# Red & Black
# Revolution
## A magazine of libertarian communism

# Contents

Like most of the publications of the left, Red and Black Revolution is not a profit making venture. It exists in order to spread ideas and contribute to the process of changing the world.

If you would like to help out in this work there are a couple of things you can do. One option is to subscribe to the magazine. Another is to take a number of copies of each issue to sell. We are always looking for bookshops or stalls that will sell this magazine on a commercial basis.

Our time and resources are limited and at times of busy activity our publications are often delayed. So any help that you can offer would be a real help in getting our ideas out to a wider audience. If you want to help out, get in touch at the address below.

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# About the Workers Solidarity Movement

The Workers Solidarity Movement was founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1984 following discussions by a number of local anarchist groups on the need for a national anarchist organisation. At that time with unemployment and inequality on the rise, there seemed every reason to argue for anarchism and for a revolutionary change in Irish society. This has not changed.

Like most socialists we share a fundamental belief that capitalism is the problem. We believe that as a system it must be ended, that the wealth of society should be commonly owned and that its resources should be used to serve the needs of humanity as a whole and not those of a small greedy minority. But, just as importantly, we see this struggle against capitalism as also being a struggle for freedom. We believe that socialism and freedom must go together, that we cannot have one without the other. As Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist said, "Socialism without freedom is tyranny and brutality".

Anarchism has always stood for individual freedom. But it also stands for democracy. We believe in democratising the workplace and in workers taking control of all industry. We believe that this is the only real alternative to capitalism with its ongoing reliance on hierarchy and oppression and its depletion of the world's resources.

In the years since our formation, we've been involved in a wide range of struggles - our members are involved in their trade unions; we've fought for abortion rights and against the presence of the British state in Northern Ireland, and against the growth of racism in southern Ireland; we've also been involved in campaigns in support of workers from countries as far apart as Nepal, Peru and South Africa. Alongside this, we have produced over 80 issues of our paper *Workers Solidarity*, and a wide range of pamphlets. Over the years we have brought many anarchists from abroad to speak in Ireland. These have included militants from Chile, the Czech Republic, Canada, the USA, Greece, Italy, and a veteran of the anarchist Iron Column in the Spanish Civil War.

As anarchists we see ourselves as part of a long tradition that has fought against all forms of authoritarianism and exploitation, a tradition that strongly influenced one of the most successful and far reaching revolutions in this century - in Spain in 1936 - 37. The value of this tradition cannot be underestimated today. With the fall of the Soviet Union there has been renewed interest in our ideas and in the tradition of libertarian socialism generally. We hope to encourage this interest with Red & Black Revolution. We believe that anarchists and libertarian socialists should debate and discuss their ideas, that they should popularise their history and struggle, and help point to a new way forward.

A couple of years ago our paper Workers Solidarity became a free news-sheet, which appears every two months. With a print-run of 6,000, this means a huge increase in the number of people here in Ireland receiving information about anarchism and struggles for change. As more people join the WSM, we are able to do more to promote anarchism. If you like what we say and what we do, consider joining us. It's quite straight forward. If you want to know more about this just write or email us.

We have also increased and improved our presence on the Internet. This move has been prompted by the enormous success to date of our web site and resources. The WSM site has been updated and moved to www.wsm.ie and we are adding new material all the time. A large number of people are now looking at and reading about our anarchist ideas on our site. Many of our papers, magazines, posters and some pamphlets are available inn PDF format - allowing for material to be downloaded in pre-set format, to be sold or distributed free right across the world.
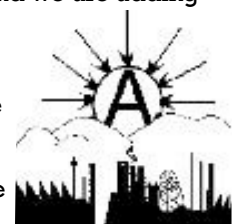
# INSURRECTION

# ANARCHISM & INSURRECTIONALISM

Insurrection - the armed rising of the people - has always been close to the heart of anarchism. The first programmatic documents of the anarchist movement were created by Bakunin and a group of European left-republican insurrectionists as they made the transition to anarchism in Italy in the 1860's. This was not a break with insurrectionism but with left-republicanism. Shortly afterwards Bakunin was to take part in an insurrection in Lyon in 1870.

by Joe Black

European radical politics of the previous hundred years had been dominated by insurrections, ever since the successful insurrection in France of 1789 had sparked off the process leading to the overthrow of the feudal order across the globe. The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 showed the power of the people in arms, this insurrectionary moment, which changed the history of Europe, probably involved only around one thousand people.

## Insurrection and Class Politics

1789 also set a pattern where, although the working people made up the mass of the insurrectionists, it was the bourgeoisie who reaped the rewards - and suppressed the masses in the process of introducing their class rule. This lesson was not lost on those who saw freedom as something that had to involve the economic and social liberation of everyone, not the right of a new class to carry on 'democratic' exploitation of the masses.

In the republican insurrections that broke out in Europe in the century that followed, and in particular in 1848, the conflict between the republican, capitalist and small capitalist classes and the republican masses became more and more pronounced. By the 1860's this conflict had led to the emergence of a specifically socialist movement that increasingly saw freedom for all

as something that the republican bourgeoisie would fight against not for - alongside the old order if necessary. For Bakunin, it was the experience of the 1863 Polish insurrection, where it became clear that the bourgeois republicans feared a peasant insurrection more than the Czar, that conclusively proved this point. So now the fight for freedom would need to take place under a new flag - one that sought to organise the working masses in their interests alone.

The early anarchists embraced the new forms of workers' organisation that were emerging, and in particular the International Workers Association or First International. But, although they saw the power of the working class organised in unions, unlike the majority of the Marxists they did not see this as meaning that capitalism could be reformed away. The anarchists insisted that insurrections would still be needed to bring down the old ruling class.

## Early Anarchist Insurrections

Anarchist attempts at insurrection spread with the growing movement. In fact, even before the Lyon attempt, the anarchist Chávez López was involved in an indigenous insurrectionary movement in Mexico which, in April 1869, issued a manifesto calling for *"the revered principle of autonomous village governments to*

*replace the sovereignty of a national government viewed to be the corrupt collaborator of the hacendados."*[1] In Spain in the 1870's, where workers' attempts to form unions were met with repression, the anarchists were involved in many insurrections, and in the case of some small industrial towns, were locally successful during the 1873 uprisings. In Alcoy, for

> ## "The workers seized and burned the factories, killed the mayor and marched down the street with the heads of the policemen"

instance, after paper workers who had struck for an eight-hour day were repressed *"the workers seized and burned the factories, killed the mayor and marched down the street with the heads of the policemen whom they had put to death."*[2] Spain was to see many, many anarchist led insurrections before the most successful - that which greeted and almost defeated the fascist coup of July 1936.

In Italy in 1877 Malatesta, Costa and Cafiero led an armed band into two villages in Campania. There they burned the tax registers and declared an end to Victor Emmanuel's reign - however their hope of sparking an insurrection failed and troops soon arrived. Bakunin had already been involved in an attempt to spark an insurrection in Bologna in 1874.

## The Limits of Insurrections

Many of these early attempts at insurrection led to severe state repression. In Spain the movement was forced underground by the mid 1870's. This led into the 'Propaganda by Deed' period when some anarchists reacted to this repression by assassinating members of the ruling class, including a number of kings and presidents. The state in turn escalated the repression. After a bombing in Barcelona in 1892, some 400 people were taken to the dungeon at Montjuich where they were tortured. Fingernails were ripped out, men were hung from ceilings and had their genitals twisted and burned. Several died from torture before they were even brought to trial and five were later executed.

Arguably the fatal theoretical flaw of this period was the belief that the working people were everywhere willing to rise and that all the anarchist group had to do was to light the touchpaper with an insurrection. This weakness was not limited to anarchism - as we have seen it was also the approach of radical republicanism. Sometimes, as in Spain or Cuba, the anarchists and the republicans found themselves fighting together against state forces. Elsewhere the left sometimes slotted into this role - the Easter Rebellion of 1916 in Ireland saw a military alliance between revolutionary syndicalists and nationalists.

However, the original organisational approach of the anarchists around Bakunin was not limited to making attempts at insurrection, but also included the involvement of anarchists in the mass struggles of the working people. While some anarchists responded to circumstances by constructing an ideology of 'illegalism' the majority started to turn to these mass struggles. In particular, they started entering and constructing mass unions on a revolutionary syndicalist basis. In the opening years of the 20th century, anarchists were involved in or simply built most of the revolutionary syndicalist unions that were to dominate radical politics up to the Russian revolution. Very often these unions were themselves then involved in insurrections, as in 1919 in both Argentina and Chile. In Chile this included workers who *"took possession of the Patagonian town of Puerto Natales, under the red flag and anarcho-syndicalist principles."*[3] Earlier, in 1911, the Mexican anarchists of the PLM, with the help of many IWW members from the USA, *"organised battalions …in Baja California and took over the town of Mexicali and the surrounding areas."*

## Insurrections and Anarchist Communists

The anarchist communist organisational tradition within anarchism can be traced back to Bakunin and the first programmatic documents produced by the emerging anarchist movement in the 1860's. But these organisational ideas were not developed in any collective way again until the 1920's. Still there were individuals and groups that advocated the key features of organised anarchist communism: involvement in the mass struggle of the working people and the need for specific anarchist organisation and propaganda.

> ## "the only way to transform society into a society of free workers is the way of violent social revolution"

Anarchist communism was clarified in 1926 by a group of revolutionary exiles analysing why their efforts to date had failed. This resulted in the publication of the document known in English as the 'Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists' which we have analysed at length elsewhere.

Here the relevance is to note that, like their predecessors of the 1860's, this grouping of anarchist communists were trying to learn from the anarchist involvement in insurrections and revolution of the 1917-21 period. They include Nestor Makhno who had been the key figure of a massive anarchist-led insurrection in the Western Ukraine.

The Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine fought the Austro Hungarians, anti-semitic pogromists, various white armies and the Bolshevik controlled Red army over those years.

These platformists as they have come to be known wrote *"the principle of enslavement and exploitation of the masses by violence constitutes the basis of modern society. All the manifestations of its existence: the economy, politics, social relations, rest on class violence, of which the servicing organs are: authority, the police, the army, the judiciary... The progress of modern society: the technical evolution of capital and the perfection of its political system, fortifies the power of the ruling classes, and makes the struggle against them more difficult… Analysis of modern society leads us to the conclusion that the only way to transform capitalist society into a society of free workers is the way of violent social revolution."*[4]

## The Spanish Experience

The next development of anarchist communism once more involved those at the centre of an insurrection - this time the Friends of Durruti group who were active during the Barcelona insurrection of May 1937. The FoD *"members and supporters were prominent comrades from the Gelsa battle-front."*[5]



The FoD was composed of members of the CNT but was highly critical of the role the CNT had played in 1936. *"The CNT did not know how to live up to its role. It did not want to push ahead with the revolution with all its consequences. They were frightened by the foreign fleets…Has any revolution ever been made without having to overcome countless difficulties? Is there any revolution in the world, of the advanced type, that has been*

able to avert foreign intervention? … Using fear as a springboard and letting oneself be swayed by timidity, one never succeeds. Only the bold, the resolute, men of courage may attain great victories. The timid have no right to lead the masses...The CNT ought to have leapt into the driver's seat in the country, delivering a severe coup de grace to all that is outmoded and archaic. In this way we would have won the war and saved the revolution... But it did the opposite... It breathed a lungful of oxygen into an anaemic, terror-stricken bourgeoisie."[6]

Across much of the world anarchism was crushed in the period up to, during and after World War Two. Anarchists were involved in partisan movements across Europe during the war, but in the aftermath were repressed by eastern 'communism' or western 'democracy'. In Uruguay, one of the few places where a sizeable anarchist communist movement survived, the FAU waged an underground armed struggle against the military dictatorship from the 1950's. Cuban anarcho-syndicalists, in particular tobacco workers, played a significant role in the Cuban revolution only to be repressed in its aftermath by the new regime.

## The Ideology of Insurrectionalism

There is a long tradition within anarchism of constructing an ideology out of a tactic. The long and deep involvement of anarchists in insurrections has, not surprisingly, given rise to an anarchist ideology of insurrectionalism.

An early self-definition of insurrectionalism in English is found in this 1993 translation: *"we consider the form of struggle best suited to the present state of class conflict in practically all situations is the insurrectional one, and this is particularly so in the Mediterranean area. By insurrectional practice we mean the revolutionary activity that intends to take the initiative in the struggle and does not limit itself to waiting or to simple defensive responses to attacks by the structures of power. Insurrectionalists do not subscribe*

*to the quantitative practices typical of waiting, for example organisational projects whose first aim is to grow in numbers before intervening in struggles, and who during this waiting period limit themselves to proselytism and propaganda, or to the sterile as it is innocuous counter-information."*[7]

## "As an ideology insurrectionalism originates in the peculiar conditions of post-war Italy and Greece"

As an ideology insurrectionalism originates in the peculiar conditions of post war Italy and Greece. Towards the end of World War Two there was a real possibility of revolution in both countries. In many areas the fascists were driven out by left partisans before the allied armies arrived. But, because of the Yalta agreement, Stalin instructed the official revolutionary left of the Communist Party to hold back the struggle. As a result, Greece was to suffer decades of military dictatorship, while in Italy the Communist Party continued to hold back struggles. Insurrectionalism was one of a number of new socialist ideologies which arose to address these particular circumstances. However, the development of insurrectionalism in these countries is beyond the scope of this article. Here we want to look at the development of an insurrectionalist ideology in the Anglo world.

## Insurrectionalism in the Anglo World



One insurrectionalist has described how these ideas spread from Italy: *"insurrectionary anarchism has*

*been developing in the English language anarchist movement since the 1980s, thanks to translations and writings by Jean Weir in her "Elephant Editions" and her magazine "Insurrection" ... In Vancouver, Canada, local comrades involved in the Anarchist Black Cross, the local anarchist social center, and the magazines "No Picnic" and "Endless Struggle" were influenced by Jean's projects, and this carried over into the always developing practice of insurrectionary anarchists in this region today ... The anarchist magazine "Demolition Derby" in Montreal also covered some insurrectionary anarchist news back in the day."*[8]

That insurrectionalism should emerge as a more distinct trend in English language anarchism at this point in time should be no surprise. The massive boost anarchism received from the summit protest movement was in part due to the high visibility of black bloc style tactics. After the Prague summit protest of 2000, the state learned how to greatly reduce the effectiveness of such tactics. Soon after the disastrous experience of Genoa and a number of controlled blocs in the USA, arguments arose that emphasised greater militancy and more clandestine organisation on the one hand and a move away from the spectacle of summit protesting on the other.

Alongside this, many young people who were entering anarchist politics for the first time, often made the incorrect assumption that the militant image that had first attracted their attention on the TV news was a product of insurrectionalism in particular. In fact, most varieties of class struggle anarchists, including anarchist communists and members of the syndicalist unions, had participated in black bloc style protests at the summits. As these all see actual insurrections as playing a significant role in achieving an anarchist society, there should be nothing surprising in them being involved in a little street fighting on the occasions when that tactic appears to make sense. By the time of Genoa, when the state had obviously greatly upped the level of repression it could deploy, anarchist communists were debating

whether such tactics had a future in the columns of this magazine and other publications.

## The Ideas of Insurrectionalism

It is probably useful to dispel a couple of myths about insurrectionalism at the start. Insurrectionalism is not limited to armed struggle, although it might include armed struggle, and most insurrectionalists are quite critical of the elitism of armed struggle vanguards. Nor does it mean continuously trying to start actual insurrections, most insurrectionalists are smart enough to realise that this maximum program is not always possible, even if they are also keen to condemn other anarchists for waiting.

So what is insurrectionalism? Do or Die 10 [9] published a useful introduction with the title *"Insurrectionary Anarchy : Organising for Attack!"*[10] Substantial quotes from this article are used in the discussion that follows.

The concept of 'attack' is at the heart of the insurrectionist ideology:

*"Attack is the refusal of mediation, pacification, sacrifice, accommodation, and compromise in struggle. It is through acting and learning to act, not propaganda, that we will open the path to insurrection, although analysis and discussion have a role in clarifying how to act. Waiting only teaches waiting; in acting one learns to act."*

This essay drew from a number of previously published insurrectionalist works. One of these '*At Daggers Drawn*' explained further:

*"The force of an insurrection is social, not military. Generalised rebellion is not measured by the armed clash but by the extent to which the economy is paralysed, the places of production and distribution taken*

*over, the free giving that burns all calculation ... No guerrilla group, no matter how effective, can take the place of this grandiose movement of destruction and transformation."*[11]

The insurrectionalist notion of attack is not one based on a vanguard achieving liberation for the working class. Instead they are clear that *"what the system is afraid of is not these acts of sabotage in themselves, so much as their spreading socially."*[12] In other words the direct actions of a small group can only be successful if they are taken up across the working class. This is a much more useful way to discuss direct action than the more conventional left debate that polarises extremes of 'Direct Action crews' who see their actions in themselves as achieving the objective, versus revolutionary organisations that refuse to move beyond propagandising for mass action - and all too often actually argue against 'elitist' small group actions.

## Riots and Class Struggle

Insurrectionalists often recognize class struggle where the reformist left refuse to. Writing of Britain in the early 1980's, Jean Weir observed that *"the struggles taking place in the inner city ghettos are often misunderstood as mindless violence. The young struggling against exclusion and boredom are advanced elements of the class clash. The ghetto walls must be broken down, not enclosed."*[13]

The idea that such actions need to be taken up across the working class is
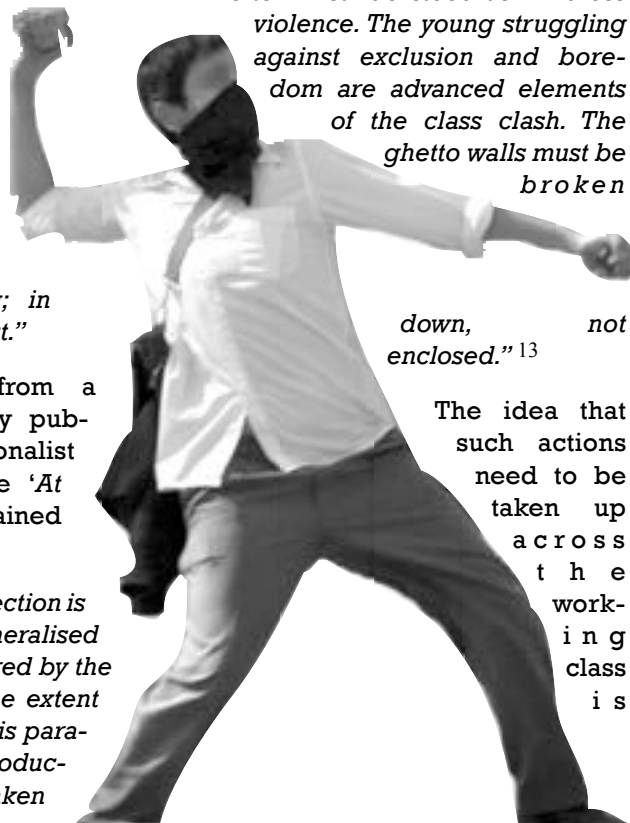
also seen by insurrectionalists as an important answer to the argument that the state can simply repress small groups. It is pointed out that *"it is materially impossible for the state and capital to police the whole social terrain."*[14]

As might be imagined, individual desires are central to insurrectionalism but not as with the rugged individualism of the 'libertarian right'. Rather, *"the desire for individual self-determination and self-realization leads to the necessity of a class analysis and class struggle."*[15]

Much of the insurrectionalist theory we have looked at so far presents no real problems in principle for anarchist communists. On the theoretical level, the problems arise with the organisational ideology that insurrectionists have constructed alongside this. Much of this has been constructed as an ideological critique of the rest of the anarchist movement.

## The Organiser

The insurrectionist criticism of 'the organiser', while a useful warning of the dangers that come with such a role, has expanded into an ideological position that presents such dangers as inevitable. We are told *"it is the job of the organiser to transform the multitude into a controllable mass and to represent that mass to the media or state institutions"* and *"for the organiser... real action always takes a back seat to the maintenance of the media image."*

Probably, most of us are familiar with left campaigns run by a particular party where exactly this has happened. But our experience is that this is not inevitable. It is quite possible for individuals to help organise a struggle without this happening. A comrade has more time than anyone else so they take on a number of tasks that need to be done - are they not therefore an organiser?

The problem with the apparent blanket ban on 'organisers' is that it prevents analysis of why these problems arise and thus how they can be prevented.

In the case of media work there is no mystery. Anyone doing media work for a controversial struggle will be bombarded with questions about the likelihood of violence - in media terms this is a 'sexy' story. If they are getting this day after day, week after week then they will start to try to shape the struggle to follow this media agenda.

The solution is simple. This problem arises because the left tends to have their 'leader' who is doing the key organising of a protest also as the media contact for that protest. Our experience is that if you divorce the two roles so that the organisers of a specific event are not the people who speak to the media about it then the problem is greatly reduced if not eliminated. The actual organisers are isolated from the media but feed information to whoever is nominated as a media spokesperson. That media spokesperson, however, has no particular say about the organisation of the protest.

## The media and popular opinion

This leads onto the insurrectionalist description of the media. *"An opinion is not something first found among the public in general and then, afterwards, replayed through the media, as a simple reporting of the public opinion. An opinion exists in the media first. Secondly, the media then reproduces the opinion a million times over linking the opinion to a certain type of person (conservatives think x, liberals think y). Public opinion is produced as a series of simple choices or solutions ('I'm for globalization and free trade,' or 'I'm for more national control and protectionism'). We are all supposed to choose - as we choose our leaders or our burgers - instead of thinking for ourselves."*

This all sounds pretty good - and there is considerable truth in it. But this blanket analysis again prevents a discussion about how these problems can be overcome. Until the time we have our own alternative media - and in that case some of the problems above would still apply - we would be crazy not

to use those sections of the media through which we might be able to reach the millions of people that lack of resources otherwise cut us off from.

And while the media likes to simplify the story by reducing it to binary choices, this does not mean that everyone who gets information from the media accepts this division. Many if not all people have an understanding that the media is flawed and so tend not to accept its binary divisions.

## Waiting for the revolution?

We are told the left in general and the rest of the anarchist movement in particular hold *"a critique of separation and representation that justifies waiting and accepts the role of the critic. With the pretext of not separating oneself from the 'social movement', one ends up denouncing any practice of attack as a 'flight forward' or mere 'armed propaganda'. Once again revolutionaries are called to 'unmask' the real conditions of the exploited, this time by their very inaction. No revolt is consequently possible other than in a visible social movement. So anyone who acts must necessarily want to take the place of the proletariat. The only patrimony to defend becomes 'radical critique', 'revolutionary lucidity'. Life is miserable, so one cannot do anything but theorise misery."*[16]

## "public opinion is produced as a series of simple choices"

Here we see the chief weakness of insurrectionalism - its lack of serious discussion of other anarchist tendencies. We are led to believe that other revolutionaries, including all other anarchists, favour waiting around and preaching about the evils of capitalism rather than also taking action. There are some very few groups for whom this is true, but the reality is that even amongst the non-anarchist revolutionary movement most organisations also engage in forms of direct

action where they think this makes tactical sense. In reality this is also the judgement that insurrectionalists make - like everyone else they recognise the need to wait until they think the time is right. They recognise that tomorrow is not the day to storm the White House.

## Critique of Organisation

Another place to find fault with the ideology of insurrectionalism is where it comes to the question of organisation. Insurrectionalism declares itself against 'formal organisation' and for 'informal organisation'. Often quite what that means is unclear as 'formal' organisation is simply used as a label for all the things that can go wrong with an organisation.

Insurrectionalists attempt to define formal organisation as *"permanent organisations [which] synthesise all struggle within a single organisation, and organisations that mediate struggles with the institutions of domination. Permanent organisations tend to develop into institutions that stand above the struggling multitude. They tend to develop a formal or informal hierarchy and to disempower the multitude ... The hierarchical constitution of power-relations removes decision from the time such a decision is necessary and places it within the organisation ... permanent organisations tend to make decisions based not on the necessity of a specific goal or action, but on the needs of that organisation, especially its preservation. The organisation becomes an end in itself."*

While this is quite a good critique of Leninism or Social Democratic forms of organisation, it doesn't really describe ongoing forms of anarchist organisation - in particular anarchist communism organisation. Anarchist communists don't, for instance, seek to "synthesise all struggle within a single organisation". Rather we think the specific anarchist organisation should involve itself in the struggles of the working class, and that these struggle should be self-managed by the class - not run by any organisation, anarchist or otherwise.

## Solutions to the Problems of Organisation

Far from developing hierarchy, our constitutions not only forbid formal hierarchy but contain provisions designed to prevent the development of informal hierarchy as well. For instance considerable informal power can fall to someone who is the only one who can do a particular task and who manages to hold onto this role for many years. So the WSM constitution says no member can hold any particular position for more than three years. After that time they have to step down.

These sorts of formal mechanisms to prevent the development of informal hierarchy are common in anarchist communist organisations. In fact, it is an example of where formal organisation is a greater protection against hierarchy. Our formal method of organisation allows us to agree rules to prevent informal hierarchies developing. Insurrectionalism lacks any serious critique of informal hierarchy but, as anyone active in the anarchist movement in the anglo world knows, the lack of sizeable formal organisation means that problems of hierarchy within the movement are most often problems of informal hierarchy.

If you strip out the things that can go wrong with an organisation, then the insurrectionalist concept of 'formal' organisation boils down to an organisation that continues to exist between and across struggles. Even here the distinction is clouded though, because insurrectionalists also see that sometimes informal organisation may be involved in more than one struggle or may move from one struggle to another.

From an anarchist communist perspective, the major point of an organisation is to help create communication, common purpose and unity across and between struggles. Not in the formal sense of all struggles being forced into the one program and under the one set of leaders, but in the informal sense of the anarchist communist organisation acting as one channel of communication, movement and debate between the struggles that allows for greater communication and increases the chance of victory.

## The insurrectionalist Alternative Informal Organisation

The method of organisation favoured by insurrectionalists is guided by the principle that *"the smallest amount of organisation necessary to achieve one's aims is always the best to maximize our efforts."* What this means is small groups of comrades who know each other well and have a lot of time to spend with each other discussing out issues and taking action - affinity groups.

We are told *"to have an affinity with a comrade means to know them, to have deepened one's knowledge of them. As that knowledge grows, the affinity can increase to the point of making an action together possible."*[17]

Of course insurrectionalists know that small groups are often too small to achieve an objective on their own, so in that case they say that groups can federate together on a temporary basis for that specific goal.

There have even been attempts to extend this to the international level. *"The Anti-authoritarian Insurrectionalist International is aimed at being an informal organisation... [It] is therefore based on a progressive deepening of reciprocal knowledge among all its adherents... To this end all those who adhere to it should send the documentation that they consider necessary to*



*g*  [18]

## Autonomous Base Nucleus

It is obvious that a successful libertarian revolution requires the mass of the people to be organised. Insurrectionalists recognise this and have attempted to construct models of mass organisation that fit within their ideological principles. Autonomous Base Nuclei, as they are called, were originally based on the Autonomous Movement of the Turin Railway Workers and the self-managed leagues against the cruise missile base in Comiso.

## "a successful libertarian revolution requires the mass of the people to be organised"

Alfredo Bonanno in The Anarchist Tension described the Comiso experience: *"a theoretical model of this kind was used in an attempt to prevent the construction of the American missile base in Comiso in the early '80s. The anarchists who intervened for two years built "self-managed leagues."*[19]

He summarised them as follows: *"these groups should not be composed of anarchists alone. Anyone who intends to struggle to reach given objectives, even circumscribed ones, could participate so long as they take a number of essential conditions into account. First of all "permanent conflict" that is groups with the characteristic of attacking the reality in which they find themselves without waiting for orders from anywhere else. Then the characteristic of being "autonomous", that is of not depending on or having any relations at all with political parties or trade union organisations. Finally, the characteristic of facing problems one by one and not proposing platforms of generic claims that would inevitably transform themselves into administration along the lines of a mini-party or a small alternative trades union."*[20]

For all that they have 'self-managed' in their title these leagues in fact look pretty much like the front organisations used for linking into and controlling social struggles by

many Leninist organisations. Why so? Well the above definition is one of an organisation that while seeking to organise the masses does so along lines defined by the informal groups of anarchists. If it was truly self-managed, surely the League itself would define its method of operation and what issues it might like to struggle around? And from the start the leagues exclude not only all other competing organisations but even relations with political parties or trade union organisations. Again, any real self-managed struggle would make the decision of who to have relations with for itself and not simply follow the dictat of an organised ideological minority.

Another insurrectionalist, O.V., defined the leagues as *"the element linking the specific informal anarchist organisation to social struggles"* and said of them *"these attacks are organised by the nucleii in collaboration with specific anarchist structures which provide practical and theoretical support, developing the search for the means required for the action pointing out the structures and individuals responsible for repression, and offering a minimum of defence against attempts at political or ideological recuperation by power or against repression pure and simple."*[21]

If anything this is worse - the specific anarchist structures are given the role of making pretty much every significant decision for the league. This makes a nonsense of any claim to self-management and would turn

such a league into a creature to be manipulated by a self-selected cadre of true revolutionaries supposedly capable of grappling with the issues that its other members cannot. This seems to fly so much in the face of what insurrectionalists say elsewhere that we should stop and pause to wonder how they end up with such a position.

## The Question of Agreement

The reason lies in the fact that common action obviously requires a certain level of common agreement. The insurrectionalist approach to this is quite hard to get a grasp of and is the reason why such odd contradictions open up in the self-managed leagues they advocate. The problem is that reaching agreement requires decision making and in the making of decisions you open the possibility of a decision being made by the majority that the informal cadre thinks is a mistake,

The Do or Die article tries to define this obvious problem away as follows, *"autonomy allows decisions to be made when they are necessary, instead of being pre-determined or delayed by the decision of a committee or meeting. This does not mean to say however that we shouldn't think strategically about the future and make agreements or plans. On the contrary, plans and agreements are useful and important. What is emphasised is a flexibility that allows people to discard plans when they become useless. Plans should be adaptable to events as they unfold."*

This asks more questions than is answers - how can you plan without pre-determining something? If a group of people "think strategically about the future" is that group not a "committee or meeting" even if it chooses not to use that name. And who argues for plans that are not "adaptable to events as they unfold"?

From an anarchist communist perspective, the point of thinking strategically about the future is to use that thinking to plan for the future. Plans involve making decisions in advance - pre-determining them to at least an extent. And plans should be made and agreed formally, that certainly involves meetings and may well involve the meeting of a committee. Why deny any of this?

### Negotiation

Like the more ideological anarcho-syndicalists, insurrectionalists take an ideological position against negotiations. *"Compromise only makes the state and capital stronger"* we are told. But this is a slogan that only works if you are a small group that has no influence on a struggle. Short of the revolution, it will be unusual to win a struggle outright. So, if our ideas are listened to, we will again and again be faced with either a limited and therefore negotiated victory or snatching defeat from the jaws of victory because we advise fighting for more than we know can be won. Surely our aim should be to win everything that is possible, not to go down to glorious defeat?

## "compromise only makes the state and capital stronger"

Apparently not. One insurrectionalist favourably describes how *"the workers who, during a wildcat strike, carried a banner saying, 'We are not asking for anything' understood that the defeat is in the claim itself."* [22] This obviously can only make sense when the workers concerned are already revolutionaries. If this is a social struggle for, say, a rent reduction or an increase in wages,

such a banner is an insult to the needs of those in the struggle.

Short of the revolution, the issue should not be whether or not to negotiate but rather who negotiates, on what mandate and subject to what procedures before an agreement can be made. The reality is that if these questions are avoided, then that vacuum will be filled by authoritarians happy to negotiate on their terms in a way that minimises their accountability.

## Repression and Debate

Without going into the specifics of each controversy, a major problem in countries where insurrectionalists put their words into deeds is that this often means attacks that achieve little except, on the one hand, providing an excuse for state repression and, on the other, isolating all anarchists, not just those involved, from the broader social movement.

Insurrectionalists claim to be willing to debate tactics but the reality of state repression means that in practise any critique of such actions is presented as taking the side of the state. Nearly 30 years ago Bonanno attempted to define all those who thought such actions premature or counter productive as taking the side of the state when he wrote in 'Armed Joy' that, *"when we say the time is not ripe for an armed attack on the State we are pushing open the doors of the mental asylum for the comrades who are carrying out such attacks; when we say it is not the time for revolution we are tightening the cords of the straight jacket; when we say these actions are objectively a provocation we don the white coats of the torturers."*[23]

The reality is that many actions claimed by insurrectionalists are not above critique - and if workers are not allowed to critique such actions, are they not simply reduced to being passive spectators in a struggle between the state and the revolutionary minority? If, as Bonnano seems to imply, you can't even critique the most insane of actions then you can have no real discussion of tactics at all.

## Towards an anarchist communist theory

Anarchist communists have adopted a different test to that of sanity when it comes to the question of militant action. That is, if you are claiming to act on behalf of a particular group, then you first need to have demonstrated that the group agrees with the sort of tactics you propose to use. This question is far more important to anarchist practice than the question of what some group of anarchists might decide is an appropriate tactic.

## "if you can't even critique the most insane of actions, then you can have no real discussion of tactics at all"

As we have seen, anarchist communists have no principled objection to insurrections, our movement has been built out of the tradition of insurrections within anarchism and we draw inspiration from many of those involved in such insurrections. In the present, we continue to defy the limitations the state seeks to put on protest wherever doing so carries the struggle forward. Again that is not just a judgement for us to make - in cases where we claim to be acting in solidarity with a group (e.g. of striking workers), then it must be that group that dictates the limits of the tactics that can be used in their struggle.

Insurrectionalism offers a useful critique of much that is standard left practice. But it falsely tries to extend that critique to all forms of anarchist organisation. And in some cases the solutions it advocates to overcome real problems of organisation are worse than the problems it sets out to address. Anarchist communists can certainly learn from insurrectionalist writings, but solutions to the problems of revolutionary organisation will not be found there.

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# The Insurrection of Easter 1916

At 11.30 in the morning on April 24 1916, Bugler William Oman - a member of a workers' militia called the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) - sounded the 'fall-in' outside union headquarters[1]. This was the start of an insurrection in Dublin which was to see up to 1,700 armed men and women seize key buildings throughout the city and to hold these positions against thousands of British Army soldiers for almost a week. In the course of putting down the insurrection, 1351 people were killed or severely wounded and 179 buildings in the city centre were destroyed[2].

— by Andrew Flood

It would be odd to write an article in Dublin on insurrections on what is the 90th anniversary of this rising without mentioning the Easter rising (it started on Easter Monday). Despite the fact that there was no known anarchist involvement, the rising does provide a useful example of what an insurrection can be. Maybe a little over 15% of those who fought were members of the ICA which was in an alliance with nationalists. The ICA was created in 1913 due to police attacks on members of the syndicalist Irish Transport and General Workers Union. It was only open to union members.

The insurrection was planned by the ICA leader James Connolly and the nationalist leadership of the secretive Irish Republican Brotherhood who had successfully taken many of the leadership positions in the Irish Volunteers. From 1915, Connolly was publicly pushing for a rising, he had even converted part of the union building into a munitions factory which made bayonets, crowbars and bombs.

The rising took place in the middle of World War One and, as with other Irish republican risings, "England's difficulty was seen as Ireland's opportunity". The struggle for Home Rule that had dominated Irish politics for the previous 40 years had created a situation where, even before the war, hundreds of thousands of Irish men were members of nationalist and unionist militias and tens of thousands of rifles had already been illegally imported.

In later generations it would be largely accepted that the rising was a 'blood sacrifice'. That is that the leadership knew all along that it was doomed to failure but that they had organised it to either - in Connolly's case - make a statement against the imperialist war or - in the nationalists' case - keep "*faith with the past, and hand[ed] a tradition to the future*". But, as John A Murphy wrote, "*it should be remembered that up to the stage of the final confusion, the Military Council believed the rebellion had a real chance of success*"[3].

The First World War meant that the British army in Ireland "*stood well below full strength*"[4]. If all the 20,000 Irish Volunteers had been mobilized, they would have outnumbered the army around five to one. It was only at the last minute that MacNeill, the Volunteer leader, realised the depth to which he had been tricked by the IRB and had orders printed in the newspapers cancelling the mobilisation order. German support, which did see a diversionary Zeppelin raid on London and a naval bombardment of Lowestoft port[5], would have also supplied a huge quantity of arms had not they been intercepted at the last minute off the Irish coast.

The military preparations of the rebels were quite well made; they had studied street fighting and had seized and fortified well-chosen positions from which they ambushed the British army. Rather than using the streets to move around, they tunneled through walls of adjoining buildings and barricaded the doors and windows of their strongpoints. The units of the British Army deployed against them seemed to have had little or no training for urban warfare allowing, for instance, a tiny force of around 17 rebels at the canal at Mount Street to catch the Sherwood Foresters in a cross-fire and inflict over 240 casualties. Despite the vastly better equipment of the British army, including armoured cars and artillery, their better medical facilities and the fact they outnumbered the rebels 3 to 1, rebel deaths were only 40% of those of the British army and police.

The British knew something was up but they feared a premature move against the rebels would only win the rebels support. They had spent the evening before the rising debating moving against the rebel HQ at Liberty Hall but had concluded they did not have sufficient forces to hand. On the first day of the rising, Lord Wimborne could only regretfully write that "*if we only had acted*

last night with decision and arrested the leaders as I wanted, it might have been averted."[6]

Part of the reason the British authorities felt secure was that they knew that the rebel cause was not that popular with the population. A huge number of Irish men were serving in the British army - 170,000 Irish men had enlisted, which was 41% of the male population between 10 and 44. Around half were from Ulster and many of these would have been loyalists but of the 40 to 50,000 killed in the war at least half were Catholic[7]. Even the ITGWU, the syndicalist union from which the ICA had emerged, believed half of its 1914 membership to have joined the British army by 1916[8].

The insurrection took place on the first anniversary of the 2nd battle of Ypes, in which the Dublin Fusiliers, which many of these ITGWU men would have joined, had suffered very heavy losses. Eyewitness James Stephens noted in his account written just after the rising that "It is considered now (writing a day or two afterwards) that Dublin was entirely against the Volunteers... Most of the female opinion I heard was not alone unfavourable but actively and viciously hostile to the rising. This was noticeable among the best dressed classes of our population; the worst dressed, indeed the female dregs of Dublin life, expressed a like antagonism, and almost in similar language. The view expressed was "I hope every man of them will be shot."[9]

Max Caulfield wrote that as the rebel prisoners were being marched away at the end of the street the poor working class women attacked them. "'Shoot the traitors' they cried .. the shawlies pelted them with rotten vegetables, the more enthusiastic disgorging the contents of their chamber pots"[10]. On a more measurable level Caulfield points out that "Not a single trade, political or municipal society anywhere in Ireland had declared for the republic."[11]

Despite this, within two years the republicans were to win the overwhelming majority of seats in the 1918 election and within five years

the British were forced to sign a treaty and leave 26 of the 32 counties. The 1916 insurrection almost seems designed as a perfect case study of how an insurrection can radicalise the population.

Even during the insurrection James Stephens noticed that public opinion was changing. He wrote that on the Wednesday "There is almost a feeling of gratitude towards the Volunteers because they are holding out for a little while, for had they been beaten the first or second day the City would have been humiliated to the soul."[12]

After the rising, the British establishment made up for their lack of action beforehand. 3439 men and 70 women interned, 92 sentenced to death[13]. 'Only' 16, including Roger Casement, were executed but many observers recorded public opinion changing as the executions were dragged out. When they culminated with the execution of Connolly on May 12th, who was so wounded that he had to be shot sitting in a chair, the foundation was laid for the nationalist myth that it was the insurrection, and in particular the blood sacrifice of the leaders, that 'freed Ireland'.

There is only room in this article to sketch out the reality. The executions certainly gave the public cause to think again but it was the slaughter of World War One and the need for the British army to conscript Irish men to fight its war that really recruited for the IRA. According to Kerry police estimates, "the rate of affiliation to the republican movement was highest between October 1917 and November 1918 when the threat of conscription loomed largest."[14] Ernie O'Malley who rose to OC of the Second Southern, the second largest division of the IRA, was in Donegal at the other end of the country. He recorded that "fear

of conscription passed away with the European war. The numbers in the Volunteer companies decreased and we had more opposition."[15]

But that too is only part of the story because, even according to the reckoning of Michael Collins, the IRA never had more than around 5,000 active volunteers during the war while the British administration built up a force of tens of thousands of armed men. Yet, by 1921, the British ruling class was in a panic. Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson recorded in his diary "18 May 1921. I said that directly England was safe, every available man should go to Ireland that even four battalions now serving on the Rhine should ought also to go to Ireland .. I was terrified at the state of they country, and that in my opinion, unless we crushed the murder gang this summer we shall lose Ireland and the Empire."[16]

In Ireland, two things combined to create this panic. Across the world these years were years of revolutionary struggle for the working class. In many countries workers were defeated by the forces of law and order. The nationalist armed struggle which was largely directed at making it impossible to police the country created a 'law and order' vacuum. Into that vacuum the working class stepped. The unique situation in Ireland meant in the southern 26 counties the forces of law and order were largely ineffective.

There were 5 general strikes between August 1918 and August 1923 and 18 general local strikes, twelve of these in 1919. In the course of these, workers took over the running of towns and cities across Ireland, most famously with the 1919 Limerick Soviet but this happened even in the small town of Dungarvan in 1918 for one month. "Nothing could be bought or sold without a union permit. Nothing could enter the town without union permission. People who tried to break the blockade had their carts overturned and their goods destroyed… The strike committee set up its own rationing and distribution system."[17]

Pitched battles were fought between

workers and police, republican police and even self styled 'white guards' set up by employers. Of the General Strike of April 1920, the Manchester Guardian noted *"the direction of affairs passed during the strike to these [workers'] councils, which were formed not on a local but on a class basis. In most places the police abdicated, and the maintenance of order was taken over by the local Workers Council... In fact, it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike."*

In Jan 1919 the *London Times* wrote of fear that the radicals would *"push aside the middle class intelligentsia of Sinn Fein, just as Lenin and Trotsky pushed aside Kerensky and other speech makers."*[18] The ruling class really started to panic when the loyalist workforce of Belfast started using similar tactics during 1919. Mutinies broke out in the Irish Regiments of the British army stationed in India.

When, even in Glasgow, pitched battles were fought in George Square and 6 tanks and 100 lorry loads of troops with machine guns were brought in to prevent rallies,[19] it is not hard to see why the British ruling class was in something of a panic. The Director of Intelligence at the Home Office Basil Hugh Thomson wrote *"During the first three months of 1919 unrest touched its high-water mark. I do not think that at any time in history since the Bristol riots we have been so near revolution."*[20]

For the British and Irish capitalist class, Sinn Fein came to be seen as a way of returning to business as usual. The key event was probably May 17 1920 in Ballinrobe, Co Mayo when the first public Arbitration Court was held by Sinn Fein. This found against small holders who had occupied a 100 acre farm. Although they defied the court decision and remained in occupation, in the words of a Dail pamphlet *"the Captain of the local company of the IRA descended upon them with a squad of his men - sons of very poor farmers like themselves - arrested four of them, and brought them off to that very effective Republican prison - an unknown destination."*[21] Ernie O'Malley summarised what happened: *"there was land trouble in the South and West. The Dail, afraid of the spread of land hunger, used the IRA to protect landowners; the IRA who were in sympathy with those who wanted to break up estates carried out the orders of the Minister of Defence."*[22]

The 1916 insurrection remains part of the story but, for the left, it created the conditions by which the nationalists could come to power. The week before the rising, Connolly warned the assembled ICA that *"if we should win hold on to your rifles because the Volunteers may have a different goal. Remember we're out not only for political liberty but for economic liberty as well."*[23] But there was no organised left force that survived the insurrection and Connolly's successors in the union were unchallenged as

they led it into an uncritical alliance with the nationalists that went as far as opposing most of the 80 or so workplace occupations of 1922. Technically the ICA continued to exist until 1927 but Frank Robbins, imprisoned for 2 years after 1916, said of the ICA of March 1918 *"the majority of the new members, strange as it might seem, did not hold or advocate the social and political views that had motivated those who fought in 1916."*[24]

The insurrection and the events that followed created a political vacuum that allowed a massive spontaneous workers' struggle to emerge but this struggle was without ideology and without political leadership - nationalism filled that vacuum and led the workers to defeat.

13

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# the rip-off of public resources
# Privatisation
## but is nationalisation the answer?

Throughout the world, public services have been under attack for the past twenty years. Forming a central plank of the capitalist globalisation agenda, 'privatisation' and 'competition' are the seemingly unchallenged dogma of modern capitalism. The levels of privatisation which have taken place worldwide are absolutely mindblowing. During the 1990s alone over $900 billion of public assets were transferred into private hands. Globally this agenda is pushed by the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The basic theory by which these bodies operate is that all decisions should be made on the basis of profitability alone.

*by Gregor Kerr*

Economies in the so-called 'developing' world have been carved up under re-structuring deals called *"Structural Adjustment Programmes"* which have been like manna from heaven for international business. The World Bank website[1], for example, *"provides information on more than 9,000 privatization transactions in developing countries from 1988 to 2003"*. This information is presented to highlight *"revenue generating opportunities"* for international capital. The current phase of the WTO's strategy for the imposition of its privatisation agenda is the General Agreement on Trade in Services – which looks to sell off such basic services as healthcare, education, housing, water supply, waste management etc. This strategy is driven not in the interest of the ordinary people of these countries but by the needs of international capital. David Hartridge, Director, WTO Services Division put it quite succinctly: "Without the enormous pressure generated by the American financial services sector, particularly companies like American Express and Citicorp, there would have been no services agreement and therefore perhaps no Uruguay Round and no WTO."[2]

This privatisation agenda has had disastrous consequences for many peoples and communities in the developing world. According to journalist John Pilger *"the introduction of school fees where there was previously free education has driven many poor families to withdraw their children from school, while hospital fees have put basic health care beyond the reach of millions.*

*Although they acknowledge the harm which privatisation has brought to poor communities in the Third World, the World Bank and IMF still insist on prescribing it as an economic model. Water privatisation is just one example. The World Bank*

## "water in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince costs up to 10 times as much from the private sector as it does from the public supply"

*notes that water in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince costs up to 10 times as much from the private sector as it does from the public supply, and that poor families in Mauritania now have to spend a fifth of their household income on water.*

*Yet both the World Bank and the IMF continue to force water privatisation on developing countries. During 2000 alone, the IMF made water privatisation or full cost recovery a condition of loan agreements to 12 African countries. The World Bank has promised Ghana an extra $100 million in loans if it privatises its water supply."[3]*

### Lisbon Agenda

At EU level, privatisation is being driven by what is called the 'Lisbon agenda'. This refers to an agreement made by EU governments in March

2000 to make the EU *"the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010"*. One of the most influential lobby groups which has pushed this agenda behind the scenes is the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT). The ERT brings together approximately 45 'European industrial leaders'. According to its website *"ERT members are chief executives and chairmen of major multinational companies of European parentage…Individuals join at the personal invitation of existing members."*[4] Members of the ERT include Ireland's Michael Smurfit and the CEOs of such companies as British Airways, BP, Renault, Fiat, Deutsche Telekom, Diageo, Royal Dutch Shell, Heineken, Nestlé, Bayer, Nokia and many other household names. The ERT see *"the higher cost of doing business in Europe"* as *"a drain on competitiveness."* Current ERT priorities as listed on their website include *"deadlines for full liberalisation of gas and electricity markets and postal services"*. The ERT has a direct line to the heart of EU decision-making, boasting that *"at European level, the ERT has contacts with the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European parliament…every six months the ERT meets with the government that holds the EU presidency to discuss priorities…At national level, each member has personal contacts with his own national government and parliament, business colleagues and industrial federations, other opinion-formers and the press."*

It is this 'personal contact' which drives EU economic policy and which is fuelling the push towards privatisation. One thing we can be sure of is that when the ERT get together with their political cronies, workers' rights or defence of the welfare state doesn't figure high on their agenda. In fact they tend to see such things as minimum wages, workers' holiday entitlements, minimum safety requirements etc. as barriers to the god of competitiveness, and when they talk about 'liberalisation' what they mean is the removal of any and all barriers to their unfettered right to make unlimited profits.
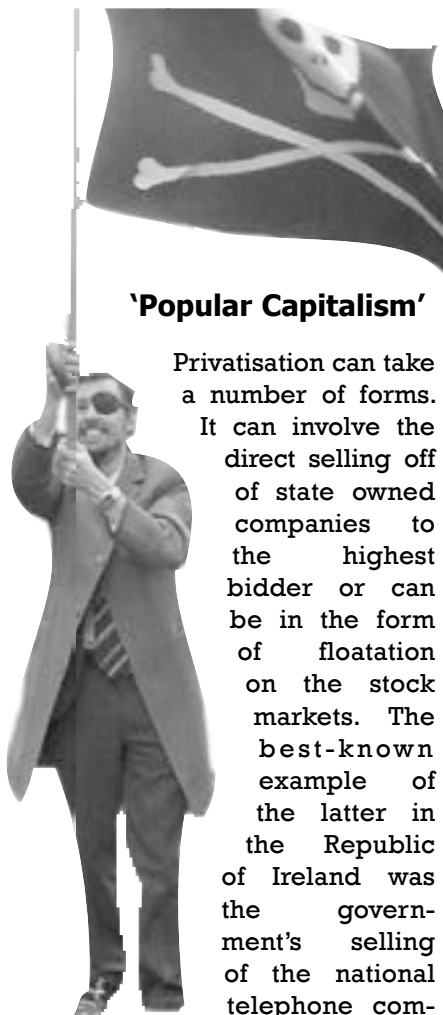


### 'Popular Capitalism'

Privatisation can take a number of forms. It can involve the direct selling off of state owned companies to the highest bidder or can be in the form of floatation on the stock markets. The best-known example of the latter in the Republic of Ireland was the government's selling of the national telephone company, Eircom, in 1999. This privatisation was sold to the Irish people as 'popular capitalism', whereby everybody supposedly had the opportunity to become a shareholder. A massive government propaganda campaign persuaded 575,000 people to buy shares in Eircom. According to Paul Sweeney's book *Selling out? Privatisation in Ireland*,[5] almost a third of those who purchased shares came from the skilled and unskilled working class. However, within two years, Eircom was fully in the hands of venture capitalists with many ordinary shareholders losing up to 30% of their investment. Privatisation of Eircom was successful for some however – the top 4 managers earned a total of €29 million between them in a 30 month period between late 2001 and March 2004 – a staggering average monthly salary of €240,000 each! Obviously 'popular capitalism' works for some.

The privatisation of the rail and water services in Britain led to similar staggering wage rates for top managers. In the first seven years after the privatisation of the British water service in 1989, salaries and bonuses paid to the top directors increased by an average of between 50 and 200 per cent per annum. At the same time, the water bills being faced by householders soared – with an average increase of approximately 50% in the first four years. Indeed, water bills in England and Wales are set to rise by a further 13% over the next five years.

It is these consequences of privatisation that is driving the current battle against the introduction of water charges in the North. It is obvious to campaigners that the successful introduction of a charge would be the first step towards privatisation. Privatisation of the service is one of the main driving factors behind the attempts to introduce a bin tax in the South as well (and will no doubt lead to attempts to re-introduce domestic water charges in the not-too-distant future). In 37 local authority areas in the South, the bin collection service has already been privatised. In all of these, an important precursor to privatisation was the successful implementation of a charge. After all, who was going to be interested in running the service unless they were going to be able to make money from it? Once the last vestiges of resistance to the introduction of the bin tax is crushed, the service will be privatised throughout the state and householders' bills can be expected to soar.

### Pay and Conditions

Another consequence of the privatisation of the bin and water services will be a major attack on the pay and conditions of workers. In the post-privatisation economy workers can look forward to the replacement of their jobs with 'yellow-pack' jobs. In late 2003/early 2004 workers at the private bin-collection company, Oxigen, which has the contract for collecting the green recycling bins in the Dublin City Council area, were forced to go on strike for 3 months to even win union recognition. Working conditions and rates of pay for Oxigen workers are much worse than for

the workers directly employed by Dublin City Council. This is the future which faces all workers in state-run services if the privatisation agenda is successful.

While privatisation is sometimes open and obvious, governments often have to be more circumspect when the service being privatised is in politically sensitive areas such as health and education. This is where scams such as Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) come into play. Private Finance Initiatives are the 'Trojan horse' used by the Blair government in the UK to introduce private capital to the public sector, especially, but not exclusively, in the National Health Service (NHS). Under PFI, hospitals are built by the private sector and then leased back to the NHS over a period of between 20 and 30 years. The private company is paid an annual sum for provision of the building and services in it, rather like a typical mortgage but with the provision of caretaking, security, maintenance etc. added on - most likely at wage rates inferior to those of direct employees.

### Public Private Partnerships

In Ireland the government has embraced Public Private Partnerships in a number of areas, most notably in the construction of roads and other infrastructural projects. These have inevitably resulted in huge profits for the private companies involved. For example, in 2000 the Department of Education and Science (DES) entered into a PPP agreement for the design and construction of five new secondary schools. Sites for the schools were provided by the State and contracts were awarded to companies to build the schools and to maintain and operate them for 25 years. The DES trumpeted this as the new way forward and claimed an expected saving of 6% compared to the cost of direct state provision. The truth, however, turned out to be somewhat different. In June 2004 the Comptroller and Auditor General's report found that the projected cost of the provision of these 5 schools was going to

be 8 – 13 per cent higher than the traditional methods of funding - a transfer of an extra €30million from the taxpayers' pocket into that of private business!

Transport infrastructural investment in the Republic of Ireland over the last number of years has been huge. Motorways which are built as PPPs are a licence to print money for the private companies involved. Of the €8 billion which will be spent on national roads up to 2008, €1.2 billion will come from the private sector. As the motorways are built, these private companies will recoup their investment through the imposition of tolls. And they will collect massive profits! It is estimated that over the next 30 years €5.5 billion will be handed over in tolls by road users. National

> ## "Bus drivers for Aircoach work a 12-hour shift, they can only take a toilet break if they are ahead of schedule and they must pay for any damage to the buses"

Toll Roads, the company which collects the tolls on the M50 motorway, turned in a profit of €18 million in 2004.

### Run Down of Services

Quite often governments need to be even more duplicitous in order to push their privatisation agenda. Public services are deliberately allowed to run down and become 'inefficient' in the hope that people will then welcome the intervention of private business. In the Republic of Ireland, this is most obvious currently in the area of public transport. Dublin Bus, for example, has been starved of necessary investment for years with the result that the company is now at least 150 buses short of what they need, even to provide what is already an insufficient service. In fact, Dublin Bus receives the lowest State subsidy of any public transport operator in Western Europe or North America.

One result of this lack of investment is obviously a disimprovement in the level of bus service. What better way to prepare public opinion for the introduction of private buses? And this is exactly the government's plan – the privatisation of Dublin Bus by 2008 is stated government policy, starting with the hiving off of 25% of the routes.

When the privatisation is successfully pushed through, 'uneconomic' routes will be gone. People who live in the suburbs can expect to have a bus service at peak times when buses are busy but at off-peak times no private company is going to have half-empty buses on the road.

And, just in case it needs to be stated again, privatisation leads to a disimprovement in workers' conditions of service. Evidence of this can be seen in the private company Aircoach which runs a coach service from Dublin city centre to the airport and from Dublin to Cork. Bus drivers for Aircoach work a 12-hour shift, they can only take a toilet break if they are ahead of schedule and they must pay for any damage to the buses they drive. The company refuses to recognise or negotiate with any union.

Privatisation of public services – whether it is through the direct sale of utilities or through indirect methods such as PFI and PPP – involves a massive transfer of wealth from taxpayers to the pockets of private business interests. It negates the concept of there being such a thing as 'public service' and subjects everything to the bottom line of profit. In other words it seeks to maximise the profits of a few at the expense of wages and social obligations. Furthermore, privatisation inevitably leads to an attack on wages and working conditions – conditions which have been fought for through years of trade union agitation are done away with at the scratch of a pen.

### 'Nationalisation'?

While anarchists oppose the privatisation of state assets and services for the reasons discussed above, we do not call – as some on the

left do - for the 'nationalisation' of services as a solution to problems. For example, during the recent Irish Ferries dispute, the Socialist Party put forward as one of the ways in which the workers' demands could be met:

*"Take Irish Ferries into democratic public ownership in order to safeguard pay and conditions and to safeguard the shipping industry as a vital asset"* [6]

But the taking of Irish ferries into public ownership would in no way 'safeguard pay and conditions'. We'd be expecting the same politicians who are busily implementing the neo-liberal agenda to now take on the role of workers' protectors. While I'm not suggesting for a moment that the Socialist Party are proposing this, it is important to point out that the 'nationalise it' or 'take it into public ownership' slogan is far too often spun out by people on the left without their taking into account that there is a massive difference between state control/ownership and workers' control/ownership.

Of course that is not to say that nationalisation is of no consequence. What I am trying to argue is that while we don't see nationalisation as the answer, it would of course be a significant development especially for the workers directly involved. In the Irish Ferries case, for example, presumably if the Irish government was the employer it would not have been as easy for them to pull the legal ruse of paying the workers wages lower than the Irish minimum wage. So while they might well have sought ways to drive down wages, their options would have been more limited.

Similarly, many on the left have called for the re-nationalisation of the Corrib gas reserves off the coast of Mayo. While it is an absolute disgrace that the government gave these reserves away to Shell/Statoil for such a poor return[7] and that the billionaire owners of Shell, Statoil and Marathon stand to make a fortune from assets which should be rightfully owned by the Irish people, we all know that even if the



revenues from the gas were still in state ownership, spending it on housing the homeless or reducing hospital waiting lists would not top the agenda of the government.

Their being in state ownership would, however, make more possible the type of political campaign which might force them to spend the moneys in the interests of the working class. A nurses' strike

> "state ownership does not equal workers' ownership. No-one would argue that the fact that apartheid South Africa had a very high level of state ownership made it a workers' paradise"

to demand the Irish government invest the proceeds of the Corrib gasfields in healthcare would have a much greater likelihood of success than a similar action directed at the Shell management.

Put simply, state ownership does not equal workers' ownership. No-one would argue that the fact that apartheid South Africa had a very high level of state ownership made it a workers' paradise. Neither would it be claimed – except by some died-in-the-wool stalinists – that Soviet Europe, where the ownership of all industry was in the hands of the state, was good for the majority of workers.

### Alienation

It can actually be argued indeed that state ownership can contribute to a heightened sense of alienation

among working class people. In such a scenario we are sold the lie that the resource – be it gas reserves or whatever else – is 'public property'. The reality however is that far from being in the ownership of 'the public', ordinary people have no direct say in the allocation of these resources. Just as working class people are consistently alienated from the product of their labour, this selling of the idea of 'public ownership' over which the public have no real say leads to an increase in apathy and a sense of helplessness among ordinary people. It is much more likely that the political establishment who control the purse strings supposedly 'in the public interest' will actually spend revenues generated from these 'public assets' on measures that will have the long-term effect of re-inforcing rather than alleviating social division. Public policy consistently results in an increase in the gap between the well-off and the poor.

There are of course advantages for working class people in services and resources being in 'public' rather than private hands. In the case of the Corrib gas fields, for example, a 'public' company would be much more susceptible to public political pressure in terms of both safety issues and the distribution of the gas. Because of the nature of the deal done with Shell and Statoil when they were given control of the gas reserves, the community in North-West Mayo are expected to take all the safety and environmental risks associated with bringing

the gas ashore. But – because the oil companies' profit margins are the principal motivation involved - there is no intention of connecting the local community to the gas grid. Instead it will be piped directly to the existing Dublin-Galway pipeline where, incidentally, the state-owned Bord Gais Eireann will buy the gas at market rates.

It can certainly be argued that if the gas reserves had remained in 'public' ownership the local community would be in a much stronger position when it came to trying to exert political pressure to ensure that it is both brought ashore safely and put to the benefit of the local people.

## Trade union organisation

Probably the biggest argument in favour of 'public' rather than private ownership of services and resources is in relation to employment and conditions of service. Traditionally public sector workers have enjoyed stronger trade union organisation. In recent years this has become even more entrenched. According to official statistics published in September 2005, trade union membership in Ireland rose by around 20% from 1994 to 2004, to stand at 521,400. However, union density as a proportion of all employees fell from 46% to 35%, with private sector union density now standing at a mere 21%. Trade union organisation within the public sector is obviously much easier especially in a climate where more and more private sector employers adopt a strongly anti-union stance.

Public sector workers as a rule tend to have a greater sense of job satisfaction especially in terms of civic pride etc. Workers in education and health, for example, can see a direct benefit to the communities in which they live from the provision of the service in which they work. This same level of direct benefit to the community is not always evident in private sector employments.

To sum up, the arguments against privatisation of public services and assets are strong. Privatisation inevitably operates in the interest of the wealthy and big business. On the other hand, however, the call for

'nationalisation' or for the retention of services etc in public ownership only makes sense in the context of a radically changed social set-up. In today's world 'public sector' has come to mean 'government'. It is only if 'public sector' can be made to mean 'people's ownership' in a real sense that the call for public ownership can be a truly radical one. In the absence of revolutionary change, what is important is not who owns the gas or the aeroplanes or whatever. The truly important thing is how the profits made are spent and how the service is operated in the interest of the public. This can be done through state ownership

or through levying punitive taxes on the profits of the private companies. At the end of the day, if either was to happen, it would indeed be a significant change.

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3. see http://pilger.carlton.com/globalisation/privatisation

4. http://www.ert.be

5. Paul Sweeney is economic adviser to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions

6. www.socialistparty.net

7. see the Shell to Sea website for details www.corribsos.com

# Independent Workers Union



The Independent Workers Union (IWU) is a new small Irish trade union which stands outside the partnership consensus and is attempting to build a radical trade union. At the WSM's conference in the autumn of 2005 we added to our Trade Union position paper:

*"In recent years the Independent Workers Union (IWU) has been formed. It openly declares itself as being anti-social partnership and is actively working to recruit and organise low-paid workers. We welcome this development and will do anything we can to assist them in this work.*

*We encourage all WSM members to become either full or associate members of the Independent Workers Union with a view to working within and alongside the IWU to further the objectives of our Trade Union position paper"*

Since then, a number of WSM members have been actively involved in

the IWU and in assisting its work. We have done so because we see the work it is doing in recruiting and attempting to organise workers who are currently unorganised as being of crucial importance. Much of the IWU's work is aimed at recruiting and organising people in 'precarious employment'. This often consists of taking cases for people to the Labour Court, Employment Appeals Tribunal, Rights Commissioners etc. – work that is far from glamorous but is of huge significance for the individuals affected. The people involved in the union want to recruit workplaces and want to re-build a radical fighting trade union spirit. This can't be done by a clicking of the fingers but takes a hell of a lot of work.

We would encourage all revolutionaries, radicals, anarchists and libertarians in Ireland to join the IWU and help in the task of building what can become a new radical voice for workers.

**www.union.ie for more on the IWU**

# Precarity

## All we have to lose is our chainstores

Precarity is a term synonymous with precariousness. It is perhaps best conceived as chronic insecurity. In recent times, with the dismantling of the welfare state and the destruction of social security, workers' existence is becoming more and more insecure. Precarity is a term that has been developed to describe these changes and the new form of working class existence that has developed from them.

The term is used in particular to refer to the demise of the job-for-life and job security. In this sense it is closely linked to the process of casualisation. For anti-capitalists, these changes has been significant. The social-democratic/mass trade union model of working class action does not seem fit to deal with this new situation. The level of union membership in the working class is continuously on the decrease. This decrease in union membership is, unfortunately, not being replaced with any new form of workplace organisation.

The difficulties posed by organising precarious workers have led the trade union movement to, for the most part, abandon these workers. Precarious workers, those who are most in need of protection and organisation are today the least organised.

As many anti-capitalist activists are precarious workers, the issue of precarity is one that has been widely debated within the international anti-capitalist movement. Some hold that it is a completely new phenomenon, while other hold that it is a return to what existed before the exceptional period of Keynesian capitalism, or social-democracy. Still others question whether the 'job for life' ever existed for the mass of society*.

Some of the debate about precarity is driven by those who once identified industrial workers as the vanguard of revolutionary change, and who now see precarious workers as fulfilling this role. While this may not be a particularly useful analysis, we should not ignore the question of how to organise these workers.

Here we offer a few samples of the issue that has been termed precarity. We open with an article by James Redmond on attempts by Irish libertarians to engage with this issue. He discusses the 'Get Up, Stand Up' campaign which attempted to direct some of the anti-capitalist energy thrown up by the 'anti-globalisation' movement into grassroots workplace organising. He also writes about the Polish Temp Workers Defence Committee and the struggle in the Tesco distribution centre and how our involvement in organising solidarity with those workers raised issues about the content of the 'Get Up, Stand Up' campaign. We follow this with an article by a member of the British anarchist group, the WOMBLES, and a T&G (Transport and General Workers Union) activist on the organising drive taken up by the T&G. He discusses both the potentials and limitations of this model of union organizing for activists. This model is based on that developed by the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) on the States. The SEIU's new attention to organising has led to them being the major driving force behind the Change to Win Coalition, which split from the AFL-CIO last September. The final article, by Alan Mac Simoin, a WSM member and SIPTU activist, discusses this split, its significance and its limitations.

by Oisín Mac Giollamóir

*For a detailed look at work in the 21st Century see '*The Nomad, the Displaced and the Settler: Work in the 21st Century*' in *Red & Black Revolution 9,* online at www.struggle.ws/wsm/rbr/rbr9/work.html

**More Precarity**

http://www.prol-position.net/
http://www.euromarches.org/

http://www.chainworkers.org
http://www.euromayday.org/
http://www.precarity.info/

http://www.metamute.com/
http://noborder.org/
http://www.eurotopiamag.org/

# Ireland

Over the past year there has been an emerging preoccupation among anarchists and socialists with precarity - as an expression of a new work discipline imposed by neo-liberalism. Already there have been several precarity forums in European cities aimed at etching out a sense of the identities formed through the shared experience of the demands of job market flexibility.

There have also been five successive years of Euromayday parades across Europe calling for "flexicurity." None of this escaped the notice of Irish activists. In Ireland, the WSM has so far been involved in two campaigns that can be linked to the issue. Our members were involved in providing solidarity to a group of Polish temp workers in an attempt to highlight the exploitative use of agency staff by Tesco, and also in giving out information on workplace and union rights in the *Get Up, Stand Up* Campaign.

The *Get Up, Stand Up* initiative emerged from discussions between members of the Workers Solidarity Movement, Irish Socialist Network, Independent Workers Union and other individuals in order to spread information on unions and workplace rights to the largely unorganised sectors of the main retail streets and malls in Dublin city centre.

Starting off on Mayday 2005, the campaign distributed over 5,000 multilingual leaflets containing information on basic employment rights and union contact details, directly to workers in high street shops and shopping centres. The campaign also played another role, by attempting to revitalise the idea that workers and bosses have nothing in common. We argued that this manifests itself most clearly in the need for distinctly worker based organisations like unions.

The campaign also offered an alternative to the spectacular and short term strategies that characterised much of the recent anti-capitalist era. It was at this level that the precarity discussions were most influential, allowing ourselves as activists to begin seeing ourselves within the class relationship and start engaging in forms of political work more closely related to our own everyday experiences. To start speaking of ourselves as part of a class, instead of as an activist community and develop coping mechanisms which can strengthen and broaden the appeal of our politics as a result of this recognition.

Already there is a wealth of statutory bodies who give out information on workplace rights; equally the unions should be taking a much more proactive approach to this work. In a sense the campaign ended up substituting itself for these bodies, with no real sense of going beyond and developing a coherent and valid criticism of them. Eventually dialogue within the campaign revolved around questions of what shopping centre should be leafleted next. The ability to learn from the activity we were engaged in was sidelined for the safety of a campaign of information dispersion, with the campaign's aesthetics speaking of one thing but the form of the campaign remaining very much short sighted.

Later in the summer and independently of *Get Up, Stand Up* contact was made with a group of young Polish workers, who were facing into protests with management of a Tesco distribution centre in Greenhills. Coming from a background in militant politics, these workers took the initiative to use their own experiences as temps - used to undermine the security of the workforce - as a propaganda vehicle to highlight an increasingly common work experience. Tesco never breached a piece of employment legislation; the workers' direct employer was an agency called Grafton Recruitment. To Tesco they were immediately disposable
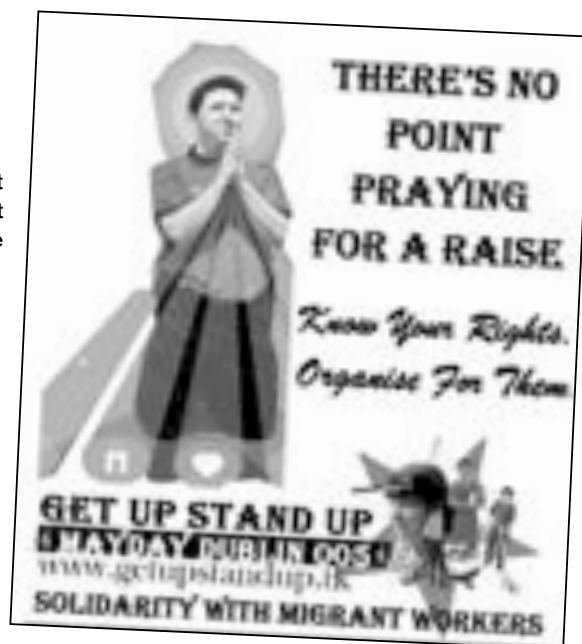


and the rights we relied on in the *Get Up, Stand Up Campaign* were no longer relevant. Members of the WSM provided solidarity, by helping to organise a protest outside a Tesco store on Baggot Street and calling for solidarity elsewhere. This led to several demos across the UK and Poland co-ordinated by activists in the libertarian milieu and organisers in the T&G. The protests garnered a huge degree of media attention within the new Polish media in Ireland and back in Poland.

For a time these two experiences were a healthy breakaway from the sort of activity that is dependent upon mobilizing for the next big event, as well as a start to formulating strategies of how we move towards workplace-geared activity. Equally, here were opportunities to explore a political language of struggle based on how identities are emerging in workplaces rather than having to rely on the baggage of an awkwardly represented archaic class struggle; a rhetoric that in the long run only isolates us from those who class struggle anarchists need to enter into dialogue with.

The application of organizing skills which have developed in the anti-globalisation period, the use of subvertisements, the aesthetic separation from the corporate branding of mainstream unions, the success of internet based organisation in mobilising for the Tesco pickets can only be a positive addition to an organisational vocabulary that can speak to workers apathetic and distrustful of a politics and unions which to a

large extent simply do not challenge the reality facing increasing numbers of people.

During the Irish ferries dispute, Irish unionism had a moment of brief respite. Contrary to the fears of many, huge numbers of workers left their employment and protested in solidarity with the workers of Irish Ferries. Listening to popular chat shows and reading bulletin boards left an impression that there was a considerable popular desire to mobilise in employment sectors where there are weak unions or bullying bosses. There's a lesson here that significant organisational drives are needed.

Had *Get Up, Stand Up* retained a more self-critical awareness of the work it was entering into, it might have been a forum where issues of workplace solidarity could have been raised and teased out separate to the capital political parties seek to gain from them. With the breakdown in democracy in many unions, and the recent Collen and Delaney cases there's no doubt that there is a need for the permanence of such a network within the movement.

*Get Up, Stand Up* style initiatives and ventures such as the Polish Temp Workers Defence Committee have a role to play in briefly sketching and experimenting in how this can be done both from within and outside the unions. For the moment though, many of those involved in these campaigns have become active in the IWU, setting up a Polish Workers Section and joining its recruitment drives. **by James Redmond**

# UK

In the UK, union membership has been in steady decline for the past 25 years, not least due to how people are being employed - casualised labour, increased imposition of agency work, temporary, short term contracts & contracts of 'self-employment', along with the general lack of confidence in unions after years of complacency, compromises and defeats.

One of the UK's 'big four' unions, the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G), has sought to address this by adopting the model created by the American Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with its strategy of a national unit of professional 'union organisers' to target traditionally untouched areas of unionisation (precarious work in fragmented workplaces - most significantly in the UK, Polish immigrant labour in the north & cleaners on London Underground and in the City). A lot of finances and resources have gone into ensuring this experiment is a 'success'. The model is on a 3 year probationary period and for this year the organising unit should have recruited 10,000 new members.

On the surface this looks an impressive undertaking, especially the work done around the Polish workers in Crewe, yet we need to look closely just how they are operating and how much they encourage solidarity and militancy rather than compliance and acceptance of union leadership.
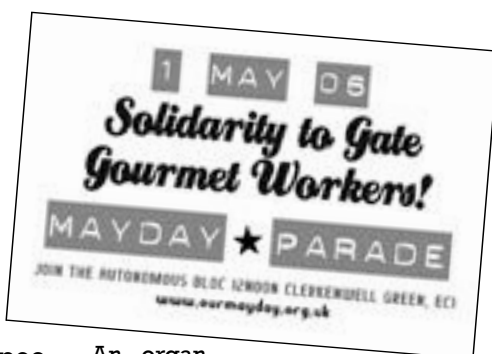
An organising team is typically made up of a team leader, an organiser and an organiser in training. These teams are usually from an activist or academic backgrounds ("because of their political commitment & willingness to work extra hours") who go to workplaces to talk to and encourage workers to join the union. The more militant workers are encouraged to become organisers themselves who in turn organise in their respective workplaces.

The problem with this imposed structure is it is geared towards getting results. Essentially your energy and responsibility goes into meeting targets rather than meeting the needs of the workers (this is amplified when you do not share the same common conditions and problems at work). In effect organisers become the tools of the union teaching workers how to organise rather than being the delegates of workers in the workplace. It is an artificially informal hierarchy that re-imposes the formal hierarchy of the leadership, although a lot of effort is done on the ground to alleviate the impression the members answer to the union.

What is retained though is the leadership speaking on behalf of the workers, as evidenced with workplace grievances being dealt with directly by the 'representation team', sidelining any progressive dialogue between organisers and the people they've unionised, indicating the primary objective of 'union organisers' is to simply recruit new members. Plus this doesn't bode well if we look at way the T&G handled the Gate Gourmet dispute, where the union stepped in to negotiate to get all the sacked workers reinstated only to sell them out in a compromised deal. Ironically, the evening of a tube cleaners' organisers meeting at T&G headquarters. there was a picket outside by Gate Gourmet workers demanding their hardship pay be reinstated, having been withdrawn by the union. Despite all the fine words, activist commitment and workers' militancy the union leadership will always have the last say.

The question then is can there be a genuine model for grassroots rank and file political activity and organising within a union setting, and if not what are the alternatives?

One initiative has emerged, on the back of the T&G tube cleaners campaign, called The Solidarity Collective – a group set up by people involved in the IWW, the Wombles, T&G organisers and other left groups to support ongoing workplace struggles independently of any union hierarchy. How this develops is dependent on those involved but the intention is to link up with, and support the development of, autonomous and self organised workers struggles (not reliant on unions or political parties) as a means to foster forms of solidarity and collective strategies sadly missing in the current political climate. What is paramount is the recognition that we must work together in creating methods of confronting capital together. These are our collective struggles and we all have a part to play in them.

**by Dean (Wombles, UK)**

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# USA

Last September saw a split in the USA's Congress of Trade Unions, the AFL-CIO. The Change to Win Federation held its founding convention in St. Louis, Missouri, where they set out their plans: cut down on bureaucracy, devote a lot more resources to organising the unorganised, and start building industry-wide super-unions.

The seven founding unions were the Teamsters (a general union and the USA's biggest), the Building Labourers, Service Employees (third biggest in the USA), UNITE-HERE (clothing and restaurant workers), Farmworkers, Food workers, and the Carpenters. Together they made up about 35% of the AFL-CIO's members.

Literally from day one, we could see this was not going to be some radical break from the undemocratic practices of the AFL-CIO. There was no membership vote over affiliation to this new federation, the handful of people on each union executive took the decision themselves.

So, is this new formation simply an attempt by a few discontented senior union leaders to increase their power or do they have ideas that merit serious consideration? Most of their literature has been long on describing the problems faced by working people, but short on offering solutions.

Well, there are very real problems in the US trade union movement. Whether you are a radical or a conservative, you can't avoid the fact that the percentage of American workers in a union has dropped to an all-time low of about 12%. And that's an open invitation to the bosses to stick the boot in, an invitation the bosses have been more than happy to accept.

*"We are focusing our resources on organising tens of millions of workers who are without union representation. We are shifting our resources into organising",* said Anna Burger, Change to Win Chair. Indeed the federation has put it like this:

*"1. Working people, including current union members, cannot win consistently without uniting millions more workers in unions.*

*2. Every worker in America has the right to a union that has the focus, strategy, and resources to unite workers in that industry and win."*

Among their proposals to achieve these objectives are encouraging unions to organize on an industry-wide basis, merging smaller unions into a few large unions, and spending more money on organising as opposed to electoral politics.

All well and good, but unions have to be seen to do more than merely hold the line against employer demands for cutbacks. They need to actually spearhead a fight for higher wages, more job security, better healthcare, shorter hours and improved pensions. There has to be a sense that we are going forward, that any sacrifices or risks we are asked to take will be worth it.

Just as important, even a brief look at labour history suggests that ideas, politics, and grassroots worker involvement are far more important than changes in organisationalstructures in the recipe for reviving union strength.

There are no short-cuts to rebuilding our movement, and that it will take far more than a few mergers or spending more on recruitment to produce the reversal in union fortunes that so many of us desire. After all, that's what has been done here by SIPTU and IMPACT, to name but two of our own big unions which were formed through mergers.

This is not to say that the heads of the new federation are "sell-outs", "traitors" or any of the other silly names that sometimes get thrown at union leaders. By and large they represent the general ideas of the members who elected them. When most workers see no alternative to the conservative political parties, let alone to capitalism, we should not be surprised that our unions are not some sort of revolutionary movement.

What is needed is not "better leaders". We are not sheep who simply require a better or more farsighted shepherd. Real change necessitates the active participation of a lot of people.

All over the world we need to convince our work colleagues and fellow union members that a militant fight for workers' interests is a good thing, that ordinary member involvement and control of our unions is a good thing, that a fundamental change in the way society is ordered is possible.

In our unions, whether in the USA or Ireland, experience suggests that we need a programme that puts far greater weight on political and social change, rank-and-file education and empowerment, and a commitment to reinvigorating collective bargaining as well as rebuilding membership. This was the experience of Connolly and Larkin, of the US Congress of Industrial Organisations in the 1930s, and of every large-scale union movement since.

**by Alan MacSimoin**

# men are from earth (and so are women)

How different are men and women? Very, according to some. John Gray's book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus,* is based on the idea that there are fundamental differences between the genders. It may be just another self-help book on relationships, but it has also sold over 30 million copies and been translated into 40 languages.

by Aileen O'Carroll

Deborah Tannen's book, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation,* was on the New York Times bestseller list for nearly four years and has been translated into 24 languages. Pope Benedict, when still a cardinal (and an obvious expert on gender) in a statement on the role of women wrote that women's characteristics were *"listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting"* in the first statement published by the Catholic church on the role of women in a decade. In January 2005, the president of Harvard argued that women were underrepresented in science because biologically they weren't as capable at scientific thinking as men. During his time as President the number of tenured jobs offered to women at Harvard fell from the low 36% to the even lower 13%. While we may not care very much about the pope or pop-psychology, their ideas carry weight with large segments of the world's population.

The idea that men and women are fundamentally different can also be found on the left. Some women's peace groups, such as the Greenham Common women, base their activity on women's supposed opposition to war and violence. Or to take a more recent example, some of the supporters of the centre-left President of Chile Michelle Bachelet, argued that as a woman she is better able to multi-task and thus more able for the job; *"she is going to take the reins of this country as if it were a big house. She is going to manage us well. Look at us men, we do one thing at a time, while the mom is cooking, talking on the phone, feeding the children and listening to the radio!"*

If you just listened to popular media and general conversations, you would expect the genders to be worlds apart. Yet a study by Shibley Hyde found far more similarities than differences. This article looks at this research, and then asks in the light of it why might the idea of gender difference be so popular presently.

## Mostly the Same

Published in the journal *American Psychologists* in September 2005, the research challenges the idea that men and women are very different psychologically. Shibley Hyde reviewed the results from 46 surveys and concluded that men and women are similar on most, but not all, psychological variables.

Arguments about the roles that men and women play in society often revolve around whether these roles are due to nature (our genetic make up) or nurture (the type of society we live in). The implication of this research is to overturn the idea that male and female roles are connected to particular characteristics of men or women.

In 1974 Maccoby and Jacklin analysed the results from over 2,000 psychological studies on gender difference and in doing so they overturned many myths; girls aren't more social than boys, neither are they more suggestible, girls aren't any better at learning off by heart, boys aren't good at more abstract learning, girls don't have lower self esteem and it is not true that girls lack motivation.

In all they found only four areas where gender differences were evident; verbal ability, visual-spatial ability, mathematical ability and aggression. Yet despite the fact that overwhelmingly their story was one of similarity, almost all reports of their work focused on the differences. So why if genders, in the main, behave similarly are they perceived to be different?

## Same Behaviour, Different Perceptions

One explanation for this is that the meaning attached to the behaviour varies depending on whether you are a man or a woman. So, for example, if a woman isn't good at map reading, this is seen to be proof that women are less spatially aware. If a man isn't good at map reading, well it's just one of those things that he's not very good at. I once asked a teenage boy what toys he played with as a child. Like most boys, he played with action man. He went on to say that he thought action man was 'cool', while Barbie was stupid. Despite the fact that both toys are essentially the same – a piece of plastic representing a person – to him the possibilities and meanings attached to the male toy were far more positive than the female toy. Mars and Venus are the same place, they are just seen from different perspectives.

## What Does it Mean to Come from Venus?

Society attributes different meanings to similar behaviours. In fact, even stranger, society is quite happy to talk about very different behaviours as if they were all

similar. So, for example, what do people mean when they say 'women's work'?

One certain thing that can be said about gender roles, despite the Mars/Venus clichés, is that they vary greatly between different cultures, classes and change over time. Venus seems to be a number of radically different planets. In Ireland, nursing is a women's profession, in southern Italy most nurses are men. This is because in the south of Italy, labour market shortages were so great, that one of the few jobs available was nursing, and as traditionally men were seen as the major bread-owners, these became seen as 'male'.

The daughter of a manual labourer on a poor Dublin housing estate is more likely to see her role in terms of motherhood and so will often start her family early in life. In contrast, the daughter of a doctor might be expected to go to university, and establish a career before she has children. And on the other end of the scale, the role of Paris Hilton, the daughter of a multi-millionaire, seems to be to be thin, shop and act stupid.

Over time, the role women were expected to play within capitalism has varied. In the early factories they were valued (as were children) as a cheap form of labour. Then they were moved to the home, where their role was to provide all the social care and support required to keep the workforce ticking over.

So for example, in the US during the depression, working women were accused of taking men's jobs. Although the numbers of women working outside the home increased gradually from the 1900s, in general this was acceptable only for single women. In Ireland, it wasn't until the

early 1970s that married women were allowed to continue working in the public sector. When women were in paid employment, it was in those sectors that mirrored their role in the home such as domestic work, or caring work such as nursing. But the idea that women's role was in the home has been overturned at certain points.

This happened most dramatically during World War Two when propaganda extolled the virtues of women working – in fact, the skills they used at home were argued to be the same as the skills needed in the workplace. Alice Kesser Harris explains, *"they were induced into the labour force with a rhetoric which played on their housewifely role. For example, they were told that operating a drill press was just like operating a can opener; that wielding a welding torch, for example, was just like operating a mix-master might have been; that a drill press was like an iron."*

After the war, although in the US 75% of women said they would like to keep their jobs, about 90% ended up being forced to leave. Once again women's place was in the home.

Today women make up a greater part of the labour force than ever before. In the west, manufacturing has declined, while service industries and knowledge industries have grown. Throughout the world

women are paid less than men and in order to attract cheaper female labour, women's characteristics are once more being re-defined as useful on the labour market. So, for example, women are argued to be good listeners and empathic, and so make good call centre employees, or women are good at multitasking and so suited to IT work; an article on Microsoft's webpage argues that *"Biology [and] upbringing make women more flexible and so they are better managers."*

In fact there is a certain irony that as the workplace is becoming more female, the idea that genders are very different seems to be gaining increasing popularity (at least if the sales of John Gray's books are anything to go by).

The idea of gender differences can be used to either exclude women (as in the position of women in Harvard) or to attract more women (as in the call centre workers). The malleability of the idea of difference, and the different political uses to which it is put, should make us very wary of arguments that take difference as their starting point.

## Mostly the Same, a Little Different, What Next?

So far I've been arguing that the similarities are far greater than the differences, but that doesn't mean that differences don't exist or that they aren't important. Women and men are treated differently in society and this different experience affects the roles that women and men play.

In her study, Shibley Hyde conducted a review of 46 studies, each of which themselves was a review of other studies. Hundreds of reports were involved. She grouped her data into six categories and set

about seeing if she could find any evidence of difference. The categories were: those studies that assessed cogitative variables; that assessed verbal and non-verbal communication; that assessed social or personality variables; that assessed measures of psychological well-being (for example self-esteem); that assessed motor behaviour (for example, how far can you throw a ball) and finally a category of miscellaneous reports, such as 'moral reasoning'.

As with the earlier Maccoby and Jacklin study, she found gender differences in a few very specific areas. The first area is, not surprisingly, throwing ability. Men can throw a ball further and faster than women. The second area was found in some measures of sexuality – men masturbate more and have different attitudes to casual sex. The third and final area was in levels of aggression, in particular in levels of physical aggression.

### Differences Aren't Stable

They also found that in some areas there are little differences in childhood, but differences develop in the teenage years. So for example, in high school, a small difference emerges favouring males in terms of solving complex problems. This small variation in differences over time, Shibley Hyde argues, overthrows *the notions that gender differences are large and stable* (p588), that men have permanently set up camp on Mars which is a great distance from Venus.

The study also highlights the importance of context in determining gender differences. So, for example, averaging out over all the studies, it was found that men helped more. But if the studies were separated into those where the helping occurred when onlookers were present, and those where onlookers were absent, it was found that a large gender difference only occurred when onlookers were present.

This difference, she argues, can be explained by looking at social roles – in western society 'heroism' is seen as a masculine attribute, which

means that men are more likely to help others when they are doing it in a public way that might be interpreted as heroic. The difference in one trait 'helping others' can be large, favouring males, or close to zero, depending on the social context in which that trait occurs.

Similar differences were found when looking at interruptions to conversations – very little difference were found in groups of two, and small differences were found in groups of three and more. Again the social context affects the behavioural response – and the idea that there are fixed male and female responses, which we are all hardwired to perform, is undermined.

### Different Experiences, Different Responses

In those areas where men and women behave differently, it is in large part because they are treated differently growing up. An example of this different treatment can be found in a study by Myra and David Sadker in which they looked at the different ways boys and girls were treated in US high schools. After three years of classroom observations, they discovered a hidden, unconscious bias that neither teachers nor students were aware of.

## "Boys were asked more questions, were praised more, referred to more in class, girls were less often called on, often ignored"

Boys were asked more questions, were praised more, referred to more in class, girls were less often called on, often ignored, to the extent that teachers would stand with their back to the girls while talking to the boys. In addition, in the text books given to the students, women's contribution to society was often absent, ignored or hidden. Finally there was a tolerance of sexual discrimination of girls by other children or indeed incidences of sexual discrimination by teachers.

The result of this was that as you look at the progression of girls throughout the education system they become progressively quieter. In a typical US college classroom, 45% of the students don't participate by asking and answering questions, and the majority of those are women. In light of this study, the behavioural findings on conversation interruptions don't seem to be that surprising.

The Sadker study found that over time, due to their different experiences growing up, boys and girls acted in different ways within the classroom. The Hyde study also found some differences in behaviour but emphasised that these differences are not as great as the similarities.

### Many Voices Make up the Movement

So where does this leave us – knowing that genders are not as different as often described but also aware that gender (as do other cultural attributes) can colour the way in which we perceive and act within the world?

A key starting point for any group, movement or society who want to mobilise the full potential and creativity of humanity is to challenge the gendered nature of roles. This begins when we challenge the idea that the differences between the genders are based on biology, rather than experience.

However, this doesn't mean that we are all the same - men, women, old, young, city dweller, country person, black, white – rather that our different experiences have created a diversity of characteristics, attitudes, values and identities. The movements and the society we are trying to build have to allow a voice to this diversity.

Women are under-represented in anarchist groups throughout the world, and this means our movements are considerably weaker. as we are losing the point of view, the experiences, the skills and understandings of a large portion of humanity.

One of the few groups who seriously and successfully faced up to this problem was the anarchist group Mujeres Libres, who fought during the Spanish Civil War. They recognised that the problem of incorporating women into the anarchist movement operated on many different levels. On one hand there was the obvious sexism of part of the anarchist movement, which needed to be combated.

In a less obvious way, many men in the anarchist movement were and are, gender blind. That is they do not realise that their own way of seeing the world is coloured by their own gender and aren't aware of or interested in understanding other perspectives. While we all naturally make sense of the world from the point of view of our own experiences, we also need to be able to realise that our experiences aren't universal. Where those other voices are in the minority, we need to actively go out and seek those alternative perspectives.

This is different from saying, as John Gray does, that women and men are so different they need a self-help book to be able to understand each other. This doesn't mean that we believe that men and women occupy different spheres of life,

that some are best suited to revolutionary organisation, while others are not.

It does mean however that we try as revolutionaries to look beyond our own world-view (and of course this doesn't apply just to gender, it holds true for race, nationality, and all the other aspects of culture). In the pages of their papers and at their meetings, Mujeres Libres gave voice to women's experiences.

Mujeres Libres also worked to challenge restrictive gender roles. It is generally true that you cannot do what you haven't dreamt. If a woman never imagines herself taking part in an anarchist organisation, if she doesn't see a role for herself within that organisation, it is very unlikely that she will ever feel motivated to join one.

As a women's only group, Mujeres

Libres automatically gave women a space where they knew, by virtue of their gender, that they were welcomed and needed. From that starting point, the women involved undertook work that was more usually done by men; they organised meetings, they spoke at meetings, they travelled around the country.

Mujeres Libres also had the advantage that they were working in revolutionary times, and so the fight for women's liberation became part and parcel of the new society that was being built. Today's anarchists operate in less optimistic times and, though for women things are a lot freer than they were in 1930s Spain, the problem of how to create revolutionary organisations which reflect the full diversity of society have yet to be solved.

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# Caliban and the witch

as the central example of how women's bodies were targeted in a counter-revolutionary strategy to facilitate primitive accumulation, i.e. the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.

The period which saw the transformation from feudalism to capitalism involved what Marx termed primitive accumulation. In Europe this saw the working population (serfs) of Europe being deprived of the 'means of production' e.g. land. Primitive accumulation also involved the enslavement of some of the population of Africa and the Americas and the use of this enslaved labour to extract gold and silver from the new world. All together this primitive accumulation created both the capital and dispossessed workforce on which capitalism was built.

One of Federici's main arguments is that the transformation to capitalism of primitive accumulation was not just the economic relationship to labour and production but also includes reproduction and the alienation from the body through science and wage work.

In Federici's overview of the serfs' struggle and the heretical movement in the first part of her book, she says that it was their struggle and the failure of feudalism that brought along capitalism. She included the importance of women's role during this time, where women were less dependent on men economically and socially and where they treated on a more equal basis. This is not to say that there was any form of feminist utopia. Saying that, this was the first women's movement in several European countries as well as the first proletariat international.

Unlike the American witch trials, the European ones included both men and women. Silvia concentrates on the prevalence of women being targeted. She importantly genders and classed the witch trials by looking at who was being prosecuted and why. The witch trials were an exemplary performance used to discipline other unruly subjects through example. It is interesting to note that neither men nor women stood up to stop or challenge the witch trials and subsequent burnings.

She places the witch trials into a historical context to understand why women were being prosecuted. Two things happened in this time. First of all, they banned certain ways of life and secondly science and intellectualism provided a way of understanding the world that legitimised this change. It was a change of culture from a time of living on commons and communal living to a time of capitalism and the individual.

## "women's knowledge was destroyed by the transition into capitalism"

the individual. Those affected most by this change were elderly women who no longer were taken care of through the "moral economy" and had to steal from private land to survive. It was these women who were being persecuted as witches. Secondly there was the introduction of science, the redefinition of the body and the interest in anatomy which changed the body to a machine that can be modelled into a worker.

Women's knowledge was destroyed by the transition into capitalism. Women's knowledge whether it was midwifery or medicine was demonized since it didn't work within the confines of science and intellectualism. This intimate knowledge of the body was passed on over generations through oral tradition. So the process of alienation from production occurred alongside an alienation from reproduction. The witch trials were a hunt to erase any form of women's control over their bodies, such as knowledge of birth control, abortion, midwives and medicine women. She argues that the witch trails in Europe and the Americas have a very similar root; anyone who was using other forms of knowledge and understanding that challenged the capitalist, imperialist goal was targeted either as a witch or a savage.

This understanding of women's work gives insight to the root of what is called the feminisation of poverty. This is the fact that the majority of the world's poor are women. According to the UN, even today women earn about half of what men earn.

The book itself, although full of insightful and captivating ideas, is plagued with an academic language and style. Those interested in engaging with her work will find her examples and theoretical analysis very interesting. For those who would rather learn in other ways, I encourage you to listen to her talk on the book at Fusion Arts in New York City on November 30, 2004 which is hosted on Interactivist Exchange. She gives a detailed overview of her thesis and the reasons she finds her work important now.

# Caliban and the Witch

## women, the body and primitive accumulation
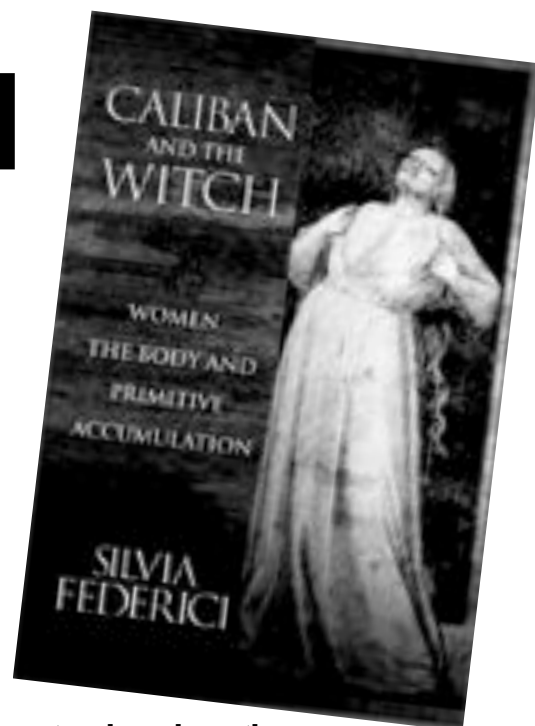
Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch; Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* does a fantastic job of taking the feminist analysis of the body and re-conceptualizing it within a class struggle understanding of history. She fills in the blanks that a traditional left analysis has missed, including the concepts of difference, women, race and the body. This work is very important, allowing feminists and socialists alike to realize that identity and class struggle are not polar opposite theoretical understandings.

reviewed by Tobie

Federici's background comes from Italian Autonomous Marxism, from her comrades in the Midnight Notes Collective on the US East Coast, and past influences include Maria Rosa Della Costa - author of *The power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1971) and Selma James author of *Sex, Race and Class* (1971). She was in the wages for housework movement that discussed how capital was dependent on domestic labour and developed the understanding that patriarchy worked alongside capitalism to enslave women. She also spent time in Nigeria working on issues of development and feminism which resulted in her writing many works on globalization, structural adjustment and the IMF. These experiences put her in a good position to have an insight on a society that was forced to move from communal living to that of capitalism. This book is her project to express an understanding of women's position in our society and the effects of globalisation and imperialism.

> "Feminists have always critiqued Marxist theory for not acknowledging the reproductive role of women and the importance of the body in production"

Feminists have always critiqued Marxist theory for not acknowledging the reproductive role of women and the importance of the body in production. Feminists have taken time to show how the body is a place of struggle and resistance. Federici continues to do this without disregarding class struggle as fundamental. Instead she gives an argument for how the body and female sexuality, reproduction and knowledge have been systematically targeted in order to break solidarity of working class struggle. She gives examples of its use in destroying the rebellious serfs: *"efforts were made by the political authorities to co-opt the youngest and most rebellious male workers, by mean of a vicious sexual politics that gave them access to free sex, and turned class antagonism into an antagonism against proletarian women"* (pg. 47). As anarchists this is very important, realizing the feminism is not individualist but involved in complex power structures.

The book jumps back and forth in both time and place so the reader should either have good knowledge of feudalism or get ready to be a bit confused. It goes from looking at the serfs' struggle for land and the heretical use of religion to challenge hierarchies and power, then moves onto the colonization of the Americas and demonisation of aboriginal cultures. The main argument focuses on the witch trials