

A History of the Solidarity Federation

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The Solidarity Federation was formed in 1994, at a conference in Blackpool, Lancashire, called by the Direct Action Movement, industrial networks and Norwich Solidarity Centre.

To understand why and how this came about, we need to look back into developments happening in the Direct Action Movement in the 1980s and early 90s.

The DAM was the British affiliate of the International Workers Association, or IWA, the anarcho-syndicalist international organisation. It had formed in 1979 from a conference involving the previous affiliate, the Syndicalist Workers Federation, and groups of anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists across Britain. At the time, there was no real current of organised anarchism in Britain, with previous initiatives having stalled or disappeared; and the other groups that came to the fore in the 1980s – the ACF and Class War – were yet to be established.

This meant that the DAM swiftly attracted what, for the time and place, was a lot of members, peaking at around 200. However, the problem soon arose that there was no clear agreement on what DAM should be doing. Some people saw it as an anarchist federation, others as an anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group; when I joined in 1985, the person recruiting me told me it was his union. It wasn't, and lacked clarity on exactly what it was doing. However, the mid 80s was the last time in this country that the class war was fought openly on both sides. There were a series of big disputes, including the year long miners' strike, steel workers, newspaper printers at Warrington and Wapping, P&O. Alongside these were many smaller disputes such as Silentnight, Ardbride, Moat House, the John Laing lockout, Trader Group. The DAM didn't have a detailed strategy, but was very good at initiating and providing support to workers in struggle. It is important not to downplay this solidarity, as it meant a lot to the workers involved, and also to our political evolution.

The ideas that the DAM advocated, of workers control of disputes, militancy against the bosses and government and general rank and file control, found echoes in the experiences of workers involved in them. However, as an organisation DAM varied and had lots of baggage, so this rarely translated into membership. Barry Pateman famously tells of miners involved in the hit squads expressing interest in DAM, but there not being any way DAM could have accommodated them.

So, on a general level, we had learnt that our ideas had a real world resonance, particularly for workers in struggle. But one dispute in particular was to influence how the DAM progressed, the Ardbride dispute.

Ardbride was a small company with two factories in Ardrossan, on the West Coast of Scotland. They made products for the upmarket Laura Ashley chain, such as lampshades. Laura Ashley marketed these as “hand-stitched” but in reality they were machined in a sweatshop. Workers joined the T&G and struck in September 1986 over pay and conditions. At the time the top wage was £1.70 an hour and there were no guards on the machines in the lampshade factory and the pottery had 12 times the legal limit of dust. The workers demanded safe conditions and £2.50 an hour. Two days later the boss fired them all.

The T&G was supportive at first but refused strike pay as the workers hadn’t been in the union long enough. This meant the strikers were only getting money to survive from supporters as there was no state help.

Edinburgh DAM had made contact with the workers and asked for support across the DAM. Ardbride were hard to reach, as it was in an out of the way place, so at the suggestion of the strikers, we picketed their customer: Laura Ashley. As they had international outlets, this was picked up by the FAU in Germany and WSA in New York among IWA sections, and by the WSM in Dublin. Solidarity was also expressed outside some branches by the newly formed ACF. It worked as far as it could, Laura Ashley put pressure on Ardbride’s owner to settle, and he offered them up to £2000 but they refused. In April 1987 the union pressured them to agree, then dropped the dispute when they refused. The strikers carried on, but the company told everyone that it was not official. At the time, workers were far more likely to respect a picket line if it was “official”, as was found when some SW London DAM members tried to picket the delivery depot for Laura Ashley.

From these experiences, came a view that we should start taking ourselves more seriously and begin the work to become a union. This wasn’t a consensus, a number of DAM groups rejected it, most notably SW London, Huddersfield and the younger members of Manchester, arguing that building unions when the TUC had nearly 10 million members was a misdirection of effort and instead we should be arguing for greater union democracy and rank and file control. Eventually this group coalesced into the Anarchist Workers Group, left the DAM and adopted a platformist approach. Other opposition to the project of becoming a union within the DAM didn’t extend to any formal positions being taken up.

At this time, as well, the ideas of industrial networks became better worked out. This marked a direct rejection of the old rank and file networks promoted by DAM previously, in that there was a rejection of the political pluralism within them, leading to many just being electoral machines for left wing slates. Most famously, when such slates were elected such as in the CPSA, they proved to be no different from the right wing slates. These ideas were summarised in the pamphlet “Winning the Class War”.

Three networks were formed – Transport, Education and Public Services. Transport was the smallest but probably had the biggest impact, but was hit hard when one of its primary militants was sacked for his activities. All the networks had some successes, and were separate from the DAM. Some members even left the DAM to prioritise the work of the networks. DAM members were also involved in setting up the Despatch Industry Workers Union, among couriers in London. DIWU was the first union initiative for many years, and though it never grew massively in terms of members, it had an influence way beyond those numbers. It was also a practical test, as at the same time a Trotskyist was organising a Couriers Branch of the T&G, in effect following the course of action advocated by the AWG who had split. While DIWU was not a long-standing initiative, it still lasted many years past the T&G in the industry, and DIWU militants were in-

volved in another attempt to start a couriers' union some years later under the banner of the IWW.

The other strand of thinking that emerged from this time was that of the Local, with an emphasis on having some sort of physical building. This was carried furthest in Norwich, where the Norwich Solidarity Centre grouped together DAM members and other militants in a shared space, and got involved in supporting local struggles including the fight to stop Nestle closing the old Rowntrees factory and against a personnel agency.

So, this was the background to formation of the SF. I think it's fair to say that the initial growth that had been expected as part of this regroupment didn't happen, and SF nudged along with between 40 and 60 members. It didn't help that the SF was launched after a decade of defeats for the working class in Britain that was unmatched since the 1920s.

In 1996, there were listed Locals in N&E London, SE London, North Somerset, Sheffield, Manchester, Preston, South Herts, Liverpool, Tyne & Tees, Edinburgh and Norwich and Norfolk, with contacts in Bristol, Wales and the South. Transport Network was via Norwich, Public Services via NELSF and EWN and Communication Workers via Manchester.

Ten years later, the contacts page in DA 37 lists Locals in Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Manchester, Northampton, N&E London, Preston, South Herts, South London, South West England (Somerset) and Yorkshire. Only EWN and PSWN are listed under networks. Probably the most notable development during this time was the Stuff Your Boss anti-casualisation campaign. This was rooted with a basic leaflet outlining basic employment rights and used as an agitational tool. The members of SF at the time clearly saw the erosion of the terms and conditions associated with permanent employment as a threat to us all, but all the mainstream unions were hoping the Labour government would expand employment rights. And they call us idealists! Labour had power from 1997 to 2010 and did not expand employment rights much, and did nothing to roll back the anti-union laws.

However, SF was about to experience its first modest growth in years as a younger generation of militants joined and brought some fresh energy, generating some much needed internal debate. Many of them had been through the activism associated with summit-hopping and were looking for something else. Those especially critical of the activist scene had regrouped around the website libcom.org, and many of these joined SF. The younger generation brought new ideas and experiences, but also new technologies, as slowly the creaking SF website and internal communications were improved.

As well as the growth in terms of both locals and networks, the last few years has seen a number of refinements into internal processes, such that there is now a handbook, capacity for decision-making on a federal level between National Conferences, and a process by which a new Local or network can be established. This latter allows for a Local-in-formation status, allowing new groups to slowly grow into becoming a Local, which has seen a higher proportion remaining. There are currently 12 Locals and four more in formation, and the size of each local is significantly bigger. As an example, SLSF meetings used to happen around a table in a pub – and a small table at that. SLSF now has just under 30 members and while not all will come to meetings, a room is now rented.

In terms of the new ideas, there were long internal discussions around a document called Strategy and Struggle by the new Brighton Local, which eventually laid the foundation for "Fighting For Ourselves", the pamphlet (or more accurately book) recently published by SF. Fighting for

Ourselves has been fairly well received and it is worth going into it a little bit here as it is a culmination of processes, whereby SF has ended up where it is.

Reformism is in a corner. So, if workers are going to organise to improve things, the ability of reformists to gain reforms is limited. (And by reformists I mean people who think that that is all that is possible).

Chapter one analyses “the mainstream workers’ movement”, charting from the full-blooded origins of trade unionism to today’s hollowed-out bureaucratic structures. In contemporary times, “The energy it would take to reform or dislodge such bureaucracies, not just the elected officials but the structures themselves, is many times that required to simply bypass the bureaucracy and take action outside it.”

This is from the infantile disorder blog’s critical review. The pamphlet makes it clear that the sort of union SF advocates is an associative one, not a representative one.

The last few years has seen SF Locals take on more of the functions that an a-s union would have – assisting workers in trouble and helping them take direct action to get what they want. This has involved SF mobilizing around issues like stolen wages, such as with Office Angels and the Hartley pub. With Office Angels, an employment agency, they had not paid a contact for three days work. SF members picketed the Office Angels office and gradually escalated, to the point of there being an international mobilisation lined up at the point the company caved in.

Similar logic has followed SF’s participation in the anti-workfare campaign. Workfare is where the unemployed are forced to work for their benefits. SF has seen it as an attack on all workers, not just those forced to work for nothing, as it undermines pay and conditions.

Where there have been larger social movements, such as against austerity or the student protests of last year, SF’s involvement has been to push for militant direct action, and tried to make that visible, such as by calling radical workers blocs with likeminded militants and groups like the AF.

Coupled with the public activities like this, SF has developed a training programme, which has been rolled out across Britain and is aimed at whatever scenario people find themselves in – whether in an already unionised and organised workplace, where there is a union but no organisation or where there is nothing.

SF members have also taken part in several accountability processes, both within SF and the “wider movement”. This has been an important development, as the emphasis has been on “safer spaces” and there being a process.

At the SF’s 2011 conference in Brighton, it was agreed that SF should be described as a “revolutionary union initiative”. The motion talked about SF’s role and identity following several years of discussions and “to reflect our movement away from being a simple political organisation, we should describe ourselves as a ‘revolutionary union initiative’. In conversation, this abbreviates to ‘union initiative’ where appropriate, whilst the ‘initiative’ covers the fact we are aspiring to function as a revolutionary union rather than being one at present.” SF is still tiny, but as one member put it when I was canvassing on the first draft: “we see ourselves as an organisation that is yet to become what we want to be, and we’re finding out how to do so. Office Angels and the workfare campaign make us visible as an organisation while in background, the workplace training and the experience of older members enable us to re-establish traditions of workplace organising. We’re still tiny but we’re on the right track.” I can only summarise by saying that the development of SF mirrors the confidence we have in our ideas.

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