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Big Flame
A Short History of the Libertarian Communist Group
1980

Retrieved on 7th May 2022 from bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com
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A Short History of the Libertarian Communist Group

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Taking inspiration from the French Organisation Revolutionnaire Anarchiste, the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists was started in 1971. It was a reaction to the powerlessness and lack of formal structure of the now defunct Anarchist Federation of Britain (AFB). The AFB was a real Holy Roman Empire of the left, containing all sorts of anarchists, from syndicalists and libertarian communists, through hippies and liberals to individualists. It had grown to a size of several hundred in the aftermath of the CND/Committee of 100, but its lack of political cohesion rendered it incapable of growing, many activists leaving to join the rapidly growing International Socialists (IS) and International Marxist Group (IMG).

A group developed inside the AFB that called for such fundamental points as formal membership, voting to decide issues and collective responsibility, and for class perspectives in opposition to some of the vague ‘humanist’ ideas that sought to blur a class analysis of society. At first the organisational perspectives were more strongly emphasised, and the ORA group set up inside the

AFB as a ginger group finally decided it could make no further headway and departed. There followed a period of consolidation when a number of pamphlets were produced. By February 1973, ORA, numbering about 80 people, decided it was strong enough to bring out a monthly agitational paper, *Libertarian Struggle*. The paper proved to be a forcing-house for the development of the group and ORA's class perspectives were developed more acutely. Early editions concentrated on all aspects of struggle against capitalism, anti-fascism, claimants, gay liberation, housing, as well as the women's movement and the industrial sector. The paper was an advocate of the necessity for the autonomy of women's and black struggles.

It has been noted that ORA publications tended to reflect the concentration on the development of libertarian forms of organisation. Pamphlets such as "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" and the "Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists" were not seen as perfect models for a libertarian organisation, rather as a basis for discussion.

In the beginning of 1974, a split took place when some members who had formed the "Left Tendency" quit. They called for an elected Editorial Board rather than a paper edited in rotation by each group and for a more coherent position on Ireland among other things. However, they lacked patina, and lasted only a few months before they decided that it was in the nature of libertarian socialism that the attempts to form a national organisation were bound to fail, and turned to the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). This must be seen in the light of the intense agitation against the Heath government and the feeling at the time that a crunch situation was developing.

The organisation came to a virtual standstill, as these members had been amongst the most active in the group, and many others, who weren't prepared to take on the workload, dropped out.

Amongst those who remained, some took the initiative to revive the organisation. A short run (1,000) *Libertarian Struggle* was put out in November 1974 and sold out within ten days, and there

followed a period of recruitment and consolidation, until May 1975 when the paper began to appear again on a regular monthly basis.

At the beginning of 1975, ORA changed its name to the Anarchist Workers Association. A change which these writers in retrospect felt was a mistake, implying workerism, tending to narrow the perspectives which the early ORA had. This development was in part due to the fact that most of the membership was active in union/workplace struggle, although this is still a poor excuse.

By 1976, the AWA had 50 members, most of them active, with 3 groups in London, groups in Oxford, Yorkshire, Leicester, Brighton and Scotland. The paper, now called *Anarchist Worker*, was a regular monthly with sales of 1,500 to 2,000, mostly street sales. It was to some extent a “libertarian version of *Socialist Worker*” but in fact the coverage was wider, for example covering the struggles of squatters and claimants, and also more provocative in questioning the work ethic. The AWA was devoted to a thumping class-struggle anarchism but did have a line of full support to the autonomous struggles of women, blacks and gays, though perhaps in a rather undifferentiated fashion.

The organisation went through a vicious split between Spring 1976 and Spring 1977. The “Towards a Programme” tendency was founded primarily to change the 1976 Conference decision on Ireland, where the majority had back an abstentionist, “plague on both your houses”, anti-republican position. The TAP tendency then went on to develop a number of initiatives, some of them practical e.g. commissions to cover women, the public sector, industry etc. some of them political e.g. for the AWA to develop a programme to put to the class, for a less “ultra-left” attitude towards trades unions, for the AWA to develop its theory.

Unfortunately, the AWA did not have a tradition of political debate. Much of the debate there was conducted at a puerile level. The opponents of the TAP tendency accused it of “Trotskyism”, who retaliated with charges of “traditional anarchism” and “wishing to lead the AWA back to the days of the AFB”. In fact, neither set

of accusations was strictly true. The TAP tendency was a progression for the AWA, though not towards Trotskyism, and their opponents were class struggle anarchists who were anti-intellectual, and, when it came to the crunch, liquidationist.

Eventually, at a conference in May 1977, the TAP tendency had a clear majority and asked their opponents to leave the organisation, saying they would have left if the positions had been reversed. This offer was declined and the opponents of the TAP tendency were expelled.

The AWA changed its name to the Libertarian Communist Group, while those who had been expelled set up the Anarchist Communist ASSociation which has since collapsed.

We moved from a class struggle anarchist to a libertarian, critical, Marxism, although this development was maturing in the years of the ORA/AWA. We already had a commitment to:

1. Trades union work. We recognised that trades unions have been produced by struggle and are now bureaucratised and often act against workers interests, but we saw that we had to work within them.
2. United Front Work. We backed work in the Socialist Teachers Alliance and the Socialist Students Alliance. We believed it was possible to work with other socialists around specific objectives.
3. Anti-imperialist struggles. We supported the right of nations to self-determination though retaining the right to criticise the leaderships of such struggles.
4. Towards a programme. We had not, and still have not reached agreement on what kind of programme we need. We have always felt that it was vital to be in a position to intervene in the struggles of the class around a set of demands.

In the period since 1977, we have never had more than 20 members. We have carried on our active involvement in trades union work and we have produced Libertarian Communist as a thoughtful, critical, paper. We have tried to develop our ideas and our understanding of the history of the revolutionary movement. We have produced supplements to Libertarian Communist on Russia 1917, Spain 1937, etc. and also supplements on problems such as “Socialism and Democracy”, “The Role of the Peasantry”, etc.

The decision to fuse with Big Flame arose partly because we felt increasingly that the LCG was too small to give us an acceptable forum for political discussion and also that we lacked an adequate collective practice, however, we would not have decided to fuse had we not felt that there were no serious political differences between the two organisations.