

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



The Usefulness of Faceless Resistance

Ronan Mcaoidh

Ronan Mcaoidh
The Usefulness of Faceless Resistance
17 May 2010

Retrieved on 17th December 2021 from www.wsm.ie
Published in *Irish Anarchist Review* Issue 1.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

17 May 2010

class identity have come to seem passé and out of date, the formulation of a new discourse of class is vital. This cannot be predicated on the old bases of class identity, but instead on the daily experiences of work and the often invisible struggles against it. Workplace stories can provide a way for revolutionaries to communicate directly with workers, to construct a new class identity, and help build the movement that will abolish the wage system.

Contents

GENESIS – SWEDEN AFTER ANTI-GLOBALISATION	5
KAMPA TILLSAMMANS & THE OTHER WORK- ERS MOVEMENT	6
CLASS COMPOSITION	7
WORKERS' INQUIRIES OR STORIES?	8
STRUGGLE TOGETHER	10
SELF ACTIVITY AND STRATEGY	10
STRUGGLE IN, WITH OR AGAINST THE UNIONS?	12
CONCLUSION	13

workers more power over their own conflicts and increasing the role of the local sections. This went hand in hand with an opposition to 'organisational chauvinism', i.e. a recognition that helping to win conflicts rather than members should be the primary activity of the union.

Meanwhile a network of workplace militants organised within the LO called Folkrörelselinje have incorporated ideas of Faceless Resistance into their own trade union practice, which works within the union to build strong workplace collectives. For them, Faceless Resistance can be another tool in the organisers handbook, that can be pulled out to suit certain contexts where other tools might not be appropriate.

CONCLUSION

The concept of Faceless Resistance is a very useful one for revolutionaries today. The financial crisis and the cut-backs and redundancies it has entailed has opened up again the possibility of a widespread workplace militancy that had for so long seemed dead, and many young militants now have the opportunity to engage in meaningful organising in their workplaces. Kämpa Tillsammans' lessons about building workplace collectives as the basis for struggle seem especially relevant when the failure of the union organised fightback has exposed the weakness of their workplace organisation. A workplace strategy that focuses on organising within the union is not obviously useful in situations where there is no union in a workplace, or where the union exists in name only. This is not to say that revolutionaries should refuse to work within unions, but that this decision should always be a pragmatic one, made on the basis of the specific conditions within the workplace and the tactics most likely to develop militancy among the workers.

The practice of workplace stories and blogging is also very relevant. In a society where discussions based around a traditional

STRUGGLE IN, WITH OR AGAINST THE UNIONS?

One of the unusual features of the Swedish labour market is its high level of union organisation (80% of workers in 2005) in comparison to England or Ireland. This of course raises the question of how the ideas of Faceless Resistance relate to union organisation; do they oppose it, complement it or ignore it? The presence in Sweden of the SAC, a large syndicalist union, throws this question into sharper relief. Kämpa Tillsammans tend to remain ambiguous on the question of union organisation, stating that they are neither for or against union organisation; unions are a fact of life for workers in capital, and so long as people have to sell their labour, unions will be there to handle the deal.

For Kämpa Tillsammans focusing on the question of union organisation is a mistake, the real power in a conflict comes from workplace militancy, regardless of whether this is expressed through a union or not, arguing that *"regardless of the view on the role of the trade unions, every successful struggle at workplaces came from the solidarity between workmates; a strong workers' collective."* Thus the role of revolutionaries should be to build the workers' collective, rather than building the union organisation. The union framework for disputes can be used by the workers when it is appropriate and discarded when it is not, but the foundation for struggle must always be the solidarity and organisation of the workers.

Despite this ambivalent attitude towards union struggle, the ideas of Faceless Resistance have proven adaptable to a union context both within SAC and the LO (the main union confederation). Kämpa Tillsammans' ideas helped to influence the recent re-organisation of SAC, which shifted the union's orientation away from a service model of unionism, based on the management of disputes, and towards a more combative position, giving

Although Faceless Resistance as a concept has been discussed among radical circles in Sweden for several years, it has only recently begun to be noticed in the English speaking world, primarily due to delays in texts being translated. In this article I will look primarily at the work of Kämpa Tillsammans, who developed the core ideas of Faceless Resistance, but I will also situate these ideas in their historical and social context and introduce other tendencies that have been influenced by and adapted some of the theory.

GENESIS — SWEDEN AFTER ANTI-GLOBALISATION

As with many other countries around the turn of the century, the radical movement in Sweden was massively re-invigorated by the anti-globalisation movement. The highpoint of this movement in Sweden was the protests during the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001, which culminated in several protesters being shot and a convergence centre being brutally raided. Similar to developments in Ireland, America and England, the momentum and energy aroused by the anti-globalisation movement turned to a period of self questioning and internal discussion as activists began to look for the next step. In Sweden, thanks perhaps to an already existing tradition of syndicalism going back almost a hundred years, this next step took the form of a focus on workplace-based confrontation with capitalism.

At this stage, study groups based in cities around Sweden had already begun to engage with the alternative Marxist tradition, from Italian operaismo trends of the 60s and 70s, to the autonomist Marxism of Harry Cleaver, and back to intensive reading of Marx's original works. These study groups sometimes formed the nuclei of future movement initiatives; in Stockholm for example, fare-dodging initiative Planka.nu, the Women's Political Forum, the Rohnin publishing house, strike support group 'Stockholm United Commuters'

and web-magazine 'The Daily Conflict' all developed out of a study group called Stockholm Autonomist Marxists. At the same time a tendency within SAC (the syndicalist union) called Folkmakt (People's Power) was engaging with different theoretical tendencies and developing a critique of the bureaucracy within SAC as well as the activism of the anti-globalisation movement.

KAMPA TILLSAMMANS & THE OTHER WORKERS MOVEMENT

One group that developed in this fertile environment was a collective with members from Malmö and Gothenburg that became known as 'Kämpa Tillsammans!' (Struggle Together!). They started from the position that while the left wing typically sees class struggle on a formal level, consisting of union conflicts, strikes, pickets and negotiations, they ignore the daily experience of work and the struggle against it.

This position was informed both by theoretical perspectives and practical experience in the workplace. After beginning their first permanent jobs in a factory, members joined the union and tried to work within it to improve conditions. However they found the union organisers completely uninterested in their grievances and unwilling to take the conflicts further. The organisers were in fact surprised that these youngsters working temporary contracts were even members at all! Gradually, the young workers decided that the real action was not happening within union structures, but within the informal organisation of workers.

The group's practical frustration with union-based organisation developed their engagement with Marxist tradition, particularly that which stressed the importance of our daily experience of work for theory. The Italian operaist tradition argues that the composition of the working class is in flux and thus developed the practice of 'workers' inquiries' to constantly renew the vitality

Of course, this is not to imply that class struggle does, or should, consist solely in these small isolated acts of defiance; but that these small practices build collectivity between workers that can then be the basis of larger struggles. This 'worker's collective' has much in common with the 'affinity group' style of organising that members of Kämpa Tillsammans had learnt from the anti-globalisation movement. They suggest that the collective can be built up in 3 stages: 1) work together, 2) have fun together, 3) struggle together!

In the workplace we often naturally develop a sense of solidarity, as we co-operate to solve problems and pass the time. However, there are nearly always barriers between workers that limit the development of collective action such as hierarchies based on race, sex, work roles and seniority. Management frequently exploits these divisions by, for example, assigning different jobs to men than to women, or giving foreigners the worst jobs. It is necessary to break down these hierarchies in order to develop the solidarity between workers, and open the door to collective action.

The affinity between workers can be developed by playing around and having fun, inside or outside the workplace. While many companies try to use evenings out and 'fun events' for building team spirit and good relations between management and employees, Kämpa Tillsammans argue that having fun together away from the bosses is vital for building a strong workers' collective. Of course, the point of that these actions is not to be best friends with all your co-workers; this is a 'politics of small steps', by starting with these small actions one can build the solidarity and trust between workers that will allow progressively bigger struggles to be taken on.

and class, that can in turn help to propel working class mobilisations.

STRUGGLE TOGETHER

These struggles, or practices, that struck management directly and made our lives immediately easier we came to call “faceless resistance” for lack of a better name. This was during a time when the left, our political environment, to a large degree saw that it was “calm” or “peace” at the workplaces, in stark contrast to our understanding of our situations at the workplaces. I still argue that an everyday class war is occurring and no peace is possible as long as capitalism exists.

SELF ACTIVITY AND STRATEGY

What Kämpa Tillsammans found in their investigations led them to develop the term Faceless Resistance. This referred to all of the small acts of workplace resistance that go unnoticed by the traditional left, but are vital to their understanding of class struggle. This list is nearly endless, but can include things such as taking extra toilet breaks, stealing cash or other things from the workplace, clocking out early or calling the boss an asshole behind his back. While these examples may seem trivial, they are important since they represent the struggle between our aspirations for a decent human life, and the constant pressure to reduce our lives to simply another input into the production process. What’s more, struggling in this way can supply their reward immediately, as, for instance, as instead of going through a protracted union negotiation for less work hours, by skipping out early one achieves this goal directly and becomes conscious of one’s own power in so doing.

and relevance of revolutionary theory. The orientation of such inquiries resonated with Kämpa Tillsammans’ own experiences and they concluded that the most fertile space for investigation, and intervention, lay in what the Indian group Kamunist Kranti called “*constant innumerable, insidious, unpredictable activities by small groups of workers*”. Such ‘unpredictable activities’ defied acceptance of a passive role in either the production process or in pursuing grievances, and so was constantly hampered by the workers’ own representatives as well as their bosses.

CLASS COMPOSITION

“No methods of struggle or organizational models can correspond to the class composition forever. Regardless, a large part of the left is not able to renew politics when society changes. They stick to their old truths and try desperately to represent an out-of-date understanding of the working class. The class struggle has inevitably left the institutionalized left behind and made old political truths obsolete. This is an important explanation to why communist parties, unions, and other leftist organizations that used to have considerable political relevance in the past, are totally out of touch today.”

Kämpa Tillsammans! No peace in the Class War!

Central to the practice of Kämpa Tillsammans is the understanding that radical theory must be closely tied to the actual reality of class composition. As the organisation of the production process changes, in response to diverse factors, from market conditions and new technologies to the development of class conflict, the working class also changes, and this will be embodied in its forms of organisation and methods of struggle.

For example, the early workers’ movement in Central and Western Europe was based upon an organisation of work in

which production was carried out primarily by skilled workers, concentrated in factories. These workers organised in craft unions and demanded control of production. Operaist academics argued that both this form of struggle and its goal were related to the specific conditions of work, and not to any objective theoretical 'correctness'. They pointed out that the resulting struggles forced capitalism to alter this organisation of work, and with the implementation of both new technologies and management techniques (conveyor belt-assembly and Taylorism, respectively), re-arranged the production process, de-skilling work, lessening the skill basis of workers' power, and thus undermining the hitherto dominant organisational form, the craft union. From this re-organisation older forms of struggle became irrelevant, and new forms developed to suit the changed context.

This analysis has a direct consequence for revolutionaries; since class consciousness and methods of struggle are constantly shifting, revolutionaries cannot simply accept the theories of past generations. We have a duty to investigate this changing composition in order to circulate the lessons from it, and derive theory to match the reality. Thus the centrality of the workers' inquiry; in this process, militants constantly engage with the experiences of class struggle to challenge their own preconceptions and create a constantly evolving revolutionary theory.

WORKERS' INQUIRIES OR STORIES?

While traditional workers' inquiries tend to be quite formal, often involving questionnaires and formal interviews, the members of Kämpa Tillsammans chose instead to document their own (often humorous) work experiences, draw lessons from them and publish them on the internet. They deliberately chose the medium of storytelling because they wanted workers to engage with the stories in a way that is not possible with formal surveys. Kim Muller of Kämpa

Tillsammans explains that they wanted to change the popular idea of what it was to be a worker; workers do not communicate with each other via "*written pamphlets or leaflets but by talking and storytelling*", thus stories provide a far better way to develop a new workers' discourse than dry analysis and documentation.

This practice has since become popular in the Swedish workers movement, with many militants reporting on their workplaces online on sites such as forenadevardare.se (for health workers) or Arbetsförnedringen (for job seekers). The practice of workplace blogging can easily spread work experiences, showing the political dimensions in daily conflicts as well as giving clues about the changing composition of the working class.

One such blog, 'Postverket' is written by Postal Service workers. They see it as a way of developing the discussions that start in the canteen or on the shopfloor and circulating them among other workers in different sections and in other parts of the country. In turn, the discussions on the blog can serve as the basis for further discussion and action within the workplace.

The writers have found that, once introduced to the blog, their co-workers start to read it and discuss it with other workmates, helping to develop their ideas and sharpen their criticism of the bosses and the work.

Thus for the Swedish movement, workplace blogging has a number of different functions. On the one hand, by publishing online, workers can transcend their individual workplace to connect their experiences and ideas with those of other workers on the other side of the country. It allows for the deepening of political arguments and critique. On the other hand, workplace blogs can create a new discourse of work, and help to form the basis of a new working class identity. For many people, the mention of 'working class' summons up a dozen grey clichés, none of which are relevant to their experiences. Stories and experiences from modern workplaces can help to popularise a more relevant conception of work