

An Interview With The WSM

Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists

2003

After 37 years the WSM has announced that it intends to disband, shutting down Ireland's best-known anarchist organisation.

In a statement, the group noted:

“While we recognise the WSM's many achievements over the years and while we are each committed to continuing the cause of anarchism in some capacity, we have collectively agreed that the WSM is no longer the best vehicle to achieve that aim.

“We intend to maintain existing WSM material on and offline as an archive. We also intend to develop discussions around what the legacy of the organisation is, its achievements and lessons to be drawn for the future.

“Each of us expects to remain active in anarchist politics and indeed to often find ourselves working together, including potentially as members of future organisations. We recognise that old habits are hard to overcome and that younger generations of anarchists are better placed to come up with the structures and organising practices most suited to the current moment.

“As anarchists, we still carry a new world in our hearts. We know that the way you fight back and struggle will shape the victory. The WSM has come to an end. We hope this decision will open a space for new revolutionary anarchist ideas, energies, and new beginnings.”

Formed in 1984, WSM was for the duration of its existence a platformist organisation, and found particular success in recent years through its key role in the water revolt of 2015. Former members of the group will be working their own retrospectives over the course of this winter, with a great deal more still to be written about it. In the immediate term however the following interview, first published by NEFAC in 2003, gives a good overview of its historic ethos and aims.

What is the history of the WSM? When did you form, and under what circumstances? Did the original founding members come out of other existing anarchist, socialist or left-republican tendencies active in Ireland?

WSM: Up to the 1970s there was no real anarchist history in Ireland. In the mid '70s small anarchist groups were formed in Belfast, Dublin, Dundalk, Cork and Limerick. These groups mainly consisted of people who had returned from living abroad. Most of these groups, while calling themselves anarchist, had no real concept of working together as a group and most only existed for months rather than years. The exception to this was the Belfast group, which founded Just Books (a political bookstore which lasted over a dozen years). The Dublin group which existed at this time fell apart due to having no real group coherence.

Over the subsequent years, various attempts were made to try to pull something together again. In 1982, people from Dublin, Cork and Ballymena started discussion around the area of defining what they meant by anarchism and how to relate to the 'national question' and to the trade unions.

Out of this series of discussions was born the Workers Solidarity Movement. The founding members did not come, as a group, from any existing political or anarchist tradition. This was the first conscious attempt to establish an anarchist organization in Ireland which would have agreed principles and a long-term perspective, and began with just five people.

One problem which emerged in the early years was that much more debate/discussion took place about tactics than about goals. Thus, by 1987 the Cork branch had quadrupled. But it turned out that many of these people had joined with no great understanding of what anarchism was. This led to the Cork branch becoming a collection of 'activists' rather than convinced anarchists, and in the end most Cork members left, with a few of them turning to Bolshevism.

From this episode, WSM realized the need for having a clear recruitment policy and the need for people to have a good deal of political agreement before joining the organization.

How did members of your organization first become interested in platformist ideas and methods of organization? What led to this theoretical development?

WSM: From 1968–69 onwards there was much analysis of the failures of the anarchist movement, particularly in France and Italy, where we began to capitalize on the years of political turmoil of the late sixties. Many anarchists began to see the need for some degree of political organization. This thinking transferred to Britain, where a significant number of anarchists started to move towards platformist politics.

But it seems that many of the people involved were so burnt out or disillusioned by their bad experiences that they were really looking for something outside of anarchism altogether, and some of them ended up in Leninist organizations. That experience does not appear to have been replicated in any other country.

Our interest in platformism has become known worldwide. A lot of this is due to the development of the internet and our use of it. And because the WSM is now 17 years old and quite clearly still anarchist, this dispels the myth that platformism is about getting out of anarchism, or moving towards Leninism.

How would you say platformism informs the practical activity of the WSM?

WSM: On a day-to-day level platformism allows the WSM to put forward a coherent, consistent set of political beliefs, and allows us to tie our involvement in particular campaigns – against war, against unjust local service charges, for abortion rights, against 'social partnership', etc. – to our anarchist politics. By this we mean that we emphasize that our opposition to the bin charges (increased taxes on garbage pick-up), for example, is linked to our opposition to an unjust society and to our belief that a better society is possible. We never hide our anarchist politics.

It also means that we continually debate and discuss politics – both the theory and the practice – as we strive for theoretical and tactical unity. By theoretical unity we mean that members agree on a certain number of basics. There wouldn't be much point in having an organization in which half the members believe that trade union struggles are crucially important, and the other half think that they are a waste of time. It might make a good debating club, but the organization would be totally hamstrung in trying to make effective political intervention in day-to-day working class struggles. Neither would the organization be very effective if half the organization think that trade union struggle is important and the other half agrees that if they say so it must be, but never actually bothers to discuss/debate the issue. Thus internal education is an integral part of our organization – both in terms of political theory and in terms of practice (i.e. the particular tactics which may or may not be successful in any given campaign).

This process is only useful however if it leads to action. When we discuss issues/campaigns, if we decide to prioritize a particular thing (e.g. anti-war work), we do so as an organization, rather than as individuals. Once a particular issue is prioritized, all the members agree to commit themselves to it for the duration of the campaign, where possible, and the tactics and potential of the campaign are discussed regularly at our meetings.

This leads to collective responsibility, meaning that each member will support the decisions made by the organization. Without this type of commitment/agreement, decisions made might look very good on paper but would be totally useless in practice. There wouldn't be much point in our discussing at length how to intervene in the anti-war movement, for example, and then not bothering to actually as individuals attempt to do our best to carry out the decisions made. This does not of course negate the right of members who disagree with the majority view to express their own views. In doing so, however, they must make it clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the organization. Where a group of people in the organization disagree with the majority view, they have the right to organize and distribute information so that their arguments can be heard within the organization as a whole.

Part of our anarchism is the belief that debate and disagreement, freedom and openness strengthen both the individual and the group. This of course distinguishes us completely from Leninism – a form of political organization which does the complete opposite (i.e. which discourages and opposes internal debate and disagreement and in which the 'line' is handed down from the central committee).

Our form of political organization makes no attempt to impose a monopoly over members' political lives, but recognizes that, as individuals, members may be involved in any campaign in which they have an interest (unless of course it is something which conflicts with basic anarchist principles) but we recognize that having a group of people/an organization which is agreed on a number of basics increases the strength and effectiveness many times over. At all times, of course, political struggle has to be viewed through the eyes of the class struggle (i.e. our fight is not against the State as an abstract institution but against the State as the executive arm of the ruling class).

A point of debate among platformist-influenced groups is centered around the relationship between anarchist organizations and trade unions. What is the WSM's relationship to the trade union movement in Ireland? How would you answer to the criticisms (made by some revolutionary anarchists and ultra-left Marxists) of trade unions being inherently non-revolutionary?

WSM: We would, of course, agree that trade unions are “inherently non-revolutionary”. If we only participated in things that were revolutionary we could quickly find ourselves sitting on our butts doing nothing. Trade unions in general are not designed to be revolutionary, anarcho-syndicalist ones may be but even here there are huge practical difficulties [see next question].

Certainly in Ireland – the major unions are designed purely to fight on bread and butter issues. To even describe them as ‘reformist’ would be to imply that they have a goal to change society. They don’t, they are simply trade unions – no more. There is a “political levy” which goes straight to the Irish Labour Party, which, in this country, could possibly be termed “a party of the middle class” (in the sociological sense of the word anyhow).

We do advocate that members join trade unions and participate in them. This is not at all because they are revolutionary organizations or even that they have any such potential.

At the most basic level joining a union implies that workers have different interests from the boss. The reason that unions survive is that workers recognize, rightly, their need to band together to defend themselves. For most that’s as far as it goes – unions are organs of self-defense for workers under capitalism. But it’s a very important step to see this basic class interest.

Secondly, of course, the most organized and militant workers will, usually, gravitate towards unions. As class struggle anarchists we should be there with them. Union membership is high in Ireland though it is also declining quite fast.

In 1980, union membership as a proportion of those in work was 61.9%, since then it has declined to 44.5% in 1999. Though union membership has risen, it is rising much slower than the rate of new people coming in to work and a huge proportion of the private sector especially the tech sector is un-unionized.

As stated, unions are little more than organizations to defend and improve people’s lot under capitalism. In Ireland over the past few years this role has been further limited by social partnership and a lack of democracy.

Social partnership is a system which dictates wages and working conditions along with other vague aspirations which are combined into a national plan between unions, bosses, government, farmers and the “poverty industry”. In practice this has frozen shop floor organization and increased the power of the bureaucrats. People now see very little point in going to union meetings when everything has already been agreed nationally with the bosses. Further the union heads have swallowed draconian restrictions on the right to strike and picket under the industrial relations and public order acts. These have now been used very effectively against strikes, most recently in Dublin airport where eight activists have recently been fined for breaking an injunction to picket in the City Jet Strike.

The lack of democracy in some of the large unions is striking, which only has biennial conferences and where the membership is miles removed from the highly paid full time bureaucracy. The WSM (with some non party individuals) is probably the only group, which has tried to raise lack of democracy in union structures/rule books as an issue in itself. It seems to be a fairly low priority for the Leninists.

In practice we encourage members to join unions where possible. We have several members in private sector un-unionized employment. Here the best tactic seems to be to lie low – but to try to organize people collectively even to pursue small issues. Companies in this sector always operate on the basis of individual contracts – so breaking this down is a step. To actually go from this to trying to unionize would probably be only possible on the basis of some real victory for the collective non-union efforts.

We have active membership in the SIPTU education branch and the INTO (primary teachers union) – our members there have had some success in industrial actions – noticeably in Trinity College in a recent successful SIPTU fight for pensions for part time cleaners (this was supported by most college workers including many non unionized ones). With very little on the ground activism it is possible to have a real impact with a couple of members, but some of this impact is due to low activity with the left taking up the slack.

Our long term hope is to create active rank and file groups cutting across unions, sectoral barriers and on union employment. At this point that goal looks quite distant.

What is WSM's position on anarcho-syndicalism? Do you see independent revolutionary anarchist unions outside of existing mass-based trade unions as a viable strategy at this stage of class struggle in Ireland?

WSM: In general we think the ideal form of union organization is syndicalist. This form of union organization would be a vast improvement on the unions in place at the moment. We are not an anarcho-syndicalist organization though, and do not see our goal as setting up anarcho-syndicalist unions to overthrow capitalism.

In our view syndicalism (at least historically) has failed to address the issue of political power. We believe that to make a revolution it isn't sufficient that workers just seize their workplaces and the land. They must be organized right across communities and workplaces to smash state power and replace it with workers' councils. This requires revolutionary anarcho-communist organizations dedicated to this goal. The workers from day one must abolish all power relations.

Syndicalism doesn't create the revolutionary organization required to do this. It creates trade unions. As stated these are miles better than other unions but still unions by design. It organizes ALL workers regardless of politics (recently some anarcho-syndicalists have decided to organize ALL workers EXCEPT for Leninists and Trotskyists in their industrial networks – this is surely even MORE of a recipe for disaster!).

Many workers will (rightly) join these unions because they use the most radical tactics and get the best results. They won't join them because they are revolutionary anarchists or anywhere close. For this reason syndicalism has been dogged with reformist currents. Spain in 1937 was the high point of syndicalist organization. Because the CNT would not address the issue of political power they managed a situation of dual power ñ workers controlled factories and fields but the government was left. In the end the ruling class managed to get it back together and used the state to smash workers power. Some of the CNT higher ups even joined the government and these were from the "radical" FAI anarchist wing of the union designed to keep it politically anarchist!

In practice we recognize that syndicalist unions are miles ahead of others, and – on the positive side – members of anarcho-syndicalist unions are likely to be exposed to anarchist ideas. We would seek to join but maintain our anarcho-communist organization alongside them, as we would do in any union.

In the last couple of years in Ireland there was an attempt to set up a left split from the ATGWU in Ireland. This is the Independent Workers Union. Though they still aimed to have full time officials (or at least a full time leader!), it did embrace some syndicalist ideas and it did appear to be a hopeful development. It since appears that two left wing bureaucrats who were kicked out of the ATGWU were really using them as pawns in an internal struggle. As the new ATGWU leadership will probably reinstate these it is hard to know what will now happen. The IWU has a fair sized paper membership in Cork – but, as far as I know, most kept ATGWU union

cards as well. They managed to get a negotiating license held by another small butchers' union. Whether this would have stood up is unclear as the Irish government makes it very difficult to get negotiating rights. We await developments.

There is an added practical difficulty with attempting to establish an anarcho-syndicalist union here. Unlike in the US where any group of workers can – in theory at least – set up their own union, here the process of establishing a union is fraught with legal minefields including the need to be issued with a negotiating license by the State.

Meanwhile we have and seek good relationships and practical solidarity with a huge number of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations world wide. We take no side on the numerous disputes that have emerged within the IWA and other groups over the past few years.

Outside of trade union activity, a lot of WSM's activity is based around community organizing (water taxes, bin charges etc). What have you brought to these struggles? How effective has your organizing been in these areas?

WSM: Firstly two general points. There are a huge number of community, church, women's and voluntary groups in Ireland. By their very nature community groups tend to be organised around the members of a community. This means that groups cannot just parachute in and start arguing their politics from on high. Generally, the only way to be really involved in a community group is to be active within that community! Sorry to state the obvious, but it's a point that is often NOT appreciated by Leninist and reformist groups.

Secondly, many community groups in Ireland have also been co-opted into the whole idea of "partnership". Once community groups begin to have full time paid staff and become dependent on government or European Union funding, they lose site of their initial (often radical) aims and democratic structure. Many so-called community groups are now just part of a well paid network which might be best described as the "poverty industry". Although some may be very well-meaning, they are not functioning community groups answerable to local people. Only real struggle on local issues tends to draw together and revitalize tenants' and community groups. The bin charges and water charges campaigns have to some small extent done this in a few parts of Dublin.

Our experience with the Dublin Federation of campaigns that beat the water charges was a good one. This federation was, at least in theory, based on representatives from local groups throughout Dublin. It mobilized very large demonstrations, fought court cases and maintained high non-payment in the three council areas that make up the greater Dublin area. Water charges were abolished.

The lesson we drew from this was that local organizing, involving and empowering people and giving them a say in the campaign is the way to go! The lesson drawn by the reformist/Leninist members of the Socialist Party was that the election of one of their members was the main factor. In fact, he was elected AFTER the charge was beaten and his election was linked to the massive mobilization that beat the charges. The successful grassroots campaign beat the charges AND built an electoral base.

The Trotskyists put the cart before the horse and decided that electing a TD (Irish member of parliament) was the crucial factor. Now the Socialist Workers Party has joined the Socialist Party in attempting to build electoral machines. Of course we argued long and hard against this in the campaign and gained respect for our ideas from many people who would have considered anarchism as a loony bin philosophy. Unfortunately, the electoral road seems quick and easy and the long-term disempowerment isn't always readily viewable.

The water charges campaign worked as a federation. It was a VERY imperfect federation – dominated by the Socialist Party and with many local groups that were just paper tigers. But it did contain several highly active ones.

So far the campaigns against bin charges have been almost completely top down. For example, in Dun Laoghaire the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party have informally split the area. Neither side has any interest in building local groups and leaflets are centrally planned and designed and then handed to people to be given out. In the city center area, with WSM participation, there are a couple of active local groups where we have members living but, again, the campaign in general works top down. We have also found (in fairness) that in the absence of any major council threat building local groups is not that easy. There just isn't any reason to get involved and people expect the campaign to function as a sort of insurance service for which they pay a few euros.

Long term, though, the main problem in Dublin is the domination of the two Leninist groups who look only to recruiting members/voters. This is worrying not only because it is not the way to involve or empower anyone, but also because it means a hollow campaign with no in depth membership beyond Trot full timers. If the council go on the offensive we may pay the price.

The WSM has been very active around abortion rights in Ireland (campaigning heavily against the recent anti-choice referendum, supporting the Women on Waves project, etc). In what ways have you tied this activity into more traditional class struggle anarchism?

WSM: Due to the high cost involved in travelling to England for an abortion, it is working class women who are most effected by the lack of access to abortion in Ireland. Both in our own propaganda and within broadbased pro-choice groups we have always argued that, because of this, the lack of abortion rights in Ireland is a class issue. Within broadbased pro-choice campaign groups we have also pushed for grassroots activism such as door to door leafleting, as opposed to political lobbying and media stunts.

Although the WSM is the oldest formal anarchist organization still active in Ireland, new groups such as the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation (ASF) and Anarchist Federation Ireland (AFI) have recently formed. What is your relationship to these organizations?

WSM: Unlike Leninists, we don't see other anarchist groups as 'rivals'. Our basic approach is to work hard to keep good relations going between the anarchist groups in Ireland despite the political differences that exist.

In recent times we have co-operated very successfully with both the ASF and the AFI – as well as with other anarchists and libertarians – in campaigning against the Nice Treaty (i.e. the latest phase of the European Union project). We are also currently working very closely with them in building support for direct action against Irish involvement in the U.S. war against Iraq.

Some of the people in the ASF were in Organise! before so we have had a relationship with them for over a decade which has included organizing joint lecture tours, summer schools and providing speakers for each other's meetings. At times in the past we have had joint internal discussions which have included looking at possible grounds for unity.

The AFI formed more recently. Our political differences with them would be wider on day to day issues, particularly on the question of involvement in mass organizations of the working class, e.g. Trade Unions. This has not however stopped us from working with AFI members in a number of campaigns to date.

Apart from these organizations we put a fair bit of effort into promoting and maintaining good relations within the wider anarchist movement which includes many individuals who are not members of any anarchist group. This has included initiating with others a series of island wide 'Grassroots Gatherings' which happen every 4 to 6 months in a different city. Last summer it included two anarchist summer camps which were really social rather than political gatherings. It also included starting the mailing list Irish Anarchism which is now moderated by members of both the WSM and AFI.

What sort of international relationships do you have with other platformist anarchist organizations? What prospects do you see for the development of platformism within the international anarchist movement?

WSM: We should start by pointing out that as a very small organization our general approach has been that we do not have the resources to sustain any sort of real membership of a formal international organization. And we think 'pretend' internationals whose sole role is to inflate the self-importance of local groups do more harm than good.

So our formal relationships are very weak. We exchange publications with around 35 other organizations internationally. We are asked to do more exchanges but for financial reasons restrict ourselves to organizations that are either 'platformist' or strike us as particularly important.

More recently we decided to join International Libertarian Solidarity. This however is a network intended to facilitate solidarity between different libertarian groups rather than an international of national sections.

On a less formal level we have contact with a number of organizations, including NEFAC, which are possible only because of access to the internet, sharing a common language and the travel of individual militants. Until the time when several really large platformist organizations exist that have the resources to fund translation, travel and international conferences then much of our international work will depend on such informal contacts.

We have made one effort to formalize this a little bit through the setting up of an email list called 'Anarchist Platform'. This list is intended to allow militants of the different organizations (and those for whom there is no local organization) to communicate news and ideas.

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