

Ireland: Platformism in action

**Introductory talk about the Workers Solidarity Movement delivered to the
Cushendall meeting hosted by Organise!**

Organise!

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The Workers Solidarity Movement was formed in 1984. Prior to this the late 1970s and early 1980s had seen the first episodes of public anarchist activity with the emergence of local anarchist groups, many of them short-lived, in Belfast, Dublin, Dundalk and Limerick. These groups tended to have no common policies or activities, no organised education or discussions about anarchism, no strategy for changing society. The only requirement for membership was usually that one described oneself as an 'anarchist'.

There was a widespread tendency to opt out of real struggles in favour of self-imposed isolation. A good example of this was the behaviour of many anarchists in Dublin at the time of the anti-nuclear movement in the late 1970s. Hundreds of people, mainly young and not members of any political grouping, were in local anti-nuclear groups. Rather than joining these groups, making concrete suggestions for taking the campaign forward, working to increase the level of self-activity and explaining anarchism to an audience which contained many who were open to radical politics, what did they do? They cut themselves off from these people and set up their own anti-nuclear group for anarchists only.

A few of us who had been through all this messing initiated discussions with other anarchists about the need for clear policies, agreed tactics and a new organisation. Our starting point was that the working class has the power to overthrow capitalism and create an anarchist society. Our role is to convince our class that this is possible; to win the battle of ideas against the authoritarian solutions of social democracy, nationalism and Leninism; and to popularise anarchist ideas and methods.

We saw, in broad terms, four major streams within modern anarchism: reformism, synthesis groups, syndicalism and 'Platformism'. We were attracted to, for want of a better word, 'Platformism'.

Before going on to say a little about this I should give our views on what is, by far, the largest current within the international anarchist movement, and one that has been a major influence on Organise! – syndicalism.

What is Syndicalism

It can trace its roots back to the last century. As the repression which followed the Paris Commune of 1871 began to relax and the idea of 'propaganda by deed' was seen to be taking our movement into a cul-de-sac some anarchists looked away from such acts of revenge and desperation, and towards the newly emerging labour movement. A set of ideas, anarcho-syndicalism, developed which said that organising workers into One Big Union based on libertarian beliefs and using methods of direct action would lead to the General Strike where the bosses were locked out and the classless, stateless society ushered in. Unlike other unions, their belief is that the union can be used not only to win reforms from the bosses but also to overthrow the capitalist system. They hold that most workers are not revolutionaries because the structure of their unions is such that it takes the initiative away from the rank & file. They see the biggest problem in the structure of the existing unions rather than in the ideas that tie workers to authoritarian, capitalist views of the world.

This movement grew until the 1920s and 1930s when the rise of fascism saw it suffer horrific repression, from which it has never fully recovered. With the exception of Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands none of today's syndicalist unions has a membership of more than 1,000 [Italy

and France should now be added to this list]. This is a good figure for a political organisation but not so good for a union. Most are more accurately described as propaganda groups trying to build unions rather than being unions as we understand that word. But this should not blind us to their importance. In many countries they have a real tradition, they have organisation, they attract excellent militants. They are the biggest tendency in present-day anarchism.

Syndicalists do not wish to create a revolutionary political organisation. Their aim is an industrial union. It is a-political, arguing all that is necessary to make the revolution is for the workers to seize the factories and the land. After that they believe that the state and all the other institutions of the ruling class will come toppling down. They do not accept that the working class must take political power. For them all power has to be immediately abolished on day one of the revolution. Because syndicalist organisation is the union, it organises all workers regardless of their politics. Historically many workers have joined, not because they were anarchists, but because the syndicalist union was the most militant and got the best results. Because of this tendencies always appeared that were reformist. And who, even in the syndicalist movement, would deny that this is the case with the bigger syndicalist unions today such as the Swedish Central Organisation of Workers (SAC), the Spanish General Confederation of Workers (CGT) or the Dutch OVB?

Syndicalists are quite correct to emphasise the centrality of organising workers in the workplace. Critics who reject syndicalism on the grounds that allegedly it cannot organise those outside the workplace are wrong. Taking the example of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain it is clear that they could and did organise throughout the entire working class as was evidenced by the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth, the 'Mujeres Libres' (Free Women), and the neighbourhood organisations. More recently we saw the British DAM [now the Solidarity Federation] putting time, energy and resources into both the anti-poll tax campaign and the Anti-Fascist Action organisation.

Why the Syndicalists went wrong in Spain

Its weakness is rooted in its view of why workers are tied to capitalism, and in its view of what is necessary to make the revolution. Spain in 1936/7 represented the highest point in anarcho-syndicalist organisation and achievement; achievements we draw a lot of inspiration from. But because of their a-politicism they were unable to develop a programme for workers' power, to wage a political battle against other currents in the workers' movement (such as reformism and Stalinism), and to give a lead to the entire class by fighting for complete workers' power.

Instead they got sucked into support for the Popular Front government, which in turn led to their silence and complicity when the Republican state moved against the collectives and militias. The minority in the CNT, organised around the Friends of Durruti, was expelled when they issued a proclamation calling for the workers to take absolute power (i.e. that they should refuse to share power with the bosses or the authoritarian parties).

The CNT believed that when the workers took over the means of production and distribution this would lead to the liquidation of the bourgeois state which would die of asphyxiation. History teaches us different. In a situation of dual power it is very necessary to smash the state.

In contrast to this the Friends of Durruti were clear that to beat Franco we need to crush the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and Socialist allies. The capitalist state must be destroyed totally

and there must be installed workers' power depending on rank & file committees. A-political anarchism has failed. The political confusion of the CNT leadership was such that they attacked the idea of the workers seizing power as evil and leading to an anarchist dictatorship. More on their ideas can be found in their pamphlet *Towards a Fresh Revolution*

The syndicalist movement, organised in the International Workers Association and outside it, refuses to admit the CNT was wrong to postpone the revolution and enter the government. They attempt to explain away this whole episode as being due to exceptional circumstances that will not occur again. Because they refuse to admit that a mistake of historic proportions was made, they are doomed to repeat it (should they get a chance).

We recognise that the syndicalist unions, where they still exist, are far more progressive than any other union. But anarchist-communists like ourselves will seek to organise within their ranks and everywhere else workers are organised. We will not liquidate our specific politics and organisation into the a-politicism of syndicalism. The battle of ideas is vital. It is not enough that people are won to accepting that the present system should be overthrown, it is not enough that they are won to accepting that anarchism is a nice idea. We have to win the argument that it is superior to any other alternative being put forward. That means combating other ideas in the left and unions, not ignoring them.

We must also understand what is involved in changing society. Revolutionary situations throw up situations of dual power where neither the working class nor the ruling class (or would-be rulers) is immediately able to exert its total control. The power of bosses and their state must be smashed or we leave them the means to get back on top. Spain in 1936/37 demonstrated this in a most forceful fashion.

So what is Platformism

Which brings us to 'Platformism'. Anarchists, who numbered up to 10,000 without including the Makhnovist army, had been involved in the 1917 Russian Revolution. They had been in the unions, in the factory committees, in the soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers. They had their own papers, federations and clubs. Yet their influence was extremely limited and we all know how that revolution turned out in the end. Nestor Makhno, Peter Arshinov (author of *The History of the Makhnovist Movement*) and others forced into exile set up the bi-monthly magazine *Delo Truda* in Paris in 1925. The following year, along with Ida Mett (the author of *The Kronstadt Commune*), Valesvsky and Linsky (about whom I know nothing), wrote the *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*.

It saw the problem of the Russian anarchists, and the movement generally, as its failure to provide a theoretically coherent and organisationally effective alternative to Leninism within the working class. Or to put it plainly, nice ideas were not enough.

They dealt with the class struggle, the state's relationship to the class division of society and used classical anarchist arguments against the Bolshevik advocacy of the party dictatorship in the so-called 'transitional period' between the overthrow of capitalist power and the maturing of the classless society. They also pointed to the political weakness of syndicalism and argued for a struggle in all the unions "for the domination of libertarian ideas". As it states "It is necessary to never forget that if trade unionism does not find in anarchist theory a support in opportune times it will turn, whether we like it or not, to the ideology of a political statist party". This has

been seen to happen in the French CGT, in Argentina where the FORA lost support to Peronism and in Spain where the bulk of the CNT's mass membership did not break from the 'leading militants' who entered the Popular Front government.

They went to talk about the sort of organisation that the Delo Truda group thought necessary. This was covered under four headings.

No. 1: Theoretical Unity

Theory is what guides us along a defined path towards a determined goal. They said that such theory should be common to all members of an organisation. That is, that they share the same goal and they agree on a common path towards it. Though this is common sense, we can still find anarchists who disagree saying that it straitjackets us into a forced conformity.

No. 2: Tactical Unity

In our case it means concrete things like membership of the WSM is not open to those who reject work inside the unions nor to those who would see the state as some power that stands apart from the bosses, because to include such views in our organisation would mean that we could no longer work together as an organisation. We would be little more than a group of individuals who came together to tell each other of the different and sometimes contradictory things we were doing. Not a lot of point in that.

Instead we discuss, debate and then agree what tactic in a given struggle is best for that struggle and for anarchism. Having reached a decision we implement it, we use our strength and numbers as an organisation with a unified outlook to give added effect to our activity.

No. 3: Collective Responsibility

The Platform says "The Practice of acting on one's personal responsibility should be decisively condemned and rejected in the ranks of the anarchist movement". No, this doesn't mean we have to be continually running off to some committee for permission to show a bit of initiative. It does mean that there should be no room for the self-indulgent egoists who treat politics as more of a hobby than a commitment. Our goal, our tradition and our means are profoundly collective (as opposed to the authoritarian individualist ethos fostered by capitalism).

Each member should be responsible to the organisation for their political activity and, in turn, the organisation must be responsible to each member. There must be no division between leaders and led.

No. 4: Federalism

Here the authors draw a distinction between real federalism, the free agreement to work together in a spirit of free debate for agreed goals; and what they describe as "the right, above all, to manifest one's 'ego', without obligation to account for duties as regards the organisation". As they point out there is no point making decisions if members will not carry them out.

However, when they went on to talk about a General Union of Anarchists they found themselves under attack from anarchists such as Voline, Fabbri, Malatesta and Camilo Berneri who accused them of trying to “Bolsheise anarchism”. I believe that this criticism was wrong. On one hand Voline and his fellow thinkers were opposed because they saw no problem with organisations which were a pick ‘n’ mix of anarcho-syndicalism, anarchist-communism and individualism with all the incoherence and ineffectiveness that implies. On the other hand many anarchists saw the proposed General Union of Anarchists as some sort of monopoly organisation that would incorporate all anarchists. It is a fault of the authors that they did not say explicitly that the General Union would, as all anarchists should, work with others when it is in the interests of the class struggle.

Neither did they spell out that all the decisions, the policies and the direction of the organisation would be taken by the members after full and free debate. It should not have to be spelled out when addressing other anarchists but seemingly it did, and the Platform was misunderstood by many as a result of this omission. Further signs of authoritarianism were seen in the proposal for an executive committee. Maybe if they had called it a working collective or something similar the same threat would not have been seen. The tasks of this executive committee were listed as “the execution of decisions taken by the Union with which it is entrusted, the theoretical and organisational orientation of isolated organisations consistent with the theoretical positions and general tactical line of the Union, the monitoring of the general state of the movement, the maintenance of working and organisational links between all the organisations in the union, and with other organisations. The rights, responsibilities and practical tasks of the executive committee are fixed by the congress of the Union”.

The last sentence of the document talks about the aim of the Union to become the “organised vanguard of the emancipating process”. It appears that what is being talked about is winning the best militants, the most class conscious and revolutionary workers to the Union. But it is not clearly spelled out. A doubt could exist. Did they mean a more Leninist type of vanguard? When taken with the entire pamphlet I don’t think so but even if this is not the case it still does not invalidate the rest of the work. It would be very stupid to throw away the whole document because of one less than clear sentence.

Just before leaving this topic I want to look at two arguments that get used again and again against the Platform. Firstly we are told that it is Arshinov’s ‘Platform’ as if the other four authors were just dupes, quite an insult to the memory of revolutionaries like Makhno. It is done because in 1934 Arshinov returned to Russia, where three years later he was murdered in Stalin’s purges. What Arshinov did eight years after helping to write the ‘Platform’ surely does no more to invalidate what was written then any more than Kropotkin’s support for Allied imperialism in the First World War invalidated all his previous anarchist writings.

The other is the experience in Britain where the Anarchist Workers Association in the 1970s and the Anarchist Workers Group of a few years ago both claimed the ‘Platform’ as an inspiration. Both groups – after very promising starts – declined, degenerated, died and then saw their remnants disappear into the Leninist milieu. This question can be taken up in the discussion. I would also recommend the WSM document about the decline of the AWG which was presented to our Wexford meeting last year.

The Platform Today

The 'Platform' is no Bible full of absolute truths. Anarchists have no need of such things. It is a signpost pointing us in what we believe is the direction of making anarchism the alternative to both the present set-up and the authoritarian alternatives served up by most of the left. Its ideas have been developed and modified in the light of experience over the years.

So now onto the more specific history of the WSM. We are a very small group. Therefore the first task facing us is to get anarchism better known in Ireland and to develop our politics through our involvement in real struggles. I haven't got time to go through everything we have done over the last eight and a half years but I'll mention a few things to give an idea of how the WSM works.

Internal – membership is open to those who agree with our policies (or at least most of them), contribute financially to the organisation, do work for the WSM such as selling Workers Solidarity, or being involved as anarchists in their unions and in campaigning groups. Decisions are made by everyone after a period of discussion and debate. Where a minority does not agree with a position we may adopt they have the right to use part of Workers Solidarity to put their case, as well as the Internal Bulletin and meetings. This has not arisen so far but we have made a point of providing for such an occasion because democracy is not something we can treat lightly.

Industrial – Through our involvement in our unions and in strike support work we have shown at least a small layer of trade union activists that anarchists are far from the media stereotype and are actually deserving of respect. Though small in numbers two of us have been elected onto our branch committees as known anarchists and one as a delegate to the Dublin Council of Trade Unions. We have always seen this as our most important single area of activity and this has translated into work, in particular, around the Dunnes Stores, Waterford Glass, Pat Grace and Japan Boutiques strikes – to name but a few.

International – We have always been ready to give whatever aid and solidarity we can to workers and anarchists in foreign lands. Our first actions in this sphere were probably leafleting and picketing the Laura Ashley shop in Dublin in response to an appeal from workers in one of their Scottish suppliers were on strike, and were receiving assistance from the DAM. Another was the circulation of an information sheet and model resolution among trade unionists in Dublin's only tyre factory at the time anarcho-syndicalists of what was known as the Renavado CNT were on trial in Vitoria. More recently we have registered a protest with the Nepalese Dept of Labour against union busting, in response to an appeal from the Nepal Battery Workers Unions which arrived via the US section of the IWA. We have also picketed the Nigerian embassy on the international day of solidarity with the anarchists who had been jailed by the military regime and sent money to help their families, and we have sent money towards the court costs of comrades facing trial in Peru.

Pamphlets/paper – We have, so far, produced 39 [49 by Dec 1996] issues of *Workers Solidarity*, though have had to stop producing a monthly and move to a bigger quarterly as we don't have the numbers to produce a monthly, sell it and do all the other things we want to. As we grow, in both numbers and geographical spread, we hope to move towards a monthly which can popularise anarchism and address current issues with information, advice and debate. At present, however, we have to aim our [paper] at those who have already rejected the system to some degree but as our base grows so will our ability to take anarchist politics to greater numbers of people.

We have also produced pamphlets on anarchism, on the national question, on divorce, on Spain and reprinted the Organisational Platform. Two of the pamphlets have had to be reprinted as they sold out. In addition to this we get anarchist ideas and history into a few more hands by running a mail order book service. [To this list can now be added regular production of *Anarchist News* a two sided sheet of A4 dealing with current issues and *Red & Black Revolution*, a theoretical magazine once a year].

Abortion/divorce – Recently considerable gains have been made in terms of social progress in the 26 counties. Last year [1991] we were instrumental in forming the Abortion Information Campaign and organising the 10,000 strong march which finally led to the overturning of the constitutional ban on abortion. We have also been involved in the pro-Divorce campaign, canvassing in 1986, getting two members elected to the National Executive of the Divorce Action Group and producing a pamphlet on the politics of the family and divorce during the last referendum. [Dec 1996: Were involved in a city wide campaign against Water charges which 15,000 households have now paid to join, this campaign is now on the edge of defeating the government Divorce was won in a referendum in November 1995].

Meetings – We hold public meetings, which often allows us meet people we may otherwise never have contact with.

For a small organisation with a few supporters who sell our magazine and work with us politically – this isn't too bad. It shows what could be achieved if we had more anarchists and bigger organisations.

We believe that, while we still have things to learn, we are going in the right direction and will contribute towards building a mass anarchist movement in our country. The small number of anarchists in Ireland at present, the absence of a native tradition and the lack of any sizeable base within the working class are drawbacks. But they do not depress us. All movements start somewhere. Anarchists time and time again, in many countries and in the most difficult of circumstances, have grappled with the problem of building and maintaining a mass influence within the working class. It is not easy but it can be done. We hope that comrades will want to find out more about the WSM, will work with us on matters of mutual concern, and where they find themselves in agreement with us will join the WSM.

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This is the text of a talk given in the course of a debate with the anarcho-syndicalist group Organise!. It gives a general introduction to Platformism and the WSM. The parts in [...] are later updates that have been added.

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