analysis a rainbow coalition of disaffected non-pacifists- was an organisation whose predominant ideas were neither revolutionary nor anarchist but populist, never getting very far beyond generalised anti-rich anti-state rhetoric and betraying a poor understanding of class- politics. It was an organisation in the business not of encouraging working class militancy but of glorifying working class violence. Class War has:

"No clear industrial strategy and prefers to encourage street violence and open physical rather than political confrontation with the establishment."¹⁹

An example of this can be seen in the headline of the article the paper carried about the Silent-night strike. "Silentnight, violent night, get the scabs and kick 'em to shite" without offering a workable strategy for winning the dispute and without seeming to understand that there is more, unfortunately, to the class struggle than caving a few heads in. In many ways Class War has ended up a mirror image of the pacifist ghetto it so despises- chaotic, disorganised and lacking politics and strategy firmly stuck in the ghetto of its own making. It has become an organisation in a rut of

"desperate publicity-seeking stunts (and an) ultra leftist and street fighting mentality"²⁰

¹⁸ David Luton resignation letter to CWF

¹⁹ A Reid "An Analysis of Contemporary British Anarchism" Feb 89

²⁰ David L. *ibid*

The last straw was the decision taken by the London group to stand a candidate in the Kensington by-election the ultimate example of the tendency within the organisation, that has been there through-out its existence to turn Class War into a circus intent on performing tricks for the media.

Class War should be applauded for giving the anarchist movement the timely shake up it needed, and deserved, so desperately. However, it has now served its purpose, and its continued existence is a waste of time, energy and commitment of the good activists who are still within it. The party was good while it lasted but now its over and its time to go home.

A third national organisation, the Anarchist Communist Federation was launched in March of the same, year, 1986. The impetus from this came from the Anarchist Communist Discussion Group, that produced the 'magazine Virus' and could trace its history back to the Anarchists Workers Association of the 1970's. The Anarchist Communist Discussion Group (ACDG) had merged with Medway based Syndicalist Fight Group and developed a network of contacts around the country, The situation was looking healthy Only a couple of months earlier the Syndicalist Fight had carried an article arguing:

“The anarchist movement...is isolated from even the most militant sections of the working class. Most anarchists lack a clear understanding of theory and understanding of working within the labour movement. These are serious problems and we cannot hope to become an influential movement in this country until we begin to solve them...the key to future success for British anarchism is interventionism. 1986 could be the year our movement begins to grow”

The Anarchist Communist Federation

And in some ways it was. Whilst DAM was searching for syndicalism's lost youth and Class War Federation was remaining strictly prepubescent. the ACF wanted to develop an anarchism that was politically mature. However when the organisation was launched problems began to set in. In fact, the founders of the ACF can be seen as victim to their own enthusiasm for the type of organisation they had hoped to create, and putting cart before horse rashly flung open the doors of the ACF to all newcomers. And many responded, bringing with them the same problem that was brought to the DAM- the residual trappings of their all too recent liberalism. The original members wary of alienating the new-comers were slow to challenge this. The problem with a defacto open door membership policy is that it can lead to one of two consequences. One is that the relationship between the more politically developed members and the rest of the organisation, is militarised. The “cadres” then constitute a formal or informal leadership who “hand down” the politics to everyone else, whose role is to repeat it and digest it parrot fashion. This means that regardless of the political content, the form would cease to be anarchist, and become the worst kind of “democratic” centralism. The other option is that either individually or as a faction the founder members would argue that their particular politics were the best on offer inside (or outside) of the organisation and in effect attempt to win the membership over to the very ideas the organisation was set up with the intention of promulgating. This option was plumped for in the ACF. The crucial mistake was to invite people to join and then try to win them to the politics rather than winning them to the politics-and then inviting them to join. In practice, the initial vision of the ACF became clouded, and this political dilution and disunity had the effect of

militating against successful intervention in the class struggle. The ACF substituted numerical growth for political development.

The ACF claims- and this is a claim that must be taken seriously, to stand in the tradition of the Platform, the Friends of Durruti and the French Libertarian Communists: that is the tradition of coherent, political anarchism. Initially, the group discussed “the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists” a document drawn up in 1926 in response to the disorganisation of the anarchist movement in Russia at the time of the revolution, and arguing for a tighter, harder movement. This was a bold move in view of the fact that whilst most of the anarchist movement had never heard of the Platform, those who had were practically unanimous in dismissing it out of hand as “Bolshevised Anarchism”. A group of DAM members even went so far as to produce a leaflet entitled “ Anarchism or Platformism “ roundly condemning it:

“The Platform was rejected by most of the anarchist movement and denounced as an attempt to Bolshevised anarchism”²¹

And on the British platformists ..

“The first critics of the platformists had described them as being just “one step away from Bolshevism”, in this case (the ORA) it seems to have been a very short step indeed”.²²

The combination of this external pressure together with internal pressure from the more liberal elements of the membership led to the ACF distancing itself from the Platform, and thus- in common with most of the anarchist movement- distancing itself from one of the most important documents ever written by any anarchists:

“We differ with the Platform on the question of absolute theoretical and tactical unity. An organisation must be allowed the convergence of ideas through a dynamic dialogue between its members. A federation does not smother its membership with doctrine- even if it is adopted democratically.’ [23]

And this is from the “pro-platform” tendency within the ACF! A false dichotomy has been created here – of course “dynamic dialogue” between members is essential if an organisation is to remain healthy and democratic. However the aim of such dialogue is to force a democratically achieved unity, theoretical and tactical. Talking till your blue in the face is meaningless if everyone then goes off and ‘ argues their own thing to the class’. It reduces internal discussion to little more than sterile intellectual game playing. Democratically adopted positions are not “smothering members with doctrine” they are an essential prerequisite to successful intervention in the class struggle as an organisation. The leadership of ideas means nothing unless you can agree what those ideas are.

Recently the ACF has started to transform its politics. Unfortunately the direction they are taking smacks of ultra-leftism rather than anarchism. On the issue of industrial strategy, the unions are seen as the fifth column of capitalism within the working class. They are:

²¹ Phil Kane “The Movement in 1986” Syndicalist Fight No 2 Jan 86

²² “Anarchism or Platformism” 1986

“part of the array of ideological forces used by the state against workers.”²³

This misses the point that the function of the union is to defend workers interests under capitalism. A contradiction exists between the rank and file, which are objectively anti capitalist, and the interests of the bureaucracy, which are to maintain a role as permanent mediators between labour and capital. The ACF claim that ‘a steward who is revolutionary cannot last’. So anarchists should stay in the unions but abstain from the struggle over who controls them- the bureaucracy or the rank and file? If rank and file workers have the potential power to take on the capitalist state it is a contradiction to say that they don’t have the power to take on their own bureaucracy.

A second example of the creeping ultra-leftism of the ACF is in their attitude to the imperialist struggle In their revised aims and principles they state:

‘We are opposed to the ideology of national liberation movements which claim there is some common interest between the native bosses and the working class in the face of foreign domination’²⁴

In another article , specifically about the Irish War, the ACF state that they are opposed to:

‘the unification of Ireland on any basis other than in the context of international socialism.’²⁵

In effect, this means abdicating from the struggle against British imperialism in Ireland — unless it is in the context of international socialism! Thus, by default siding with British state against those fighting for the re-unification of Ireland. It is not the role of British anarchists to impose pre-conditions on our call for troops out of Ireland. To build the necessary solidarity in Britain, amongst British workers, we must unconditionally support the Irish peoples right to self-determination, backed up by providing political and practical support to those Irish anarchists who are counterpoising the fight for anti-imperialist working class unity, to the bourgeois nationalism of the republican movement. Despite these political, organisational and tactical mistakes it would be sectarian and churlish to dismiss the ACF and what they stand for out of hand. A group who claims to stand in the best traditions of anarchism is a rare and welcome sight in the British anarchist movement. It is essential that all serious anarchists engage in political dialogue with ACF members as they share our traditions and our aim of building a strong libertarian communist movement capable of winning workers to anarchist ideas and strategies.

It was not just rational anarchist organisations that grew and flourished as a result of the Miners Strike and Wapping. The local groups, many of whom had sprung up during the heady days of Crass inspired liberalism- were on the upsurge. The local groups phenomenon was a strange beast- a growing , but not always healthy movement, that engaged in flurry of activity wherever anything was happening. It did very little else.

Many of the local groups were a classic example of the synthesis where irreconcilable differences, irreconcilable ideas- liberal individualism and class struggle anarchism — sat side by side. However, many of those in the local groups who claimed not to be influenced by liberalism had

²³ “What is the potential of Rank and File Action” Organise No 14 Feb/Apr 89

²⁴ ACF” Aims and Principles” Organise No 14 Feb/Apr 89

²⁵ “From Imperialist War to Class War” Organise 14 Feb/Apr 8

an analysis of class rather than a class analysis. For them, class struggle was narrowly characterised as a single issue amongst a series of single issues that were all mysteriously related. Thus:

“Although we put most of our ideas into class struggle issues we do not by any means regard issues like racism, feminism, and animal rights as secondary”²⁶

This quote is a classic example of the mistake of seeing the class struggle as, for example, strike support work alone. Fighting for abortion rights, fighting immigration controls or fighting the NHS cuts are seen as separate issues rather than the central and integral part of the class struggle they actually are. This means that such groups could only relate to the class struggle in a limited fashion, unable to proceed far beyond the level of supportism and activism. Hence they were also unable to give a clear political lead because they lacked any coherent view in the context of which strategies and tactics could be worked out. This means the local groups intervened apolitically, not as anarchists but as individual activists. Unfortunately, this cult of movement without direction was held up by many in the local groups as a positive development. The only acceptable criteria to most groups was the extent to which someone was prepared to ‘get stuck in’. Anarchist theory was a low priority, which led to a bob-a-job response to struggle: the non-politics of ‘let’s do something’. Rejecting theory means that political education is also rejected. In the local groups new members had little hope, other than through their own efforts as individuals, of gaining a deeper political understanding, if the supposedly more experienced members were themselves ill-equipped to provide a political lead. A lack of theory and education inevitably led to a lack of unity, and activity was therefore on an individual rather than collective basis. There existed no agreed and predetermined political, tactical or organisational framework around which to operate. This was seen by many as healthy, with the subsequent problems dismissed:

“The problem with the anarchist movement is ..Well there a number of them really. There will always be with such a wide based and growing movement.”²⁷

Disunity, as we have said, militates against successful interventionism. However, with the local groups it was not so much the inability to politically intervene that was the problem as the very horror at the thought of doing so. This essential role for revolutionaries was repeatedly rejected on the spurious and ill-considered ground that “the trots do it”. This ignores the fact that throughout the history of the anarchist movement, “doing it” has been a crucial tactic- and by “doing it” we mean formulating clear positions around key issues and arguing them in a principled way to the class. The ‘movement’ however does not agree, interventionism is:

“Trying to tell people how to conduct their struggle...moving into an issue or cause and trying to make it your own”²⁸

In the quote the author is referring to the Revolutionary Communist Party. Yet to reject a tactic simply because it is shared by Leninists is to prove nothing but the absence of any real understanding of why anarchists reject Leninism. We are not at odds with the fact that the

²⁶ Manchester Fight Back No 1

²⁷ “Notes from NAN” Northern Anarchist Network Bulletin in No 3 Dec 86

²⁸ “Fly this Revolution to Sutton Manor” Liverpool Anarchist Newsletter No 2 Nov 88

Leninists “do it”, or even how they “do it”. What we reject is the specific political content and basis of their arguments.

The local groups could not break free from their fragmented and apolitical response to struggle, because as already stated, there was no organisational framework around which to operate. And this was a conscious choice. Thus the absence of politics both dictated and was dictated by the absence of structure. It is sobering that Piotr Arshinov’s comment on the Russian anarchists in 1917 is as relevant today as it was then:

“Disorganisation is the twin of irresponsibility and together they lead to impoverished ideas and futile practices”²⁹

This lack of organisation has manifested itself in an inability to build a national federation of anarchist groups or any lasting regional federations. This means that even if it wanted to, the anarchist movement is incapable of responding to struggle on a national level, or adopting national policy. In short it is incapable of acting as the movement it claims to be. It lacks aims and principles, democratic decision making structures and any basis of accountability. This means the movement is unable to come to the attention of militant workers, and, even if it were has nothing to offer them. Anarchism stands firmly in a ghetto of its own design, whilst the people it should be having the arguments with remain shackled by reformism or are won over to various Leninist brands of socialism.

There were those within the local groups who sought to make the break from all this. Back in 1986 one group argued for:

‘greater co-ordination between the class-conscious and genuinely revolutionary elements within the anarchist movement’³⁰

Although they received some positive feedback ultimately nothing emerged from their call. More recently local class-struggle anarchist groups have begun to spring up around the country. However unless they rid themselves their antipathy to theory, interventionism, and coherent organisation their longevity and ability to operate meaningfully is open to serious question. They will ultimately have to ask themselves whether they are to remain ineffective and irrelevant or turn their backs once and for all on the local group mentality that hamstring them.

It was in this context, that in the summer of 1988 the ANARCHIST WORKERS GROUP was formed, as a recognition of the fact that if the anarchist movement is to have any real impact and lasting influence on the class struggle, it will have to undergo a radical transformation. We saw the need for a political organisation of anarchist workers, firmly rooted in the labour movement and able to intervene decisively in the class struggle. We saw the need for an organisation with a clear political program and coherent strategies that were democratically arrived at, by an active, participating membership. This being achieved through a thorough analysis of day to day reality and a re-evaluation of existing revolutionary theory. It needs to be an organisation controlled by the membership with the commitment and self-discipline to consistently take the ideas they develop, the strategies and priorities they adopt to the class. One which would provide its members with a sound political education and develop within them the agitational skills needed

²⁹ Quoted in “Anarchism in Britain 1986” from Freedom: 100 Years, Freedom Press Oct 86

³⁰ Statement by “Streatham Action Group” in New Anarchist Review No 9 Oct 86

to win the battle of ideas. Furthermore, an organisation that would constantly encourage and promote working class self-activity, self management of struggles and the confidence to fight but would not shy away from giving political lead. We looked at the anarchist movement and reluctant concluded that no such organisation existed. Neither was there, it seemed, a grouping with the will or capacity to build or transfer itself into one. The AWG does not pretend to be that organisation however we want to build just such a libertarian communist organisation that can – for the first time in this country – put it truly where it belongs centre stage in the arena of class struggle, and, in doing so, play a role in making libertarian communism a reality.

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Nigel Fox
Anarchism in the Thatcher years
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