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Front cover : Gerd Arntz 1900-1988] image : "Politique"

Rear cover : Joe Thomas at Wapping picket of News International 1986

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A Libertarian Socialists publication



Life and Times of Joe Thomas

- the road to
libertarian socialism

by
**Alan
Woodward**

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The author Alan Woodward was born into a London working class family in 1939 and spent three decades in running and taking shop stewards courses. He worked in the Midlands, London, in colleges and universities and WEA, for several union organisations and rank and file bodies. He was always active in workplace and union. Politically he was active in the newly formed International Socialists. Events move on and after two decades battling against increasingly sectarian marxist organisation, he is now active in the libertarian movement. At 70, he has retired technically but still reads widely, thinks in a hurry and writes obsessively.

Though this booklet is formally "history", experience shows that the great majority of the happening within the workers movement is unrecorded. This publication is offered as a version, collating some of the truth but not as the last word and readers are asked to accept this booklet on that condition. It makes no pretence of being impartial, being clearly socialist.

Contact Libertarian Socialists at PO Box 45155 London, N15 4WR..

The programme "*As We See It Now*" is printed near the end of the present publication.

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Joe Thomas and the road to libertarian socialism-some dates, institutions and events

- 1912 born 27 February ?
- 1933 works as a clerk in ASLEF union HO [aged 21] and joins National Union of Clerks, later Clerical and Administrative Workers Union, CAWU, and APEX, [now finally in the General and Municipal Workers Union]
- 1934 becomes branch officer for CAWU [aged 23]
- 1936 associated with strike at AA office, with Dennis Levine [24]
- 1937 Chair, London Young Communist League of CPGB [25],
- 1938 works full time for London Trades Council, youth section [26].
- 1940 works at Napier Engineering, Acton, NW London [28]
- Common Wealth movement founded,
- 1941 leaves CPGB over record of CPUSSR ref WW2 [29].
On General Council, that is national executive, of CAWU union,
- 1942 joins CW and works in London office [30]
- 1944 ousted from CW, [32]
Founder member of Socialist Workers Group
- 1945 joins his group with Lenin League with DL and forms Revolutionary Workers Association of GB, affiliated to the International Contact Commission of Chicago, an organisation formed by leninist Hugo Oehler.
- 1946 Socialist Workers League formed as RWAoGB pulls out. [34]
- 1949 son born, [37],
- 1950 Ohlerite formations in UK, France and USA,
- 1951 working at Press Association (as a sub editor ?) [39]
- 1956 to 1951, JT associated with unofficial London Port Workers Committee, with Ernst Schneider, "Icarus", German revolutionary who he later cooperates with over the publication of *The Wilhelmshaven Revolt*
- 1951 SWL collapses, JT joins Independent Labour Party and meets up again with Dennis Levine [39]
- 1954 leaves ILP and forms Workers League, with DL [42]
- 1957 Draft Manifesto for a New Workers Party [45]
- 1960 Solidarity for workers power group formed, Chris Pallis, Ken Weller and co.
- 1961 expelled from WL for "bureaucratic repression of discussion"

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- 1965 WL finally ends [53]
- 1966/7? JT published duplicated Workers Review, attempted revival of WL ?, [54]
- 1967 associated with Albert Meltzer , Mark Hendy , etc, over "Ludd" bulletin during seamen's strike .[55]
rejoins ILP and active in left fraction
- 1972 ILP splits and left fraction form Workers Voice with some ex trotskyists from Liverpool , [60]
- 1972 WV re-publishes *The Origins of Workers Council* by Canne Meier
- 1973 WV splits and JT is part of the London breakaway *Workers News* but only two issues produced [61]
- 1974 *Social Revolution* formed from ex members of the Socialist Party of Great Britain , John C, Mike B ; joined by JT, Terry L, ,[62]
- 1975 JT leaves SR over sexual liberation issues [63]
- 1977 Social Revolution group merge with *Solidarity fwp*, and *Solidarity for Social Revolution* formed
- 1977 founder member of *London Workers Group*, with two others [65],
- 1982 SR group, mainly Manchester , leave Solidarity fsr
- 1983 *Wildcat* re- formed
- 1984 miners strike , meets Mike Baker
- 1985 founder member and main funder of *Movement for Workers Councils* [73]
- 1986 Wapping printers strike , Joe on the demonstrations [photo]
- 1987 operation for lung cancer due to smoking, not falling down stairs ! [75]
- 1988 *Subversion* formed out of Wildcat etc
- 1990 JT dies, 21 Feb [78]
the publication of Jan Appel's 1939 book *The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, JT with Mike Baker [78]

Life and times of Joe ThomasIntroduction - the road to libertarian socialism

Joseph Thomas (1912 -1990) lived through tumultuous times but became a libertarian after being in organisations that were successively stalinist, leninist or even trotskyist, it is said. Like so many others, including the present writer, he abandoned , partly at least, the concept of the vanguard revolutionary party for an alternative theory of the capacity of the working class to organise themselves without the leadership of an external political party. This meant industrially and politically, without the leadership of an external dominating political party. He almost certainly retained the idea of a political organisation, in the original council communist sense. [Gorter 1978] – note, to get the full title of the book or internet site referred to, see the reading notes at the end of part three. *Thereafter, unless there is a page reference, diligent use of the indexes is required.*

When Joe first became active there were only two very small - and warring – organisations, the Anti Parliamentary Communist Federation and the United Socialist Movement in the area we can call libertarian socialist. Both of these were based in Glasgow [Shipway] When he died nearly 60 years later there were several thriving bodies with branches all over the UK that could be termed more definitely libertarian socialist. Joe was part of this movement , and though his personal role may have been small, his life can be regarded as typical of millions of others.

At the start

This idea of an industrial organisation plus a guiding political leadership as first defined in 1922, is the basis of a number of people's beliefs the present time. This concept also implies that the workers council rather than the party is the mechanism for administration in the post revolutionary period of the re-construction of the new society [Bricianer]

We examine in a little more detail the life history of J Thomas. Joe was active in the workplaces, but also in the union structure above that, and in trades councils. As a clerical worker in the engineering and printing industry, he put in "serious and unpaid work" [Rogers]. Some details of his work inside the broadly libertarian movement can be found in the colourful autobiography of a leading anarchist figure [Meltzer 1996]. His

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final, but for our purposes most productive years, were as an advocate for his version of council communism, a political philosophy which would probably be classified today as a form of libertarian socialism. The development of that specific political movement is the second theme in our story.

Background

He had four siblings - or half siblings. The oldest Yvonne tried her best to keep up family links. His father had his own business and shop in the leather trade in Cricklewood. He was active in the Freemasons and became a lodge official [M. Cole].

Joe attended a public school, Haberdashers Askes, then locally located in Hampstead. Education at a minor public school may well have resulted in an early commitment to socialism as a reaction. We do know that he first surfaced publicly as a union employee

In a political biography, person characteristics are not a primary concern, but it is true that his personality attracted some adverse comment over the years as he was thrown out of several accommodations for lack of co-operation, including that of his parents. He did however work in his father's shop at times, between jobs, as they say. His father had been a contractor, for leather goods, to the public school he attended. On the other hand he was, as several people have confirmed, always well dressed.

At first

Joe first surfaces around 1933 in his twenties, as a junior clerical worker, at the ASLEF union head office in Hampstead. The hows and whys of his being there are unclear. He was already active from an early age in the Communist Party of Great Britain, CPGB, and was reported as being Chair of the London Young Communist League, and being close to John Gollan, Tom Mann, J R Campbell and suchlike [Hillman]. This familiarity with the leaders of the Party suggests a future in that leadership himself, or at least within the trade union movement top flight. To his credit, he refused to take up employment in that elite and remained at the base all his life.

Andy W recalls that Joe had told him he had met Sylvia Pankhurst when organising a May Day demonstration in these years - a curious co-

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incidence in view of his later beliefs in council communism, and hers for many years. - the distant future and the abandoned past [Wilson]

He visited Paris in 1936 to see Campbell and met a senior Party member from Russia. He was part of the Workers' Olympic Committee of that year, an event cancelled because of the Spanish Revolution. The WO were conceived as an alternative to the Berlin Nazi Olympics. In the event in Berlin, black American athletes spoilt the fun of the champions of the Master Aryan Race by winning the major prizes, an early taste of black power.

Anti fascist

Joe took his opposition to Nazism seriously and took part in the protests at Oswald Mosley's fascist rally at Olympia in west London. The opposition was co-ordinated and a series of protestors arranged to disrupt the speakers in succession. The protestors were brave souls as the fascist stewards were noted for their brutality at previous demonstrations in east London. The plan worked, and one after another, the comrades interrupted proceeding before being forcibly ejected [Cross].

Joe told Mark Hendy that one protestor kept the Nazis at bay for several minutes swinging a heavy pair of stillson pipe tools round his head.. He was eventually overpowered, beaten up and thrown out. Joe in turn did his bit and was ejected, losing several teeth as a result. Joe learnt to speak minus some teeth!! [Hendy]. There is a full account of the fighting by the libertarian writer Aldous Huxley and his associates in *Fascist at Olympia*, compiled by Vindicator [Hopkinson]. Incidentally, a stimulating chapter on Huxley as a left libertarian has appeared in a recent publication [Goodway 2006]

He had a consistent record of active opposition to the Nazis, in the streets of the East End particularly [Liddle 2005]. The campaign of physical resistance can claim some credit for success, then as later. Mosley's fascists were losing ground for most of the latter years. His principal backers, like the right wing daily paper the *Daily Mail*, pulled out but retains its reputation to the present day for support to the extreme right wing.

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Workplace and union

He had been active in the National Union of Clerks and gave assistance to an unsuccessful strike of workers at the AA office in Birmingham. It was to be thirty years before this company was unionised. . It was through this dispute that he met Dennis Levine who was to figure strongly in his activities some time later in the tiny post-Trotskyist groups of Oehlerites [Heisler].

He also worked in the Napier Engineering factory in North West London. The shop stewards appear to have been solidly Communist. This factory was within the Park Royal industrial boundary which was not only the largest such collection in the south of the country but also one of the places where unionism became very strong indeed. By the next decade CLR James was describing the conditions in workplaces in the UK, the USA and France etc, and welcoming the strength and autonomy of the shop stewards movement, in his book celebrating the return of workers councils after Hungary 1956 [James]. We examine this later. There is also some information about organisation in another excellent text about shop stewards. [Frow]

War and anti war

As a leading CPGB member, he campaigned against the imperialist WW2 and succeeded in getting a resolution through at the 1940 NUC Annual Conference. This was passed to the TUC where it upset the labourist majority.

In the meanwhile despite apparent dislike of Peoples' Convention as a cross class alliance, he became associated with the whole anti war feeling that it was reflecting. Joe could have been influenced by articles like that in the Anti Parliamentary Communist Federation's journal Solidarity, which called instead for a Workers Revolutionary Alliance to crush fascism [Wildcat] In fact, later events showed the PC had a much more serious fault, a total subjugation to Russian foreign policy. When that country was attacked by Hitler, all the CPGB organisations dramatically changed policy to the defence of the "Soviet" Union, of which more later.

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New union

Meanwhile the NUC was amalgamated with the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries to form the Clerical and Administrative Workers Union, CAWU, in the new year and Joe was on the General Council, later National Executive Committee, of this [Hughes].

The previous expression for the leading body was left over from the guild socialist years of the old union. The NUC was one of many unions with a semi syndicalist element [Ostergaard]. Curiously other unions like that of the postal workers maintained the tradition for some decades on [Clinton] This union had purged the Guild Socialist sinners some years previously but the labourists used the crisis to eliminate the remnants and suppress the communist rank and file comrades and their erstwhile majority.

At the 1941 Conference, the previous year's resolution was reversed, names were changed, a new general secretary appointed and Joe Thomas and his associate Bill Carver were disciplined [Marsh].

They were deemed to be "unsuitable representatives of any unit of the union". Previous supporters were cajoled into line, mainly the full time officers. Not for the first time an official leadership defeated the rebels.

Later

Curiously, the CAWU NEC used the same mechanism when a rank and file group was organised in 1969. The organisers of the Apex Action, including the present writer, were similarly "proscribed" [Woodward, 2005]. They were members of the International Socialists but the events were ignored in the account of the rank and file groups [Callinicos] . and in the official history of the IS/SWP [Birchall]. One of the consequences, enforced by local branch officers with a CPGB locally, was to remove the writer from his position as Secretary of the Haringey Trades Council. The Communist chairperson of HTUC, Bill Neary, also assistant secretary of the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions - a leading CPGB "front" organisation, was at first inclined to disregard the ruling, but Party discipline held.

Life and times of Joe ThomasCommunism, state capitalism and all that

Back to JT. He had had a short spell in the London Trades Council at this time, in the Youth Section. He had been involved with a big conference in 1937 which was deemed a success [Clinton]. But the international crisis now intruded on the domestic scene.

It is necessary to go back some years regarding the perspective. The regime that had emerged from the Russian revolution after 1917 was not the one intended by the Russian workers and the international socialists movement. All opposition was crushed by Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky [Maximoff 1940]. The revolt of workers in 1921 [Aves], was dealt with after the civil war had been won with the help of the Ukrainian Free Workers Army with Nestor Makhno and the free collectives regime in that country [Arshinov]. One chapter of the hidden history is how Trotsky and Lenin then turned on the libertarian Makhno government and killed substantial numbers. Trotsky's autobiography, written when the great man was in opposition to Stalinism, glosses over the betrayal [Trotsky].

A comprehensive record of suppression of the factory workers councils into Party controlled union structures is told by a pioneering book [Brinton]. At the next level, district committees of councils or "soviets" were increasingly by passed and ignored. Party bodies including the Cheka secret police over-ruled them. Hence the surviving bodies were a degenerate form of the original councils though the two are often spoken of as identical by, for example, the Socialist Workers Party. [Woodward 2005]. Academic writers are also informative on this [S A Smith].

Many libertarians had labelled the regime as state capitalist within months [Maximoff], also the communist workers bodies of the councils in a few years [Shipway] and by the end of the 1920s a part of the Left Opposition, following the now ousted Trotsky, thought the same way [Ciliga].

Somersault

Even so, the Nazi party saw the Russian regime as a threat and Hitler had made clear its desire for "living room" in the East which implied war in that region. Russian Party dictator Stalin sought urgently to buy time from war by a treaty with Hitler's Nazi Germany, as the west had done with the Munich agreement. He reversed this when the country was

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invaded, one of the most visible policy double somersaults in history, in 1939 to 1941 [Dewar].

The effect on the national Communist Parties was drastic. Many members, perhaps as much as one quarter, in the UK resigned in disgust at a clear denial of Lenin's concepts, including Joe Thomas. He turned elsewhere.

Common Wealth

He sought work in the new Common Wealth Party [Calder], and was employed as a full time London Regional Officer in 1942. CW challenged the war time electoral truce, advocated workers control, and christian socialism and, like the later trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party, won an astonishing amount of electoral support. It won three by-elections. George Orwell pointed out at the time the leadership's rejection of the class struggle, acceptance of parliament, albeit reformed, and overall moral approach of leaders like J B Priestly, then Sir Richard Acland [Orwell 1968]. As is often the way, individual members were reported as feeling differently, especially about the class struggle element.

Most of the members were from the Left Book Club or the local Labour Parties – disillusioned about the decision to suspend all local activities except for an Annual General Meeting. There was also support from workers in the workplaces who did not like the CPGB approval of production committees and campaign against industrial action, to promote the war effort for Uncle Joe Stalin. In addition, one respondent reports dissident members of the armed forces on leave from active service delivering surreptitiously accounts of their experience to the office, though in fact CW did support the war effort [Otter].

Ken Weller reports that when he was called up to the British Army he was told that there were two unofficial networks, both quite influential, that of the CPGB and that of CW. He recalls that the latter organisation had a premises up to the 1970s in Hampstead, packed out with books but miscellaneous colonisers gradually took it over.

The general secretary was a left Labour member, R G McKay, who was determined to promote his labourist policies. Joe's revolutionary perspectives caused political conflict and by 1944, he was out of the

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CW. The party later capitulated to Attlee's Labour Party after the overwhelming election win in 1945. The view of the members about this rightward move is not clear, though there was talk of pockets of resistance [Otter].

Sacked

There are two conflicting accounts of his departure. One is that he was offered a cash golden handshake, which he, as a person of strong principles, found hard to accept. He was not above a bit of ducking and diving with regard to the law in general but this could be seen as collaboration with the employer, hence his hesitation.

The second tells of a frame-up of the London region organiser on a phoney charge of stealing money which forced his hand. A subsequent inquiry revealed the truth and Joe was apparently offered his job back, but he kept the money and stayed out. [M Cole]. The writer prefers the second version.

Personal

Around this time, Joe lived with, and later married Monica Cole, a journalist from Crouch End also employed by CW, around the end of the war. Her politics are unstated but she anyway apparently shared enough of his politics at the time to participate in the business of his chosen organisations. She helped type out documents and letters etc. The couple lived at 31c Hampstead High Street, from where Joe operated his political activity.

They lived later in East Finchley where Joe was said to be a member of the Labour Party at some point. [Heisler]. The marriage lasted some years and produced a child Glyn, in 1949 [Heisler]. but was to end acrimoniously in the 1950s. She was later a journalist with the local paper *Ham and High* and later again with the BBC.

Monica had only sporadic contact with her ex husband, but did approach the local council after his hospital operation in 1986 and he was allocated better housing on his discharge. She was located living in Pimlico, in 2007. The son, Glyn, born in 1949, who later changed his name on his mothers re-marriage, as indeed she had. Glyn went into the Royal Navy,

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moved to Plymouth where his family still lived after his retirement and kept in occasional touch with his father. By the Will, he inherited the balance of Joe's estate on his death in 1990.

Miscellanea

Mark Hendy recalls another curious personal detail, a fondness for British abstract art of the 1940s [Hendy], a habit he may have picked up from Ernest Rogers' artistic interests. Monica Cole reports Joe was a competent player of the piano, by ear, another possible spin off of his upbringing and/or education.

Years of the locusts

Politically this period was a to be followed by a decade of increasingly sterile activity. Though unemployed and reportedly living off his CW pay-off, Joe was involved subsequently with various very small left groups, with never more than a handful of members. These were basically marxist/leninist in orientation, and characterised by Oehlerism, a marxist philosophy, which was to dominate the next period of his life. [Cannon]

Oehlerism from Trotskyism onwards

Hugo Oehler was a leader of the Workers Party, of America and an effective leader of strikes. His movement was born out of a split in the leadership of the Workers Party USA in 1937 when the WP raided the Socialist Party for recruits, following Trotsky's directive. He disagreed with both the decision to enter, then to leave, the SP, and proceeded to set up his own Revolutionary Workers League. [Cannon]

This was to be an international movement. Oehler went to Spain for example and set up a rudimentary organisation there. In Britain the Leninist League, based in Glasgow, was the leading structure. Joe's old friend Dennis Levine was a leader in this but due to sectarian disputes and State repression in the war, membership had fallen to a handful [Heisler]. Joe's *Socialist Workers League* was formally amalgamated with the LL in 1947 and a small network of sects was beginning to be in place.

British section

Joe became an energetic representative of this movement for more than a decade. He was active in a succession of organisations: Leninist League,

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Revolutionary Workers group, Communist Workers Group, Socialists Workers League – twice -, Workers League, as well as two spells in the Independent Labour Party, - mostly trawling for members it can be assumed.

The negative consequences of the warring group of sectarian activists are all too familiar to many on the political left. One incident illustrates the futility of this strategy. In 1961, Joe and another comrade were expelled from the Workers League by the other four members in the group, for bureaucracy of all things. This absurd situation exemplifies the small group politics of the period [Rogers, Obituary]

Oehlerism, despite the record of many individual members, was unable to overcome its inheritance. There was, however, one blip in the process some years after its inception. The ideas of Oehlerism received an enormous boost ideologically in the 1950s with the emergence of three tendencies in France, the USA and Britain, which again rejected trotskyism and Stalinism for a broad form of marxist/leninism. These were Socialism or Barbarism, CLR James' group and Tony Cliff's Socialist Review group, later International Socialists, then the Socialist Workers Party, respectively.

Though none of these formally acknowledged a debt to Oehler, nor was there any organisational link between the old Oehlerite bodies and the new converted marxists, the replication of their ideas justifies the concept of a movement. Like him, they originated in trotskyism, but rejected its ambiguity over Stalinism and Russia. Still authoritarian but much less so than the developed state capitalist politics of the post leninist regime in Russia, the Oehlerite groups can be seen as a small step, in spite of itself, to a more libertarian philosophy in the future.

JT and Trotskyism

Al Richardson, a very reliable commentator, added a note to the obituary in 1990 to the effect that a "Joe Thomas" had been in the Revolutionary Communist Party in WW2. In the absence of evidence, it can only be assumed that this was another person but we do know that he was in contact with the USA trotskyist journal "*The Shop Steward*" in 1946. He corresponded with this, exchanged copies of the journal, and wrote for it.

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[The Shop Steward] Deeper involvement remains problematic. At that time, the movement around Marty Glaberman could perhaps be regarded as the most natural partners for Joe but we have no explanation for the lack of contact. A recent publication traces the American group's progress for several decades [Glaberman]

Dockers revolt

But these years were not entirely politically negative, and there was one outstanding success. Joe and his band of stalwarts worked with the London Portworkers (Rank and File) Committee and helped to produce their paper, the Portworkers Clarion from October 1949 [Rogers]. The national journal should not be confused with the smaller journal of the same name which was produced by the Merseyside Portworkers Committee from 1951. The most identifiable difference was that the national paper was subtitled "For the Portworkers Charter now and workers control of industry" while the Liverpool one, from an address in Birkenhead, had an inspirational quotation from William Morris. The content was similar.[Port Workers Clarion]

There was an exchange of members by the activists - Harry Constable, Bert Aylward and so on. These years were marked by a number of bitter unofficial strikes in the ports as the Transport and General Workers Union full time officials routinely collaborated with the port authorities [Hunter].

The dockers later produced a Charter demanding substantially better conditions:

- ❑ 25 shillings a day basic pay [£1.25 in new money]
- ❑ 40 hour , 5 day week
- ❑ Adequate pensions from a levy on tonnage [occupational, that is]
- ❑ Adequate and proper welfare

Union officials ignored this and settled for much less, resulting in another unofficial strike in 1950. The Attlee's government prosecuted the seven leaders, Constable and co, using the old war time legislation, Order 1305. After a long public trial at the Old Bailey central court, the jury returned a 'Not Guilty' verdict. The story goes that supporting dockers were advised to bring their hand hooks with them, though the effect of the potential threat of violence is not clear. Either way, this was a famous victory for the

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strikers, with photos in the history books and all that. It has been seen as a model during subsequent years.

The government had used the full repressive apparatus, including phone taps and plain clothes staff but was now forced to drop Order 1305, a dramatic reverse. It should be remembered that this was the time of a stringent wage freeze, reduced personal weekly ration allowances for food, secret discussions to build the 'A' bomb, but practically no official strikes. The new welfare state used the old Poor Law standards, crushed the old workers self insurance schemes ; nationalised industries kept the old owners still there on the various Boards of management and the old "costs-plus" system produced large and easy profits for government contracts. The dockers' victory was an unexpected blow for Labour, "Old" though it might have been. Throughout his life, Joe was active in workers support groups but this was perhaps the best known of his support work [Rogers].

In the print

Joe was now working in the print trade, both in East London and in an agency that later became part of the Press Association. He became involved with his union rank and file printworkers group – which was believed to be one of those that veered uneasily between a genuine group (as defined by the Shop Stewards and Workers Committee movement in WW1) and the CPGB version of a broad left on the Minority Movement model [Cliff]. The former can trace parts of its ideas back to anarcho syndicalism and other left ideas from the Independent Labour Party :

- Independence from the national union
- Strict accountability of elected leadership, and so on. [Frow]

Overall the latter option fits into the perspective of the Leninist CPGB with its emphasis on the role of the national union and the political alliance with parliamentary leaderships. We examine the rank and file perspective below.

Assessment

He continued in the grouplets, getting a reputation for being politically autocratic [Heisler]. In general terms however, it is difficult to find

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anything more constructive to say about this era, labelled by some as the years for the locusts [Higgins].

New directions

However by the mid sixties Joe had moderated into libertarianism, though the extent and the exact mechanism is unclear. Certainly being an Oehlerite gave him a defence against the growing influence of trotskyism and its varieties, though it is just possible that he may have been in the trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party, see above [Richardson,]

He had been in the League for Workers Control, formed with elements of the Independent Labour Party, Common Wealth and miscellaneous individuals [Ostergaard]. A pre-war model, the Committee for Workers Control, was a pilot for this [Meltzer 76]. Some years later, he associated with the National Rank and File movement with Peter Turner and Bill Christopher, from the latter's address in Walthamstow.

The NR&FM, according to its publication, "*has been organised to fight in the defence of workers' interests, and in the course of that struggle to promote the policy of workers' ownership and direct control of industry. Such a movement must be independent. It must be free from political control and free from the control of the trade union officials and bureaucrats. It must be based on the principle of rank and file control.*"

AIMS AND OBJECTS

- 1 To promote liaison between industrial militants (groups and individuals) and those political groupings which accept these stated aims and objects.
- 2 Promote financial help to members needing assistance, through dispute, victimisation anti nuclear activity.
- 3 Encourage and actively assist the linking up of various industries in solidarity action.
- 4 Make available, to workers in dispute, printing and duplicating facilities.
- 5 Collate lists of addresses, available transport, loudspeakers vans, etc, in all main centres so that when fellow workers are in dispute and visit other towns, accommodation, transport, and other facilities (such as the raising of cash) are at their disposal.
- 6 Work for international support in all stoppages.

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7 *Bring to the attention of other workers the demands and requirements of workers in dispute.*

8 *To promote the policy and slogan of an "International General Strike Against War".*

The NR&FM was later taken over by the Direct Action Movement, successor to the Syndicalist Workers Federation. [NR&FM] Both these two organisations mentioned in the previous paragraph were quite different in character to the modest labourist Institute of Workers Control, led by Ken Coates from 1964 [Coates and Topham 1970].

By the late 1950s, he was attending Syndicalist Workers Federation open meetings and this is the first reference to him outside the Oehlerite context [Hendy]. Later, he frequented the London social club in Swiss Cottage, Camden, of the political exiles from Franco's Spain, the Centro Iberico, both attending meetings there and socialising [Ruff]. Joe had been a non drinker in his youth, but later, while condemning in the traditional way workers who drank away much of their wages, was known to take a glass of ginger and whiskey [Liddle]

"Politically motivated" men

He was involved in the production of the bulletin "Ludd", during the seamen's strike in 1966 [Meltzer] and was apparently miffed at Hendy's mild criticism. There are many accounts of the strike but "Unholy Alliance" is recommended [Foulser]. Foulser's autobiography is also a neglected but informative document of hidden workers history of this period.

Back in the print

He was now back working in newspapers as a copy taker and associating with Albert Meltzer, Laurens Otter, Mark Hendy, and miscellaneous anarchists in the Guardian newspaper. He had been active in solidarity work with striking workers in these years but appears to have been moving ever closer to libertarianism. He was photographed, a rare event, at social events, more frequent!! [Meltzer 96, p196]

Joe was active in one of the printworkers rank and file groups which early on had adopted the libertarian practice of decision by consensus, not

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majority voting [O'Connell]. A statement by a worker on the role of the rank and file, against that of the full time officers structure, stresses the essential difference:

"I was in the NATSOPA or its successors from 1963 to 1989. For more than a decade I was active in the workplace, as a father of the chapel, in local strikes, Grunwicks especially, and the union London structure. Then I left to study for three years and came back, this time into the central London newspapers.

As a returning FOC, the normal practice was an appointment, through the union, in a well paid job like engineers assistant. However I was put on a lower grade, my years of upsetting the full time bods no doubt influencing the decision. We did get up their noses – once we went to the head office to exercise our Rule book right to inspect the Union books, after due notice. We got nowhere, so we came back the following week with a few more people. They still rejected our right, changed all the door locks and strengthened security against us.

At Wapping, we used direct action. Working depots out in the country were visited by flying pickets and the cops were forced to close them down. Newsagent's supplies of scab newspapers were commandeered and finished up in the Welsh Harp lake quite regularly every week. There was one Southampton pub which the electricians union were using to get scab labour. Two of our people went down there and were physically ill-treated. Shortly after, we went back and returned the favour – the pub was subsequently closed. We set up traps for the so called "white mice" vans who did the sub distribution, and we got some of them too.

In the end, I was thrown out by the union officials because I took up the case of some women in the Mirror who complained bitterly about unequal conditions. It got quite nasty "
[Mick]

Reports of activity

Joe held numerous rank and file offices including father of the chapel, or shop steward. One associate was Digger Walsh. Joe frequented Albert Meltzer bookshops at 374 Gray's Inn Road and in Coptic Street by the

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British Museum. From here we can pick up the story from various sources, as he was still working diligently. It is clear, as well as the politics, he found the libertarian movement more congenial than the leninists sects, not a surprising decision.

May Day

A recent account of the life of the active and mobile John Lawrence summarises the next events –

“Many will remember the London May Day Committee in which Lawrence was the prime mover. Despite its slender base, the committee campaigned with at least a modicum of success for strikes to turn May Day itself, not the nearest weekend, into a workers’ festival in opposition to capitalism. Lawrence was increasingly attracted towards his own version of anarchism based on the writings of Tolstoy. He contributed extensively to the long-running voice of British anarchism, Freedom, and became one of its editors. He was at the centre of a small group of printworkers, such as Pete Gold who worked on The Times, Bill Christopher, Jimmy Benjamin, Laurens Otter, then FOC at the Guardian, and the veteran Oehlerite Joe Thomas who also worked at that paper, who were active in SOGAT.

“In 1968, together with Brian Behan and Fred Emmett, many of them formed Workers Mutual Aid. They warned workers that ‘no trust can be placed in politicians and political parties’ and aimed ‘to encourage independent action by workers themselves to secure control of their lives. To give help to all who fight for better wages and working conditions “ [McIlroy]

Joe’s participation was slightly hindered as he was subsequently declared redundant and therefore missed some of the events around the London May Day Committee, a grand rank and file initiative. As well as the mentioned activists, Jimmy Benjamin, and Albert Luck were also involved, [Gold]. The LMDC was a runaway success in terms of support, over several years and not to be confused with the contemporary May Day Manifesto 1967/8, a university New Left group of “socialists” which has sunk into history virtually unnoticed [Williams 1968].

Life and times of Joe ThomasWorkers Mutual Aid

More on this organisation. This was the group joined under the heading of Kropotkin’s seminal book, *Mutual Aid*. It was largely composed of libertarian printworkers and met in the Old Codgers pub by Reuters in Fleet Street. This pub has since been demolished and expensive flats stand in its place.

Hendy recalls the foundation of WMA.

“This came out of the London Workers May-Day Committee in 1969, that is three years after this began. John Lawrence proposed the winding up of the LWMC and the setting up of the WMA. Joe vehemently opposed this as taking away the emphasis on the rank and file industrial organisation in favour of a more communitarian approach, but at the meeting he was almost a lone voice. Lawrence conducted street meetings and spoke to International Socialists branches - as well as elsewhere no doubt - in the hope of launching a mass movement, but I think his zigzag political history of stalinism-trotskyism-stalinism-anarchism-Tolstoyanism, and his somewhat overbearing style of leadership, which hardly fitted the times, were against him” [Hendy]

The history of the WMA is largely unknown. One of its coups was the protest over a Vicky cartoon in the Mirror which was replaced by a blank space [Gold]. Further information welcome.

Workers Review and News

Next came the Workers Review project, where Joe and Alan Elliot - a copy taker at the communist *Morning Star* until he was ill - having meetings at various inner London pubs to produce the journal. Meetings were originally at the Lamb and Flag in Covent Garden and later at the Marquis of Granby at Cambridge Circus, where anarchists frequently held court..

Rational Review

Another project undertaken as a libertarian initiative was into anti religious publications with the RR. Albert Meltzer writes of a theme of opposing papal intervention in the British labour movement, a consistent strand in the free thought movement [Manhattan] as well as among marxists

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[Haldane] & [Clark]. Joe was involved in this with Meltzer and J M Alexander [Meltzer 1976]. Today this particular torch is carried by Terry Liddle's *Freethought History Research Group* and its small journal.

Workers Voice

He was also associated with the Workers Voice group of Liverpool with Bill Armstrong, expelled from, and harassed by, the trotskyist Socialist Labour League, and others from the same experience. A number of the WV members came from a breakaway from *Solidarity* in 1973

WV published a reprint of *The Origins of Workers Councils Movement* from the Dutch GIC [Cann Meijer]. This had been translated by Mark Hendy and was published originally by Albert Meltzer. Joe had been very active on this and it was his suggestion to call it "The Origins of, etc " [Hendy]. In the reprint he was apparently associated with Dave Graham over parts of the document. A discussion document for WV was also produced. When the group split, the Londoners did manage two issues of a paper called *Workers News*. [Liddle]

He also wrote the introduction to *The Wilhelmshaven Revolt* by Ernst Schneider, re-published in 1975 after the 1940s original. This tells the story of the mutiny that sparked the German workers council revolution in 1918. [Icarus], the consequential history being in the document above. Schneider had come to the UK in the 1930s and been active writing for the APCF journals [Wildcat 86]. The later edition of Schneider booklet had a replacement introduction by Dave Graham. This concentrated on the main text and ignored Joe's paragraphs about the German's role in post war Britain. It should be remembered that Schneider was an associate of Joe Thomas from the London dockers organisation.

And more...

After this, Joe became briefly associated, with Terry Liddle, Mike B, Sheila R. Ian P, Stephen S and Bob M in *Social Revolution*. This was formed by ex members of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, escaping briefly from the epithet "Small Party of Good Boys", with their own bulletin, later journal, *Libertarian Communist*, then *Social Revolution*.

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Disagreement over sexual politics [no further information – a relic of his upbringing or experience probably] caused him to leave. [Liddle]. *Social Revolution* was to merge with *Solidarity*, with whom Joe had friendly relations [Weller]. This was mainly at the instigation of the Manchester branch, though only seven people were involved [Robertson].

A Note on Solidarity [1960-92]

This long standing movement, formed largely from exiles out of the CPGB and later the ultra trotskyist Socialist Labour League, was the largest libertarian group. Maurice Brinton provided much of the ideological drive.[Goodway]. With a strong base of workers many of whom wrote for the monthly journal, it was largely based on London but had groups in around 16 areas. Its membership was considered similar to that of the International Socialists and many swopped over.

As well as the regular journal, a long series of one-off booklets was produced, often reprinted and translated into other languages. Many were the work of Ken Weller, an engineering worker. The group survived numerous changes, like the one below, published a second series of journals but folded in 1992. A core of members still keep in touch and its history is eagerly awaited.

Lastly

Back to the text - *Solidarity* renamed its journal *Solidarity* for *Social Revolution* for some years, and from 1977 published several editions. Liz Willis recalling the 'publishing history' in the later '*Solidarity 2: a journal of libertarian Socialism*', no 16, Spring 1988, says SfSR ran to 16 issues. The merger was not a happy or permanent arrangement. After a split in 1982, the residue of the Manchester around Mike B went on to form *New Ultra Left Review*, later *Intercom*, later still the new *Wildcat*, and finally *Subversion*. The latter two were both broadly council communist politically.

One outstanding achievement was to keep distributing and re-publishing the main booklet by Hermann Gorter, joint founder of council communism, *An Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*. This was a polemic in which he exposed the weakness of the great leader's attack on non bolshevik

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revolutionaries in *Left Wing Communism, an infantile disorder*. The Introduction was largely written by Mark Shipway

In 1998 Subversion assessed its role, and explained the reasons for closure in its final statement [Subversion]. The subject also awaits its historian.

LWG

The next main event from 1977 was the establishment of the London Workers Group, which met in South Islington. Dave Morris recalls that it was founded by a Guardian copy taker active in the NATSOPA Union chapel – JT – a train driver from ASLEF – Adam Flowers – and an Islington postal worker – himself, later to be half of the McLibel Two. [Vidal].

They had met at a Libertarian Industrial Network conference in London – the LIN was a very loose national network of about 60 individuals active in various industries, but not organised geographically. Peter Turner was perhaps the main instigator [LIN bulletin], Martyn E was active, Dave C and Phil G from the Calvert's printing co-operative *Dark Star* were also active in LWG at this time [Morris].

The organisation was formed during what can be considered a lull in libertarian development at the time. There had been a split in Solidarity, some fairly negative experiences in other groups and the main anarcho-syndicalist organisation the Syndicalist Workers Federation was in another political decline [*The Raven*]

The LWG was an unusual kind of solidarity organisation – a very active libertarian workers collective, open to all workers (employed or unwaged) in London, engaged in providing solidarity to individuals in their own workplaces, supporting various disputes and discussing a wide range of issues. Its politics was radical, libertarian and anti-capitalist, embracing a range of alternatives including workers council communism, anarcho-syndicalism and anarchist communism. The approach was very lively, non-sectarian and generally focused on real life and practical action, rather than ideology, but critical of the wage-labour system and trades unions in general but especially those structures above the workplace.

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The LWG attempt to spread their organisation to other area was unfortunately diverted into a new anarcho-syndicalist structure, the Direct Action Movement. LWG had preferred a federation of collectives and after a conference voted against their view, declined to participate in DAM. The organisation, that was unique then and now, could have been a model all over the country, but the baggage of history overruled it

Joe edited the early editions of the bulletins (which ran to 14 editions, mostly produced on a Gestetner duplicator at the office of the Rising Free Collective in Upper Street, or in Haringey – sometimes running to 500 copies). As an editor, he was fond of side headings it is recalled, [Morris].

He also contributed many articles about the print industry and its Union issues (especially about chapel-level organisation and about the looming impact of new technology which would culminate in the bitter Wapping dispute). Also about the theory and practice of workers councils. He wrote both in his own name and as Nathaniel Soper, from his union NATSOPA, or SOGAT. Later. Joe attended the Wapping picket lines as a re-claimed photo attests. This is on the back cover of this booklet

The LWG gradually faded away during the mid-1980s, but some of the active members continuing to produce a more general journal '*Workers Playtime*' (produced cheap or free by printers active in the group) and from the long-running BBC Home Service radio variety show where they took 'turns' round factories. There were special editions on the miners strike and then on the printing industry dispute [*Printers Playtime* or *Paper Boys*]. It also expanded its horizon and started also producing a range of polemical leaflets for demonstrations and events

Playtime was recognisable from the LWG school of politics. Slightly more conventional in presentation and accepting articles, in theory at least, from a wide range of writers, it produced a more or less continuous series of journals – though there were several long blank periods in production – during the hectic events of these years. It was the height of the Thatcher crackdown on workplace unions, aided by illegal police action, repressive law and unemployment.

Life and times of Joe ThomasClass War

This period saw the emergence of another charismatic and demonically energetic libertarian group, Class War. Some LWG members went on to help form CW which had a dramatic effect for some years, as outlined by the autobiographical account of its chief instigator [Bone]. Their political manifesto is arguably the best summary and popularisation of anarchist perspectives – recognised strengths but unrecognised weaknesses.

There is for example, a reasoned chapter on revolutionary organisation [Class War]. The full history awaits its author but a brief comment may be in order here. *Class War* and its *journal* came out of a slightly wider anarcho/punk culture in the 1980s. After the original aim of creating as much conflict with the police as possible was predictably crushed, they flirted briefly with electoralism, standing a candidate in a Kensington by-election in the 1987. Later there was an anti election alliance.

In 1986 it had become the Class War Federation, a decision following the inclusion of what has been described as a number of new more politically minded members. A parallel could be drawn with the LWG. This caused considerable debate and eventually the “new” members were persuaded to leave. This left the old guard back in charge but in 1997 a majority decided that the organisation had run its course. Issue 73 of the paper sums up their success and failures. The minority continued to produce a paper, periodically, which has been criticised by some as a parody of its former self. Ian Bone continues to be active in writing and reporting within the movement. There are occasional publications

Wapping and the “Picket” bulletin

Back to another scene entirely. In 1986 Joe, by now retired, was photographed with colleagues in front of a Guardian printworkers Union banner on a solidarity demonstration outside the Wapping print works. Other former LWG activists like Dave Morris, were actively involved in support for the Wapping pickets, and in the production of the independent printworkers 'Picket' news bulletin, written by and for the printworkers in dispute.

There were 43 issues produced, subsequently bound and published [Picket]. Some editions of Picket up to edition 18, used the address of the

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Tottenham Claimants Union at the TCP at 628 Tottenham High Road. Then, due to the objections of a Communist Party member to this unofficial body and CP views on anarchists in the labour movement, the publication address was switched to Housmans Bookshop at 5 Caledonian Road, N1.

Around 5,000 copies were distributed weekly to strikers throughout the year-long dispute - it was enthusiastically backed by all those involved in the dispute but hated by trade union full time officials and the Communist Party as it was outside their control. This strikers' bulletin was everything that the LWG had for years been arguing for and could have helped inspire other similar initiatives in other disputes. However, tragically, the LWG had already folded. [Morris] Wapping can be considered as a crucial part of the story of the rank and file printworkers. Perhaps the best account of the strike is in an academic journal [Bain].

His politics ?

There were, and are, many in the movement who say that Joe was “not a real libertarian, he still hankered after version of marxism”. A more rational assessment comes from Mark Hendy :

“In 1969 if not later Joe was still advocating a workers’ party with a full-time collective leadership. He insisted that any mass struggle would inevitably throw this up. I don’t remember him being very vehement on this issue or any libertarians seriously debating it with him – perhaps he thought the LWMC was already such an organisation in embryo”

“He was certainly no out and out Leninist – he acclaimed the David Shub biography as exposing the essentially self-serving nature of Bolshevism. At the time on the libertarian left, there were anarchists opposed to marxism, anarchists who considered anarchism a form of marxism (and vice versa), also those who opposed both philosophies, as well as post-anarchists and post-marxists, marxist-humanists and so on and so on”.

“Albert Meltzer who knew Joe personally as well as anyone once remarked to me that Joe would have been really at home among the members of the Spanish CNT – where I guess there would often have been a similar mix, but always the emphasis on organisation at the point of production. He also stressed “workers’ ownership and control” to me – “not common

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ownership and workers' control; the producers must own the means of production" [Hendy]

This preference for the anarcho-syndicalist element is of course still believed by some who call themselves council communists. However, the recently updated version of the old Solidarity statement, *As We See It Now* relies on a wider version of popular control [As We See It Now]

What they do, not what they say

Of course some marxists do pretend to be libertarian for their own ends, most notably Lenin, cynically publishing *The State and Revolution* to capture more radical support in Russia in 1917. This classification overall can however be more appropriately applied to those like International Communist Current.

Changed philosophy

But many others change their affiliation, like Daniel Guerin and Murray Bookchin for example. If a person talks, writes, and acts as a libertarian then to my mind they are libertarian unless strong evidence can be found to the contrary. It should be remembered that the expression "libertarian" covers a wide spectrum from "new" marxist to more definite anarchists. This word is frequently defined in the negative – what it isn't, and that is basically authoritarian.

Joe associated with the movement and later took a leading role, even as a pensioner, and so far nobody has come up with an explanation beyond that he was an irascible old codger, somewhat self willed, and a bit too fond of his own voice, smoking and socialising. Life is too full of variations for a model "person" to be imposed..

Movement for Workers Councils

Joe now set up an overtly council communist organisation, the MfWC. He was joined by Mike Baker and Ray Gibbon. The main project - perhaps the last one of his life - was the translation and reprinting of the Dutch GIC 1930 educational text on the *Fundamental Principles of Communist Methods of Production and Distribution*, by a veteran KAPD member, Jan Appel]. This was a big project outlining the measures to be taken as part of the transition "after the revolution".

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Mike Baker translated and Joe worked through the book which was to finally published privately [Appel]. One of the problems was the huge amount of annotation, which tripled the length of the manuscript. Getting all the complex details right was a task some times beyond the duo but the book finally saw the publication in 1990. Both authors died that year, but the book remains a monument to their work..

The third musketeer was Ray Gibbon, from Herne Hill. Ray had been in Solidarity, and was identified with that group of marxists who functioned separately. In his last years he published a pamphlet of two articles by Anton Pannekoek and a summary of his life by Paul Mattick. He had spoken elegantly at the funeral for Mike Baker a few years before [Liddle, Obituary 2002,]. He died a few years later.

Death

Previously, heavy smoking had resulted in an operation in the summer of 1986 for removal of a lung for Joe. Ray Gibbon and Monica Cole had fought the local authority to get him out of his grotty room in Notting Hill into sheltered accommodation. This was successful.

Joe did not want a funeral but there was a Memorial Meeting at the Unemployed Centre in Woolwich where Terry Liddle chaired the management committee. The union followed the usual practice and stumped up £200 for hospitality. Among those present were Albert Meltzer, Mike Baker, Andy W, a union member who was a councillor in Sidcup called Dixon, possibly Ian Dixon, and Dave Morris. [Liddle]. Unfortunately, there is no full record of the event.

Joe specified that his papers should be burned and his books donated to a library, an unusual specification, similar to that of Herman Gorter, the joint founder of council communism. In the event some of his papers were saved but the majority were destroyed [Couch]. His son keeps the residue of documents.

Obsession ?

For reasons unknown, Joe had strong beliefs about state persecution. His stated date of birth – as yet unrecorded in the official Register – perhaps is

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due to this. His obsession with avoiding being photographed would also fit this pattern. Monica Cole recalls that at their wedding, at the Hampstead Registry Office, a photographer tried to snap the happy couple. Joe responded violently, smashing the man's camera. He had refused to be interviewed on several occasions and was only photographed at social events. It has been suggested that a fear of blacklisting could have been the cause. Generally, this unusual attitude has no apparent explanation, and we await explanations.

A final word

In a brief assessment, Mark Hendy writes *"I was surprised to find myself feeling sentimental about Joe, but thinking about it, I realise that personally, he was warm, big-hearted and without any sourness or spite. Perhaps he was one of the happiest people I have known, even if he spent far too long seeking his true home politically. There was always something about Joe that said "Cheer up!"* [Hendy] This seems appropriate.

Joe and the political movement

Joe had played a big part in the modest revival of council communism as a living political practice. Previously, those claiming the name were universally sectarians of the worst kind, with a fortunately high mortality rate. Many persisted in terming council communism, in the 1920s Bolshevik style, as the "Communist Left". Few survive to date, and their obscure publications remain largely unread.

Libertarian Socialism

Today the council Communists concept is contained within the ideas of LS. There are few reading references for the modern movement. [Gombin] & [Cohn-Bendit] A very brief summary is therefore followed by its recently renewed political statement *As We See It Now* written by the present writer.

Libertarian socialism renews the old ideas of council communism which first emerged after the revolution in Russia in 1917. The council communists in 1920 disagreed with Lenin and broke with the regime over their right to form their own policies. They believed that the differing situation and historical framework in each country meant that those arguing

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for radical change were correct to devise their own programme of activity, and not be dominated by the Russian Party "communists".

They adopted some aspects of libertarian ideas and organisation. This involved re-asserting the anarcho-syndicalists' emphasis of the key role for workers councils, in both working for a change and as the basis of the new federated revolutionary society

Later, the leaders adopted the idea that USSR was state capitalist.. In the Spanish revolution, the Friends of Durruti broke with the anarchist CNT union as the war against the fascist forces under General Franco was being defeated. They proposed a similar solution to the one reached by the original council communists

Workers councils have been a feature of most insurrections around the world over the years. The story of their attempts to build a new world are rarely recorded and rarely extended beyond an embryo form of Libertarian Socialism. That history, however meagre, remains untold and its exposition remains a major task today.

Libertarian Socialists : As We See It Now

This is an updated version of the old Solidarity booklet.

One

Our basic society changes little. Economic compulsion still forces most of us to work for a living, parliament mainly defends the property rights of the rich and pays a minimum regard to our threadbare legal rights and living standards. Business interests use their control of the state bodies to protect themselves while those of us who must work for a living suffer war, welfare cuts, poverty and ill health. For the retired, existence on pensions adds to the poverty and social isolation for the majority.

In our "democracy", we do not elect any of the tin pot tyrants or bureaucrats who run our lives at work, home and else-where. We do not live in a "democracy", just the shadow of a dream. The farce of "parliamentary representation" is increasingly ignored by voters as the private financial market intervenes more and more in our lives, employment, public health services, bookshops and even our football teams..

Two

Despite the raised living standards of working people and more consumer goods, the status of the worker in the production of the world's wealth remains basically the same. Workplaces are models of tyranny. Nor has progress given the bulk of mankind much freedom in other social institutions.

East and West, North and South, across the globe, capitalism remains an authoritarian type of society where the vast majority are bossed at work and manipulated in consumption and leisure. The conflict between labour and capital goes on, albeit carefully camouflaged.

Propaganda and policemen, prisons and schools, traditional values and traditional morality all serve to reinforce the power of the few and to convince or coerce the many into acceptance of a brutal, degrading and irrational system. The "Free" world is not free. All religions still repress rather than liberate. Remaining "Communist" states are not communist and the Third World features more military despots every year.

Three

The fantasy that workers and their families can be bought off with material goods from an ever expanding "market", and that people can only

challenge on piecemeal issues anyway, ignores the long term economic instability within the system. Politicians and bosses also mistake acquiescence with acceptance.

Capitalism always suffers financial crises, and slumps and depressions that sometimes follow, despite periods of expansion or stability. The recent failure in 2008 exemplifies this.

So we believe that conditions of life and experiences in the workplace and in neighbourhoods, constantly drive the people -

- ❑ to adopt and adapt priorities and tactics,
- ❑ to dispute the established patterns of thought,
- ❑ and to find methods of organisation which challenge the established social order.

These responses are implicitly socialist and collective. One immediate job is to overcome the fragmentation of the working class movement which is dispossessed of the means of communication, and its various sections are at different levels of awareness.

Four

Unplanned and excessive use of modern technology, in the name of profit, has endangered the planet and its inhabitants. Such dangers grow yearly in the globe. Only action by those determined to protect both people and nature, can achieve a sustainable society. Real Green society and the capitalist market are not compatible, despite the international Environmentalist industry and its cosmetic programme of minor reforms. Climate change is the consequence of this mis-management.

Five

Our alternative is a new order of libertarian socialism - the common ownership and control of the means of production and distribution. It means practical equality, real freedom, the end of oppression based on discrimination, and a radical transformation in all human relationships. Libertarian socialism is people's understanding of their environment and of themselves, their control over their work and over such social institutions as they may need to create. In any replacement society, these changes must be worked for, as the only guarantee that a genuine social transformation has taken place and no backward subversion is allowed

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A new society can therefore only be built from below, and that for us means councils. Regarding the production of society's resources, decisions concerning the workplace will be taken by workers' councils composed of elected and recallable delegates from mass members meetings. Above the base level, federated liaison committees will ensure people's control, through computer aided collective planning, not centralised bodies.

Similar council organisation will be applied as communes to all social services, bodies and enterprises thus ensuring popular control from assemblies upwards in both production and substitute "state" institutions. All councils or communes should comprise delegates from the body concerned, plus those representing social interests. This democratisation of society down to its very roots is what we mean by 'workers' power' or "popular power", and we support effective action to promote this.

Seven

Effective action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, autonomy, initiative, participation, solidarity, equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of people. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces passivity, apathy, cynicism, differentiation through hierarchy, alienation, reliance on representatives to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others - even by those allegedly acting on their behalf. This applies before, and after, any "change over" in the way our society is run.

The primary role of all who want to promote libertarian socialism is to work for the formation, development, unity, and co-ordination of resistance to capitalism on a day to day basis. Socialists are most able to promote their aims by being active and unionised members of a workplace, and standing as delegates in that capacity. This is a primary agitational function, even for those who chose to become politically active, and one that cannot be neglected.

Also depending on local circumstances, libertarian socialists may be active in -

- organisations fighting racism and discrimination against asylum seekers;

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- the defence of the welfare state against privatisation, closure and cuts.
- anti war campaigns, and other fields including, in specific circumstances, possible electoral work at this stage.

Activity in such bodies assumes the positive acceptance of organisational responsibility rather than the blatant use of "interventions" in public meetings to recruit membership. People will become politically active on the basis of the performance of existing socialists, rather than lectures and rehearsed speeches.

Eight

The trade unions and their Labour Parties started life with many supporters wanting to change society radically. But these bodies have come to terms with the existing patterns of exploitation. In fact they are now essential for exploiting society we live in to continue working smoothly. The unions act as middlemen in the labour market. The political parties use the struggles and hopes of the ordinary people for their own ends. The degeneration of working class organisations, itself the result of the failure of the "revolutionary" movement, has been a major factor in creating working class apathy, which in turn has led to the further degeneration of both parties and unions. Racism, or even fascism, in society is a frequent secondary consequence.

Meanwhile, the trade unions and political parties cannot be reformed, 'captured', or converted into instruments of liberation. We don't call however for the proclamation of new unions or parties, which, in the conditions of today, would suffer a similar fate to the old ones. Nor do we call for militants to tear up their union cards, but to work with the rank and file in workplaces, unions and action alliances.

Nine

By their convoluted ideas, rigid hierarchical structure, and destructive activities, bolshevik and similar types of leninist political Parties have discouraged this kind of socialist understanding and prevented mass participation. The idea that socialism can somehow be achieved by an elite party (however apparently 'revolutionary') acting "on behalf of" the population, is both absurd and reactionary. "Party" led action has been shown repeatedly to end in defeat, isolation or political corruption.

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After the decline of more prescriptive sets of ideas, many believe that in modern society, libertarian organisation is the remaining hope. Those active as a result of, or a belief in, anarchist ideas have had a powerful, if hidden, influence in such resistance over a historical perspective. Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, though excluded from academic and orthodox theories, can point to a much less disastrous history than those more favoured institutions. Consequently it is increasingly widely thought that a new society of libertarianism is the hope of a disillusioned world.

Eleven

No ruling class in history has ever relinquished its power without a struggle and our present rulers are unlikely to be an exception. In any move to a fairer society, power will only be taken from them through the conscious, autonomous action of the vast majority of the people themselves. Building up for this, Libertarian Socialism advocates forceful direct action. This method has repeatedly shown itself as the one that gets results. It bypasses the parliamentary road block by using mass action.

We see the right to vote as one weapon in the overall strategy and do not propose abstention as others do. However it is largely a negative power to prevent the worst option, as parliamentary majorities will achieve very little within that framework. Instead we propose the popular form of society outlined above. In the meanwhile we could accept the idea of voting for issues, rather than political parties. Subsequently "voting" may have a consultative role.

Twelve

It is clear from the experience earlier that political parties cannot organise the social transformation that is the libertarian revolution. There needs to be an general plan.

To achieve the new order, we propose a co-ordinating political organisation to oversee activity at base level: to respond, think, discuss, plan, liaise, propagate, suggest tactics, guide, prepare, communicate, administrate but not centralise, within the overall strategy outlined above.

Life and times of Joe ThomasReading references, author's surnames, alphabetically listed

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