

BAD Brigade Breaks Up

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

ca. 1999

After more than 13 years of hard work, the Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade voted to dissolve itself during an extended drinking bout at the Green Street Grill in Cambridge, MA, on Thursday, February 4, 1999. Some participants in the debauchery spent the rest of the weekend nursing a hangover. Other members announced their intention to carry on the BAD Brigade's publishing venture in another state more conducive to their revolutionary goals.

The BAD Brigade started out as a small circle of anarchist drinking buddies and their friends back in 1986. The founding group included an individualist anarchist and several members of the Black Rose collective from across the metropolitan Boston area. Over the years, the BAD Brigade evolved from a loose network, meeting after the Black Rose anarchist lecture series, into an even looser organization. Their desire to avoid becoming a serious, committed, and humorless organization, coupled with the dissemination of individualist and other heretical ideas, made the BAD Brigade an object of continuous controversy within the anarchist scene. Despite these controversies, the reliable publication of the BAD Broadside series and various pamphlets provided a valuable source of unconventional views among anarchists and activists of many persuasions.

The break-up of the BAD Brigade was preceded by a two-year-long debate within the organization around a number of issues that proved irreconcilable. In the course of this debate a few members signed onto a document entitled "Where and What We Drink" (WWWD), which argued that all of the practical and theoretical problems that faced the BAD Brigade could be answered from "within the haze of a smoke-filled bar." Other members raised provocative questions (How do you organize a cocktail party without replicating elements of a state? How does a revolutionary relate to her or his drinking companions as an organizer?) and often found that bartenders and waiters didn't have satisfying answers. The WWWD document and its backers offered vague and moralistic answers to such questions. Worse, WWWD warned that this questioning was evidence of a covert plot to corrupt anarchism with prohibitionist thought.

A second major issue was the theory of name brand privilege, which holds that the social and cultural privileges granted to drinkers of top-shelf liquors in the US, and not just anti-beer snobbery, is the primary obstacle to unity among oppressed drinking people in this country. WWWD described the privileges granted to drinkers of top-shelf liquors as "petty and apparent" and some members of the WWWD faction attacked the theory of name brand privilege. In opposition to this position, others argued that opposition to the system of name brand privileges was central to their politics and part of what attracted them to the BAD Brigade in the first place.

A third major issue was ownership of the means of consumption. Some of the WWWD faction members had stopped contributing to maintenance of the Brigade's collective mug supply years ago. This was reflected in their drinking behavior. Some brought along glasses, purchased with their own funds, which often weren't integrated into the BAD Brigade's preferred style of drinking apparatus. Yet others even drank beer sold in individual bottles. A couple were doing good work, drinking out of appropriate vessels and avoiding bottled beer, but had failed to fulfill responsibilities to the organization which they had taken on when the BAD Brigade Drinking Apparatus Committee (DAC) was expanded to include them. The DAC was the body responsible for the day-to-day decision-making of the BAD Brigade, but this DAC never met after it was elected at the 1997 BAD Brigade Beer Bust.

While this debate was taking place, two BAD Brigade members broke down. One became less and less active after relocating to another city which banned the sale of alcohol and coming to see the organization as irrelevant to their recovery. The breakdown of another came later and was more directly associated with the political divisions that finally split the organization.

Although many sought to keep the debate over these issues civil and focused on the underlying political questions, a number of documents sunk into personal attacks and distortions of people's actual political positions. It was in this context that many of the opponents of WWWD decided that they could no longer remain in the same organization with the WWWD faction. The degeneration of the debate, combined with the organizational breakdown of the DAC and the individual breakdown of several members, created a general demoralization that was followed by a rash of resignations from the organization, though these came primarily from members who had long been sober.

It was clear that the organization had come to an impasse. Opponents of WWWD realized that it was necessary to support a resolution to disband the organization, in order to clear the way for launching a new organization on a firmer foundation of political unity and commitment to actual participation in mass happy hours.

This new organization took the name Drunk by Night Organizing Committee from the drinking song "Goes Down Smooth" which refers to the ease of consumption of draft beer. The name also reflects our desire to root our politics in the real traditions of drinking of the society we live in. In that spirit, we have decided to form a provisional committee that seeks to build an organization from the ground up with other groups and individuals we see as our political allies.

Several members of the new group still identify as liquor drinkers, and the organization is committed to anti-authoritarian politics, an anti-statist revolutionary strategy, and regular consumption of alcoholic beverages. But we have deliberately chosen not to identify as a hard-liquor-drinking organization to make clear our anti-sectarianism, our openness to a range of intoxicating influences, and our determination to distill a new politics more in tune with the drinking habits of the 21st century. We look forward to continuing to work with all of our allies, both those who identify as beer drinkers and those who don't.

The Drunk by Night Organizing Committee is currently composed of a local branch in Cambridge, MA. A number of other groups and individuals have already expressed interest in affiliating or working closely with the new organization. We will continue our participation in student and poor peoples' drinking efforts and we will carry out an intensive study and discussion process in order to clarify our basis for political unity. There is a strong commitment on the part of its members that, in comparison to the BAD Brigade, the Drunk by Night Organizing Committee will be more consistent in making sure that its members live up to expectations of membership

that are appropriate to a serious drinking organization, and that we will be more serious about the development of our politics through drinking, study, imbibing, discussion, tipping, and ongoing critical reflection on our experiences in mass happy hours.

The WWWD faction has begun work on two projects. The first is a journal to be titled either “Libertine” or “Dyspepsia.” The second is a call to form a “Fresh Revolutionary Anarchist Drinking Brigade,” “a group of individuals united around firm anarchist/anti-authoritarian politics and outlook, oriented to the drinking classes and most thirsty, and active in building Anti-Sobriety Action as an anti-prohibitionist mass movement.” Some members were unhappy with the lines along which the organization split and will not be part of any of the post-BAD Brigade projects, nor will the small minority who actually did come to twelve-step conclusions during the period of debate.

The final drinking bout started civilly with reports on the work and future plans of the people in the room followed by a unanimous vote to disband the BAD Brigade. This tone was only broken when the question of dividing up the resources of the organization came up, and it became clear that the debts of the organization were greater than its assets. As it currently stands, the Drunk by Night Organizing Committee has been shouldered with all of the debts incurred by the BAD Brigade. Negotiations are under way to see if the other projects will contribute anything toward retiring the BAD Brigade’s debts.

Members of the BAD Brigade expressed feelings ranging from deep intoxication to profound nausea at the disbanding of the organization. The burning question for members and non-members alike was what would happen to the publishing project, which was respected, or at least tolerated, by many who never supported the organization that produced it. A final statement will be published [You’re reading it now!]. The Drunk by Night Organizing Committee has decided not to create any new publications for at least six months, until we can determine whether or not sufficient support exists for them and whether or not it is a politically appropriate use of our limited resources.

All BAD Broadsides and some of the BAD Brigade pamphlets are still available from the Bad Press. We can be contacted at:

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