

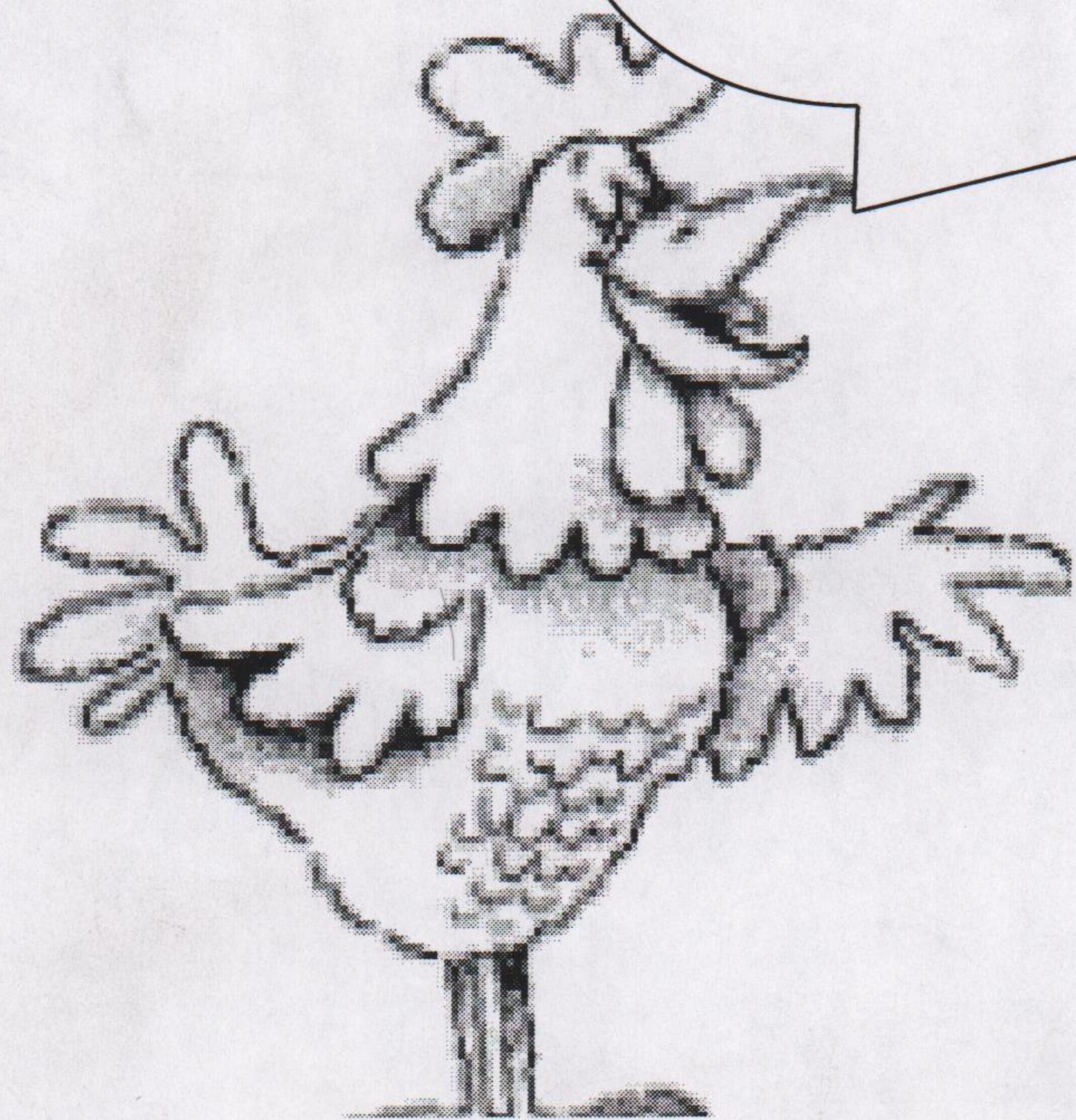
Northern Anarchist Newsletter No3

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**Conference Issue Editorial -
"We, the Northern Anarchists!"**

**The 'Cock's' critics – Toby and
Laurens.**

Anarchist view of war – Barry.



Price: NAN donation

March 2003

Cock o' the North

editorial:

Regional Anarchism in the North.

A correspondent in *Freedom* (Jan. 11th, 2003) suggests "any co-ordination of anarchist activity will have to be built from the bottom up, and the experience of the Northern Anarchist Network could be something to learn from." Iain McKay then asks: "Can we have more details of what's done there and as importantly, how?"

In view of the importance our affinity group (Mack the knife) attaches to these points, we are devoting a big chunk of this issue of the 'Cock' to dealing with them in detail. More so since it is clear that, even in the North, there is some ignorance of the significance of our experience and achievements.

Our History: Activism vs Sectarianism

The history of the NAN, which dates from the mid-1990s, is odd yet probably typical.

Comrades in Derbyshire of individualist/pacifist persuasions initiated the founding Conference at Manchester Town Hall. It was well attended by people from across the North belonging to most anarchist tendencies.

The next Conference in Salford was organised by members of the small group 'Subversion' (now defunct). This was to be one of the most successful conferences; with a turn-up of over 70 and speakers from the Liverpool Dockers' support group, the anti-JSA campaign in Edinburgh, and a campaign against a local motorway.

People inspired by this conference went on to form a Manchester Dockers' Support Group and a local Anti-JSA Campaign.

It is interesting that the initiatives for both these conferences came from small groups and not national organisations. To some extent the national anarchist organisations dragged their feet at this stage. Many who threw themselves into campaigns like the regional Anti-JSA Campaigns were often not affiliated to the national organisations.

There is a temptation for national organisations to pursue members rather than to stimulate activity. Although members of the Anarchist Federation from Manchester, Merseyside and Nottingham, did get involved. In Nottingham some were arrested while taking part in the Groundswell anti-JSA Campaign.

More seriously, two things were incubated at the Salford NAN Conference:

- (i) The positive campaigns against the JSA and on behalf of the Liverpool dockers.

- (ii) A negative and sectarian hunt to expel and limit membership and attendance at the NAN.

Curiously an intervention by a member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain at the Salford Conference was the pretext for this purge. Some of us saw this as a trivial matter. Others from Leeds and Sheffield anarchist groups took the view that future meetings of NAN should not be advertised publicly in *Freedom* etc.

This mentality became a burden to us. While our campaigns against the JSA continued; NAN Conferences became bogged down over issues such as whether 'Subversion', which didn't claim to be 'anarchist', should be banned from NAN Conferences.

This matter, which was eventually resolved in favour of *Subversion*, wasted much time, lost NAN support and led to Leeds Class War failing to attend NAN Conferences. Bradford also dropped out around this time.

Our Methods: Militant Gymnastics.

Iain McKay asks how did the NAN work?

Well, we've shown that NAN has defects common to all political organisations. More recently some in the NAN objected when, in November 2001 in Bury, we had a joint conference with the 'libertarian Marxist' Revolutionary Socialist Network.

At the last Conference of NAN, it was pointed out that the NAN does not determine actions such as the anti-JSA Campaigns in the North or the activities of the Tameside Careworkers' Support Group. As the NAN is a network, it is the individuals and member groups that initiate action. This was also the case with Groundswell (the national anti-JSA network). Equally, if we are to believe Stuart Christie's account of the FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) in 'We, the anarchist', the FAI in large part had no central authority.

While we would in no way want to compare the case of the NAN to that of the FAI, its decentral nature is similar. Mr Christie notes (p28): "The basic units of the FAI were not individuals but small autonomous affinity groups of anarchist militants...the atomic structure of the FAI meant there was no central body to provide an overview of the movement as a whole."

The NAN is not a membership organisation, but an assembly of groups, northern branches of national organisations and individuals. Stuart Christie

writes: "(T)he term 'organisation' hardly fits the FAI: it had no collective identity other than a commitment to libertarian communism as an immediate objective."

The danger in the anarchist national organisations is that their members will have partisan loyalties to those bodies and not to their fellow anarchists and our mutual ideals.

To some extent the NAN counters this danger and makes co-operation across the libertarian left more likely. In the NAN we know each other better and recognise our family resemblance's. The NAN offers a forum to swap ideas, to inspire action and mobilise across the anarchist spectrum. The NAN is a modest reflection of the FAI.

On only one occasion can I recall the NAN acting as a unit early in the anti-JSA Campaign. That was when a Sheffield Conference voted to picket the Cheetham Hill Job Centre, Manchester. As well as locals, people came from Huddersfield, Sheffield, Leeds and Lancaster.

Usually NAN groups worked with other organisations, such as Salford and Bury Unemployed Centres and groups linked to the North West TUC. This led to the regional network North West Against the JSA, including groups from Oldham, St Helens, Burnley, Bolton, Salford, Tameside, Manchester and Bury.

Five of these groups had a strong anarchist ties, and all eight occupied Job Centres across the region. St Helens put on the Euro March in the North West, and all North West groups backed this. Yorkshire groups also had an involvement.

This willingness to work with others to fight for limited ends was crucial and didn't dilute our basic libertarian ideas. Indeed, it later led to others joining us to form the Tameside Careworkers' Support Group during the strike in the old peoples' homes there, as well as the North West Against the JSA. It was found that the local anarchists are trustworthy, and not 'flaky' as some suppose.

After a slow start we urged the striking careworkers to perform occupations of Ashton Town Hall and job agencies, which were bringing in scab labour. Anarchists in Manchester also invaded a solicitor's office; this solicitor was part of the Trust, which governed Tameside Care Group. During this occupation anarchists did a deal with him on the phone: if he came to explain his support for the careworker's pay cuts the anarchists would lay-off occupying his offices.

Later, when he tried to renege on this deal, he was told that it would not be a good idea to break his promise. At the careworker's public meeting there was the good solicitor with his tail between his legs.

There were intriguing aspects to our experiences: 1. On one occasion Alec McFadden (Socialist Labour Party) of the North West TUC, who was on

our North West Against the JSA team, tried to get us to drop our occupations of Job Centres, so that he could wring concessions out of the TUC bosses.

2. Martin Ralph (Revolutionary Socialist League), Chairman of the Tameside Careworkers' Support Group, was clearly superb at refereeing meetings, but weak when it came to doing the dirty work involving direct action.

McFadden was told that our direct action was not on tap, to be turned on and off to suit some union official. With Ralph we knew it was horses-for-courses.

Our Tools: Participant Reporting.

In 1996, two important meetings took place at Bury Unemployed Centre. No minutes were taken, but a member of the *Freedom Group* came up to discuss a northern regional input into *Freedom*. About 12 attended from Hull, Burnley, Rochdale, Leeds, Hebden Bridge, Tameside and Manchester.

It was agreed that this group contribute regular articles to fill several pages of *Freedom*. This was effectively a Northern editorial collective; providing northern news and writing. In the past there had been attempts to edit industrial pages in *Freedom*, such as the Pete Turner and Bill Christopher era in the 1960s and when Vero asked me and 'Johnny Miner' to edit some industrial material in the early 1990s. But, as far as I know, this was the first attempt at a regionally edited section and I was supposed to co-ordinate this group.

It was a set-up that worked well up until 2000. Peter Neville, at the time, chided us saying that *Freedom* had been take-over by 'northern workingmen'.

The reality was that people up north were writing and actively creating stories at the same time. Action in occupations, strikes and demos, was recorded in words and photos by those taking part. Charles Crute of *Freedom Press* helped to link the North with the paper and produced an anti-JSA leaflet entitled 'Cheetham Hill: House of Horror'. Harold Schulthorpe put out a *Raven* on 'Class struggle and Social Protest' (1998), recording the history of our campaigns.

Judge the vibrancy of the stuff that came out of the North in that period, instead of the engineered set pieces composed of platitudes and wishful thinking. This link between a team of northern 'stringers' and *Freedom* gave us the edge on all the other political groups working with us.

One would have thought it should have been a source of pride, but *Freedom* has lately distance itself from this experience. The reasons for this relate to changes at *FP* in London in 2000, and to a skirmish between our affinity group, the *Freedom Collective* and Professor Noam Chomsky, over

some academic essays critical of the good Professor's linguistics.

It must be said there was a certain amount of backstairs bullying to stop the publication of these essays, by one of Chomsky's former political secretaries. Later we got an apology for this and, when he heard about it, Professor Chomsky expressed his concern to me. However, in the fuss generated *Freedom* took fright, and later refused to publish the criticisms in *The Raven*. This was despite having thanked one of Chomsky's critics for his contribution.

Our affinity group took a principled stand on this. Together with several northern academics we edited an 'alternative Raven', including the essays rejected by *Freedom*.

Chomsky's former political secretary had warned us that if we went ahead our reputation would be in tatters. To which Derek Pattison (a former Dukinfield dustman), at an editorial meeting of northern academics and anarchists, declared: Unlike Professor Chomsky "I've no reputation to lose, so I think we should go ahead and publish." This simple statement brought the academics and the rest of us round.

Manchester and Northern Anarchism.

Some are now criticising the NAN for being dominated by the North West or Greater Manchester. Yet in its early history it was, if anything, dominated by Yorkshire groups in Leeds and Sheffield. In a way, it's like saying that at some stages the Spanish anarchist movement was overwhelmingly Catalan, and centred on Barcelona.

There have been fears that as a consequence of low activity by the NAN recently in Manchester, and an increase in membership of the AF, that the AF may be tempted to pull out of the NAN. But at the November 2001 Conference of the NAN, the AF groups reaffirmed their support for the NAN. The Sol. Fed has had an ongoing presence on the NAN.

Though recently the NAN has had limited output, its constituent groups have not been dormant. They have taken part with others on local demos and put out leaflets against terrorist legislation. During our anti-election campaign in Oldham, 9 people were arrested including members of both AF and Sol.Fed. Last November's NAN Conference gave its support to the setting up of a campaign against Corporate Killing and agreed to co-ordinate our activity in event of a war against Iraq.

When we cast our eye over the post-war history of northern anarchism, we would have to remember Jack McPhearson and Jim Pinkerton of the Dukinfield Anarchist Group, and Julian Pilling, the Morris Dancing anarchist from Nelson, all who started out in the 1940s, with the Syndicalist Workers' Federation. Then there would be the national strikes of engineering apprentices in the

1960s, in which anarchists took a leading role locally in Rochdale, Oldham and Manchester.

In the 1970s, we had the Arrow Mill strike over four Asian doffers and an anarchist weighman who'd been sacked. The Oldham, Rochdale and Manchester anarchists, then launched an ultimately successful campaign for shop stewards in textiles. Even today, people in Oldham talk about the Arrow Mill strike.

The old Manchester Anarchist Group had been active in the peace movement, and in the mid-1960s: there had been a major confrontation with the police in Albert Square – the battle of Albert Square – when the anarchists and some 'ban the bombers' tried to hold a public meeting and were deserted by most of the rest of the left, especially the 'International Socialists' (now known as the SWP). Many anarchists and other young people were arrested and some were falsely accused of assault, when they went to complain about the conduct of the police. One leading former 'IS' member, John Lee, still apologises to me about their cowardice on that day and that of the mainstream CND.

Manchester has a long history of anarchist and syndicalist activity. Central Manchester had a group from the early 1960s; in nearby Burnley and Ashton there has been a long-term presence and in Rochdale there has been intermittent activity since 1960, linked initially to YCND and the Committee of 100.

The region had one of the most erudite intellectuals in the country in Jim Pinkerton. Hence, there has been a continuous body of experience to draw on in the North West, but without a regional network such as the NAN we were often isolated. The NAN makes us more co-ordinated and cohesive regionally.

Another thing now is that there are small teams of activists, who have known each other for years and work well together. These militants are very flexible and accommodating with who they work with. Working with trade union Unemployed centres and the union left, as well as anti-capitalists in the anti-JSA campaign. Working with Liberal Councillors on Tameside Council, when resisting the Labour Council's plan to privatise council houses.

We admit this is in no way a full account of anarchism in the northern region, even over the last half decade. Our report has a Manchester bias. The syndicalists/Wobblies on 'Humber-side', the AF on Merseyside, the Sol.Fed. in south Manchester and north Lancashire, the Manchester anti-capitalists in the Riotous Assembly and now 'Beyond TV' and 'Under the Pavement', have all made valuable contributions.

B.B. for the Mack the Knife Affinity Group

The Cock's Critics.

Dear Cock,

I think your editorial was over the top.

Firstly in the matter of its tone, obviously Toby (a Freedom editor) overstates and oversimplified things, but then he is young and most of us overstated and oversimplified things when we came into the movement; and if we want to attract a new generation of anarchists perhaps we need to have – for our most widely distributed paper – a new young convert who does just that. It may need a second, more thought out paper, I think it does; but your reaction too is (though on a different level) overstated and oversimplified.

Secondly, (and perhaps more importantly), when you touch on the SPGB you do not mention that he is by no means unique in having moved from the SPGB to anarchism (or for that matter the other way), the paths between are fairly well trod, and some fairly noteworthy comrades have passed that way.

In the NAN, Mike Ballard is ex-SPGB. I was a candidate member, while Carl Pinel, for a long time Chair of the Manchester SPGB, is a former anarchist.

Toby's predecessors in London include Alfred Reynolds, Peter Newell and Bob Bartrop,... and Stan Parker making it a return journey. Tony Turner left the party for us, though he didn't stay. Eddie Grant though always SPGB, always argued a clear anarchist case, likewise Ken Smithy; Richard Headicar, now in the SPGB, was an active anarchist in the 1960s and Bill Lean, who was the AIT's contact in Britain from 1948 to '53, was all that time in the SPGB.

Obviously there are occasions and areas of thought where we need to make the distinctions between our two traditions very clear, we ought also to make clear that neither we or they are monolithic. There are disagreements within both traditions: so that

there are SPGBgubs with whom we have nothing in common, but then there are anarchists with whom the NAN would have nothing in common!

I think we also ought to work towards a thought-out statement of the extent to which the bulk of the two movements are akin, share a common history and common aim. The fact is we have more in common with them than the rest of the political spectrum.

Does the fact that they make candidate members pass an exam really count against them? Obviously for many youth (particularly working class youth), the connotations of an exam are hierarchical and middle class; but is it fair to attack Toby for not understanding more about anarchism and in the same article the SPGB for insisting that their candidate members know what their party advocates?

Best, Laurens.

Dear Laurens,

Thanks for sending me a copy of your letter (above) to 'The Cock'... I'd like to clarify two points you take up from the anonymously published Cock.

'The Cock' specifically criticises six editorial articles from *Freedom*. In your reply, you say "obviously Toby overstates and oversimplifies things". In fact, only one of the six (editorials) was written by me.

Regarding two people who left the Freedom Press Group last year, the circumstances of their departure are on the record in the minutes of our regular meetings, kept by Donald Room. I'll send you copies if you want.

Other "facts" in 'The Cock' (editorial) are likewise products of the editor's imagination.

Regards, Toby.

EDITORIAL REPLY TO THE COCK'S CRITICS:

Good God Laurens!

If only the Socialist Party of Great Britain had sent us Lady Macbeth rather than Harriet Harman! She might have geed us up a bit.

I make no comment on Toby's intervention about the "six editorial articles from *Freedom*", other than to ask the obvious question: Who is responsible for the editorials if not the editor?

Laurens makes a good point that weighs heavily upon me. That is about the usefulness of youth in attracting "a new generation of anarchists" and "a new young convert ('for our most widely distributed paper') who does just that". A new boy on the block who offers new ideas, and a fresh way of looking at things! A naive eye that spots the 'seen, but unnoticed features'!

Would that that is what we're getting. Not so, we've had special effects but no new insights.

The approach is that of a Marxist mechanic. Full of scripts and formulas; the product of a closed mind.

Gullibility can be dangerous, recall the Christie Affair in 1964. Stuart now admits he was dumb at that time, but the consequences for anarchism were dire. It widened the conflict between the CNT exiles and FIJL (Spanish Anarchist Youth), and did harm in this country.

War, Militarism and the State: an Anarchist view.

Militarism and its concomitant war are the sine qua non of the State. This is well illustrated by the insatiable 'war drive' of the US State.

The US militarists have now opened up a 'second front' against the 'Stalinist' regime in Pyongyang (North Korea). Indeed, the US Defence Secretary has openly boasted of the capacity of the US military to fight wars simultaneously against both North Korea and Iraq, if needs be. The North Koreans have upped the 'ante' by restarting their nuclear program with the veiled threat of producing nuclear weapons.

The North Korean crisis has intensified against the background of a massive US military build up in the Middle East, as a precursor to all out war against Iraq with the avowed intention of securing 'regime change'. The possibility of the whole Middle East being engulfed by war cannot be discounted.

This marked deterioration in the international situation has presented Anarchists in the NAN with a real opportunity to advance a coherent critique of the State and war; since the dynamic of statist forms encompassing coercion, authoritarianism and hierarchy inevitably results in conflict, violence and war.

The anarchist perspective, in contrast, is based on mutual aid, co-operation, social solidarity and the absence of authoritarian structures; pointing the way forward for a world of peace and social justice. To this end it is important that anarchists engage in the anti-war movement to pre-empt its domination by the authoritarian apologists for state power.

Barry Woodling.