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The Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation

Anarchist Federation of Scotland

May 12, 2013

The first Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax conference took place on 27th April in Glasgow, its aim to unite local groups across the country into one campaign with greater strength and resources. I'm surprised it hasn't received more coverage and criticism. I suspect that's because people are holding their tongues and focusing on organising locally and in other campaigns. However, I would argue that we need to discuss what's happening nationally so that we can be more effective in challenging the Bedroom Tax, and any government cuts, but also to ensure that a campaign like this is controlled by working class people themselves.

Here's what I've written previously:

The old authoritarian Left, after having lost much of its credibility, recognises the importance of the anti-Bedroom Tax campaign and has been trying as usual to put itself in a position of leadership in order to control it and regain political influence and power. Tommy Sheridan, out of prison for perjury, is back in the media spotlight as the face of

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the anti-Bedroom Tax campaign and, after everything he's done, still manages to muster enthusiastic support from his fan club. He briefly got himself elected secretary of the interim committee of the West of Scotland Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation, before being forced to resign because of his divisive role. But don't count him out just yet.

Well, that was a bit of an understatement. What in fact happened at the Glasgow conference was that the West of Scotland federation effectively became a national federation. Tommy Sheridan was elected the chairperson and, coincidentally, members of the Socialist Party Scotland (CWI) and SWP gained positions as secretary and deputy chairperson respectively. These, just to remind you, were the same parties that backed each other up previously in manipulating things in the West of Scotland federation and in putting forward Dave Sherry, one of those high-ranking SWP members who covered up a rape in the party, as speaker on the last march against the Bedroom Tax in Glasgow, 30th March. Sherry gave another speech at the conference. There were over 200 people there on the day, although it's unclear how many of those were voting delegates. In any case, out of all those present only one person actually voted against the officers during the election or seemed to have an alternative proposal. Furthermore, amendments to the pre-written founding statement were not allowed. And to cap it all, speeches were given arguing for the necessity of a workers' party and that we should look, funnily enough, to the example of the Militant tendency's influence in Liverpool council in the 1980s as to how local government should be run.¹

¹ Funnily enough, because both the CWI and Solidarity come out of the earlier Militant tendency. The Liverpool example is a bit hilarious, really. Militant managed to dominate the Labour council through undemocratic machinations in the labour movement and their very own Sheridan figure, Dereck

3. However, it may be that we can be involved in national organising and avoid much of the authoritarian Left. The No2BedroomTax campaign seems to have originally been part of the West of Scotland federation but is now independent of it. It seeks to support and link anti-Bedroom Tax groups throughout Scotland, and also seems to have a commitment to grassroots democracy and skepticism of politicians very unlike the Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation. I'm sure they're not interested in sectarian battles between left groups, but want to extend the campaign and have an impact. So, as far as I can see, this is a much more positive initiative. They've called a Day of Protest against the tax for the 18th May in Glasgow.

I'm much more inclined towards a mix of options 1 and 3. But I know from my own experience that the Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation is trying to involve groups from across the country in their own organisation, and that many don't see or aren't aware of it being dominated by the Sheridan crowd. At the moment, that's really unfortunate. The key points are to fight the tax without sacrificing or undermining other fundamental principles, not to surrender control of the campaign to the authoritarians, to be where working class people are, and to take our arguments to them.

This is all bad news. It is incredibly cynical to use a grassroots campaign meeting, presumably meant to attract people from different groups or none, as an opportunity for your own party political broadcast. That Sheridan has taken such a central position within this new organisation shows, as though any more proof were needed, the extent to which he's willing to go to trample over any independent attempts at organising and promote himself. As a politician, he is so toxic and divisive that his latest ego trip is his way of saying a big fuck you to the rest of the Left, and leads him to actively compete with any other organisation he can't control. As for the structure of the federation, the steering committee is meant to consist of 60 elected members from across Scotland. That's sounds democratic, right? The problem is that the national federation's officer positions appear to be permanent rather than rotated, there is no mention of recallability for the members from local groups, and it seems likely that the parties will between them be able to engineer things in enough local groups to marginalise any differences in the steering committee – after all, this is what's happened so far. And, just to be clear, a real federation doesn't 'steer' things from the centre but *co-ordinates* what groups have already decided and told their spokespersons. It all starts to look like a small group of party activists deciding things among themselves and then passing on these instructions to the 'foot soldiers'

Hatton (who's now a millionaire property developer). When they got into power the Labour council did indeed build houses, parks and sport centres. It ended up fighting teachers' unions, the Black and Ethnic Minority community, making deals with the Conservatives so that Liverpool council didn't support the miners, spreading mass disillusionment among council workers, especially after having to 'pretend' to deliver thousands of redundancy notices, and seriously undermining self-organisation and radicalism among the Liverpool working class for succeeding generations. Another hierarchical leadership cult, whose vague Leftism was constrained by becoming the business managers of a council, and who were eventually chucked out of the very party they were meant to take over to achieve socialism.

– without whom there wouldn't be a "federation" in the first place. That's not a federal structure, it's a party structure.

But this is an important point. It's not just party hacks who were at this conference or who will be involved in the "federation". Most of the people will be those who are genuinely concerned by the Bedroom Tax or are directly affected themselves. And I am certainly not criticising them. The number of people attending the first conference was certainly impressive.

It is argued by some that anarchists only denounce things and retreat into 'pure', small-scale initiatives with little influence or give up entirely. I would dispute this, but were it ever to be true it would be a mistake. We need to be where people are. What we share even with the parties mentioned above is the aim to defeat the Bedroom Tax: to pressure local authorities, housing associations and government, and to physically prevent evictions if necessary. In campaigns like this it would be naive to think that we can avoid working with other political groups we often disagree with.

However, it would be equally naive to suggest that divisions aren't ever meaningful and can simply disappear. There is a line. Pro-feminism isn't an add-on or a separate issue, it has to be advocated by us in everything we do. We need to oppose sexism wherever we encounter it or we are hypocrites. And we should always argue for directly democratic structures. This isn't some sort of luxury; it increases the participation and popular base of organisations, making them stronger and more radical, and ensures that a struggle like this has a positive long-term effect on class solidarity and empowerment.

This all leads to the question: can and should anarchists and anyone with a commitment to genuine grassroots organising be involved in the Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation?

My mind isn't made up on this, but I think there are a few options:

1. If it becomes clear that this federation is a lost cause, and just another in a long-line of front groups then we could ignore it and concentrate on making the local community groups we're already involved in as successful, as influential and participative as possible. At the same time we should continue to be actively a part of regional federations like that of Edinburgh & Lothians, which has taken a much more positive direction since it's much more diverse, hasn't yet been captured by party socialists, and recognises the need for directly democratic decision-making. We shouldn't take that for granted, but make sure that we build on this beginning.
2. Let's get one thing straight: anarchists love federations (the clue's in our name). We want to federate everything, and build a collective power from below, rather than have weaker isolated groups. So, we definitely support the idea of an actual national federation. Despite all its problems, if this federation is the only cross-Scotland organisation in town and continues to attract local groups and working class people (which is what it was designed to do) then perhaps we need to be involved. But that would require us actively arguing for important changes in the structure, processes and current officers. Sheridan needs to be ousted, and Sherry refused a platform altogether. That all sounds like an uphill struggle. On the other hand, Trotskyists and their ilk will always try to dictate and manipulate. They're the ones who call the A to B marches on Saturdays, who set up the 'national federations' and open 'coalitions', choose the speakers and speak to the media. We can either complain about this or challenge it with a co-ordinated response.