

Have we the right to condemn?

Scottish Anarchist debate on Tommy Sheridan

Scottish Federation of Anarchists

1995

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Tommy Sheridan: Have we the right to condemn?

He has been jailed for refusing to pay fines, arising from the occupation and vandalising of Sheriff Officers premises.

He has been arrested on numerous occasions, the most recent being during the attack on the 'Pollok Free State' camp against the M77 by police and Wimpey employees on the 22nd March.

He is the first socialist outwith the Labour Party to achieve instant public recognition since the days of John McLean, and is a proven communicator, whether on TV or Radio, or in speaking with working class people.

He doesn't drink or smoke, his reputation is intact.

So why does he incur such wrath amongst anarchists and other revolutionaries?

The answer is simple: the Trafalgar Square Riot.

So, why is the Riot so important to the anarchists and why do anarchists south of the border know so little of Tommy Sheridan since that one glorious sunny day five years ago?

The story of the riot is well documented in the Acab Press pamphlet, *Poll Tax Riot, 10 hours that shook Trafalgar Square*¹. Militant members, the stewards of huge marches that day in Glasgow and London were appalled at what they saw as the degeneration of the massive London march, and the media's spotlight on the battle in the square at the expense of news featuring 100,000 demonstrating in London and 20,000 in Glasgow.

Tommy Sheridan was flown down to appear at the end of the London rally and as the 'leader' of the All Britain Anti Poll Tax Federation was pitched into the controversy surrounding the police attack on demonstrators. Sheridan and Steve Nally, the Militant London activist who was the Secretary of 'the Fed.' were instructed by the Militant leadership, then led by Peter Taffe and the ailing Ted Grant that the riot was a 'godsend' to the Tories and would 'alienate' activists from the anti poll tax movement. The script was that "200 to 250 of these individuals intent on causing trouble" had sabotaged the march (Tommy Sheridan BBC 31-3-90).

Urged by the 'consensus conspiracy' that passes for news coverage, Tommy declared "*we condemn it totally*" and both he and Nally came out with the statement that "our Federation is going to be conducting an internal inquiry to try and root out the troublemakers" (Sheridan, LWT News 1st April) "...*which will go public and if necessary name names*" (Nally, ITN 1st April).

In the months to come there was uproar in the APTF, both at federation level and in the local Anti-poll tax groups. Dozens of houses in Hackney and elsewhere were raided by riot police. The media conducted their populist witch-hunt to identify the 'ringleaders'. Eventually the clamour died down. Instead of resistance to the poll tax disintegrating it was Thatcher's government which was rocked and a salutary lesson was learned as to 'who your friends were'. The so-called internal inquiry never got beyond the drawing board, such was the level of outrage that basic solidarity with the marchers attacked by the police, imprisoned and in some cases jailed, had been breached.

A year later Militant Labour was formed in Scotland, most of their members having been expelled from their beloved Labour Party. Militant Labour elsewhere took longer to make an impact, which in Scotland, especially clydeside, was helped by Tommy Sheridan's second place to Labour in the Parliamentary Election of 1992, closely followed by his and another victory in the Pollok ward in the District Elections of the same year.

¹ Available on Libcom here

In Scotland, the media spotlight has continued, as Tommy can always provide “rent a quote”, especially during the protests against water privatisation and a continued guerrilla war against the dreaded Sheriff Officers. Recently the attention has dimmed, especially with the emergence of the eloquent Lynsey Keenan of Earth First connected to the M77 issue. Outside Glasgow, Scottish Militant Labour has not made much of an impact with the partial exception of Dundee, and the political arena is still dominated by Labour with the Scottish Nationalists trying to muscle in.

Elsewhere in Britain, Militant has not achieved the impact or benefits from the organisational stranglehold on the late lamented anti poll tax movement, and they are just another trotskyite marginalised sect along with the SWP and all the others, too numerous and unworthy of mention.

Recently in mid February, the Glasgow Anarchists were host to a visit by 20 comrades from Tyneside, kindred spirits from a similar working class city: Newcastle. As with previous sorties by English and Welsh anarchists north there is a culture shock, and this was shown in their reaction to Tommy Sheridan up on the platform in George Square at the start of the M77/ Criminal Justice Act Demo. It is hardly surprising that Tommy Sheridan is viewed in the same light as Nally and the other Militant Labour leaders. In *10 hours* the quotes taken from videos of the Trafalgar Sq. riot is followed by the assertion that Militant is “*an organisation that is opposed to the working class fighting back*”. This may be true in England & Wales, Scottish anarchists reserve judgement on this subject. For Scottish Militant, it simply appears false.

The reason being is that Militant strategy has changed considerably from their days as an entrust Tendency. It is certainly true that few anarchists can match the Militant members from Pollok and elsewhere for their dedication to direct action. Nor are they disarmed by the ethic of pacifism, with many arrests associated with ‘fighting back’ literally, or failing to respect the property of Sheriff Officers² and their sub-species. Part of this stems from their recruitment of young people from the housing schemes and the everyday common sense of direct action if you have nothing to lose. As mentioned Tommy Sheridan has led by example, even after elected to the Council, and faced a jail sentence and countless arrests.

Of course the appeal of direct action to Scottish Militant Labour has to be understood. There have been examples in history where Communist Party members took part in such actions, and even the SWP at times have to show their ‘mettle’. The difference is that Militant now places community struggles at the centre of their strategy, no longer giving it second billing to workplace disputes and confrontation is part of the way people can see through the role of Labourism, as defenders of the status quo.

Even as far as ‘controlling’ actions, a level of sophistication appears to have been adopted. The Alliance Against the Criminal Justice Bill, rechristened the Defiance Alliance is a case in point. Unlike the front organisation character of the Scottish SWP’s “Coalition”, the Alliance involves ravers, animal libbers, anarchists and — especially Earth First. Such was the structureless nature of the Alliance, the Scottish Federation of Anarchists tried to bring up the formal structure of the organisation at the February Alliance conference. Yes, Militant are dominant, but such the poor record (outside demonstrations) of anarchist involvement it could be a case of — by default.

This begs the question. We have a right to be lazy, but have we revelled in it for too long. Many anarchists drop out because they’ve ‘done their bit’, had their youthful rebellion, got wasted and waken up to the reality of exploitation from such a dreamstate, and in the process collective action goes out the window. We have lacked the sophistication to realise that politics isn’t stuck

² Baliffs south of the border

in a mould, and that we have no right to patent direct action as our idea. Possibly, of course, Glasgow Militants are a special case, and the charismatic Tommy has skills rarely seen in the revolutionary mindset. No doubt, taken the longer view, old Bakunin will be proved right again. Lenin's teachings are still followed by Sheridan, down to his assertion in his recent book that there are working class anarcho-syndicalists who understand struggles and the majority are an infantile rabble prone to sectarianism and manipulation by the State, and he believes all English Anarchists belong to the latter camp!

Our criticism of Militant will only stand up if we³ have a voluntary commitment to meet the dedication that their Party demands. Anarchist strategy and organisation will have to develop – the formation of the Scottish Federation of Anarchists is a small step, but isn't enough. Questions will have to be answered about who anarchism appeals to, why, and why we let ourselves be marginalised or out manoeuvred time & time again, by the State and by statist revolutionaries. Let's put aside the nonsensical assessment that Sheridan is scarred for life due to Trafalgar Square, respect his and Glasgow Militant's commitment to direct action, match it by our own and, after eating some 'humble pie', rediscover a purpose beyond 'playing hard to get' away from the theatre of demonstrations.

From: BM Hurricane London WCIN 3XX

Dear Comrades

It is always useful to overturn sacred cows, and Black Sheep's article on Tommy Sheridan certainly did that. However, I feel they missed the point. Sheridan may be an admirable activist, committed to his politics and at the forefront of many popular campaigns in Glasgow. However it is precisely his politics with which we disagree.

Slagging anarchists off for not matching Sheridan's revolutionary zeal does not excuse his behaviour. The fact is that when the crunch came, Sheridan sided with the law. I notice you make no apologies for the uncharismatic Nally, who probably works as hard for his cause as Sheridan. Why did they do it? The answer is enshrined in their Leninist politics, it is nothing to do with any personal failings they might have. Because their idea of democracy is one where the Party controls all, and they were the representatives of the Party, they could say what they liked and not have to worry about being held to account. This is compounded by Militant's support for their behaviour, and more recently, their lies about it.

If Militant Labour believed their representatives were wrong, then they should have apologised and taken steps to ensure it didn't happen again. If they didn't think so, then at least they would remain consistent in their anti-working class stance. However, they have been telling contacts of theirs attracted to anarchism that the whole episode was taken out of context because of the influence of anarchists in the media. It beggars belief that they think anyone will take this seriously.

Respect Sheridan's qualities by all means, but never forget he is a prisoner of Leninist politics, and will make the same mistake if put in the same situation again. The reason Sheridan has

³ This criticism may apply to Glasgow Anarchists more than some of their English counterparts!

grudging respect for some anarcho-syndicalists is because of their working class orientation and willingness to get their hands dirty. Glasgow has a strong tradition of anarchist working class activity, draw on that and you can prove him wrong about Scottish anarchists and show that there is a better way than Lenin.

In solidarity
Martin
S.E. London

In reply to Black Sheep's article "Have we the right to condemn"

The main thing that interested us in the article was the fact that, the writer seems to have a very low opinion on English and Welsh anarchists and their commitment to direct action. The author conversely has a high regard for Tommy Sheridan and Scottish Militant as a whole for their commitment. The article seemed to home in on a small incident that happened during our thoroughly enjoyable trek up to Glasgow for the M77/Anti-Criminal Justice day demo in February. Some of our members shouted "grass" at Sheridan, this outburst resulted in threats of a good thrashing by some Millie security, so to avoid the demo turning into a big scrap, a begrudging apology soon followed. This incident seems to have prompted the author into a long obscure ramble on Sheridan and Scottish Militant and how great they are in Poflok.

Firstly TAG found it very offensive that it was suggested that we found Glasgow a "culture shock", we just did not understand the situation. On the contrary our experience of Glasgow showed us that as cities and as people we have very much in common. The main thrust of the article seemed to try to get around the simple fact that after the Poll Tax riot Sheridan was prepared to name names, a thing that he has never publicly apologised for. These rioters (and we would contest that it was only 200+ rioters, more like 2000+!) were not just an 'infantile rabble' of anarchos causing trouble, they were working class people — Sheridan was prepared to pass on names and addresses of people involved in the anti Poll Tax movement to the police, that is a fact, a fact that the article cannot get away from.

Can you really be sure that if anything happened at the Pollok/M77 demos that overstepped the bounds of the Millies analyses of direct action, we wouldn't see a rerun of Tommy's outbursts in 1990? The article goes on to say that, "*It is certainly true that few anarchists can match the Militant members from Pollok and elsewhere for their direct action*"; dedicated to direct action! In 1992 (*Red Action* 63) Sheridan was instrumental in organising (although unsuccessful -as the BNP laughed at the idea) a public debate between Militant and the Fascists. Trying to poach VOTERS from the BNP? Also if our memory serves us right at the demo in February — the Militant stewards were as bad as the police i.e. stopping people walking on the paths at the side of the march and generally being 'in charge' of the whole event.

Also let us not forget that Militant is NOT anti state. The whole philosophy of Militant is that of the vanguard. Militant's analysis of Pollok may have led them to take the course of action that they have done, but nationally Militant by the very nature of their 'Party' disempower working class people. Scottish Militant are part of this movement, and to gloss over this misleads the reader.

As for the accusations of anarchists in England and Wales being lazy and ineffectual when it comes to direct action — this is absolute rubbish!

We can't speak for other groups in England and Wales, but the majority of TAG members have been involved in direct action for many years, from hunt sabbing, our own road protest (Cradlewell Bypass) to anti fascist work. TAG has been the only group in Newcastle to physically confront fascists and have been successful in stopping them from selling their papers in Newcastle for over 2 years.

Even more damaging was the fact that it seemed to suggest that Scottish Anarchists as a whole “reserve judgement” on Militant and Tommy ‘Bakunin’ Sheridan. On speaking to Glasgow anarchists in February we found this not to be the case. We would hope for a GAG group response to the article.

Overall we found the article very confusing — what was the point of the article? Was the writer trying to be controversial and to get people's backs up? — If so it worked — we're fucking furious.

In Solidarity
TYNESIDE ANARCHIST GROUP

“Black Sheep” stands condemned (or is that shorn!)

As the writer of the controversial article about Tommy Sheridan/Militant Labour and anarchist outrage in Issue 2 of Scottish Anarchist, I was not surprised at the reaction it created. However, many connected to the Glasgow Anarchist Group were.

Much of the article I stand by, and perhaps in places my sense of mischief (humour) didn't go down well — for example, “*He (Sheridan) doesn't drink or smoke, his reputation is intact*”!! I did feel that we had let visitors down in the past, such as our “twinned” group in Tyneside, by not briefing them properly about the situation in Clydeside, the distinctive approach of Militant Labour here, and his “folk hero” status...

I do accept that my depiction of anarchists as predisposed to the “right to be lazy”, mostly involving people temporarily rebelling against inevitable incorporation into the world of careers was over the top. It was meant to be provocative, and although it contained a grain of truth, there are many class struggle (and environmental) anarchists who display an incredible amount of commitment in terms of the work they put into campaigns, direct action, etc., and inevitably they feel “written out” of history and unappreciated by those, including me, who should know better!

There is, however, a sense that anarchist strategy does drift, is reactive, and eschews any reasonable assessment (such as goals achieved, links with long-term aims...) due to an irrational/spontaneous ethos which is often anti-theory, anti-strategy.

The comments about “culture shock” appear to have been misunderstood. For the benefit of Tyneside and other comrades, I did not mean to infer they did not understand working class existence/struggle. The “culture” I was referring to was the distinctive “Scottish” question (see “Braveheart” article elsewhere in this issue), not principally the “class” question. That said, there are anarchists whose attachment to marginal declassé politicised crustie lifestyles have served

Leaders such as Sheridan in their ploy to caricature all English and many Scottish anarchists as drop out public school-kids turned crustie layabouts!

I also wish to retract my criticism of fellow Glasgow anarchists, since the level of activity over Summer '95 illustrates a high degree of organisation and commitment. As a libertarian communist opposed to dogmas, in favour of being heretical, I am aware that my criticisms have incurred condemnation, and in the light of day deserve to be modified.

“Black Sheep”

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