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Recollections of my time in Solidarity

A brief account of four years in Solidarity.

Louis Robertson

I thought I'd try and put down some recollections of my time in Solidarity and what I remember about the organisation. I actually joined in the late 70s and was a member for about four years, during the time that we were producing the magazine Solidarity for Social Revolution.

Soldarity was formed by ex-members of the Healyite Socialist Labour League. People leaving the SLL could expect a dose of 'proletarian justice'. Rumour had it that Solidarity members kept a load of incriminating SLL central committee papers which they threatened to publish if needed. Strangely enough nobody in Soly got a pasting from the SLL heavies.

Solidarity was heavily influenced by Socialisme ou Barbarie amongst other things. Actually, looking back, the influences were probably more eclectic. Solidarity published many pamphlets, they fell into a number of categories which probably reflect the different influences on and within the group. One effort was to republish the works of Castoriadis into English (under the name Paul Cardan). Some of these were fascinat-

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ing, most were concerned with his attacks on what he saw as Marxism.

In reality, he also came from a trotskyist background, and much of his critique is a critique of his own past. I don't profess to being much of an expert on Marx, but Cardan's critiques seemed to bear little relationship to the Marx I read.

It was from this trend that Solidarity's ideas of society being divided into order givers and order takers came, rather than a working and a capitalist class. This was not a view held by everyone and anyway many simply seemed to see the ideas of order givers and order takers as being another way of talking about the working and a capitalist class. Others took it far more seriously and I think that these ideas still linger on in the anarchist movement in the politics of Class War and Andy Anderson et al.

A second strand was rediscovering important moments of revolutionary working class history. This saw many excellent pamphlets, including Brinton's Bolsheviks and Workers Control. Without Solidarity's efforts we would all be much less knowledgeable in Britain.

A third effort was in publishing industrial accounts which gave voice to what workers were doing during important periods of struggle, particularly in the late sixties. In the late seventies we tried to continue this in the magazine with a couple of special motor supplements. We were able to do this because some of the original members had an industrial background. It also led to an appallingly crap piece of garbage on the Lump, by Dave Lamb.

Solidarity also published Brinton's excellent Irrational in Politics and some other works.

I first came across Solidarity in the early 70s, probably 72. I was in the SPGB at the time and was impressed by the way Solidarity seemed to be able to combine the need for mass revolutionary consciousness and relating that to actual industrial and social struggles. At that time Solidarity had autonomous

groups in a number of British cities and was bringing out more than one paper.

It was a time of mass industrial struggle and each issue carried fascinating commentaries and analysis of what was going on, combined with what workers were saying. I first went to one of their meetings in 1973, I think. It was in London and they were in the process of having a split.

The group that were to form World Revolution (subsequently part of the ICC) started off as members of Solidarity. The arguments centred around the Castoriadis views, and as so often happens ideas became polarised. As it turned out Solidarity were probably better off without them.

As the seventies went on a group of us in the SPGB became more influenced by Solidarity and eventually were kicked out and formed what became Social Revolution. We were never very big, we had 12 – 15 members, but we began to meet Solidarity more and eventually Brinton suggested that we merge the two organisations. Before we did that we had lengthy discussions which led to a rewrite of *As We See It* and *As We Don't See It* (the basic statements).

At that time membership fluctuated around the 80 to 100 mark. There were groups in London, Aberdeen, Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Oxford and probably some other places too. We held conferences every quarter and brought out the magazine *Solidarity for Social Revolution* at the same interval. Whilst we were never a membership organisation as such, people still had to be known by others and be accepted into membership which depended on agreement with *As We See It*.

Conferences were places for lively discussion as well as business. Sadly the political tensions within the organisation came to a fore as the 70s drew to an end. One was over the issue of money in a socialist society. Cardan's book *Workers Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* had talked about equal wages administered by workers councils.

Some people believed that this was a good idea. Others of us were more communist. You can imagine the arguments.

Another issue was the relationship to trades unions. This intensified with the uprising in Poland and the birth of Solidarnosc. The debates were around what our relationship should be to that organisation. To be fair, a group of us were becoming heavily influenced at the time by the Left Communists, so it is hardly surprising that the atmosphere got strained.

Somewhere along the line Maurice Brinton dropped out. Except that he kept the stock of literature and dealt with a lot of correspondence. By that stage things were getting pretty sour. Arguments then shifted to other areas. In all probability things had got blown up out of proportion and I don't see the point in going over them.

The Manchester group were co-operating with the local ICC to produce Wildcat as a free sheet. The ICC members left the ICC before Manchester Solidarity split from Solidarity.

A load of us left in the early 80s and from that split Wildcat eventually emerged. Other ex-Solidarity types started Counter Information. That of course is another tale. In my opinion, Solidarity was one of the most important organisations in post war Britain. Apart from the syndicalists, every group in Britain today owes something to their ideas.