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Stuart Christie interviewed for Black Flag in 2010

Black Flag

2010

Four decades on from its first issue, *Black Flag* is one of the few remaining publications from that time. So it is a great pleasure to be able to interview its founding editor, or at least the surviving half of that editorship, Albert Meltzer having died in 1996, as we enter the next ten years of struggle.

When Black Flag was launched did you expect it to still be going 40 years later?

Didn't really think about it actually, our only concern was to get the next issue out and doing the other things we were doing.

Would you care to talk a little about the founding of Black Flag?

When I came out of prison in Spain one of my concerns was the lack of a pro-prisoners defence group, to which Albert suggested we relaunch the long-defunct Anarchist Black Cross, which we did. The result was *Black Flag*, which was subtitled "the organ of the Anarchist Black Cross."

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We made an announcement about its launch at a meeting of the Anarchist Federation of Britain in Soho Square, London, that year – either late ‘67 or early ‘68.

At first it was duplicated, then Albert bought an offset-litho printer – and I learned how to use it from Ted Kavanagh who had worked with Albert at the Wooden Shoe Bookshop (and on *Cuddons’ Cosmopolitan Review*).

We were based first of all in Coptic Street, then Albert rented premises in Kings Cross – and from there we moved to what became the Centro Iberico in Havelock Hill – all paid for entirely out of Albert Meltzer’s own pocket.

History tells us there was some antagonism with the editors of *Freedom*?

Yes, there was a lot of antagonism with *Freedom*, but that had to do with the history – personal and political – between Albert and Vero Richards, and to a certain extent with Philip Sansom, tensions which went back to the 1940s and early 1950s. Richards was a very patrician – and divisive – figure and as editor-in-chief, publisher and freeholder of *Freedom*, he behaved as though the anarchist movement were his personal fiefdom. It’s not uncommon in all political movements; there were close parallels with what happened with the CNT and the FAI secretariats/committees and the rank-and-file activists who supported armed resistance after the Liberation in France in 1944. Germinal Esgleas, Federica Montseny and Roque Santamaria did much the same thing to marginalise Laureano Cerrada Santos who was a pivotal figure among the activists and the action/defence groups, much as Richards did to Albert, disparaging him and putting him down at every opportunity.

Are you surprised how *Freedom* has changed in recent years?

Not particularly surprised, just pleased.

How do you view the movement of today compared to when Black Flag began?

It's not really helpful to compare then with now: the political and social context of the 1950s and 1960s, the degree of radicalisation of the baby-boomer generation and all the expectations (and possibilities) we had for change. But probably most important of all was the fact that behind us was a powerful and radical rank-and-file working class labour movement, the trade unions, particularly the shop-stewards movement. The anarchist movement today faces serious problems of apathy and alienation – and the lack of a cohesive labour movement. Then we had an industrial proletariat, today it is a service-industry precariat, and an increasingly rootless one at that. Anyway, these are problems that this and future anarchist movements will resolve in their own way, and probably a lot more imaginatively than we were able to do.

Are you surprised by the relative lack of struggle in response to the current economic crisis compared to the 1970's?

We are living in different times, but I've no doubt the pendulum will swing our way again.

With 50 years of experience, do you have any suggestions on what we, as a movement, should be doing?

Absolutely none, other than keep spreading the word – and example!

Are you optimistic about the growth of the movement?

I'm always optimistic, not that the numbers game is at all important, I'd leave that to the SWP, but what is important is its continued existence and the influence of its ideas and the impact of its voice.

Where do you think today's movement can make the best mark on events?

Education, example and action.

What sort of response do you hope to see from the wider working class to the current situation? What do you expect?

At the moment, not a lot, but I hope to be surprised.

A few years ago you cast a vote for George Galloway's Respect party – has your politics changed much since writing and publishing seems to have become your primary focus?

No, neither my politics nor my world view have changed in any meaningful way since I was 18 except I can no longer call myself an anarcho-syndicalist as there is no organised labour movement to speak of – although I was, until recently, a member of the NUJ. Also, while some people who need to get a life might see it as hair-splitting, I did not vote FOR Respect, I voted AGAINST the Labour Party on that particular day. I woke up that morning more than usually angry about Blair's war so, as it happened to be voting day, I thought to myself I'd make a gesture – other than throwing a brick through the party office window – Respect being the only party opposing the war and with the least chance of getting elected. By the way, writing and publishing have always been my primary focus – as I keep telling the police! Nothing new there.

This is the sixth issue of *Black Flag* published by the “new” collective since the re-launch in October 2007. What do you think about it?

I must say I am extremely impressed not only with the production values, which would have enthused Albert no end – I can see him beam with pride even now – but with the extraordinarily rich mix of editorial copy. Congratulations! For me it's not a question of agreeing or disagreeing with what the contributors are saying, I'm very impressed with the broad range of views, themes and subjects you're covering – in fact what you appear to have done is seamlessly combine the politics of the original *Black Flag* with the cultural aspirations of the old *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*. If I had any criticism at all it would be that it could do with a bit more humour...

You are a prolific publisher, writer and anarchist film buff. Tell us a bit about the film archive you've been building...

I'm not a particular film buff, anarchist or otherwise. It just so happened that a few years back when video-streaming technology and improved broadband became available we decided to set up a community internet TV/video station in Hastings. It coincided with some of the CNT-FAI films from 1936–37 becoming available on DVD, which I decided to put up on the site so it all built up from there. The communal TV station idea went down the tubes because we didn't have the funds to sustain it, the guy who originally funded it having been made bankrupt. So, having learned a little about how to do it, I set up the christiebooks web site with a view to making available as many anarchist/libertarian oriented films as possible – all part of the educational process. We now have an archive of about 800 plus films to which we're adding more on a regular basis. We have a growing number of audio broadcasts as well, and are trying to build up a photographic and poster archive along with pdfs of out of print texts – books, magazines, pamphlets and such like.

Would you like to tell us what you are doing at the moment? Have you got any interesting new projects up your sleeve?

The main problem is trying to keep the site going – it is quite expensive and we don't get any sponsorship apart from the occasional donation from generous comrades, but you can number those on the fingers of a one-handed man. Apart from that my time's mainly taken up with editing the second part of the McHarg memoirs – *Pistoleros! 1919*.