

The Bradford Mayday98 Conference

A review of the proceedings

Anarchist Communist Federation

1998

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In previous issues of Organise! we have reported on the aftermath of the dissolving of Class War Federation, and possible initiatives for growth of anarchist organisation since then. We now report on the exciting MayDay98 “Struggles for social change — New ideas, new approaches” conference which took place in Bradford on 2–4 May alongside the 1in12 Club’s second Reclaim Mayday weekend. In the run up to the Mayday weekend, regular meetings had taken place to organise the event which were attended by a mix of individuals, some from anarchist organisations (ACF and Solidarity Federation), some anarchists around Anti-Fascist Action, but mostly non-aligned anarchists and libertarian communists, including ex-CWF. Out of these meetings emerged the conference content and structure, which comprised group discussion of four broad themes: “Land, Ecology and the Environment”, “All Worked Up”, “Dream Time” and “Away from the Margins”.

British revoultionaries

The intention of the conference was to bring revolutionaries in Britain together without political baggage, so as to foster a cross-fertilisation of ideas of people from different backgrounds who had little contact with each other. In the end, around 250 people registered to attend over the 3 days from the Saturday to Monday. A handful of these came from the authoritarian left like International Communist Current and the Green Party, right through to right-wing ‘libertarian’, but most were anarchists and the non-authoritarian left. 10 ACF members were present during the weekend as both attendees and organisers. Participants were divided into groups of 15–20. After each day of themed discussion, each group wrote a summary for feedback to the other groups. On the last day, groups discussed practical issues arising from the weekend before coming together for a closing session, which then split up again into ‘focus groups’ which enabled people to look at how things might go forward practically.

Class struggle

So how did it go? The overall impression is one of great success, especially as so many people were brought together, which is a significant thing in itself as it confirms we are not content with the status quo. There was remarkably little sectarianism. On the first day an opening speech had expressed the need to respect differing views, and this did go a long way to make people feel comfortable with each other in groups where people didn’t know each other. Unfortunately it was clear after the first day that this had got a bit far and many groups reported too much agreement and that discussions hadn’t really gone deep enough to find differences in opinion. In fact, some groups remedied that the next day by deliberately focusing on controversial points! Most participants had a class struggle position, which was surprising, including large numbers with environmental bias, like Earth First!. Most were critical of existing or past organisations, and although the majority who registered said they were in an organisation of some kind, these were mainly activist or campaign groups. Most interestingly from the ACF’s point of view, few expressed the need for specific or permanent ‘ideological’ organisations.

West/“Third World”

Though it is not possible to summarise all of the debates here, some interesting issues raised were on the nature of globalisation and whether ecological problems are due to over-consumption or over-production. The consumption argument blames the arrogant ‘West’ and is thus quite moralistic and doesn’t use a class analysis, whereas the production argument puts the blame on the capitalists or state bureaucrats, but lets individuals who benefit from exploitation of the ‘Third World’ off the hook. Traditionally the former has been favoured by some environmentalists and the latter by the political left (the Revolutionary Communist Group being a notable exception, with their view that a ‘labour aristocracy’ in the West precludes meaningful solidarity with workers in the ‘Third World’), but it appears that more environmentalists are now coming over to a global anti-capitalist position.

The future

In “Dream Time” the nature of revolution was also discussed. There was some disagreement over the personal and political — ‘too personal’ being seen by some as lifestylist and not changing anything fundamental, ‘too political’ being seen by others as not doing enough to experiment with alternative ways of living which may be (or become) a threat to capitalist ideology. The ‘culture of resistance’ we are fond of talking about in the ACF may be defined somewhere in between, as preparation for revolution. Unfortunately, some will take this to mean that ‘The Revolution’ is something we can live right now, rather than the single event where we take on the power of the state and capitalist forces.

The movement

“Away from the Margins” mostly looked at how ‘the movement’ marginalises itself from the mainstream. Depending on your viewpoint, this is either a good or a bad thing. Many people want to be seen as different but at the same time want revolutionary politics to be attractive to ‘ordinary people’ and minorities. Unfortunately being open about your politics can lead to open to victimisation especially in work, which is why many people keep their heads down and won’t get involved in the first place, whereas the unemployed activist apparently has less to lose. This is still an unresolved problem, but may come together as the nature of work and dole changes. Most groups talked more about the movement rather than marginalisation of groups outside of it. This inward-looking approach was recognised by some as part of the problem why the movement is so small — not exactly a new idea, but still one that needs to be addressed, especially as we want more than just a re-alignment of existing groups, and want the revolutionary movement to expand and be more inclusive.

The biggest eye-opener came from the environmental groups which the Class War “Open Letter” previously labelled as part of the ‘unofficial anarchist movement’. This turned out to be quite incisive as many of them were at pains to explain how they had taken on class struggle or at least ‘revolutionary’ positions and that not everyone was a ‘primitivist’, but that this wasn’t really recognised by the ‘official’ groups. On the other hand, the conference was deliberately not promoted as an ‘anarchist’ event, but it was noticeable that many participants wrongly made the

assumption that most people there would identify themselves as such. Some felt disappointed that more SolFed members hadn't been at the conference, though many of them were at Bradford involved in other Reclaim Mayday events. This led to an unhelpful boycott rumour, which whilst unfounded, should at least make them think they should have engaged better. This was a very important event for the revolutionary movement which should have been taken seriously by all the existing organisations.

Next year

A repeat event is planned for next year. In the meantime increased dialogue between individuals and groups with environmental concerns and the mainstream organisations and non-aligned individuals seems likely, probably at a local level. Nationally, this is already happening at events like the Birmingham G8 and Cardiff Euro-summit actions. This is positive step, and could result in a growth of revolutionary ideas in what are seen by many as 'protest' campaigns. However, this still does not address the continued problem of (lack of) workplace intervention by anarchists, especially now the Liverpool Docks and Magnet disputes have been settled. It is probably true to say that nothing new came out of the conference in this respect, which may have something to do with an understandable reluctance to discuss competing workplace strategies in any depth at the conference. Over the last year, concentration on community struggles has been one of our strengths as it is clear that the rest of the left is unable to go beyond trade-unionism and workerism. But, it is also the case that the New Deal will attack wages and conditions as unemployed people are forced into compulsory work, and that consolidation of Europe will have a huge impact on the workplace. In spite of great efforts in Groundswell and other groups opposing the New Deal, we are still not encouraging the mass of the unemployed to get involved in political activity, let alone workers who will be also affected by it. It will be interesting to see whether this situation has changed in a years time.

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Retrieved on May 14, 2013 from web.archive.org
Published in *Organise!* Issue 49 – Summer-Autumn 1998.

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