

Workers Solidarity Movement closing statement

Workers Solidarity Movement

6 March 2023

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This is the promised detailed analysis of the end of the WSM following on from our very brief announcement of December 7th, 2021 titled 'WSM has come to an end - we look forward to new anarchist beginnings'. Developed over a couple of dozen meetings since it outlines our collective reflections on why we have taken this decision. It outlines the WSM's achievements, the challenges we have encountered, and the lessons we feel can be drawn for the future. We are writing for our comrades, friends and supporters who have worked with the WSM in the past. We are also writing for fellow anarchists internationally and all those who struggle in our social movements and wish to see a world without bosses. We hope this statement will be useful to those who wish to start new conversations and discussions about the kinds of movements and organisations we need to win.

Introduction.

1.1 The Workers Solidarity Movement is no more. At a meeting in October 2021, we the members voted to dissolve our organisation. While we are each committed to continuing the cause of anarchism in some capacity, we have collectively agreed that the WSM is no longer the best vehicle to achieve that aim. We do not wish to keep repeating the same actions when we no longer believe they will yield different results.

1.2 The following statement outlines our collective reflections on why we have taken this decision. It outlines the WSM's achievements, the challenges we have encountered, and the lessons we feel can be drawn for the future.

1.3 We are writing for our comrades, friends and supporters who have worked with the WSM in the past. We are also writing for fellow anarchists internationally and all those who struggle in our social movements and wish to see a world without bosses. We hope this statement will be useful to those who wish to start new conversations and discussions about the kinds of movements and organisations we need to win. Whilst the WSM has ceased to exist, we know that the struggle to change this world continues.

1.4 We intend to keep some level of activity as an informal collective - perhaps a WSM legacy group - which will aim to archive the WSM site by 30th November 2022.

Campaigns, organisations & unions that the WSM was involved in.

Many WSM members were simultaneously involved in various groups in many capacities. In some cases WSM made a collective decision to join a group or campaign and in other cases members were involved across groups on an individual basis.

- Divorce Action Campaign
- Dublin Abortion Information Group -> Dublin Abortion Rights Groups
- Alliance for Choice
- Choice Ireland
- Abortion Rights Campaign

- Alliance for a No Vote
 - Anti Racism Campaign
 - Anti Racism Network Ireland
 - Immigrant Solidarity
 - Anarchists Against the (Gulf/Afghan) War
 - Grassroots Network Against the War
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- Dublin Grassroots Network
 - Grassroots Gathering
 - Mayday 2004 EU summit protest
 - Trade Union Fightback - anti partnership campaigns
 - SIPTU Fightback
 - 1913 Commemoration Committee
 - Justice for Terence Wheelock
 - Justice for Mumia Abu Jamal
 - Old Head of Kinsale
 - Communities Against Water Charges
 - Anti Bin Tax Campaign
 - Anti Household Tax Campaign
 - Campaign Against Home and Water Taxes
 - Reclaim the Streets
 - 1% Network
 - Social Solidarity Network
 - FEE - Free Education for Everyone
 - Slí Eile
 - RAMSI - Refugee and Migrant Solidarity Ireland
 - CATU - Community Action Tenant Union

- IHN - Irish Housing Network
 - Strike4Repeal
 - Working Class Queeros
 - Pride
 - International Summit protests (Prague, Genoa, Sterling, Dublin)
 - Occupy
-
- Bloody Sunday March
 - Queer Thing
 - Cork Radical Queers
 - Unlock NAMA
 - RAG

Social Centres.

- Garden of Delight
 - Seomra Spraoi
 - Cork Autonomous Zone
 - Baracka Books
 - Solidarity Books
 - The Barricade
 - Lúnasa Cafe Belfast
 - Realta Cafe
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- Indymedia
 - Shell to Sea
 - Rossport Solidarity Camp

International Solidarity (can include making financial donations).

- Irish Mexico Group
- Hands Off the People of Iran
- Anti-Apartheid campaign
- Dunnes Stores strike support group
- Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign

- Anarchismo & International Secretary work

Unions.

- SIPTU
- IFUT
- INTO
- IWU
- IWW
- UNITE
- NIPSA
- PSEU

List of notable speakers that we brought over.

- Noam Chomsky
- Mark Bray
- Selma James
- Martha Ackelsberg
- Janet Biehl
- Ashanti Alston
- Elife Berk, Erjan Arboya, and Aysha Gokkan (Kurdish Movements)
- Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

Publications.

- Workers Solidarity
- Anarchist News
- Red & Black Revolution
- Irish Anarchist Review
- Common Threads
- North City Anarchist
- The Libertarian
- Liberación
- Circle A
- Irish Anarchist Bulletin
- Solidarity Times

(This is a partial list, see the subject index for some of the additional groups & struggles)¹

Accomplishments.

2.1 Given the nature of revolutionary politics, in which so many different groups and people have been and continue to be involved in social struggles, it is hard to pin down our specific contribution to those struggles and to the achievements of wider movements. Nevertheless, we believe that any fair observer of the WSM's 37 years of activity would say that the WSM can rightly lay claim to a number of achievements. These include but are not limited to the following:

2.2 We sought to make anti-authoritarian ideas the leading ideas in our movements through a grassroots democratic approach to organising. As soon as someone joined the WSM they were part of the decision making process at a deep level. We developed bottom up organisational skills. We attempted to create an organisation that not only spoke of participatory democracy, but built for it. Every member was encouraged to develop the kind of organising skills that would normally be the preserve of officers in other groups. We promoted the use of non-hierarchical methods of organising because we believed that these methods have the ability to both raise the skills and the capacity of the movement and are necessary if we are to scale up struggles.

2.3 We demonstrated the power of collective direct action. Direct action is not another term for militant action but rather indicates forms of action where the act itself delivers a significant proportion of what is demanded. Its effectiveness means it is frequently criminalised but illegality in itself does not constitute direct action. In terms of our history direct action examples of direct action included the provision of (then) illegal abortion information, the non payment of

¹ Links at <http://www.wsm.ie/c/workers-solidarity-movement-closing-statement>.

water and bin charges, the halting of military flights by mass trespass at Shannon airport and the occupation/squatting of buildings to use them for accommodation and venues.

2.4 We participated in the winning of victories by social movements, victories that did not rely on the election of representatives.

2.5 We took part in and helped resource social centres as spaces for organising and community building. Social spaces such as Seomra Spraoi and Jigsaw anchored organisations and campaigns and were a focal point for networking, learning, friendships, and solidarity between individuals and groups. We consider this an integral part of building a movement.

2.6 We fought for social changes that were consistent with our anti-authoritarian politics, whether or not they were popular issues at the time. We directly challenged the authority of the state and the church. During the early decades of the WSM activity the Catholic Church had tremendous power in Ireland, it influenced state policy, controlled schools and hospitals, and ensured that laws on divorce, contraception, sterilisation, abortion, gay rights, adoption reflected church teachings. We were consistent throughout our organisational life in the support of the right to choose, keeping the issue alive in times of low activity.

2.7 The Anarchist Bookfair helped strengthen the anarchist and activist community and brought many campaigners together. Bookfairs act as a forum for sharing knowledge, creating links, building relationships and friendships between political and activist groups. The Bookfairs became an event where we could demonstrate how campaigns and movements built and organised struggle and resistance. At the Bookfairs the WSM showcased how victories could be built for by using democratic grassroots methods which could deliver victories outside of the ballot box.

2.8 Our anarchist publications include: Red and Black Revolution, Workers Solidarity, Irish Anarchist Review & Common Threads, Solidarity Times, our Twitter Feed and our webpage.

Over a 35 year period we documented the struggles of people fighting to change Ireland and the world at large for the better. Records of this sort have an immeasurable value. They provide first hand accounts of those who organised and participated in these struggles, a perspective that is often absent from official records and reporting of events and movements. These publications also provided detailed analysis and reports specifically from an anarchist perspective. These publications not only documented the struggles but the ideological changes within the movement that occur in the context of struggle. Our hope is that these publications as archives can continue to help inform those involved or interested in radical political struggle in Ireland and beyond.

2.9 The WSM played a mobilising role in a variety of campaigns. In addition to participating ourselves, we helped advertise and encourage participation in countless marches, demonstrations, and social movement struggles.

2.10 We had a commitment to oppose sectarianism within the left which meant that we facilitated co-operation between opposing groups in many campaigns, including the water charges and bin charges campaign, which strengthened those campaigns. The WSM's focus in a campaign was not just on winning the campaign, but doing so by building a participatory, broad based, democratic campaign.

2.11 The WSM offered the 'leading ideas' on the left in Ireland during the early 2000s, notably around the Zapatista encuentros, summit protest and anti-war period. We contributed theoretically and organisationally in building with others an alternative pole of these movements.

2.12 Through membership of the WSM, individuals gained confidence and skills in working in campaigns, strategic thinking and planning, political writing, evaluating and forming opinions.

Our members engaged in writing and collective editing as a way of learning about issues. We adopted a process of formulating position papers which allowed us to uncover the nuances within an argument. We built and maintained an internal culture of discussion that for the most part ensured an ability to have quite heartfelt disagreements in an atmosphere of mutual respect and very often reached resolutions that were better than the sum of their parts.

2.13 WSM hosted educational and public meetings, some of which are listed below. These educationals and meetings demonstrate the WSM's wide diversity of interests and connections with local and international movements and struggles. You can get sense of the broad scope of these talks from the selection of those uploaded to <https://www.mixcloud.com/workerssolidarity/>.

2.14 The WSM provided a body of experienced activists that were useful to campaign groups around the country. Members had, in general, well developed worldviews which countered reactionary ideas if and when they emerged in local groups. Members also had the practical organisational skills to assist in the week to week running of such grassroots campaign groups, while also being able to refer any problems back to the WSM which helped to find collectively agreed solutions. WSM members always sought to promote non-hierarchical organising methods in groups in which members participated. Something as simple as having the positions of meeting chair or minute taker rotated weekly in a campaign group results in a significant increase in the organisational confidence of the group's members.

2.15 The WSM established an international reputation as an active political organising group whose politics was defined and tested in the heat of campaigns. We shared with our international comrades, particularly with respect to the struggle in northern Ireland, our analysis of the political situation in Ireland.

Reasons for dissolving.

3.1 At the time of drafting this statement the WSM was an organisation of 10 active members. We have increasingly ceased activity in the course of the recent Covid-19 global pandemic. Nobody expected to live in a science fiction novel!

3.2 Members have cited the following reasons for dissolving the WSM.

We failed to grow into an organisation large enough to have widespread political influence in local areas. The current membership did not have the energy to develop new collective projects. Our small size and geographical distribution additionally made it difficult to build local collective projects. This led to a catch 22 in that there was no 'project' to invite new members to participate in, yet it is in these projects that we would find sufficient motivation to grow the organisation with fresh energy.

The formal organisational approach of the (previously significantly larger) WSM did not give people a sense of ownership, rather it was a barrier to new members' participation. Our existing internal culture could feel complex and resistant to change. We now feel that energy is best expended in creating something new, rather than learning how to navigate a pre-existing organisational culture.

We believe it is better and more effective at this point in time for anarchists to build new networks, tools, projects and organisations adapted to the changing political landscape.

Changing role of an anarchist organisation.

Pre-internet, especially in Ireland, one key function of an organisation was to propagate ideas that were unavailable elsewhere. With the rise of the internet, it is no longer necessary for organisations to be the main point for political or strategic discussion as these discussions often now happen across organisations online. This leaves a vacuum - what is the role of an organisation now?

The WSM saw its role in struggles to be involved in broad movements rather than act on its own in front groups seeking recruits through publicity oriented events. This worked well for much of our history when anarchism was a marginal idea. Our members were a visible pole in campaigns through our arguments in favour of direct action, direct democracy and against electoralism.

However with the spread of anarchist ideas in the 2000's, anarchist methods became more widely popular among the campaigning left. There was less need for internal organisational co-ordination of our work in struggles to resist authoritarian influences or to promote grassroots organising. Although we remained involved in struggles, internally there was less collective discussion and analysis of the campaigning organisations involved.

The organisational visibility we obtained in the course of promoting direct action, direct democracy and anti-electoralism faded. Within campaigns, WSM members appeared as committed individuals rather than members of a group promoting a particular set of ideas. In addition, in the past, the distribution of printed publications by our members made a clear connection between our members' work within a campaign, their membership of WSM and anarchist ideas. The turn to online publishing meant that this visibility was lost. This led to an impression that the WSM produced content about the struggles of others rather than being integral in those struggles.

A shared understanding and sense of purpose is vital for group cohesion, satisfaction and trust between members. One route to building that shared understanding is through the collective internal discussion of campaigns and struggles mentioned earlier.

Another route to building this shared agreement is through collective WSM projects. Our main collective projects have been holding regular meetings, regular educationals, and collective writing projects. Each year we worked collectively on perspectives discussions at National Conference and on the organisation of the Anarchist Bookfair.

Writing as a collective project declined over time. In part this was due to a move towards online platforms, which allowed much greater reach for our ideas than print publications. However online platforms also require a different type of content. It has to be produced quickly and frequently. This led to less of a focus on collective writing and a shift to individual writing. The impact of this change on our collective writing projects was not explicitly discussed within the organisation. It was felt that this on-line publishing on social media led to an increase in workload, and stress associated with having to moderate published content, and administrative work in relation to comments. Social media can feel like a hungry machine that must always be fed at the expense of other organising efforts. The challenge now is how to benefit from the distribution opportunities of social media platforms without allowing them to undermine the collective benefit of slower writing processes.

We suffered from the tyranny of strategy-lessness. We no longer had an explicit strategy to advance anarchism as a politics of revolutionary social change. Without a strategy we could not

answer the question - 'why should you join the WSM?' or 'how will my joining the WSM make a difference?' The absence of a coherent strategy and set of priorities ensured that the work we wanted to do was endless.

Historically, the WSM's pathway to revolution was to empower people into joining a broad, revolutionary movement by winning workplace struggles and broad-based campaigns, instilling those campaigns with the 'ideas' necessary to build a movement based on anarchist principles. That is, we built movements that were based on grassroots participation, which were democratic and focused on direct action as a key tactic. It was hoped that this diverse movement would grow in strength and through greater and greater victories, would become an ungovernable, revolutionary force.

In writing this we discuss the use of a metaphor of a roadmap. We want to emphasise that we don't believe the role of a revolutionary organisation is to direct where the struggles should go. Rather our role is to identify where the struggles exist and act to support and amplify them.

Unfortunately, although the absence of a revolutionary strategy was identified, we could not develop a shared understanding of purpose. We continued to call ourselves a revolutionary organisation but, in the context of actually-existing, current struggles, we no longer had a working theory for revolutionary change. We lost an answer to the question 'what is the WSM for?'

We are not alone in lacking a revolutionary strategy. The far left has dissipated itself into social democracy. This is partly because currently there appears to be no potential for anti-capitalist change.

The challenge now is to find out what revolutionary strategy can be successful.

Finding a process that would allow a very small volunteer organisation to have impact while retaining the enthusiasm and commitment of its members is difficult. Over the years, there were many campaigns which brought people into activity, but there were also others which failed to mobilise people. When a campaign or issue failed this led to disillusionment within the organisation.

A recurrent discussion within the organisation was how to decide what areas of activity we should focus on. At times members felt it was best to prioritise one area for all to work on, that is, the goal was to identify an issue or campaign, gain popular support and motivate people to become actively engaged in struggle. At other times members followed the principle of 'fight where you are', that is members would focus on areas that affected them or interested them personally. There are advantages and disadvantages in both approaches.

Wider Challenges.

3.3 Challenges posed by changes in wider society include:

The idea that it is possible to create an alternative to capitalism is no longer part of public imagination in our corner of the world. It has become easier to envision ecological collapse or nuclear war than revolutionary change.

Activism has always started with people expressing their outrage. In the past, this was often linked with a focus on building power. The next step after mobilising opposition was to build collective power in more formal ways, ways that can shift the balance of power in society in favour of our class e.g. union power, tenant power. This next step is often missing from current campaigns. One aspect of this is that for all of our existence, union membership has been in

decline. Unions traditionally provided experience, tools and skills needed to be successful in struggles. There is little sense that now the union movement is building power, or raising the capacity of their membership to build power. Most union activity is focused on individual court cases or union negotiations at a national level.

Capitalism continues to control, shape, and dominate the means of communication. It has become more difficult for groups like the WSM to use it to propagate anarchist ideas. While the reasons for this are complex they include calculated state interventions, corporate ownership of media companies, increasing buying and selling of influence, manufacture of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, a cancer of far-right grifters, as well as conspiracism.

The internet's emergence in the 1990s offered hope of a space for the free exchange of ideas and accurate information, offering huge potential for participatory democracy and revolutionary change. Similar hopes attached to the emergence of social media like Facebook in the 2010s. However, the machines and the markets had different ideas. Online debate has been manipulated, for example through the use of algorithms to create engagement through the promotion of contentious content. People often become entrenched in their positions as passive supporters rather than active, democratic participants. Online discussion can often be performative and sectarian and as a result draining.

We have seen a rise in the far right. The challenge we face is how to engage in an effective opposition to this dangerous fringe while at the same time creating the necessary belief that an anarchist world is possible.

The perceived legitimacy of the electoral democratic state is a challenge for anarchist ideas and organising. Potentially revolutionary energies in times of crisis are deflected towards established electoral channels. Well resourced political parties with lots of paid staff present a significant problem for volunteer organisations.

People who engage in electoral politics have a good understanding of how the current system of government can be used to purchase and win political support, allocate local rewards and benefits. Local politicians leverage their knowledge and access to the government structures to build their power base. This realm of activity is closed to us as we believe it is anti-democratic and fosters dependence and paternalism.

Electoral change is easier to understand than revolution (a lot of unknowns and risks). Elections give the appearance of regular change while structurally everything stays the same.

Structural problems create needs. Politically, these needs are addressed by people voting for political parties, or contacting their TDs and councillors who cater to individual needs without addressing the core structural problems e.g. to bump someone ahead on a waiting list rather than build public housing for all. This highlights the absence or failure by the wider Left to create alternative ways of meeting people's needs.

Currently the anarchist left lacks the credibility that is attached to electoralism. Our challenge is building an organisational structure where communities have input in the decisions that impact their localities and beyond. Anarchist organisations need to challenge the power that's centralised around TDs/councillors and give people the confidence to assert their political voice beyond the ballot box: "nothing about us without us".

In all social struggles, there is a tension between political parties and organising based on free association, between hierarchical electoralism and horizontal forms of decision-making. Anarchist organisations need to develop an alternative and durable ecosystem of political activity,

to model an alternative way of 'doing politics'. The challenge is for this anarchist alternative to be credible in the age of 'capitalist realism' and climate breakdown.

Generationally, in Europe and North America, people who entered the workforce in the 2000s will likely have a lower quality of life than their parents. They will work harder and longer for less pay, less secure employment, and less secure housing, and avail of fewer public services as these are privatised. As they/we reach retirement, they/we can all look forward to boat-building and rising sea levels.

People's expectations have been lowered since the financial crash of 2008 due to the diminished return of the last economic "recovery". Housing, employment and access to social supports have become more precarious. This has had an impact on people's capacity to participate in social movements. With only sporadic wins for the left, people's motivation to become involved in social movements is also lessened.

In saying that, we need to ask why younger activists and those directly affected by some of the harshest conditions austerity produced did not join the WSM. We suspect that as the WSM declined in membership, those members with relative stability found it easier to remain active members. This created a more homogenous group. This may have acted as a barrier to new recruitment.

Until the aftermath of Occupy and the movement of the squares, the majority of our members were students or unemployed, and so were able to commit much time to building the organisation. Now the majority of members are older, in full-time employment, some with care commitments. It is not possible to give to the organisation the time we feel it needs.

Within capitalism today, workers are increasingly pressed for time, energy, and attention. Students working part-time jobs, precarious workers on short-term contracts, and those commuting long distances to college or work do not appear to have sufficient 'free time' to get involved in the often slow work of participatory movement building.

The WSM recognised this and responded by introducing a members and supporters model to acknowledge people's different levels of commitment and availability. We could, however, have adjusted our approach and expectations further and implemented our strategy differently. Potentially, this may have meant moving away from weekly meetings to a routine of sprints and breaks based around specific projects and campaigns.

The WSM didn't come up with a solution to the question of how to weave together the work of running an organisation long term, versus the more energising, short term sprint of a campaign that has a lot of momentum behind it.

Lessons Learned.

4.1 Until anarchists are organised in sufficiently large numbers to maintain reasonably formal membership organisations on a permanent basis that both propagandise and organise in workplaces and communities, anarchism won't shape the outcomes of future social struggles. Until then, the electoralist left - i.e. the non-revolutionary alternative - will maintain their position as the leading ideas of our class - and, most importantly, our class will not win.

4.2 For the WSM, anarchist platformism provided a significant starting point for reinventing a revolutionary organisation fit for contemporary struggles. Our members traditionally shared and continue to share different levels of understanding of and perspectives on the role of platformism.

The relevance of platformism to contemporary struggles remains something of an open question, perhaps to be asked by a new generation of activists.

4.3 We learnt that it was important to have a collective project. Working as a collective through the WSM organisation has allowed each of us to contribute more to our movements - and to the significant struggles that our class has mounted in the past thirty-seven years - than we could have contributed as disparate individuals. So long as the struggle continues, there will be a need for collective organisation.

4.4 When organising for revolution, there is a tension between the creativity and experimentation that makes organisations relevant and attractive to individuals, and the organisational skills and structure building that allows an organisation to scale up and become a mass organisation. The value of organisation, including administration/‘bureaucracy’ or formal approaches to meetings, only becomes apparent over time.

4.5 The quality of democracy and decision-making in our movements is enhanced by adopting basic organising strategies such as the holding of regular meetings with formal approaches to facilitating and minute-taking. A culture of democracy and transparency is created. This facilitates the development of good relationships and trust being sustained over a long period of time. The ability to have discussions where profound disagreements come out and to reach agreements that can be implemented is crucial.

4.6 There is no substitute for meeting face to face, building relationships slowly over time, and building a sense of community. Social Centres are valuable. Significant options for collective action open up when a group or a movement have a physical space that can be used for meetings, events and storage. The setting up of such infrastructure is an important collective project for a movement or organisation.

4.7 Producing content or having a media campaign needs to be part of a conscious and considered strategy: a successful media campaign can be very empowering.

4.8 We make choices about how to fight for a new world. These choices shape the type of world we build. We recognise that people’s intersectional experience of oppression and exploitation will often determine how they fight back. The principle of “nothing for us without us” is of central importance. We therefore recognise that an anarchist revolutionary organisation should be diverse and multicultural.

4.9 Our experience has confirmed that we win through organising; that our power is in our unions, our communities, and our streets. People learn their own power through success. Winning is important and so is how we win. When we win by direct action people are empowered to deliver the change that they wish to see. Direct action becomes legitimate, and, as organisers, we are able to share the power of a good example.

Statement ends

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