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Review: Unfinished business — The politics of Class War

(AK Press) £4.50

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Retrieved on 12th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 39 — Summer 1993.

theanarchistlibrary.org

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have now been told to “fuck right off” out of Class War so this turn may well be over before it started!

‘Unfinished Business’ offered a new approach, only time will tell whether or not Class War has returned to it’s old ways. In any case the experience does demonstrate that it is a mistake to believe that political theory can be sacrificed on the alter of fast growth. Perhaps Class War will need to change it’s motto from “by all means necessary” to “chickens coming home to roost”.

Class War is a British group which came into existence at the time of the 1984 miners’ strike. Since then it has gained a certain notoriety with the British media and has been blamed for the 1991 Poll Tax riots among other things. This suited Class War, the paper focused on individuals or groups lashing back physically at the system and presented the rest of the left as soft, middle class and boring. Class War however found itself unable to build out of the nation-wide coverage it got during the Poll Tax riots, unlike Leninist groups like the SWP. This helped win the argument inside Class War for a turn to boring politics.

‘Unfinished Business’ is 186 pages of Class War explaining its political outlook. What’s more it does seem to represent a real if unacknowledged break with their past. The book is divided into sections which include capitalism, the state and revolutionary organisation. It provides a good, if sometimes flawed, introduction to the topics it covers and even attempts to tackle Class Wars historical problem area, Ireland.

The section on Ireland is a good place to start. For the first time Class War clearly lay the blame for the war at the feet of the British state. A clear distinction is also drawn between the activities of the Loyalist sectarian terror gangs and the IRA. They also say that Ireland needs to be raised in the same way that other political issues are raised with British workers.

CLASS WAR AND THE IRA

However illusions do exist in republicanism as is shown by the description of the INLA as a “more class struggle oriented group”. This implies not only that the INLA is a socialist organisation but also that the Provos are as well. In reality the socialism of the INLA has never amounted to more than fire-bombing Dunnes Stores during the anti-apartheid strike. This was condemned by both the strikers and their support group

and demonstrates a real elitist style of “doing it for you” politics.

The republican movement has always opposed any element of socialism which might lose its support from the nationalist middle and ruling classes. As far back as the war of independence the IRA drove off landless labourers that had occupied big estates in Munster. Socialists should defend the Provos against the British state because they are anti-imperialists not because they are 10% socialist. Attempting to find bits of socialism in the politics of the Provos just serves to sow illusions in them and throws doubts about what exactly Class War considers socialism to be.

Fortunately the rest of the book makes clear that Class War would have little in common with the “socialism” put forward by the left of the republican movement or the elitist theory of republicanism in general. As the blurb on the back says “We argue here for the re-creation of an independent revolutionary movement within the working class, under the control of none but themselves, inspired by the best traditions of unity and solidarity”.

WHAT TYPE OF ORGANISATION?

The section on organisation refers to “The Platform for Libertarian Communism” with which Class War see “no need to disagree”. Previous articles in Workers Solidarity have discussed this pamphlet which we reprinted some years ago. It was produced by anarchists who had fled the USSR in the 1920s and argued that anarchists needed an organisation with theoretical and tactical unity that was based around collective responsibility and federalism.

The issue of what Class War intend to do to build such an organisation is avoided however, instead anarchist groups are criticised for putting all their efforts into various campaigns.

Class War however are “going to build organisations which will have in-depth support and popularity in this country...and whose groups and activities will be dispersed throughout our class where it counts”. Sounds good but isn’t this the way every anarchist organisation sees itself.

One criticism of the book is its tendency to set up plastic versions of the rest of the left which can then easily be knocked down. Anarchists, we are told, “hope that some sort of spontaneous mass uprising and revolution will develop on its own”. If this was the case then why we would bother forming organisations at all. Later we are told that anarchist organisations “are loose and political emphasis varies from one anarchist to another”. This is just a standard criticism of Class War stood on its head and is hardly an accurate description of anarchist organisations like the WSM.

UNCONVINCING

The book does not really define where Class War considers itself politically. It borrows theories and quotes from both anarchism and Marxism. From its rejection of Leninism it obviously sees itself as a libertarian organisation. The book is obviously trying to distance Class War from anarchism but the methods it uses are unconvincing. British libertarian groups seem to have a tendency to get excited by a sense of their own importance and end up dressing up old theories in new clothes.

Class War’s politics up to now were aimed at recruiting anyone who reacted against the current system whatever their opinions were. For years they failed to work out any political positions beyond a general ‘bash the rich’ philosophy. The attempt to turn the organisation around would obviously be filled with difficulty and last year rumours started of an impending split. The British anarchist fortnightly ‘Freedom’ carried a letter from Class War saying those who edited this book