

Platformism and the WSM

A Workers Solidarity Movement Position Paper

Workers Solidarity Movement

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Contents

Preamble	3
A – Why the WSM is Platformist	3
B – Platformism in WSM Practice	5
1. Federalism	5
2. Theoretical Unity	6
3. Tactical Unity	7
4. Collective Action and Discipline	8
5. Outward Engagement	9

Preamble

This position paper outlines in practical terms what platformism means to the WSM. Our collective theoretical understanding is framed in the WSM Constitution's core point of unity number 3 and 4:

'3. We identify ourselves as anarchists and with the "platformist", anarchist-communist or especifista tradition of anarchism. We broadly identify with the theoretical base of this tradition and the organisational practice it argues for, but not necessarily everything else it has done or said, so it is a starting point for our politics and not an end point.

4. The core ideas of this tradition that we identify with are the need for anarchist political organisations that seek to develop: Theoretical Unity Tactical Unity Collective Action and Discipline Federalism'

A — Why the WSM is Platformist

1. The WSM is a platformist organisation.
2. We see this largely as the third way between informal and incoherent methods on the one hand and hierarchical methods on the other. It is not a compromise between or average of the two, but rather is the best balance between effectiveness and libertarian principles.
3. Organisation is not hierarchy. Informality and incoherence are not 'more anarchist' than platformism. That is a caricature of anarchism.
4. Specific political anarchist organisation is necessary. Syndicalist unions, campaign groups on specific struggles such as ecology or feminism, intentional communities and co-ops, and democratic local assemblies, are necessary but not sufficient to agitate for revolution.
5. Engaging in mass movements rather than operating as a purist and insular sect is vital to creating a revolution, which requires the self-organised resistance of large sections of the population.
6. In order to achieve global revolution, revolutionary organisations must have their memberships in thousands if not tens or even hundreds of thousands in larger societies in pre-revolutionary times, and operate over entire nations and across nations.
7. This is not possible using informal methods, which can only function in a small group of people (5 – 15) who know each other very well and for shorter periods of time.
8. Informal organisation is appropriate and has advantages in some limited circumstances. However, relatively speaking it is marginal and insufficient for creating revolution.
9. Informality and incoherency overlap, but we assess them separately here for clarity.

10. Informal organisation means that things are done primarily in a direct and spontaneous way. The group's politics and decision making processes are quite fluid, relying on personal relationships more than formal agreement. Delegation of tasks is limited, but individual autonomy is high.
11. Informality suffers from problems of:
 1. Informal hierarchy – biggest personalities dominate, cliques make decisions behind the scenes, oppressed and marginalised groups are further sidelined.
 2. Inefficiency – a consistent toss up of essential tasks means they don't get done, leading to burnout, resentment, and non-sharing of skill. Fear of organisation leads to shoddy work.
 3. Simplicity – certain tasks are just too complex to be achieved over any long period of time.
 4. Short lifespans – the lack of structure causes informal groups to disappear much more regularly than formal structured groups.
12. Incoherent organisation means that that membership is loose and open and that positions of collective agreement are very limited.
13. Incoherent organisation suffers from:
 1. Getting bogged down on disagreement over basic issues rather than being able to agree basics and focus on advanced issues.
 2. Contradictory public message and activity.
 3. Watered-down politics.
 4. Ineffectiveness due to lack of working together as a unit by the same tactics.
14. Therefore, well-structured, formal, coherent, organisation is necessary.
15. There are 5 options, then.
 1. To use a Leninist, 'democratic centralist', hierarchical organisational model whereby the specific communist organisation is de facto run by a cadre.
 2. To use an anarcho-syndicalist model, whereby the key aim is to build anarchist unions.
 3. To use a 'synthesist' model of 'anarchism without adjectives', whereby there are formal decision making procedures and some collectively agreed policy, but large variations in theoretical and tactical understandings among members.
 4. To use a cadre organisation model whereby a small group of anarchists with strong agreement formally organise but because of their size (and/or inclination) don't have the ability to directly intervene in many locations in mass movements.
 5. Leninism is too hierarchical. Synthesism is too incoherent. Anarcho-syndicalism lacks a specific anarchist political organisation and is too economist. The cadre organisation is too small and detached from the masses.

6. The last option therefore is to use a platformist model, a specific anarchist communist organisation, with high theoretical and tactical unity, which works as a collective, but which maximises freedom and democracy also.
16. Platformism is a living tradition, not a dogma.
 1. The tendency originates from a draft document written in 1926 by anarchist exiles of the Russian and Ukrainian revolutions in order to facilitate discussion around the lessons drawn from the Bolshevik counterrevolution and the perceived weakness and disorganisation of the anarchist movement. We refer to this as ‘the Platform’ for short, hence ‘platformism’.
 2. However, they explicitly recognised that the ideas were not new but rather largely a restatement of ideas and practices which trace right back to the First International and before.
 3. In any case, the WSM does not see this the Platform as holy anarchist scripture to be parroted and defended without criticism.
 4. We see platformism and especifismo as part of the same tendency.
 17. The WSM has a firmly social conception of freedom. Further we consider a mutual responsibility which supersedes the whims of any particular ego as being critical to the existence of true freedom.

B — Platformism in WSM Practice

The organisational practice of platformism is captured by 5 points: Federalism, theoretical unity, tactical unity, collective action and discipline, and outward engagement.

1. Federalism

1. Federalism is an organisational structure based on the free agreement of individuals and organisations to work collectively towards a common objective.
2. It is finding the best balance between independence and coherence, freedom and discipline.
3. All decisions are made by those affected by them as opposed to centralism, where decisions are made by a central committee for those affected by them.
4. This means, for example, that while all WSM branches are united under a common national policy, they are also autonomous, i.e. they can make their own local decisions. Branches determine their own activity by default, rather than waiting for orders from somewhere else.
5. We have no leaders or officials with higher authority than others. Rather, we have ‘officers’ who are delegated temporary authority to perform certain tasks as mandated by the membership (for instance, to be treasurer).

6. We practice direct democracy to make decisions, both at branch, and at National Conference and Delegate Council to form and administer national policy and tactics.
7. Federalism requires that different branches regularly communicate, in order to develop a sense of the national organisation and its activity as a whole, and to facilitate common action.
8. This will be done at a minimum via a National Conversation once a month (on Skype or similar online platform) which the National Secretary is responsible for co-ordinating.
9. Federalism means that there is a culture in the WSM of caring about and engaging with the concerns and activities of comrades in other branches, including travelling to support demos, and help with education, where appropriate.
10. To this end it is also important that members and supporters frequently use the Internal Forum.

2. Theoretical Unity

1. Theoretical unity is the extent to which members in the WSM share a common analysis of society, vision of the future, and strategy to get there.
2. This doesn't mean that everyone has to agree all the time (they won't) but there does need to be a certain amount of ideological unity. Otherwise, basic ideological disagreements will frequently break out and make effective organising very difficult.
3. 'Theory' here is like what physics is to an engineer, a tool to do things. Theoretical unity must be developed through engaging in real struggle, not just reading etc. Hence theoretical and tactical unity produce each other.
4. Further to this, theoretical unity also means developing a more advanced collective political understanding which carries over time.
5. The WSM does this formally by producing fairly substantial 'position papers' on certain topics (like racism, or ecology).
6. Theoretical unity allows us to act more decisively and to amplify our influence.
7. Tests of theoretical unity and level required:
 1. All members and supporters must broadly agree with the 9 points of unity. Where there are significant disagreements, those disagreeing are judged to have resigned their membership.
 2. Members are committing to be part of an organisation that implements what is written in the position papers and distributing material arguing for these positions.
8. Requirements to ensure theoretical unity is a reality

1. Theoretical unity cannot be created by a small minority producing policy. That is only nominal theoretical unity.
 2. Real unity requires regular collective discussion to both test the extent of our theoretical unity and to develop it.
 3. That discussion can take the form of educationals, discussion around collective campaigning, creating media together, discussing WSM policy at National Conference, and informal discussion at social occasions.
 4. It is necessary for the entire membership to be aware of what WSM policy is in order for them to know whether or not they agree with it.
 5. To that end it is required that all members read and become familiar with all WSM policy, or, failing that, around 70%. This is required within 1 year of joining the WSM. The organisation as a whole is responsible for ensuring this takes place, rather than just the individual.
9. We encourage criticism of established positions to avoid a stagnant and conservative political culture. Dissident and minority positions are to be considered as valuable as, and not necessarily in conflict with, the overarching aims of an organisation that strives for unity.

3. Tactical Unity

1. It is vital that an anarchist organisation must develop a coherent and concrete strategy, a tangible and inspiring vision for the future and an over-arching route to that future which guides our action in the present. Otherwise we risk being directionless, passive, and reactive, being victim to the vagaries of the system we seek to replace
2. Tactical unity means that the members of an organisation should struggle together as an organised force rather than as individuals.
3. Once tactics have been agreed by the collective all members should work towards ensuring its success, saving resources and time and multiplying our effect as individuals by concentrating in a common direction.
4. For example, making intervening in a particular campaign the main focus of our collective activity, or forming a working group to host an event.
5. In order to make a greater impact as an organisation than we would as the same number of mere individuals, it is necessary to collectively agree our working priorities.
6. This means that relevant members agree to give a higher priority to whatever is agreed to.
7. Thus a core part of the WSM's continuing practice must be a commitment to priority and goal setting. This needs to be strongly part of WSM culture.
8. Short, medium, and long term goals give us direction, improve morale and motivation, allow measurement of progress, and provide a framework with which to allocate resources.

9. There is a difficult balance to be made between the need to harness our numbers to be effective on the one hand and on the other hand the right of members to pursue what is most important to them and the tactical need to intervene in many different struggles and aspects of society.
10. However, that balance can only be discovered by experimentation, making an effort to work together on common projects and learning from that experience.
11. That process must involve collective discussion in order to develop what our collective approach will be.
12. Tactical unity will mostly not involve formally committing all of, or significant sections of, the membership to a single campaign for several years. It will mostly manifest as concentrated collective interventions over shorter periods of time, days or weeks.

4. Collective Action and Discipline

1. Collective action and discipline means that each member should take part in the collective decision-making process and respect the decisions of the collective.
2. It means the individual is accountable to the organisation but also that the organisation is accountable to the individual.
3. Also it means the WSM is a serious, self-disciplined, committed, group of revolutionaries. We are not a social club, historical re-enactment society, or group of political hobbyists.
4. Neither is the WSM a loose gathering of individual 'activists'. While we highly value individual initiative, we are mindful to tie our political activity into the broader agenda of the WSM. There is a responsibility on members to ensure their activity advances, rather than retards, that agenda.
5. There are formal requirements on being a member of the WSM. Continued membership of the WSM depends on not violating those requirements. For instance, members and supporters are bound by our Code of Conduct and paper on Relations with Left Groups, with the greatest onus on members.
6. Collective action and discipline means that we have an internal organisational culture where people consistently do what they say they will. This is often the key difference between a flimsy group that works badly and collapses, and a potent group that has staying-power.
7. Each member has a duty to make their best attempt at participating in the democratic process and doing their fair share of work rather than leaving it to somebody else.
8. We do not believe in crude individualism, and the organisation as a whole has many responsibilities to each member, including education, integration, and vindication of their rights as much as practically possible.

5. Outward Engagement

1. We are an outward looking organisation which seeks to exit our comfort zone and engage with the working class at large, rather than orienting ourselves towards the already convinced left or libertarian milieu.
2. This means seeking to become an organisation which spans the island of Ireland and has a membership of at least 1000.
3. It means making the difficult balance between meeting people where they're at and pushing the boat out. Neither left populism nor anarchist sectional purism.
4. It also means we engage in the resistance movements of the working class and with the issues that concern the working class at large.

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*Position paper on **Platformism and the WSM** as collectively agreed by the July 2017 National Conference. This sits under 'The Role of the Anarchist Organisation' paper, hence it doesn't repeat that material here.*

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