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The Direct Action Movement

Mike Hargis

1993

The DAM (British section of the International Workers Association) was founded in 1979. The founders of the DAM, which including the Manchester Syndicalist Workers' Federation, rump of what had been since the 40s a national organisation, recognised the need for better organisation and for Anarchists to address working class issues in a more coherent way than the existing Anarchist Federation (last of many such attempts) which was grounded in disorganisation and with too many interested only in pacifism and the punk scene. In a way, the DAM could be said to have fulfilled part of its original aims. The DAM's early years were spent in finding its feet and consolidating the organisation as well as intervening in industrial disputes wherever possible.

The big break for the DAM came with the miners' strike. This had a twofold effect. Firstly it shook a lot of the anarchist movement out of its life-stylist torpor and into activity. More importantly for the DAM it showed the relevance of syndicalist ideas for the British working class. The sterling work done by DAM members and other anarchists won them the respect of many of the most militant miners.

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Retrieved on 27th January 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
From Libertarian Labor Review #15, Summer 1993

theanarchistlibrary.org

The middle to late fifties saw a number of other disputes which the DAM supported, including the Kent Messenger, Silent Night, Traders, Meathouse and the printers' dispute at Wapping. Particular mention must be made of the Ardbride workers. DAM members mounted a consumer boycott of Laura Ashley, Ardbride's chief customer, which was later mounted internationally through the IWA. This forced Laura Ashley to threaten Ardbride and force them into making concessions. Unfortunately, the union (for recognition of which the workers had been fighting) called off the strike at a critical moment and the strikers failed to get their jobs back.

Experience of these disputes led the DAM to develop a new industrial strategy. This broke decisively with the previous syndicalist tactic of working within the unions. The unions were seen by the DAM as beyond reform and to have failed the working class. New strategies are needed, based on direct action, workplace assemblies, and strike committees. The first step is to form 'industrial networks' of militants in the service industry whose long-term aim is to form an anarcho-syndicalist union. (The change of direction was not unanimous and a number of people left the DAM, some of whom went on to set up the short-lived Anarchist Workers' Group).

The DAM tried to implement this strategy over the last few years, with mixed success. Workplace groups, which would be the basic building block of any union, have yet to be established. Nor is the DAM able to develop the ideas much further than at present. This is in part due to the nature of the DAM — a political group with its own share of dogmatism. But it is also because any further development must come from the practice of workers organising rather than the theory of those who aren't.

This lack of progression on the industrial front is linked to the DAM's high turnover of members, and stagnation over the last few years. However, the DAM was never going to be perfect and it's easy to criticise such things as the poor internal education, but it doesn't look so bad compared to other anarchist groups.

The DAM has been involved in a number of campaigns where it had a disproportionate influence to its numbers. In the anti-Poll Tax movement the only organised challenge to the dead hand of Militant came from the DAM. Needless to say, others who hadn't even heard of the Poll Tax before Trafalgar Square were quick to claim responsibility. Nor will it surprise us when the historians say these organised it!

DAM played a capital role in the re-launching of Anti-Fascist Action, the organisation which actually fights fascists rather than just talking about fascism (or shouting at fascists, like the SWP-organised Anti-Nazi League).

Whatever the future of the DAM, it has certainly made a great impression on the anarchist movement in Britain. Anarchists are now for better organised than they were in 1979. The task now is not to organise the anarchists, but for the workers to organise.