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The Italian Job

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MAF. I returned hopeful, knowing that the passion for true freedom and anarchy burns not only in some Irish hearts but also in the hearts of friends in Florence.

Florence has to be one of the most beautiful cities in Italy if not in the world. Nestled in a Tuscan valley it lies half way between Milan and Rome. Thanks to the hospitality of some friends in the Anarchist Movement of Florence (MAF) three members of the Workers Solidarity Movement were recently able to visit this city. During the week we spent there we were able to be tourists by day and meet with anarchists by night.

On the Friday night that we were arrived in Florence the MAF organised a meal and an informal question and answer session in their headquarters. After the beautiful food and some glasses of wine we learnt more about each others' activities and current situations. The questions we were asked ranged from the Irish government's current relationship with Sinn Féin to the possibilities for increased class struggle with the cease-fire? We were also asked for our views on the Internet and the attempts by the US government to have some control over it.

COBAS

We found out about the Cobas, which is a loose umbrella group of unofficial trade unions. They grew from broad disaffection with the official trade unions in 1987-88, initially in the railway, education and health sectors. In 1991 they went on to organise what by now has become a famous one day general strike against the Gulf War. It was fascinating to talk to someone who was involved in this movement. The talks went on until the early hours. A great deal of thanks must go to our tired translators on that night.

The Social Centres

On Saturday night we were taken on a whirlwind tour of the various social centres which exist in Florence. These Centres are all in occupied buildings and operated by various groups with different political agendas. The local councils have kicked out people from these squats but they do not seem to do it with any great persistence.

The first Social Centre I visited was the 'Autonomist', centre which had a famous rock group playing. The gig itself was free although you were asked to contribute some small amount of money at the door. Outside it looked like a deserted factory with some great graffiti on the walls. Inside you had a bar serving draught beer, a great sound system, a separate area for art, design and street theatre props. The place was alive with about 300 young people, loud music and about 12 dogs!

Next up we went to a house/villa on the edge of the public park which was used by the Greens, anarchists, and people who campaign for the rights of American Indians (as some Italian company is trying to build an observatory over their lands). There weren't as many people here but there was still a live rap band, a gallery displaying some interesting art and a lot of young people simply drinking and inhaling. There were some political books and pamphlets on display along with bootleg tapes of concerts.

The Blues Brothers, Che and me

Finally, we went to a Leninist Social Centre in the south of the city. Here a concert had just finished and hugely loud rock music was being played by a very lively DJ. There was a bar and, as in all the Centres, the drink was cheap. Young people sat around and shouted at each other to be heard while one amorous couple got to know each other better. On the walls

there was the flag of Cuba, the hammer and sickle (naturally) and posters for every anti-imperialist struggle from Palestine to Guatemala. Upon this scene of late night/early morning revelry the handsome features of the Che Guevara, coupled with the Blues Brothers looked down from the walls. I wondered what Che would make of it all ?

The Social Centres were a great experience to see in operation. Coming from a country that brings the law down on your head with furious vengeance should you dare think of occupying unused buildings, I was impressed at the new breath of life these places had. I can think of many buildings in Dublin that could be used in this way. The Centres provides a place where young people can go and not be told how to dress or be charged exorbitant money for drink. Politics don't seem to get debated on Saturday nights (if it gets debated at all, I cannot say). Importantly, the Centres provide a place where you know there exists a culture which is at least anti-authoritarian.

Anarchists in the unions

On Sunday we met with anarchists active in the CGIL (a major union federation) who are in official trade union in Education. They see getting anarchists elected as shop stewards as important in an attempt to deal with the heavy bureaucracy which exists within the official trade unions. They too are faced with big unions who have a leadership completely divorced from the issues affecting the ordinary member. Their aim is to build a rank and file movement .

Gratzi, heres to the future

So after a week of sunshine, art , culture and politics we returned to Ireland. We were treated with great hospitality and shown warm friendship, especially by the comrades of the