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The Libertarian Communist Group [LCG]

Big Flame

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December 3, 2009

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Groups who joined Big Flame no. 2.

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In BF

The Big Flame Conference in December welcomed the LCG's decision to fuse. About 10 LCG members joined BF. 5 others decided not to do so (1 of whom a few years wrote an article in the Discussion Bulletin as a BF sympathiser). Within a year, 2 of those who joined BF had left, feeling it lacked "cohesive politics". Several never became that active in the organisation. In part this was due to their geographical location. Those in London and Norwich were able to join local BF groups (as did someone from York who moved to Birmingham). Others, for example those living in Lancashire and Middlesbrough, found themselves isolated.

A handful of former LCG members were very active in BF. At different times two of them were part of the BF National Committee (NC). Ex-LCGers were active in a number of BF Commissions e.g. Irish and the International, and helped produce the newspaper. Like ex-Revolutionary Marxist Current members, former LCG members identified with one of the two main political currents in the organisation, joining the Emerald Street Tendency. Therefore, contrary to the comments on some other websites, the former LCG members were not part of the BF minority which left the organisation in 1981 to join the Labour Party.

In May 1984 Big Flame effectively ceased to be a national organisation, with only 17 people carrying on under the name. Two of these 17 were previously in the LCG.

At least one former LCG member has returned to class struggle anarchism. He lasted less than a year in Big Flame, and later helped form the Anarchist Communist Federation in 1985. It has since become the above mentioned Anarchist Federation.

ORA

The Anarchist Federation of Britain (AFB) has an extremely long history, and always contained within it a large variety of differing and opposing ideas. In 1971 the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists (ORA) was founded as a ginger group within the AFB, but soon left. ORA's criticisms of the AFB were mostly organisational rather than theoretical, but it started to develop a class struggle perspective. I have seen different figures quoted for the maximum number of members achieved by ORA – from the 70s up to the 100 mark. It produced an agitational newspaper Libertarian Struggle.

ORA suffered from a series of losses of membership, some to Trotskyist groups, and by the mid 1970s came to something of a standstill. In 1975 it changed its name to the Anarchist Workers Association (AWA).

AWA

In 1976 the AWA had around 50 members, and the paper was called Anarchist Worker. An important influence of the developing politics of the group was "The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists". This was first published by a group of Ukrainian and Russian anarchists in Paris in 1926. It was reprinted in France in 1972, and in 1977 the AWA brought out an English edition.

The AWA's "Aims and Principles" stated: "Capitalism is a class society" and "the position of the working class as the collective producer of society's wealth makes it the only force capable of replacing capitalism by a classless society". On the role of the AWA this document said: "The task of the AWA is to aid the preparation of the working class for their seizure of power. The establishment of an anarchist society is something that has to be consciously fought for by the working class. ... The AWA

aims to offer a lead within the working class movement by example and explanation. ... The AWA does not seek independent power for itself but seeks to work through the working class organisations”.

Between 1976 and 1977 there was a bitter split. The immediate issue under dispute was Ireland. The AWA opposed internment and favoured the withdrawal of troops (but not immediately and only as a result of united class action), and was strongly opposed to the IRA (“we reject all para-military groups as nationalistic, elitist and divisive”. A grouping which emerged with the AWA – the Towards a Programme Tendency (TAP) – labelled this position “absentionist”, and took the line of the Troops Out Movement.

The dispute was about other issues than Ireland. TAP also argued for a less “ultra-left” position on the unions favouring their “democratisation”. According to the Anarchist Federation: “The TAP tendency accused their opponents of “traditional anarchism” and wishing to “lead the AWA back to the days of the AFB” whilst the TAP tendency was accused by its opponents of “Trotskyism”. One former LCG member who later joined Big Flame recalled recently that the situation was “two quite incompatible philosophies co-existing in the same organisation. The non-TAP tendency seemed to me like religious fundamentalists, insisting on the letter of their sacred texts no matter how irrelevant or impractical in the real situation of the time”.

At the May 1977 Conference TAP supporters had a majority. Apparently without prior notice they proposed a motion expelling their opponents, which was carried. The expulsions were later defended on the ground that those expelled “had reached the stage of behaving in a wilfully disruptive manner” and that life for the AWA “would have proved impossible had the people concerned continued as members”. Others have argued that the split was badly handled and took the course it did because of a lack of a tradition of political debate in the AWA.

LCG

In 1977 there was another name change: the organisation became the Libertarian Communist Group (LCG), and after that the paper was renamed Libertarian Communist. An article in the October 1977 issue of Anarchist Worker “What is in a Name ... Why We’re Changing” said that while the AWA had developed out of traditional anarchism, this had fossilised. It affirmed its allegiance to working class revolution, and acknowledged that Marx had made a “great historical contribution”. The new name proclaimed an identity with other groups on the continent who described themselves as libertarian communist.

There were seven issues of Libertarian Communist in A3 newspaper format (the first dated Jan/Feb 1978) and one in A4 journal format. The new paper continued the tradition of the Anarchist Worker in supplementing short news stories with the centre pages devoted to an interesting extended feature: Russia 1917, France 1968, Spain 1936, Germany 1918–1919 and so on. The article mentioned above from issue no 3, accepted some criticisms of the paper: insufficient space devoted to sexism and patriarchy, or “quality of life”.

From 1977 onwards the LCG never had more than 20 members, and numbered about 16 in August 1980. They decided that they were too small and lacked adequate collective practice. This led to the decision to join Big Flame.

To others in the anarchist movement the LCG, and its predecessors, were “Anarcho-Trots” or a form of “Bolshevised Anarchism”. They were accused of “leftism” – tailing leftist organisation. Particular objection was taken to their position on Ireland, their participation in elections through Socialist Unity and, of course, their decision to join Big Flame. In the words of the Anarchist Federation: “the short-lived Libertarian Communist Group also displayed Leninist and reformist tendencies that would eventually see their abandoning libertarian politics”.