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Crass and Class War in the Thatcher years, by an ex-member of Bristol Class War

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I come from a Labour Party family in a town by a huge American base. Anti-Cruise demos got twenty thousand people out, across classes. We were all going to die, after all. In 1981 Crass hit me. It stripped away lots of bullshit. A lot of people come through that route. It stripped it all back, beyond what CND were saying. What, nukes are bad but napalm's OK? And you start to look at how war and the state work.

Crass really had influence and penetration into working class circles. People often want to use culture to get that sort of penetration but Crass did it. They were very influential. Look at all the people about, aged 48-55, with Crass tattoos. Builders, whatever.

1984 is the split year (in the South West). Spring 1984 is key: Crass were found out a bit. Crass started to be criticised in 1983. And then that criticism coincides with the Miners' strike. Plus

you get Stop The City. The movement goes from cultural resistance and “social centre” type activity (not that we had the term then) to “Let’s attack the City”. It goes from single-issue politics to attacking capitalism. But the cultural stuff, the punk identity, becomes a contradiction. Why does everyone want to look different from everyone else who lives round them? Why am I supposed to look like this?

In 1983, ’84 there are debates in Bristol and a massive split. Not the most bitter split, people still talked to each other, but a split. Some people were saying “The miners are sexist, the miners eat meat” – lets hide away from all that. Others remembered recent history, they remembered 1974 [Heath’s defeat by the miners]. “This is IT! Fuck gigs, fuck all the cultural stuff, we have to support the miners directly.” And we went to Wales, we went to the power stations. Class was a major element of the split. Working class people were saying “you hate us, you don’t want us”. Class War were saying exactly the same thing. [Class politics was on the rise:] *Virus* appeared at this time [which became the Anarchist Communist Federation], *Wildcat*, the DAM [Direct Action Movement], bits of the ultraleft (like the bloke who did *Miner conflicts, major contradictions*), the situationists. We sold *Class War* and read *Virus*. We sold *Class War* and *Wildcat* to the left. We were reading *Black Flag*. We split from the lifestyleists, from the social centre, alternative music scene. That music/cultural scene, we felt it doesn’t matter any more. Some of us rejected it, went back to dress like their mates did. But that “Punk versus everything else”, we moved out of it. That was part of getting politicised.

Class War was powerful. The lifestyleists were saying “They’re fascists”. Bristol Class Struggle Anarchists, in ’84 or ’85 rang Vera Krushik of Brixton, of 121 Bookshop. Vera, who was Jewish, said “these people don’t know what fascists are.” Vera knew my mum through the Older Feminist Network, and sent me *Crowbar* and the original “Riot not to work” leaflet. Andy Dewar from Glasgow was ex-Communist Party. He

things took off, we'd have to dissolve. Our aim was agitation to create confidence. If that works, Class War would self-destruct. The other alternatives were that we would be locked up, or we would stop because it hadn't worked. Once you become an organisation you have to educate people. You lose that influence, and just talk to yourselves.

I stopped in 1990. A lot of people were in a lot of trouble. And we'd been at it for nearly ten years.

There's a group of people who were involved in Class War who are now in their sixties, others in their seventies. We should get what they know written down, while we can.

[These are notes from a conversation which, hopefully, captures what the comrade had to say, and how they said it. Can't promise Vera K's name is spelled right, sorry. Edit: Vera Krishak of Lewisham appears in *Freedom's* contact column in the 1970s.]

became a situationist. He re-educated us. He'd tried to get the Sex Pistols to play Brockwell Park. He told us, "you're gold dust. Don't let anyone bullshit you." Vera and Andy said: Ian Bone and Martin Wright, their politics are really good.

After Orgreave Crass put out a statement saying half the group had renounced pacifism. But by that time, it didn't really matter to us what they said. We were getting a political education, racing through it. People think *Class War* was just thick people, or just a game, or that they were all mouth: No. They were definitely the most influential ultra-left group or class struggle anarchist group. By 1986 we were council communists.

Who supported us when *Class War* were suspended from AFA [after *Searchlight/Guardian* smears in 1986]? The DAM, Red Action, The ACF. The rest were our enemies. We didn't bother with the anarchist scene. We went where the Left wouldn't go, onto the estates. There were already people selling *Class War* in Bristol: Scooter kids, Barton Hill Youth Club (which has a radical history). We just got connected. It had already penetrated: a bit like Crass!

We sold loads of copies. Two groups of people would buy *Class War*: young people, and old people: pensioners, old socialists. If we put something against the royal family on the cover, older people would buy it. This was all completely invisible to the lifestyle anarchists. They weren't Bristolian, they wanted to be different. The concrete material stuff of class was not talked about by them.

I thought *Rebel alliances* [Ben Franks] didn't do a bad job. But I think it's a mistake to only talk about Class War from a London perspective. The hidden history of Class War is its influence. Doing bulk orders, we were sending parcels out to the forces, to aircraft carriers! That won't appear in the history books.

Bristol Class War split in about 1987. We didn't want to recruit students. We were more interested in spreading ideas

than recruiting anyway. We had a critique of technical control, of middle class control. Those were the 1970s veterans who had ended up running unions and organisations. That was the heyday of “municipal socialism”. We had the working class people, the veterans who hadn’t run things. They had just done all the work for “the comrades”. The ones without capital (social, educational). They were bitter, serious and noused. Class War in Bristol after 1987 starts to get people come from the working class left. People who left Militant. People who’d joined the RCP and found out it was crap. We were always at war with the SWP but that’s another story... Class War started to be the organisation you want to be in, because of the critique of class. Similar to what Red Action write in 1986 or ’87: class autonomy, getting rid of the vanguard party. The various dissidents, Class War, *Wildcat*, the ACF: we were all moving in that direction.

The 1987 split: we didn’t want middle class people involved. Certainly not to front the organisation. Why should we bother with students? We were cynical about the Left in general, and mish-mash liberal politics. Fuck living in a radical ghetto. Politics has to be tried out in the real world. There was a division, and that was also mirrored in London.

To get history right you have to triangulate, to compare the written word to other sources. Now you also have film, and when something’s filmed it captures something. And you can say “This is what you said then”. People’s thinking is always more radical than what’s written. Take *The Bristolian*: The Labour Party hate it. And it gets criticised from the Left: “Where’s the politics?” But when we talk about the council, we connect to real experiences. We fight for our class, and recognise our limitations. We’re not here to moderate council spending. We want more pie until we can get the whole pie. We’re not reformists, we’re realists. Aren’t organisations always more radical than their writings?

It sickens me to hear people talking about the miners’ strike or the poll tax, saying that they helped “fight Thatcher”. You didn’t support it, you didn’t support non-payment, or the Poll Tax rioters. It makes me angry, but that’s history: they rewrite it to prove that they were right.

But we took out our immediate enemies. With the poll tax struggle, two things were important: non-payment and the Trafalgar Square riot. You had to see it in political terms, it was about power. Neoliberalism hit a brick wall.

Thatcher had her worst twelve days in 1981 [the summer of riots]. She only had the support of her backbenchers and the press. She had this mantra, they thought she was cracking up: “Churchill 1940, Churchill 1940”. I think during the miners’ strike they were more in control of the situation. Nine years on, she hit another brick wall, the poll tax riot. I remember thinking “this is gonna fuck it right up”. Her cabal were in trouble. And now the memoirs come out and confirm that. Plus it became obvious to the capitalists that she was more nationalist than pro-capitalist. They turned on her. The Poll Tax was the biggest victory for an antiparliamentarian movement.

“Fuck the media”, that’s what we thought. Militant ran scared. They had an opportunity to get a huge boost, to say to people “we support you and we’re fighting alongside you”. But they pandered to the media (and threatened to “name names”). Andy Murphy coming out and saying we supported the poll tax rioters, that really took bottle. People were going to prison. The media attacked him, these posh boys attacked him by saying “he’s got a mortgage”. Which shows what they know about the working class. He lost his job. The council he worked for sacked him. 147 people walked out, went on a political strike. And he got his job back. But what he did took bottle.

The Poll Tax really affected Class War. Radicalised students wanted to join. It became trendy. And it degenerated after 1990, to become a leftist organisation. We always thought that if