

Anarchists & Organisation

Where to next?

Anarchist Communist Federation

1998

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Anarchist revolutionaries world-wide who seek to maximise the impact of their practical, agitational and theoretical work by associating together in organisations such as the ACF have been despondent in recent years about the wide-spread anti-organisational malaise in the British anarchist movement. Criticism of the pitfalls of 'the Organisation' are important, and we debate within the ACF and with other comrades, groups and organisations about such issues as the 'leadership of ideas' and the problem of whether 'form' sometimes takes priority over 'content'. For example: does being in an organisation with a coherent programme make us crypto-Leninists?; how much time does internal bureaucracy take in relation to practical solidarity and the development of theory?; and is being in an organisation worth the effort?!. We have long felt that most anarchists committed to the anti-organisational tendency — as opposed to those still seriously debating the issues and considering their priorities carefully- do not have a viable alternative to formal organisations. At their worst, they can be strategically redundant life-stylists attempting to shock rather than to build for actual change; egoists who do not wish to be restrained by formal accountability to others; or for 'action' with no 'theory' (as though the former has any purpose without carefully considered direction).

This may be changing. The debate around 'where to next?' in the post-Class War era has meant that new quarters the organisational question is being considered seriously again. Even more promising, debate is not taking place solely around the issue of workplace struggle, which we think is limited in potential in this clever capitalist era, but specifically in terms of building confidence and a subversive alternative in our communities. community activity is not a new idea to anarchism, of course, but in the past it has typically been part of what is a major weakness of the anti-organisational tendency. It has generated 'localism' where the town anarchist group has little on-going theoretical or practical link with a revolutionary movement more widely, and local injustices rather than the generalised working class experience form the agenda for activity. This improves to an extent when anarchists who are not in organisations seek to associate more closely together through federal structures — current examples being the Scottish Federation of Anarchists and Northern Anarchist Network — but these organisations are too often seen as a national/regional support network for local activism, not somewhere where theory is developed or national activity initiated. Fortunately, in the post-Class War fall-out, of the many possible new directions/structures being proposed, the return to localism has not managed to dominate. Disillusionment with one form of organisation, the Class War Federation, has not lead to the abandoning of organisation itself, which, say in the late 1980s or early 1990s, would have been a distinct possibility. Local activity is still being viewed within a wider framework.

What will hopefully emerge will be bigger than any current organisations and will have a programme that will incorporate activity around issues which all the groups and individuals within it agree on, and initiate constructive debate on those we don't. This is not to say that the ACF doesn't want more people to join 'our' organisation. Of course we do. We think we have some good ideas to offer a national co-ordination of anarchists, just as we learn as an organisation from our members' activity networks and local groups and campaigns. We also think that the movement needs structures that are reliable, though not necessarily permanent and rigid, to give it some stability against the onslaught of state forces. But we work towards the creation of an organisationally united anarchist/libertarian communist movement, and do not imagine for a moment that its structure will be an enlarged ACF. In addition, we are encouraged by the assumption behind new initiatives outside the ACF that formal organisations like our own have something to offer the libertarian movement of tomorrow.

We offer here two articles which discuss possible new scenarios for the British anarchist/libertarian movement at the turn of the century. The first discusses the process which has brought Class War to its current position of self-analysis. The second discusses some ideas on organisation within the local community current in libertarian circles in relation to our own ideas on the subject.

Revolution – An Unfinished Business

Most active anarchists will surely have heard by now of the dissolving of Class War Federation, and publication of the 'last ever' paper: "Class War is dead... long live the class war – an open letter to the revolutionary movement". In the aftermath of this, the October 1997 Anarchist Bookfair revealed a trinity of approaches: the handing out of a discussion document "Smash Hits" produced by those looking for a new direction, a new issue of Class War, "Get Rid of the Posh", by those determined to hang on to the paper, and those promoting an anti-monarchy movement. The latter two factions also appear to be involved with the paper Animal. The sentiments expressed in the open letter have been broadly welcomed for their openness and honesty. The Bookfair meeting, organised by the 'new direction' faction, which took place straight after the ACF's meeting on revolutionary organisation, was well attended. The need to look to the future, not at past failures, was put forward strongly and passionately.

So what happened to Class War? Class War Federation was launched around the same time as the ACF, in the early-to-mid 80's, bringing together groups and individuals who were coming from a class struggle perspective, some of who were already selling the existing Class War paper, and many who were in active local anarchist groups. This was a very positive step for the anarchist movement, greatly helping the break away of serious class struggle anarchism from lifestylism and do-gooding liberalism, typified by the anti-nuclear movement of the time. The CW approach justified class violence against an atmosphere of pacifism. It supported riots and rejoiced in anti-trades union activities in favour of independent working class action. This helped draw in a number of working class activists from the Left, and earned respect for anarchism in disputes like that of the Wapping printers. Class War also injected a badly needed humour into revolutionary politics.

There's not much point going on about the often quoted problem of Class War's idealisation of the male street fighter. In reality, there was much more going on in Class War than they are often given credit for. This has much to do with the fact that there was a hell of a lot of politics in Class War that was excluded from the paper. Individual members of Class War were influenced by anarchism, autonomist Marxism and the situationists, and these views greatly influenced the politics of CWF, especially in the early days.

Synthesist?

And therein lies the serious problem. How do you reconcile those different theoretical viewpoints in a overtly populist organisation? One method would have been to become more platformist, encouraging theoretical unity. Instead Class War took a conscious decision towards the alternative approach of allowing differences to co-exist, an almost synthesist approach (see article on European Anarchist Movement in this issue for a further discussion of this tendency). Putting aside the ACF's strong disagreements with CW's bias towards supporting national liberation struggles

and their ambiguity over the unions, there was much agreement with ACF positions, and several times in the past decade there were moves to bring the two organisations closer together, even as far as a series of ‘merger talks’. But the lack of desire for theoretical unity in Class War was always the stumbling block. In the early days, there was the dropping of the circled-A from the Class War logo, which ran much deeper than the cosmetic change it appeared, and many at the time argued against it. None of the theoretical publications (The Heavy Stuff, A Decade of Disorder, Unfinished Business) seemed to reflect the organisation as a whole, even when they said they did, but more importantly they did not seem to influence the organisational direction of CWF in any way, even though much of the theory was classic anarchism. Unfinished Business, their most developed exposé of theory, is littered with quotes from influential anarchists, and the book as a whole endorses the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists. But the paper carried on seemingly regardless, pumping out the often changing simplified lines, determined not to be labelled anarchist, whilst CWF experimented with organisational forms, some libertarian, some quite dubious. For example, there was the two-tier membership policy of members and supporters, the ‘Rigorous Approach’ promoting the idea of getting the ‘best brains’ together to develop CWF’s theory, and the support for an election candidate in London.

The lack of an organisation wide approach to theory helped to create and justify intellectual hierarchy, often, ironically, disguised as anti-intellectualism. Furthermore the lack of theoretical unity allowed intellectuals to come in and cause mayhem. First there was Andy Anderson’s destructive two class theory (Middle Class, Working Class, no Ruling Class which he is still pushing), then there was the almost leadership cult of Tim Scargill. Both of these caused splits. Some would argue that Ian Bone’s influence in CW’s activities was also a symptom of this, yet another ego being allowed to dominate. Instead of a sixth Heavy Stuff magazine, a pamphlet written entirely by trades union maverick Dave Douglass was offered.

Unwilling

Unfortunately, for all their honesty, the ex-CWF membership seem unwilling to discuss this past, to learn something from it, or share it with the revolutionary movement. There is still the arrogance that if Class War has failed at least it was bigger and better than any of the other anarchist organisations. In the light of the wind up of CWF, they would do well to reconsider the positions of ex-members who were in the past critical of its approach to organisation and theory. Discussion will no doubt continue, but at present the main idea seems be that of promoting solidarity groups as widely as possible. In terms of creation of a ‘culture of resistance’, which the ACF agrees with whole-heartedly, this appears to be a positive start, although the old problem of London dominance should not be overlooked. But at some point the same questions of how revolutionaries organise will arise. Even if a decision is made not to create structures with worked out policies, in a desire to involve as many people and groups as possible, some agreements will have to be reached, and also a method of dealing with the disagreements. The criticism usually levelled at the ACF (and groups like Subversion) is that we would rather sit down and discuss theory than go out and do it. But the reality is we’ve all been ‘doing it’ for more than 10 years. We haven’t built the mass revolutionary movement we want to see, yet. That’s a fact. But simply desiring something better in an almost desperate manner, without some analysis of past failure, is not enough.

It is hoped that these criticisms will be taken in the comradely way they are intended, and that something positive and vibrant will emerge, as least from the 'new direction' faction of ex-CWF. We aren't sitting and criticising from the sidelines either. The ACF, more than any other group, has had close dealing with Class War. Some current members of ACF have previously been in CW, and many others have attended conferences as observers, and of course there's the aforementioned experience of the merger talks. And we've often worked together practically over the years, so let's hope that will continue.

As for the faction (which some have called 'provisional CW') who are producing the new London Class War paper, they don't seem up to much with their sexist "Lock up your daughters" sloganeering and a Leftist approach to Ireland which makes out that the Sinn Fein election victories were a victory for the working class. To Movement Against the Monarchy we say please give it a rest ma'am and do something useful! In any case, don't take our word for it, the addresses to contact are below.

Organising for change within the Community

What Community?

When discussing possible alternatives for effective organisation at ‘community level’, we should first recognise that most of us do not experience any sense of community where we live. If we get on well with people living around us it is sometimes at the expense of concealing our more extreme views about how society should be run and who should run it. As one woman put it at the ex-Class War meeting at this year’s Anarchist Bookfair in London this October, people in my community think I’m mad!. This feeling of isolation from the very people we identify with in class terms is natural, because there can be no real community in a capitalist world, only different degrees of alienation. There are only ‘communities of unfulfilled interest’, if you like, be they defined by geographical area (such as a street, estate or suburb), or by interest, for example ones that are defensive or campaigning (e.g. refugees facing deportation, victims of male violence, employees fighting management), or creative (e.g. the ‘artistic community’), leisure orientated (e.g. a football team and its supporters), or intellectual (e.g. a utopian reading group), or whatever. It is important to note is that these groups, unless deliberately structured to avoid it, are frequently as divided by competing and conflicting interests — e.g. white middle class woman organiser vs. Asian and working class users/‘victims’; or football club directors vs. fans; or artistic patrons and artists with a commission vs. amateurs and radicals — as they are united by what brought them together.

Awareness

For example, a campaign in which ACF members were peripherally involved as part of their ‘local community’ was able to stop the siting of a Sainsbury’s supermarket in their neighbourhood. It would have increased traffic and pollution, taken up part of a children’s playing field and put local shops out of business. The campaign was strengthened by the awareness that at the same time Sainsbury’s was taking on several almost identical campaigns in similar locations around the town, on the basis that it only needed to beat one of them to get a new site. However, the fact that two rival corner shops were initially behind the campaign kept a certain irony largely unstated; they had each acted to mobilise a largely fictional community in their own economic interests. They succeeded in keeping out of the area the supermarket which would have provided the community with cheaper, better quality food as well as jobs, so that they could both continue to compete for local custom. Transient propertyless elements, such as students and problem families renting accommodation, were not even aware of the campaign, let alone mobilised by it. And the campaign’s major tactic was writing to local councillors, whom the shopkeepers already knew, being part of the propertied community etc. etc. Neither was there any attempt to link up

with the campaigns in similarly targetted localities because, on the face of it, we had different interests from them. So now it is not ours but another community which has a Sainsbury's built on what was its only bit of grass and trees.

Community — a lost cause?

So how do we go about attempting to create community? And if it isn't really possible under capitalism, is it a waste of time? Of course not. Attempting to bring people closer to others with the same interests is important work for revolutionaries. People in our own communities are usually also working class, also oppressed, unfree or exploited either by ability, race, gender, sexuality or economics, and also either angry or depressed, or commonly both, that this is how shit things are going to be for the rest of their life. But it is sometimes other people that they see around them that they blame as readily as they blame 'the rich', 'the boss' or 'the state'. It is by raising and discussing such issues, not by minimalising and smoothing over apparent conflict, that community activity can be challenging, radical, subversive and a part of wider long-term change. After all, didn't we become anarchists and communists ourselves because of the painful truths we perceive in the world around us. Our problem is essentially that we don't meet many people day to day who have yet come to same conclusions. These very real practical and tactical difficulties faced by anyone attempting to organise in their local community have been borne in mind when making the following observations about three potential and existing community-based initiatives.

New Libertarian Initiatives — Some Observations:

The IWCA and Birmingham Newtown.

The alliance between Red Action and some other activists which produced the Independent Working Class Association (IWCA) placed involvement in community issues on its agenda from the start. Correctly pointing out that working class people were cynical about middle class leftists and councils intervening for their own political gain in community issues, they wanted to give 'the community' the chance to set its own agenda. In Birmingham's Newtown area the IWCA canvassed local people to determine what issues they wanted action on. Street crime, mugging and burglary were the issues which kept coming up, and so a public meeting on the issues was set up. The organisers escorted people to the meeting who were literally too afraid of muggers to leave their homes alone. In addition, IWCA members who did not live in the area kept in the background so that the meeting genuinely reflected 'local' and not 'political' opinions. The meeting was a huge success in terms of numbers and steps were taken to make the area safer. For example, access to alleyways used by burglars was blocked up, to the fury of the impotent council. However, the IWCA seems to have failed to address itself properly to reactionary ideas which they must have anticipated would also be expressed by some people in any crisis-ridden community. For example, the idea that the major problem is 'anti-social' elements. Activists in the IWCA surely know that crime is mostly committed by people with little or no alternative but a choice between misery on the dole and preying on the most defenceless people who live near them. Are these people not also part of the community of the area, or does community only

extend to the law abiding. And exactly what type of activity is being taken against muggers? Failure to challenge such ideas and to simply accept community wishes just because the community is working class, can lead, as it seems to have done at points in Newtown, to what libertarians should recognise as a misdirection of legitimate anger. For example, we heard at the Bookfair from a macho-type involved in Birmingham that, “it just so happens that most of the muggers are black. You can’t get away from that fact, even if the SWP call you a racist, because tackling the problem of mugging is what ordinary people want”. ‘Ordinary’ people would exclude black people then? Of course this isn’t what IWCA members believe -this was nerves and bravado making him speak without thinking straight – but it made a largely white anarchist audience squirm and it is hard to imagine that ‘law-abiding’ black people would be comfortable to hear muggers described in such thoughtless and insensitive language. We must never demonise the ‘criminal’, be they poor and desperate or cynical drug barons, in the terms used by the state, the cops, racists or vigilantes. Failure to address the problems of vigilantism as a solution to social violence is in fact a major problem with the Newtown initiative, from our point of view. For a start, it panders to the property ideology of the state, just like neighbourhood watch or grassing thieves up to the cops. But more importantly, just because we feel helpless in a violent society doesn’t mean that a group of tough guys can sort it out for us. Self-activity is central to the libertarian agenda but peripheral – actually an obstacle – to patrols of self-appointed protectors of the weak who see their role as some kind of alternative law and order in Newtown. The message should never be ‘the cops can’t protect you, but we will’. This sounds all too much like the community control undertaken by paramilitaries in the North of Ireland, which has more to do with vanguardism and substitutionism, which Red Action support, than it has to libertarianism.

Forest Fields Independent Residents Association

The IWCA initiative has inspired other projects which are fortunately more influenced by libertarian ideas. In inner-city Nottingham the Forest Fields Independent Residents’ Association (FFIRA) also hosted a huge meeting as a result of canvassing the area. The initiative was also a response to the recently established Partnership Council, set up by businesses and budget holders to get local consent for their own vested interests in the allocation of five million pounds of European money. Before FFIRA had even done anything, councillors were up in arms about their authority being usurped, and one of the meeting’s organisers was practically challenged to a fight by a drunken local official. The politicians presumably realised that their inactivity in the area was being exposed and that dangerous self-activity by the residents was looking likely. A good start! As the organisers anticipated, what people most wanted to get off their chest was the state of the area – litter and dog shit mainly – and also the danger posed to children by shopkeepers selling cigarettes, drink and fire works to minors. Hardly the issues revolutionaries like to get their teeth stuck into, but what was wanted was a community-led agenda, not an ideological one (although hopefully converts may be made along the way!). Unlike the IWCA in Birmingham, The IWCA and their comrades in Forest Fields demonised neither ‘irresponsible dog-owners’ nor ‘corner-shop owners’ but suggested ways in which it could be pointed out that the community as a whole, of which the ‘culprits’ were a part, should put the blame squarely on the council (for example, for failing time and time again to provide litter and dog shit bins). Posters in shops and a demo at the councillors surgeries involving dog owners, dogs and dog shit are being planned! These activists have taken the initiative as part of their community, not on

its behalf. And yet the fact remains that at the initial large public meeting when issues for action were agreed, only a handful of people put their names down on the contact list, and even fewer have turned up to subsequent meetings to put the plan into action. There is clearly a long way to go before many people will feel confident or inspired enough to take action themselves rather than leave it to politicians or radicals. Nonetheless, the campaign is still young and maybe it will generate activity interesting enough to establish a track record and prove itself worth getting involved with. Indeed, important pit-falls such as getting bogged down in single issues are already being addressed before they become a problem, and it is too soon to be despondent.

Community Confederations

Another idea was launched at the Anarchist Bookfair which attempts to take organising within area communities beyond localism and lifestylism. A discussion paper titled Community Confederations tells us that the “culture of protest is defeated.....but the state...cannot and will not stand against a vibrant alternative.....[that should] create practical examples of an anarchist way of life at street level...[initiating community gardening, transport, pooled resources etc.] ... and that the confederations should have a branch in every town and be linked through a national network”. In itself the paper is badly thought out. No community based network can be organised on a town basis without becoming centralised and elitist, because it could not involve direct participation and free discussion but, as the paper virtually suggests, rely on an unimaginative system of elected delegates of some kind. We are stifled enough by democracy as it is, but on a town-wide scale?! At the meeting, however, the proposer suggested not that these groups should be in each town, but rather in every community — i.e. many in each town. This is an important distinction. Organisation of this kind, if it took off on a large scale, would mean that pockets of subversion would no longer be isolated by geography or the dominance of informal elites which thrive in unstructured groups, but be linked to their neighbours by geography and constant contact and comparison. Unfortunately, the discussion paper does not really depict the class make-up of towns in a useful manner, for it states that “this process could resemble a union for the community, reaching across generational, gender, ethnic and cultural barriers we now face, and dissolving the class divisions which plague us”. Really this is rhetoric and not a plan of action. What kind of union would an area community have? What bosses would it negotiate with and what labour would its members withdraw? And how many communities are plagued with class divisions? Aside from a few students, teachers and social workers with stripped-pine dining tables, area communities in the inner cities contain working class people, communities in the suburbs are usually either white working class or lower middle class, the upper-middle class and the bosses live in big houses in private estates or in the countryside. The very fact that we have a common class interest in our working class communities is why there is any long term point discussing community organisation at all.

Necessity

However, the Community Confederations’ idea that autonomous community projects should be established and resources shared should not be dismissed as readily as it might be in some quarters. On one level, the idea of sharing garden forks, bikes, child care etc. appears useful only as a point of middle class liberal/ecological principle when there is a class war to be waged

out there. It can be, usually correctly, dismissed as life-stylist. But this is a valid view only if the people involved in it are a/middle class and b/have the economic choice to spend their time distributing propaganda rather than weeding a communal vegetable patch. The reality of life for many people, even for some people with jobs, is that they are malnourished, freezing in winter, unable to get access to even essential transport and health care, or an education worth their children turning up at school for. It is not the duty of anarchists to fill this gap, because it is the fault of the state. But informally and increasingly alternative lifestyles, involving shared and created resources, are being sought not just by idealists but by semi-political people just trying to survive. As the leaflet points out, we might just want to extend this into the areas where we live not only as an example of anarchist ideas, but to help us survive and fight in the long term. After all, no one dismisses squatting as 'lifestylist', be it by punks or homeless families. More often than not it's a necessity. The author of Community Confederations doesn't believe that it is going to take more than this to change the world permanently and meaningfully, and he is wrongly dismissive of the need for revolution. When speaking about the idea at the Bookfair, he suggested that organisations such as the ACF had a place within this network, as its theoretical backbone, or something along those lines. Whilst we do think we have some good ideas, we don't see it as the role of revolutionary organisations to act as gurus. Such situations need hard work, new ideas, and coherent explanations arising from everyone's experience, not outside experts! We are individuals in our area and interest communities too, but we are also in a groups trying to start the process of real change now. The point is that if such community based initiatives thrive – we start fixing up communal cars, teaching each other languages, performing music, brewing communal beer or whatever, and all without payment or exchange of any kind, and a collectivity empathy and practical support could reduce crime perpetrated by working class people against each other – we should also raise our sights to a society when this will be the norm and there will be liberty and equality as a matter of course.

The Culture of Resistance

What we feel is needed is the creation of a culture which is more dynamic and innovative than traditional forms of democratic and hierarchical political struggle, but more analytical and honest about the nature and causes of the problems which the working class experiences than the vibrant, but essentially reformist, counter-culture which our capitalist society has become so adept at accommodating. This revolutionary culture, the 'Culture of Resistance' which the ACF talks about in its propaganda, was not our invention. It has been discussed by revolutionaries since the struggles of our class moved beyond the work place and the stifling 'one union' mentality and took on more varied forms and possibilities. Class War have recognised its importance before and it is also a phrase used by the African-American anarchist organisation Black Autonomy, and they both seem to mean the same thing by it as we do. But only in pockets has subversion managed to be both dynamic and ideologically coherent, which the 'Culture of Resistance' has to be.

The 'Culture of Resistance' essentially embodies two things. Firstly, we have said that there is no community but only unfulfilled communities of interest. Revolutionaries should engage in these communities, as they typically already do, as people sharing the experience or supporting those who do. Such campaigns as we are involved in or initiate at community level are not

less important because they are reformist either, because these days ‘reforms’ can mean the difference between health and illness, warmth or hypothermia, sanctuary or persecution, and not infrequently life and death. And, as well as taking on hard graft, we should raise issues and ideas honestly and straightforwardly as members of the same interest community. We are good at the former, but rarely effective at the latter. As people sharing such experiences we should not be shy of raising the issue that poverty, discrimination etc. are part of a wider state strategy to weaken our class, take up our time and energy, and stop us making choices about what we actually want in an ideal world, i.e. one in which we can all flourish, not just exist. Secondly, we need to establish new forms expressing revolutionary ideas and subverting existing culture, working with our political groups and also the allies who we meet in the campaigns and communities described above. Then we can spread our ideas in ways which will appeal to people bored or cynical about conventional forms of protest and recognising that, as the Community Confederations author also points out, the state has learnt to deal with demos, leafleting etc. Newly emerging and creative forms of protest and subversive activity, such as Reclaim the Streets, can teach us to be unpredictable and unexpected in our tactics. But in addition we have to put the case for changing the political world, and not settle for learning to survive it. And we must also attempt to inject our politics and outlook into established arenas which are conventionally safe from subversion – by-passing and sabotaging the tedium which local councils impose on area politics; distributing liberated erotic literature in local libraries; participatory art forms in school playgrounds at lunchtime; drowning out Salvation Army marching bands with sound systems, or whatever. It only remains to stress how important it is for us to critically reassess the ways in which we engage in our communities. The fight is too readily channelled into being either boring, ineffective or elitist, and potential communities are smashed or divided before they become collectively self-active. We must be more creative and subversive, and organise well enough to get one step ahead of the advocates of tedium and authority. We must encourage networks of dissident groups linked by their communities of interest or locality, with input from groups and individuals who have been thinking about revolutionary activity specifically, to create a revolutionary culture which is both self-active and liberating for the individual and has ability to sustain itself and prove successful.

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