

# Anarchist communism in Britain, 1870-1991



The AF outlines the history of anarchist communism in the UK from the Socialist League in the 1800s through the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation up to the demise of the groups of the 1970s and 80s.

In this article we take a look at the development of anarchist communism in Britain since the late 19th century. In the first section we deal with the early days of the Socialist League and of William Morris. In the second part we look at the grouping around Sylvia Pankhurst and at the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation and Guy Aldred. In the third part we look at the groupings of the 70s, the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists, the Anarchist Workers Association, the Anarchist Communist Association and the Libertarian Communist Group. An article on the first ten years of the Anarchist Communist Federation, appearing in this issue of Organise!, ties in with this series.

## **PART 1. THE FOUNDING YEARS**

The working class activists Frank Kitz and Joe Lane provided a link between the old Chartist movement, Owenism, the British section of the First International, the free speech fights of the 1870s and the newly emergent socialism of the 1880s. Lane developed anti-state ideas early on, even before he came to call himself a socialist in 1881. A real power-house of an activist, he set up the Homerton Social Democratic Club in that year and attended the international Social Revolutionary and Anarchist Congress as its delegate. Kitz also attended as delegate from the Rose Street Club. Kitz met the German Anarchists Johann Most and Victor Dave there and was deeply influenced by them. With the help of Ambrose Barker, who was based in Stratford in east London, Lane and Kitz launched the Labour Emancipation League. The LEL was in many ways an organisation that represented the transition of radical ideas from Chartism to revolutionary socialism. The demands for universal adult suffrage, freedom of speech, free administration of justice, etc, sat alongside the demand for the expropriation of the capitalist class. The main role of the LEL was that it was to offer a forum for discussion and education amongst advanced workers in London, with 7 branches in East London and regular open-air meetings in Millwall, Clerkenwell, Stratford and on the Mile End Waste. Nevertheless, anti-parliamentarism was already developing in the LEL.

The LEL succeeded in moving the Democratic Federation of Hyndman over to more radical positions. The intellectual and artist William Morris had recently joined this group and Lane was to have an important influence on him for several years. The organisation changed its name to the Social Democratic Federation. The autocracy and authoritarianism of Hyndman repulsed many members and a split took place in 1884. Morris, Belfort Bax, Eleanor Marx (Karl Marx's daughter) Edward Aveling and most of the LEL left to form the Socialist League. The League itself contained both anti-parliamentarians and supporters of parliamentary action, who had been united by their opposition to Hyndman. A draft parliamentarist constitution inspired by Engels was rejected, but the divisions continued. One of the results of this was Lane's Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto, which had originally been a policy statement that had been rejected by the parliamentarist majority on the policy subcommittee.

### **Anti-Statist**

The Anti Statist Communist Manifesto is not a brilliantly written or particularly well argued document.

Nevertheless it stands as probably the first English home grown libertarian communist statement . It spends too long talking about religion. It rejects reformism through parliament or the trade unions. It calls for mass revolutionary action. In the Manifesto, Lane describes his ideas as Revolutionary Socialist or Free Communist. He never publicly used the word Anarchist to describe his politics, feeling that the word put too many people off, and wishing to distinguish himself from individualists. In private he was sympathetic to openly declared Anarchists and remarked about the Manifesto: "I do not claim that I have expounded anarchy; it is for others to judge". Lane must be considered as one of the most important pioneers of libertarian communism in Britain.

Whilst Anarchism was self-developing within the League, and attempting to achieve coherence, other developments were taking place. The veteran Dan Chatterton, who had participated in the Chartist agitations of 1848, produced his own Anarchist paper Chatterton's Commune-the Atheist Communist Scorcher. This ran for 42 issues from 1884, produced in conditions of extreme poverty. Meanwhile one of the pioneers of Anarchist Communism, the Russian Piotr Kropotkin, had arrived in Britain. Kropotkin's lectures to many Socialist League branches reinforced the Anarchist tendencies among many of its members. Charles Mowbray, a tailor from Durham, active in the London Socialist League, was one of the first to specifically call himself an Anarchist Communist. Kropotkin also helped set up the paper Freedom which was specifically Anarchist Communist. The Freedom Group also undertook the organisation of large public meetings and open-air public speaking. As a result a number of workers, especially from the Social Democratic Federation, were won to Anarchist Communism, like the composers Charles Morton and W. Pearson, whilst Socialist League members like Alfred Marsh and John Turner joined the Freedom Group. Regrettably, whilst Socialist League branches distributed Freedom around the country there was a certain antipathy between the Leaguers and the Freedomites. As the Anarchist historian Nettlau was to remark, Kropotkin's failure to work within the Socialist League was:

"regrettable, for in 1886 and 1887 the League contained the very best Socialist elements of the time, men (sic) who had deliberately rejected Parliamentarianism and reformism and who worked for the splendid free Communism of William Morris or for broadminded revolutionary Anarchism. If Kropotkin's experience and ardour had helped this movement we might say today Kropotkin and William Morris as we say Elisee Reclus and Kropotkin...There was a latent lack of sympathy between the Anarchists of the League and those of the Freedom Group in those early years; the latter were believed by the former to display some sense of superiority, being in possession of definitely elaborated Anarchist-Communist theories...if both efforts had been coordinated a much stronger movement would have been created".

### **Progress**

By 1890 Anarchism had made considerable progress within the League. In London there were 2 specific Anarchist Communist groups, one in St Pancras mostly formed from Freedom Group members, the other in East London, members of the Clerkenwell Socialist League in different hats, which produced the free handout the Anarchist Labour Leaf.

1888 saw the withdrawal of the parliamentarians from the League. There was still tension between those who like Morris, did not describe themselves as Anarchists but as free communists. This tension was aggravated by a pedantic approach among some of the League Anarchists. The Anarchists insisted too much on philosophical principle and not enough on social practice. Morris wrote: "I am not pleading for any form of arbitrary or unreasonable authority, but for a public conscience as a rule of action: and by all means let us have the least possible exercise of authority. I suspect that many of our Communist-Anarchist friends do really mean that, when they pronounce against all authority" . The Anarchists H.Davis and James Blackwell were too ready to take issue with Morris's phrase "the least possible exercise of authority", failing to see that the 'public conscience' he proposed as the basis of Communism was the culmination of the voluntary principle in a society where it had become custom and habit. If Morris chose to call that a situation where authority was exercised then the dispute was semantic. (The Slow Burning Fuse, John Quail.)

Morris's tendency felt that far more propaganda and education needed to be done before the Revolution could come about. Many Anarchists felt that mass action was in itself educational, transforming those taking part. Both were right, but only partially right. There should have been a dynamic dialogue between these 2 positions. This was not to happen. The dead-end of the advocacy of individual acts of 'propaganda by the deed' couched in fiery language meant the departure of Morris, not to mention Kitz and Lane. It also meant the infiltration of the movement by police agents, and a resulting clamp-down by the State. Some Anarchist Communists, like Samuels were ferocious advocates of the 'propaganda by the deed' others like Tochatti, were just as ferociously opposed to such tactics. The loss of Morris, the withdrawal of Lane and the temporary withdrawal of Kitz were a disaster for the development of libertarian communism in Britain. The Socialist League collapsed nationally.

### Ruins

A number of specific Anarchist groups emerged from the ruins of the League. In fact despite the repression, in the period 1892-4 the movement had a massive growth. For example, Morris had estimated the membership of the League in London as 120 in 1891. In 1894, Quail estimates the Anarchist movement in London as up to 2,000. (see work cited above). The 'bomb' faction had lost out, and the 'revolutionist' tendency was re-affirming itself. As a veteran of the League, David Nicoll was to say in the Anarchist which he brought out in Sheffield in 1894: "We are Communists. We do not seek to establish an improved wages system like the Fabian Social Democrats. Our work for the present lies in spreading our ideas among the workers in their clubs and organisations as well as in the open street". The revival was not to last. An attempt to unite the fragmented groups - the Anarchist Communist Alliance - in 1895 was stillborn and the movement was in definite decline by the following year. A period of reaction and lack of struggle within the working class as well as bitter internal conflicts was sapping the movement.

There was to be no revival till mid-1903. The growing industrial unrest, the growth of syndicalism and industrial unionism, were to be contributory factors to the refound vigour of the Anarchist movement. Examples of the returning strength of the movement can be seen in the secession of a group from the Social Democratic Federation in Plymouth, the majority of whom set up an Anarchist Communist group in 1910, and a similar secession from the industrial unionist Industrialist League in Hull in 1913. That year was to see considerable agitation in the South Wales valleys, where small propaganda groups were set up, called Workers Freedom Groups. At a meeting in Ammonford with 120 present, a Communist club house was opened. It was reported that: "The Constitution and programme of the Workers Freedom Groups have been shaped upon the model of future society at which they aim, namely Anarchist-Communism". A Workers Freedom Group was established in the pit village of Chopwell in Durham, by among others Will Lawther (later to be a right-wing miners' leader.) The Chopwell Anarchists also set up a Communist Club. Anarchists set up a Communist Club in Stockport in the following year. In London groups mushroomed and agitation was intense. Here Guy Aldred., a young man who had started out as a Christian preacher, moving through secularism and then the SDF to Anarchism, began to attempt to synthesise his earlier Marxism with his Anarchism in 1910. He had set up a Communist Propaganda Group in 1907 and he now revived this, and helped set up several Communist Groups in the London area, as well as travelling regularly to Glasgow and helping form the Glasgow Communist Group there. He had serious criticisms of trade unions and had fallen out with the Freedom Group because one of its members, John Turner, was a leading trade union official. As Aldred noted: "...I gradually fell out with the Freedom Anarchists...Their Anarchy was merely Trade Union activity which they miscalled Direct Action. Their anger knew no bounds when I insisted that Trades Unionism was the basis of Labour Parliamentarianism."

But now the First World War loomed and its outbreak and repercussions were to have cataclysmic effects on the whole revolutionary movement, not least the Anarchists.

## **PART 2. THE WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH**

The Anarchist movement, not just in Britain, but world-wide was shaken to its foundations by the news

that Kropotkin and others were supporting the Allies against Germany and Austria-Hungary. To their credit, the majority of Anarchists took a revolutionary abstentionist anti-war position, including *Freedom* and the *Spur*, edited by Aldred. A fiercely active anti-war propaganda took place within the North London Herald League, where Anarchists worked alongside socialists from different organisations. This joint activity was reflected right across Britain. Indeed the Anarchists were beginning to have a growing influence among the latter.

Aldred was to remark on the growing number of "Marxian anarchists" within the movement, who accepted a Marxian analysis of the State and of the importance of class struggle. These activists were becoming impatient with those, who to quote Freda Cohen of the Glasgow Anarchist Group, were satisfied with "fine phrases or poetical visioning". Alongside this was the heritage of Morris and Co within the broad socialist movement, which was asserting itself within the Socialist Labour Party, the British Socialist Party, (the successor of the SDF) and the Independent Labour Party. Antiparliamentary ideas were re-emerging within these organisations- for instance, within the Socialist Labour Party, members were questioning the pro-parliamentary ideas of DeLeon who had founded the Party. Some left to become Anarchists.

An attempt was made to unite the Anarchists around *Freedom* and the *Spur*, edited by Aldred, with the anti-parliamentary dissidents of the SLP. This initiative came from within the SLP and at a unity conference in March 1919 the Communist League was founded, with a paper the *Communist*. In it George Rose was to remark: "we know that there must develop the great working class anti-Statist movement, showing the way to Communist society. The Communist League is the standard bearer of the movement; and all the hosts of Communists in the various other Socialist organisations will in good time see that Parliamentary action will lead them, not to Communist but to bureaucratic Statism...Therefore, we identify ourselves with the Third International, with the Communism of Marx, and with that personification of the spirit of revolt, Bakunin, of whom the Third International is but the natural and logical outcome." Rose shows himself under the influence of Aldred, who looked for a fusion between Bakuninism and Marxism, in the process glossing over some fundamental differences. Indeed an initial report in *Freedom* on the conference, whilst noting that the League was not an Anarchist organisation, remarked that the "repudiation of Parliament is a long step in our direction", but on the other hand there was a sharp exchange between Anarchists and League members over the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat and economic determinism. At a Conference of London Anarchists it was remarked that, "The anti-parliamentary attitude of many Socialists and Communists was greatly due to our propaganda in the past, and good results would undoubtedly follow if we worked with them". A resulting conference was very friendly in tone, although controversy over the dictatorship of the proletariat was not absent. However, this initiative of cooperation between revolutionary anti-parliamentarians was to evaporate when the Communist League disappeared without trace at the end of 1919.

The attempts at cooperation and unity continued however, although the whole process was clouded by the issue of the Russian revolution and support for the Bolsheviks. Aldred himself was at first a staunch supporter of the Bolsheviks, hardly surprising considering the lack of any hard information about Lenin's Party in Britain. (This was reflected in general ignorance in the revolutionary movement throughout the world). A series of critical articles by an Austrian Anarchist which were printed in the *Spur* in September 1919 were lambasted by Aldred and others, although in time he came to the same conclusions as he gained more solid information. Most revolutionaries, however were the slaves of wishful thinking, despite evidence that all was not well in Russia. This attitude, the unity-at-all-costs syndrome and "loyalty to the world revolution" position (Translation= slavishly carry out whatever Lenin and the Bolsheviks tell you to do) was to have disastrous consequences for the British revolutionary movement. As Bob Jones says in his pamphlet *Left-Wing Communism in Britain 1917-21*: "There was, as happens repeatedly in the history of British socialism in the twentieth century, a complete abdication of critical judgement when basic principles and beliefs are put to the test by supposed friends and allies". This is something that should be borne in mind at the present with various "unity" moves.

Despite the continuing growth of anti-parliamentarianism in both the SLP and BSP, Lenin was to insist that: "British communists should participate in parliamentary action... from within Parliament help the masses of the workers to see the results of a Henderson and Snowden government in practice". In practical terms this meant affiliation to the Labour Party and the call for a Labour vote, despite the (yes, even then!) reactionary role and nature of Labour. This position, which Anarchist Communists have consistently argued against in the 20th Century, is still very much an obstacle to the creation of a revolutionary movement in this country.

### **Sylvia Pankhurst**

Anti-parliamentary communism had also developed inside the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF) . This had evolved out of the Womens Suffrage Federation based around Sylvia Pankhurst in the East End of London, above all in the Bow and Bromley districts. With her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel she had led a vigorous and militant campaign for votes for women. But differences developed between her and them over a number of issues, including Sylvia's emphasis for activity among the working class, and for joint action between working class women and men for common demands. This gap was widened by the War, which Emmeline and Christabel fiercely supported, whilst Sylvia came out in opposition. During the war the WSF were very active among the East London working class, setting up free or cut price restaurants, day nurseries for children of working mothers, and distributing free milk for babies. In this period it dawned on Sylvia Pankhurst that capitalism could not be reformed, but must be destroyed and replaced by a free communist society. She saw in the Russian revolution the model for a revolution based on workers councils, where committees of recallable and mandated delegates would be elected and answerable to mass assemblies of the working class. She rejected parliamentary action and the domination of leaders, calling for the development of self-organisation and self-initiative through class struggle. Indeed at the time of the 1923 General Election when 8 women M.P.s were elected she remarked: "Women can no more put virtue into the decaying parliamentary institution than can men: it is past reform and must disappear...the woman professional politician is neither more nor less desirable than the man professional politician: the less the world has of either the better it is for it... To the women, as to men, the hope of the future lies not through Parliamentary reform, but free Communism and soviets".

Unfortunately, like Aldred, Pankhurst was a headstrong and egotistical individual. Like him, she often put the narrow interests of her own group before that of the revolutionary movement as a whole. So, she and the WSF rejected a merger with the Communist League because the 2 organisations were too similar for that to be necessary! The WSF then in June 1919 transformed itself into the Communist Party. Lenin put pressure on the Pankhurst group to arrange talks with other groups for a unity conference, at the same time fearing the establishment of a Communist Party that had pronounced anti-parliamentary positions. In his attack on left and council communists *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* he singled out Pankhurst, along with the Council Communists Pannekoek and Gorter. Another singled out was Willie Gallagher, who had left the SDF to join the Glasgow Anarchist Group in 1912. Gallagher, an admirer of Bakunin, was now a member of the Scottish Workers Council, which promoted 'communes'. In his pamphlet Lenin quoted Gallagher: "The Council is definitely anti-parliamentarian, and has behind it the Left Wing of the various political bodies". For his staunch anti-parliamentarianism (not so staunch as it turned out) Gallagher was chosen to represent the Scottish Workers Councils at the second congress of the Third International in Moscow. Gallagher pleaded with the delegates not to force on the Scottish revolutionaries: "resolutions which they are not in a position to defend, being contradictory to all they have been standing for until now." Lenin singled Gallagher and his associates out at this Congress, winning him over completely to his positions. From then on Gallagher was a loyal servant to Lenin,(and then to Stalin) working towards the establishment of a Communist Party of Great Britain which appeared in January 1921. The manoeuvres of Lenin and Gallagher were sharply attacked by Aldred in his new paper the *Spur* and by Pankhurst in the paper of the re-established WSF the *Workers Dreadnought*.

Pankhurst continued with her criticisms of Leninism. In 1924 she condemned the new rulers of Russia as: "Prophets of centralised efficiency, trustification, State control, and the discipline of the proletariat in the interests of increased production...the Russian workers remain wage slaves, and very poor ones, working not from free will, but under compulsion of economic need, and kept in their subordinate position by State coercion." The WSF was very close to the positions of the Dutch and German council communists, evolving increasingly Anarchist Communist positions by 1924, when it disappeared.

The collapse of the revolutionary wave of 1917-21, the Bolshevisation of the movement, and the repression of 1921, during which time Pankhurst and Aldred were both jailed had taken its toll. Many had been won to Bolshevik positions, whilst many others dropped out including Pankhurst herself, who ended up as a supporter of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, with a burial in Addis Abbaba.

### **The Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation**

The anti-parliamentary opposition to Lenin's positions coalesced around the Glasgow Anarchist Group and Aldred. It was to express solidarity with the Russian Revolution that this changed its name to the Glasgow Communist Group in 1920. This became the nucleus of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation set up in January 1921.

In many ways the APCF was an unstable alliance of those who accepted Anarchist Communist views and those who took a Council Communist position. Aldred and Co. still kept up illusions in the Russian Revolution up till 1924, flirting with the newly emergent Trotskyism for a while and launching attacks on Anarchist individuals and groups. As one member of the APCF in Leicester remarked in a letter to the editor of Freedom in 1924, Aldred was "running with Communism and hunting with Anarchism". Aldred also insisted on what he called the Sinn Fein tactic of running as an anti-parliamentary candidate in the 1922 General Election. This was opposed in the APCF by Henry Sara, who left to join the Pankhurst group, and Willie McDougall and Jane Patrick. Other differences were over the question of economic determinism, with economic development as the motor to social change, and over the need for a transitional workers state.

The APCF had branches in London, the Midlands and North of England, although its base was primarily Scotland. It published the monthly The Commune from 1923-9. The seething differences over the use of anti-parliamentary candidates erupted in 1933 when Aldred left over these differences to form the Workers Open Forum.

Aldred claimed that the APCF stagnated after his departure. However, this is not true as the activity of the APCF continued unabated. Further splits were to come with the Spanish Revolution and Civil War. The APCF uncritically supported the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT-FAI, the notion of anti-fascism with its unity at all costs message, and the false ideas of democracy versus fascism. They published, without comment or criticism, a statement by Federica Montseny, one of the chief Anarchist advocates of anti-fascist unity and Anarchist participation in the Spanish Republican government. Jane Patrick was one of the first to question these positions after her visits to Spain. She was disowned by the APCF, and went off to join Aldred's group, now called the United Socialist Movement. The uncritical attitude continued in the APCF, though it published several articles in its new paper Solidarity including a statement from the Friends of Durruti (see Stormy Petrel pamphlet on the Friends of Durruti). A split took place in the APCF in 1937 when some Anarchists left in 1937 to set up the Glasgow Anarchist Communist Federation, although the reasons for this remain obscure. This evolved into the Glasgow Group of the Anarchist Federation of Britain, active during the Second World War.

The APCF for its part redeemed itself during the War by adopting a revolutionary defeatist position, with opposition to both sides. However as was stated in the Wildcat pamphlet on the APCF: "...the APCF was too tolerant in allowing views fundamentally opposed to their own to appear unchallenged in the paper. These included at various times, pacifism, trade unionism, and 'critical' support for Russia...". Wildcat also

noted that: " The APCF also seemed to suffer from a lack of proper organisation. It appeared to be content to remain a locally based group, with no interest in trying to form a national or international organisation. It is sometimes argued that revolutionaries should only organise informally in local groups, to avoid the dangers associated with larger organisations...These dangers have to be faced up to, not run away from". These comments should be taken seriously by revolutionaries at the present time.

The APCF with Willie McDougall as its leading light, transformed itself into the Workers Revolutionary League in 1942, eventually becoming a Workers Open Forum and continuing into the 50s.

As for Aldred and Patrick, their United Socialist Movement had become a populist organisation, espousing things like World Government and fellow-travelling with Russia after Stalin's death. As Nicolas Walter says in his article in the Raven No1., Aldred was an: "extraordinarily courageous but essentially solitary man whose vanity and oddity prevented him from taking the part which his ability and energy seemed to create for him in the revolutionary socialist movement". Like Pankhurst, Aldred's egotism contributed towards hindering the development of a libertarian communist movement in this country, as did the differences between Anarchist Communists and Council Communists which were at first swept under the carpet and then totally polarised with no attempt to work out a practical synthesis.

Despite all this, the contributions of these groups and individuals were important. They courageously pursued revolutionary politics at a time of great isolation. They must be recognised as the forebears of present day libertarian communism in this country.

### **PART 3: POST WAR LIBERTARIAN COMMUNISM**

A specific libertarian communist current did not re-emerge in Britain until the sixties and seventies. Anarcho-syndicalism was to be the dominant current within the Anarchist movement, alongside the newly emerging 'liberal' anarchism that was developing through the likes of people like George Woodcock. In one part, this was a response to the major defeats of both revolutionary Anarchism and the working class movement as a whole, in another part it was an uncritical adaptation to the rise of the anti-war movement (Committee of 100 and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). It was, of course, correct for Anarchists to aim their propaganda at mass movements, putting a revolutionary case against capitalism and the State as the root causes of war. What was lacking, however was a theoretical strength that allowed for the recruiting of activists from C100 and CND that fought against the dilution of ideas and transformed these activists into fully-fledged revolutionaries. This was not the case, however, and the revolutionary core of Anarchism, already deeply effected by the erroneous ideas of the Synthesis as devised by Voline and Faure (which sought a fusion between individualism, syndicalism and libertarian communism within the same organisation) was further diluted in Britain. The development of the hippy and alternative culture movements were to further dilute and confuse the movement, as once again the Anarchist movement showed itself wanting in ways of relating to these movements on a revolutionary basis without surrendering to pacifism and marginalisation.

#### **Solidarity**

One healthy development was the group of activists who had been expelled from the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League of Gerry Healy in 1959, many of whom had served on its Central Committee. Revolted by the authoritarianism of Healyism, this group began to develop libertarian socialist ideas, continuing to base themselves on class struggle and class analysis. They began to edit a journal, Solidarity, from October 1960, as well as a flurry of pamphlets, at first on a monthly basis! They developed trenchant analyses of the industrial struggle as well as the peace movement, and their analysis of the unions was a huge step forward, as was their rejection of syndicalism. As time progressed Solidarity began to identify themselves more and more as libertarian communists. However, they had developed a distrust of organisation as such as a result of their experiences of Healyism. Their unflagging publishing programme and their perceptive analyses had gained a great deal of respect among many activists. Their wilful failure to translate this into the establishment of a national organisation was a disaster, as International Socialism

(the precursor of the Socialist Workers Party) was able to build on this territory abandoned by Solidarity (and by the Anarchist Federation of Britain). They failed to engage as fully with the Anarchist movement as much as they could have, as their contributions at meetings and conferences could have considerably strengthened the class struggle current within it. Finally, there was their use of the ambiguous term self-management (which could be open to a number of interpretations, including one involving a market society) and their assertion that the main differences in society were not so much between classes as between order-givers and order-takers. In the end the contents of the magazine became less and less distinguishable from the contents of Freedom, with, for example, long articles on Gandhi. Solidarity magazine stopped appearing in the early 90s and the group is to all intents and purposes, dead.-failing to live up to its promises of the 60s.

### **The Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists (ORA)**

The Anarchist Federation of Britain (AFB) had slowly emerged in the aftermath of the political dead-end and decline of the Committee of 100 and the growing new radicalism of the 1960s, with its founding conference in Bristol in 1963. There was an impressive list of group and individual contacts featured in Freedom. National conferences began to be organised that were well attended. On the face of it things looked very good indeed, with the potential for an Anarchist movement to grow and once again have some influence as the pre-WWI movement had. In reality things were far from rosy. Anyone could attend conferences, often to make contributions and then never to be seen again. There was no structure of decision-making, and therefore no decisions made at conference. There was no paper controlled by the AFB, and often groups loosely affiliated within it contained all sorts of 'anarchists' from individualists, pacifists and gradualists, lifestyleists and agrarian communards, through to syndicalists and anarchist communists. No clear analysis could be developed because of the huge array of differing and opposing ideas. Indeed the AFB only had an internal bulletin from late 1969.

The AFB was unable to respond to the huge potential offered to it, and began to drift. Indeed there was a massive exodus of activists to International Socialism (IS) and the International Marxist Group (IMG). A group emerged in the AFB around Keith Nathan and Ro Atkins, the former who had been a driving force in the very active Harlow Anarchist Group. This group produced a document called Towards a History and Critique of the Anarchist Movement in Modern Times as a discussion paper for a conference of Northern Anarchists in November 1970. Militants in Lancaster and Swansea (including Ian Bone, the future founder of Class War) also had criticisms of the AFB. The people in Swansea dropped out of the fray after their open letter was published, but their action had encouraged people in Lancaster, Leeds, Manchester and York to put a motion to the AFB that it call a 'reorganisation conference' to discuss the criticisms raised" (from The Newsletter, bulletin of the ORA May 1971). The Critique and a joint statement produced by all the critics was taken from the conference to the AFB conference in Liverpool the same month. It should be pointed out that this critical current was made up of both anarchist communists and anarcho-syndicalists as well as those who had no specific identification other than Anarchist.

The Critique was a trenchant and deeply honest document. It is worth quoting at length on the state of the Anarchist movement: "the omission of an attempt to link present short term action with the totality of capitalist society and with the totality of the future alternative society, means that when the short term issue dies, as it will, then so does the consciousness created by this short term action. ....bitter personal disputes based upon spuriously advanced positions; battles for the soul of the revolution / movement / Individual / reified anything, fought in reams of paper attacking and defending positions long since overrun by time. This is our 'theory'. Usually it totally replaces even the pretence of activity".

### **Ginger**

Following on from the Liverpool Conference the group in York decided to set up the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists to act as a ginger group within the AFB. The attention at this time was not to leave the AFB. It wanted the AFB to open its doors to other libertarian tendencies e.g. Solidarity. "...The ORA people do not want to form another sect-we see our role as acting within and on the libertarian

movement in general, as well as initiating our own work...we hope it can act as a link and a catalyst not only for ORA and the AFB but also to all libertarians". (ORA Newsletter see above).

ORA's objections to the traditional anarchist movement then, were more on the level of organisation than of theory. Their advocacy of collective responsibility, the use of a Chair and voting to take decisions at meetings, formal membership and a paper under the control of its "writers, sellers and readers" while warmly greeted in some quarters for example the May 1971 Scottish Anarchist Federation Conference was viciously attacked by others.

But the ORA itself was a hotch-potch including all sorts of anarchists, including syndicalists and those who argued for a pacifist strategy. When the ORA decided to bring out a monthly paper, Libertarian Struggle, in February 1973, it proved to be a forcing house for the development of the group, and these elements fell away. Also significant were contacts with the Organisation Revolutionnaire Anarchiste in France which had developed along similar lines within the Federation Anarchiste. Through the French ORA the British discovered the pamphlet the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists which had been written by a group of Russian and Ukrainian Anarchists, including Nestor Makhno and Piotr Arshinov. This argued for a specific anarchist communist organisation, and ideological and tactical unity.

The ORA produced a number of pamphlets and a regular monthly paper. At first this was lacking in theoretical content, in the main consisting of short factual articles on various struggles. Quite correctly, Libertarian Struggle gave extensive coverage to both industrial struggles and struggles outside the workplace, including tenants struggles, squatting, womens liberation and gay liberation. By issue 8 a greater analytical and theoretical content emerged. For example in an article on the Spanish Revolution of 1936 in Libertarian Struggle 1973 we can read about: "The failure of the anarcho-syndicalists who make a far too ready identification of their union with the working class as a whole. The way forward in a revolutionary situation is the rapid building of workers councils...union committees are no substitute for direct workers power". These anarchist-communist criticisms of anarcho-syndicalism were to be further developed within the libertarian communist movement over the years.

Similarly, the analysis of Labour was to be a consistent feature of British anarchist-communism over the following years. For example we can read in Libertarian Struggle November 1973: "Only by carefully explaining and exposing the role of the Labour Party to the working class can any progress be made to building a revolutionary anarchist alternative...It cannot be done by first insisting we vote Labour". The Labour Party was defined as a bourgeois party.

On the unions, however, the ORA was not so clear. The criticisms of the union bureaucracies were clear enough, and this included the 'left' NUM leadership. Also clear was the call to create workers action committees leading to the establishment of workers councils. However this was mixed up with calls to democratise the unions(!) and to democratise the various Rank and Files (all of which were IS fronts).

### **Standstill**

The events of 1974, the Miners Strike and the 3-Day week, led many to think (falsely) that revolution was just around the corner. This led to the formation of the Left Tendency inside the ORA. They concluded that it was in the nature of anarchism that the attempts to form a national organisation were bound to fail, and turned to Trotskyism. Most of this group ended up in the horrific authoritarian Healeyite outfit, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), whilst others joined IS. Nathan himself, whilst not a supporter of the Left Tendency, also left at this time to join the WRP.

The Left Tendency had called for an elected Editorial Board rather than a paper edited in rotation by each group and for a "more coherent position on Ireland" among other things. The organisation came to a virtual standstill, as these members had been among the most active, and many others, who were not prepared to take on the workload, dropped out. Amongst those who remained, some took the initiative to

revive the organisation. A limited edition (1,000) Libertarian Struggle was put out in November 1974 and sold out in 10 days. There followed a period of recruitment and consolidation, until May 1975 when the paper began to appear again on a regular monthly basis.

### **The Anarchist Workers Association**

At the beginning of 1975 ORA changed its name to the Anarchist Workers Association, which it was felt implied more of a class commitment, although others criticised this change as a mistake, implying workerism, and a too narrow obsession with the workplace. It was true that most of the membership in this period were heavily involved in workplace activity.

By 1976 the AWA had 50 members, most of them active, with 3 groups in London, groups in Oxford, Yorkshire, Leicester, and Scotland. The paper now called itself Anarchist Worker, was a regular monthly with sales of 1,500-2,000, mostly street sales. It was to some extent 'a libertarian version of Socialist Worker' but the coverage was wider, for example covering the struggles of claimants and squatters and provocatively questioning the work ethic.

The organisation went through a vicious split between Spring 1976 and Spring 1977. The Towards a Programme (TAP) Tendency was founded primarily to change the 1976 Conference decision on Ireland, where the majority, had argued for an abstentionist, anti-Republican position on Ireland, and that "Troops Out" was only meaningful if they withdrew through united class action. The TAP kept to the classic 'Troops Out' formula as well as the leftist "Self-determination for the Irish people as a whole". The TAP also argued for a less "ultra-left" position on the unions that is for "democratisation of the unions", "extend unionisation" etc. This tendency included Nathan who had returned to the fold.

The AWA did not have a tradition of political debate. Much of the debate there was conducted at a puerile level. The TAP tendency accused their opponents of "traditional anarchism" and wishing to "lead the AWA back to the days of the AFB" whilst the TAP tendency was accused by its opponents of "Trotskyism". The debate was clouded by controversy over the issue of abortion with a leading opponent of the TAP tendency taking an anti-abortion position, as well as some of the opponents of TAP (though only a small minority) taking increasingly anti-organisational positions.

### **Disgust**

Eventually at a conference in May 1977, on a motion sprung from the floor expulsions against the opposition to the TAP tendency was carried by 2 votes, with no prior notice or discussion at previous meetings or in the Internal Bulletin. Others left the organisation in disgust at these manoeuvres.

The expelled comrades committed to organisational politics regrouped under the title 'Provisional AWA' which then changed its name to the Anarchist Communist Association, producing a paper Bread and Roses and an introductory pamphlet to the ACA. The internal disputes had proved debilitating, however, and the ACA disappeared in 1980. The ACA had attempted to carry on some of the better traditions of ORA/AWA

As for the TAP tendency and those others who remained in the AWA, the coming period was to be one of complete capitulation to leftism. The name of the organisation was changed to the Libertarian Communist Group, there were defections to the International Marxist Group, and then the LCG announced that it had moved from class struggle anarchism to a "libertarian, critical, Marxism". The LCG backed "United Front Work" which in practice meant working in the Socialist Teachers Alliance, and the Socialist Student Alliance, fronts dominated by the IMG. This United Front work which in practice meant collaboration with leftist political formations, led to the LCG committing one of their most heinous errors-entering an electoral front set up by IMG called Socialist Unity (SU) and backed by other groups like Big Flame. Socialist Unity put up candidates where it felt they had the strength, and advanced the slogan "Vote Labour But Build a Socialist Alternative" where it did not. The LCG was supposed to be "critically" supporting SU, but failed to make any serious criticisms of this support for Labour. The SWP for their

part, peeved by the SU running candidates, and perceiving this as a threat, decided to stand their own candidates. The LCG endorsed these candidates as well, completely forgetting all the criticisms it had made of electoralism and of the nature of the Leninist groups. Finally, after the IMG, in their usual fashion, got bored with SU as a way of recruiting, it was wound up. The LCG failed to deliver any post-mortem on this.

The end was soon to come. The LCG compounded these errors by supporting a slate run by an anti-cuts group called Resistance (Keith Nathan and friends) for council elections in Leeds.

### **Relinquished**

The LCG moved for fusion with the "libertarian Marxist" group Big Flame in 1980. This organisation had been previously described in *Anarchist Worker* as "schizophrenic libertarians/Leninists": "Big Flame leads in uncritical copying of Lotta Continua in Italy, from their spontaneism to softness on Stalinism". For its part Big Flame was unable to withstand the instabilities of its politics. The 'left' "victory" orchestrated by Tony Benn in the Labour Party resulted in the collapse of Big Flame as most of its members decided to enter the Labour Party, where they eventually wound up as apologists for Kinnock. The LCG had argued that they were "too small to give us an acceptable forum for political discussion" and that there were "no serious political differences between the two organisations". The LCG had relinquished any idea of constructing a specific libertarian communist organisation as well as any serious political analysis. But in any case, the politics of the LCG had transformed so much that there really was little difference between their leftism and that of Big Flame.

### **CONCLUSION**

This history of the ORA/AWA/LCG with its history of splits, defections and gross political errors is far from inspiring. But these developments, sometimes as unedifying as they were, signals the first attempts of libertarian communism to re-emerge in the post-World War II period. These attempts to re-emerge were as one member of the ACF noted in 1991 bound to be effected by the "present comparatively weak state of anarchist communism". Two "magnetic poles of attraction" would be at work, he went on to say. One would be Leninism, which would exert its influence through comrades moving physically and ideologically over to Leninist outfits, or adopting Leninist style politics whilst still professing to be within the revolutionary anarchist movement as happened with the LCG, and later with the Anarchist Workers Group.

The other pole of attraction would involve comrades committing some of the errors associated with parts of the left communist milieu-spontaneism, refusal to construct a revolutionary organisation, and where theoretical elaboration was divorced from effective practice and intervention, and seemed to involve finding as many differences as possible between comrades.

The appearance of the Anarchist Communist Federation marked a dramatic move forward, a significant development in both the strengthening and elaboration of Anarchist Communist theory, as well as an ongoing practice. In a separate article on the [first ten years of the ACF](#) we will consider these contributions.

*From Organise! #42*