

The First Three Years Of The Workers Solidarity Movement

Workers Solidarity Movement

1988

Anarchism has no real history or tradition in Ireland. A few Irish emigrants such as Jack White or Matt Kavanagh did become anarchists but that had no effect on things at home. In the early 1970s there was a small group of ex-republicans who associated with the Anarchist Black Cross and got involved in small-scale illegal activities until the arrest and conviction of Marie and Noel Murray.

In the late 1970s the first local anarchist groups appeared (Belfast, Dublin and Limerick). Generally these were short lived as no amount of idealism could make up for the fact that they stood for nothing in particular this side of the creation of an anarchist society. They were incapable of sustaining any public activity and were a mash-mash of people who had nothing in common other than a self-description of “anarchist”.

Out of this came a few anarchists who saw the need for a national organisation, rooted in the working class and holding agreed policies and tactics. After much discussion comrades in Cork and Dublin launched the WSM in September 1984.

In the three years that followed we built branches in Cork and Dublin, gained new members and undertook activities including:

- publishing 27 issues of WORKERS SOLIDARITY,
- organising a speaking tour with a Spanish Civil War veteran of the CNT which saw him address several hundred people in Dublin, Cork, Wexford and Belfast,
- engaged in strike support work with many groups of workers including the UCD cleaners, Cork ESB, Pat Grace Fried Chicken and others,
- were involved in building support for the Dunnes Stores strikers, and set up the official support group in Cork,
- produced pamphlets on anarchism, the family and the Spanish Civil War, all of which sold very well,

- established a mail order bookservice for anarchist literature,
- involvement in ad-hoc campaigns such as those against the Herzog visit and Self-Aid.

This is but a brief selection of what the organisation was doing. It was very much an activist organisation.

It is important to state that all this took place within a context where we had written policies on the major areas of struggle, a written constitution and participatory decision making.

By the beginning of 1987 we felt we had established ourselves. We were holding regular branch meetings and producing a monthly paper. We had generated a small degree of interest and respect for the WSM as an anarchist organisation. However, this was achieved in a worsening social and economic climate. It was only achieved through a high level of personal commitment from the small numbers involved. There was considerable pressure within the organisation to recruit new members, which inevitably led to people joining who in practice had little real idea of what our politics were.

Problems were exacerbated, not only by the seriousness of the ‘downturn’, which increasingly left the organisation unable to test its ideas and politics, but also by the lack of clarity in the WSM about its own role as an organisation. Informally, though particularly in Cork, some members saw the main purpose of the WSM as building a leadership for the working class. They emphasized ideological “purity” and zealous activity. Not coincidentally they sanctioned authoritarian methods to “weed” out comrades they considered to be unsuitable, as they became increasingly more introverted in their concerns. Some of these people have since followed the logic of their position and declared themselves Trotskyists.

Emerging from all this:

- We presumed that because someone joined an anarchist organisation that they understood and accepted anarchist ideas and values. This was wrong. We need continual internal education on anarchism, its tradition, theory and values. We especially need to be sure that new members have a good understanding of our theoretical basis.
- We had people joining “a WSM” and not “the WSM”. It is not good enough for a potential member to accept our end goal or our strategy and tactics. They must understand and agree with both. This does not mean that we want everyone to agree on everything, we do not want to be an organisation of clones. But neither do we want one that is divided on important questions of orientation and direction. Seemingly small differences should be discussed in a comradely way as they come up. They should not be let slip as “minor” and allowed to fester. We can never have too much friendly discussion and debate.
- We have to insist that once a decision is made it must be taken seriously. Otherwise there is no point in making decisions in the first place.

- Libertarian values have to be upheld. Any manifestation of authoritarian or uncomradely behaviour within the organisation should be challenged.
- Our essential anarchism was not as visible as our specific tactics. In future our anarchism should be a lot more upfront.
- Should anything happen that is felt to be inhibiting free discussion it needs to be tackled without delay.
- Some comrades overestimated the role of the WSM at the expense of seeing the vital role of working class self-activity. We need a clear policy on this question.
- All our activities and developments have to be continually monitored and discussed at both branch and national levels.

The clear break came over the matter of our libertarian principles. Though other matters were related it was around this that no further ground could be given. In retrospect we can see that the WSM, because there had never before been an organised movement in Ireland, put too much stress on organisational matters and not nearly enough on the essential libertarian content of our ideas. In accepting that we made mistakes we admit to no major demoralization. We accept that anarchists struggle for as long as it takes to build the type of organisation that is not afraid to constantly test its ideas, the sort of organisation that can see the anarchist idea become a mass revolutionary influence capable of creating a better world.

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A statement issued in 1988 after internal disagreements within the WSM had led to its partial collapse. Those whom remained and rebuilt the organisation in the following years offered this analysis of what had been achieved and what had gone wrong.

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