

'SOLIDARITY'

From our knowledge of the development, organisation, publications and theory of 'Solidarity', which refers principally to 'Solidarity (London)' (S.L.), but also by implication or default to the federated groups round the country, past and present, the following points can be made. Most, if not all, of these points have been made in the past, but they have not often been put down on paper. The sooner this is done the better.

'Solidarity' has occupied the leading position among libertarian revolutionary socialist groups. This has been because people believed it to have a sound theory and a practice within the working class

'Solidarity's' Publications

Solidarity has published important historical works such as Kollontai's 'The Workers' Opposition' and Ida Mett's Kronstadt Commune. It's theoretical contribution has been the translation of Paul Cardan. Most notable among these is 'Modern Capitalism and Revolution'. The absence of any further works of substance on the economic dynamics of capitalism has tended to give the impression that Solidarity thought the Cardan was more or less definitive. Cardan was involved in setting up Solidarity in Britain in 1961 and remained in fairly close contact for several years, though nowadays his visits are infrequent.

The other major reason for dominance among the libertarian socialist groups was the industrial reporting, which was of a type scarcely seen anywhere else. Apart from being informative and often funny to read, giving a feeling of what various jobs were like, they were also well received and agitational in the place of work. Most of the people responsible for the industrial articles moved to the South London group when it was formed in the beginning of 1969 and the group there produced about ten issues of very good agitational material. Since this group folded in August 1970 there have scarcely been any articles in Solidarity written in this vein, indeed industrial articles written at the base have all but vanished.

Earlier industrial pamphlets such as 'What happened at Fords' about the 1962 strike at Dagenham helped establish Solidarity's credentials as an industrially based group, though this was probably overestimated since some of their militant members had been sacked or blacklisted so they were not always directly in the situation they wrote about.

Another work worth noting, and possibly their best pamphlet, is 'Paris: May 1968', written by M.B. and produced within three weeks of the end of the events. It is still probably the best account of what it was like to be there at the time and what was going on. It served to introduce a lot of the student left to Solidarity, as did the May events themselves.

The pamphlet on Reich, 'The Irrational in Politics', published in June 1970 has also been widely read, particularly among young people. It is thought by some within S(L) to be a watershed in Solidarity's history, filling in an important area in Solidarity's written material and differentiating the group from the other revolutionary socialist groups. In fact, as we shall indicate later, it could be construed in another manner: as being the synthesis of various currents of thought within S(L) to the effect that Solidarity is rational and everyone else must be irrational. The pamphlet should be reassessed in the light of the development and practice of Solidarity, not in the narrow field in which it is probably generally taken as being a much needed illumination of the psychological factors at work in politics.

If we are right in thinking that Solidarity has had a preeminent position in libertarian politics then we need to assess the successes and failures of the group and also of the general libertarian movement, because Solidarity must have had an effect of some sort on it. If we concentrate on what we consider the 'failures' of the group it's partly because it's more difficult to assess the successes because this would mean guess-work about the possible nature of the movement if Solidarity hadn't existed.

The first point to make is that although there are many people in the country who hold revolutionary libertarian views the strength of the organised libertarian left is exceedingly weak, all this at a time when the potential of the movement is probably the best it's been since the twenties. This must reflect adversely on Solidarity and also on the libertarian left as a whole which failed to establish another organisation or other organisations. Solidarity has, in fact, got no national presence. Those well versed in the history of the left know of Solidarity, of course, but few people coming into revolutionary politics will have heard of the group. The fact is that, for various reasons, many revolutionaries, even though they may be in agreement with the overall position of Solidarity, find themselves faced with the choice either to join IS where they can have a certain amount of independence or else drop out of organised revolutionary activity. Each alternative is bad for the individuals politics and bad for the movement.

We shall discuss Solidarity from two main viewpoints: first, its structure and practice and, second, its theory.

Structure

We shall start by considering what we believe to be the organisational structure in Solidarity (London) and what it has been over the years.

Solidarity (London) has been dominated from the start by two people: M.B. and M.F. They have dominated not only because they have always been in the group, since other people have also been present all the while, but because i) these two have written a large part of the material for the journal and many of the pamphlets, ii) they've been responsible for a lot of the editing and choice of material, and, iii) they've generally dominated meetings, both internal and national, in as much that major decisions have not been taken against their wishes. These two have given the impression that they are Solidarity and indeed this may be the case.

Around these two there have been several people who have also been in the group for many years, some since its beginning, but who have not made a significant contribution, in the form of agitation, reporting, theory etc., but have just done the routine work, typing, distribution etc. These people have generally voted along with M.B. and M.F. and thus helped maintain the status quo within the group.

At various times in S(L)'s history other people have played important roles and helped give credibility to the group. Some left to join other groups (IS mainly), others formed Solidarity (South London) and Solidarity (West London), most of whom dropped out of 'organised' politics when these groups folded in the summer of 1970, having done some good work during their short existence, particularly the South London group whose paper was a model of agitational writing.

Solidarity (London) has changed little in size over the years. Sales of the journal probably average out at about 1,200. At the moment sales probably are about 1,300 though it seems likely that pamphlet sales are increasing. Sales seem an important yardstick to S(L). An increase is described by the editors of the journal to the effect that 'Solidarity's ideas' are gaining ground. It could easily mean just a reflexion of the sharpening class struggle. Few of the people who read S(L), in all probability, are in industry and these few will probably be isolated rather than concentrated in specific factories or areas.

As far as other Solidarity groups round the country are concerned there have been quite a few which have sprung up and then disappeared. Probably only Aberdeen has had a consistent practice over a number of

years, in industry, producing a journal quite regularly and some pamphlets. Solidarity (North West), in Manchester, has produced some literature but its industrial activity has been sporadic though some of its members have been active in community work. Probably neither of these groups is doing much at the moment.

South and West London both had an industrial practice but both groups folded after about 18 months. Each was marked by a certain political and personal hostility towards the North London group and this was reciprocated. The North London group had virtually no contact with the other London groups and South and West London scarcely saw each other.

No serious attempt has been made to understand why the various groups that are formed round the country often fold quickly. And so any lessons that there might be for Solidarity's organisational structures have not been learnt.

Solidarity (London) has no industrial activity worth speaking of at the moment, nor has it had since the split between N. and S. London. It is compelled to do what it condemns other groups for doing, that is despatching leading comrades to the vital struggles going on e.g. UCS, Plessey (Alexandria), Kirby. It is now becoming more and more difficult for them to give the impression that they have both their own base and sympathetic contacts working in industry round the country who write for and distribute the journal. Perhaps they believe that the working class is not the prime revolutionary class. This is more or less hinted at in the introduction to Cardan's 'Workers' Councils' (p.4) where they say: "The text will be criticised by many anarchists as containing marxist residues (for instance it still attributes an enormous specific weight, in the process of social change, to the industrial proletariat, a weight which the author himself would probably gauge differently today)."

Solidarity's membership at the moment is probably around 25. It has probably always been about this number. Since S(L) has very little practice, in industry, community work, claimants unions, immigrants, women's lib, gay lib etc. there is nothing for new members to do except to talk, learn the politics and help produce the paper. It has very few members engaged in any serious political work, outside the immediate group activity of producing pamphlets. Indeed anyone with political experience coming into the group who had differences with M.B. or M.F. would pose a threat to the established centre. It must be a long time since S(L) recruited anyone experienced in revolutionary politics and active in his own work situation. S(L), in effect, discourages the recruitment of any people no matter how good revolutionaries if they have political disagreements, even small ones. The more active you are and the more experienced in politics the less likely you are to be recruited. This reflects also, of course, the widespread recognition among revolutionary libertarians and others (for example the dissidents in IS) of what we are saying here about the structure of the S(L) group, not to mention its theory. It is also a reflexion on the failure of Solidarity to establish itself as a national organisation with a national paper, print shop etc., itself we believe a consequence of their practice, theory and structure. Most importantly it reflects on Solidarity's failure to establish a framework in which people not entirely in agreement with Solidarity or new to revolutionary politics could work. We believe that in any libertarian revolutionary organisation you have to have free discussion between people with differing views in order to develop the groups ideas and practice. This would not, we believe, mean the end of theoretical 'stringency', but, on the contrary, it is the prerequisite for theoretical and organisational development. It is no surprise that Solidarity's theory has developed and changed scarcely at all over the years, and then not for the better. Indeed it is almost impossible for it to be otherwise. Only times and other people's consciousness have changed and passed Solidarity by.

We feel that all this shows that Solidarity (London) believes itself, in fact, to have a hold on the revolutionary 'truth'. In this absurd position which we have ascribed to them they are wrong. But we believe

our criticism is justified both from a reading of their publications and from the style in which many of their articles and pamphlets were written.

We shall now discuss the basis for all this in Solidarity's theory and writings.

Theory

In the realm of theory Solidarity, almost exclusively in the shape of Solidarity (London), has been preoccupied with a few points:

i) Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution, ii) mechanistic Marxism which it labels 'Marxism', iii) attacking left wing groups (principally IS and SLL), and iv) 'Third Worldism'.

A glance through a few of their pamphlets and journals will verify this. The points are repeated in issue after issue, virtually no chance being missed. This takes place either in the text or else in the form of a footnote. We would agree that these points, in themselves, are not necessarily invalid. But what we would say is that the way in which the points are made nullifies their effect and makes people hostile instead of winning them over, particularly those people against whom the points are made. We would go further and say that, in fact, the points are not written in order to win people over but to satisfy some need on behalf of the writers. Most people ascribe this to the histories of certain individuals within the group. Solidarity was formed in 1961 by 5 people who had come out of the SLL and it seems clear that S(L) has adopted the sectarian hostilities of that group.

Ask, for example, someone in IS what he thinks of Solidarity and the chances are he or she will mention their sectarian character, particularly their attitude towards other groups. Solidarity will be likened to the SLL in this respect - an absurd position for a libertarian group to be in, and one which has always harmed them. We would lay the blame not only on those who write this material but also on those members of the group, particularly those on the editorial committee, who put up with it even though they may agree, and some do, that it is a bad practice. We think this is indicative of the centrist, undemocratic structure of the group and a sign that the effective control of the group is in the hands of a small number of people.

Coupled with this sectarianism goes an intellectual arrogance, itself completely unjustified, which pervades much of their writing. Their attitude to Marx is typical of this. They are able to do this by virtue of the fact that a few of them have read a lot of Marx (and Lenin and Trotsky) which they are able to quote with a certain facility. They constantly feel the need to make clear their differences with Marx and more commonly 'Marxism' (though they also quote Marx favourably when they want to). This basic hostility stems not only from their personal histories just mentioned but also from the inadequacies of their theory, particularly with regard to the nature of capitalism today.

One of the criteria for new recruits might well be that they should not have read Marx, let alone be favourable towards him. Certainly the leaders of S(L) are successful in conveying their own 'hostility' to Marx to their members. What S(L) either doesn't recognise, or else they see it as fitting in with their position that they know the truth and others are wrong and irrational, is that most revolutionaries who know Marx's writings will be put off by Solidarity's attitude to Marx.

Their hostility to Marx seems to have become more acute of late. And indeed it seems to be the case that, far from possessing a great knowledge of Marx's ideas, they are very ignorant. This is testified to by A.O. in Vol 6 No.10, p.25, of Solidarity (London) of June 1971. In it he says: "Serious revolutionaries must consider the fact that all the bureaucracies in the Eastern block not only permit but find it useful to teach Marx's writings in schools as compulsory material." This shows a profound lack of understanding either of the nature of education in the Eastern block or else of Marx. We believe it must be the latter. All this serves to keep the membership of Solidarity low.

Sectarianism

To turn to the question of the sectarian nature of their writing we shall quote some examples from their latest pamphlet 'Workers' Councils'. Similar quotes can be found in most of their publications. Moreover they do not have to be dug up from obscure parts of the text. On the contrary, they dominate the writing.

A few examples of arrogant, carping technique are in the footnotes on p.36 of 'Workers' Councils'. Note 27A: "All the preceding talk... will...undoubtedly have startled a certain group of readers. We would ask them momentarily to curb their emotional responses and to try to think rationally with us on the matter." Note 28A: "One could also invent new words, if it would make people happy..." Note 28: "Those who think in terms of a society of immediate abundance, where work is unnecessary and where every citizen will forthwith be able to consume whatever he wants in terms of goods and services, seldom pause to consider who will produce these goods or provide these services, or who will produce the machines to produce them". And on p.18 Note 15: "We are fully aware that this statement will be taken out of context and that we will be accused etc....".

Another aspect of their sectarianism is the quasi-Stalinist technique of not differentiating between other left-wing tendencies. So in the introduction to 'Workers' Councils', p.3, we have: "Revolutionaries usually react to all this in one of three ways:

For the Leninists of all ilk there is no problem. They may pay lip service to 'proletarian democracy', 'Workers' Councils' and 'workers' control', but know in their bones that, wherever necessary, their Party... will take the appropriate decisions. They dismiss workers' self-management with derogatory comments about 'socialism in one factory' or with profundities like 'you can't have groups of workers doing whatever they like, without taking into account the requirements of the economy as a whole'." And then: "Non-leninist revolutionaries will react to what we say in two different ways. Either Or more simplistically"

A further example of their self-important arrogance is on p.4: "Many marxists will denounce the text as an anarchist dream(anarchist dreams are better than marxist nightmares - but we would prefer, if possible, to remain awake!)."

These quotes are by no means the worst to be found in the pages of Solidarity over the years, they are just a few from their latest pamphlet. But they all testify to S(L)'s 'sectarianism'. We would ask, for example, what leninist or luxemburgist would possibly be persuaded by the tone of remarks which are directed against leninists "of all ilk ...(who) pay lip service to 'proletarian democracy'...(and) dismiss workers' self-management with derogatory comments ... etc."

The following things are clear. The writers try very hard to give the impression that they understand fully the positions of other revolutionaries and have an adequate criticism of these positions. They seem to feel they have a quasi-omniscience, foreseeing the replies of other groups and tendencies.

Then we would ask just who do such remarks refer to. Only a handful of people would fit the bill. Thus where there may be real differences with other groups to be explored and argued about, Solidarity (London) effectively prevents any debate before it starts, precisely that debate they say they are trying to promote. This serves to gloss over the inadequacies in Solidarity's theories and also in its practice. If these remarks are directed against any people it is the leaders of various other tendencies, not the rank-and-file members of such groups.

In all this Solidarity (London) always tends to deny that anyone could exist who is neither 'irrational', reactionary, hard-line bolshevik nor ultra-utopian anarchist, and that anyone could have a revolutionary libertarian socialist critique of capitalist society and not agree with Solidarity.

There's no telling, of course, how many people have been put off Solidarity by their sectarian writing, but the number is certainly of some substance. Historically, their sectarianism has helped keep the numbers entering the group down and thus served to preserve the status quo.

Our Disagreements with Solidarity

Next it is our contention that Solidarity has failed to develop its ideas over the years and failed to develop new ones. This is to some extent due to the fact that individuals have failed to develop their own analyses. This itself is due, at least in part, to the lack of any significant practice within areas of struggle. Solidarity (London) is now, more than ever, a group whose only major activity is producing pamphlets and a journal.

We shall now list some of the areas where we disagree with the Solidarity line - and it definitely is a line - and where Solidarity has failed to develop its theory. Where the latter is the case, although we realise that there are physical limitations on the number of topics a group as small as Solidarity can tackle, we believe that it is 'no accident' that they should fail to cover them.

1) On the present state of capitalism. Economics remains the major area in which Solidarity has failed to say anything. The group's starting point is a simplistic attack against a crude 'marxism' which scarcely exists anywhere and definitely does not exist among those towards whom Solidarity should be directing its writings. What they have done, basically, is to emphasise time and again how comparatively stable capitalism has become economically. They have argued this against a few who say that the fall of capitalism is imminent because of economic crisis. They have argued, in fact, against a tiny minority on the left and accused everyone else of thinking like it if they disagreed with the Solidarity analysis or called themselves marxists.

They have effectively worked against any idea that capitalism is unstable as a system when looked at 'purely' from the economic standpoint. One of the major difficulties facing revolutionaries is that the majority of the people do think capitalism is stable and 'natural' and so to talk of another system is utopian and to talk of revolution is ridiculous. Now, when capitalism is in the biggest crisis it's faced for 50 years, and with no country in more acute crisis than Britain, the error in Solidarity's position should be obvious.

2) Along with this we get (p.57 of 'Workers' Councils'): "... in modern societies it is the division into order-givers and order-takers which is at the root of exploitation." (Our emphasis) This, of course, begs the question, what is the economic basis for this division? Thus, in 'As We See It', which expresses the basic Solidarity position and was published in April 1967, they choose this theme as the first sentence of the first section: "Throughout the world, the vast majority of people have no control whatsoever over the decisions that most deeply and directly affect their lives." Whilst this is true in itself, as a starting point for a whole political theory it is ridiculous. It is our contention that undue weight is constantly given by Solidarity to the manifestations of the structure rather than the economic foundations themselves. This is one of the most important aspects of their hostility to marxism.

In 'As We See It' we can also see the prominence given to capitalism's 'successes'. Solidarity again defines itself against what it regards as 'marxist' positions. The first sentence of section 2 reads: "During the past century the living standards of working people have improved." What is implied, to their way of thinking, is that if there are things which show that Marx was wrong in some of the things he said then marxism falls. Solidarity was able to do this to its own satisfaction only because they always argued against a crude, almost mythical 'marxism' which only a small minority of 'marxists' ascribe to.

In trying to 'transcend' Marx, which is what they say needs to be, they have rejected his way of analysing society, his methodology.

Most of 'As We See It' is concerned with the structures of any organisations that might be formed in the course of struggle, e.g. there should be democratic control from below. We, too, agree with this principle but it is only part of a revolutionary, libertarian theory. In Solidarity too much else is either neglected or inadequate.

3) Solidarity has failed to produce anything on the structure and likely future development of British capitalism, its firms and industries, and their location within the world situation, both economic and political. This work is essential, not only so as to develop and use the most effective tactics in industry, but also to generalise this struggle and link it to an attack on capitalism as a whole.

This reflects Solidarity's inadequate politics, not just its current practice, for it was not always as distant from the struggle in industry as it is now, and in the past it has emphasised the importance of the industrial struggle.

Linked with this Solidarity fails to use a class analysis to understand and explain the major movements within capitalism.

We do not make a fetish of marxism, still less of anti-marxism. The point about marxism is not that it provides you automatically with the 'correct line', but that it gives you the method with which to analyse society.

4) Another major disagreement with Solidarity is its attitude to what it calls 'Third Worldism'. Again a glance at virtually any of their writings on the subject will show the lumping together of a whole range of undifferentiated tendencies labelled as 'Third Worldism'. Incorporated in this is their attitude to the black movement, particularly in the states in the latter half of the sixties. We shall quote some pieces from their writings.

In December 1970 (Vol.6, No.7) they published an article with the title "Black Separatism and White Sycophancy". The article was written by an american in January 1964. Solidarity's preface says as follows: "We feel it would be interesting to probe deeper into the mechanics whereby some guilt-laden white radicals uncritically identify with every manifestation of black nationalism - however reactionary". This is the theme of the text and phrases like that frequently appear in it. The preface calls this 'sycophancy' "part of the general retreat from rationality so prevalent today". The idea clearly is that Solidarity is rational and everyone else irrational. Who are these 'guilt-laden white radicals'? In effect they are everyone who disagrees with Solidarity on this question.

At the beginning of their preface they define their position on the 'third world' as stressing "that support for the struggle of oppressed people should not necessarily imply support for the political organisations involved in that struggle". This, of course leaves the question of which organisations to support, if any, but it is a reasonable position with which we do not disagree. In fact, however, their real position is far from being reasonable. It is both moralistic and 'immoral'. We shall outline our reasons for saying this.

On the question of Vietnam M.B. says, and others agree, that the position he would take in Vietnam is that he would not be a member of the NLF but would take an independent line. If this meant liquidation because of isolation he would still take this position.

The crucial point here is not that one shouldn't keep one's beliefs in such situations. The point is the rejection on principle of any involvement in an organisation within which the mass of the people are fighting, on the grounds that one has political differences with the organisation's political line.

Some consequences of these attitudes have been as follows. Solidarity failed to take part in the organisation of the big Vietnam demos in the late sixties. Today there is no question of working inside the Anti-Internment League.

Most crucially Solidarity has consistently failed to take an anti-imperialist line. It has failed, for example, to make assessments of the economic importance of the Vietnam war, and of the political importance of the Vietnamese victory over U.S. imperialism, or of the revolutionary developments within the black movement in the U.S. It has always concentrated, almost exclusively, on attacking the political groups or parties involved. The manner of these attacks has been, generally, vitriolic. The result of this is that Solidarity has been unable to have any effect or relevance on the 'third world' question because its way of thinking on the subject is politically abject. Any insights it may have are lost, not because of the 'irrationality' of everyone else but because of the failure of Solidarity's views and theory and the way they have of putting them across.

Another facet of this is the following, again taken from their introduction to 'Workers' Councils', p.2: "The text was written before the momentous developments of the sixties, before the massive growth of 'do-it-yourself' politics, and before the Berkeley events of 1964 (which showed the explosive new tensions modern capitalist society was busily producing). It was written before the vast spread - at least in Europe - of the 'youth revolt' (with its deep questioning of the 'work ethic' as such - and of so many other aspects of bourgeois culture) and before the development of the women's liberation movement (with its widespread critique not only of the economic exploitation of women but of the more subtle forms of exploitation inherent in the attribution of fixed polarities and roles to the two sexes). Finally it was written more than a decade before the great events of May 1968...." But what were the events which radicalised young people in particular and which thus helped release the 'new' tensions in 'modern' capitalist society? The answer is: first, the war in Vietnam, and, second, the black movement in the States. Solidarity does not mention these things and it is no accident - it is the direct outcome of their politics. Likewise there is no mention of the developing crisis of capitalism and the sharpening class struggle.

Contrast their attitude to, say, the black movement in America with the welcome given, correctly in our view, to the women's lib. movement "with its widespread critique not only of the economic exploitation of women but of the more subtle forms of exploitation inherent in the attribution of fixed polarities and roles to the two sexes". But what about the maoists, the trotskyists, the stalinists and the liberals in the women's lib. movement? Solidarity does not use the same techniques against these people (e.g. printing juicy quotations) as it used, for example, against the Black Panthers in the U.S. in order to attack the whole movement (see the quotes inserted in the article " 'Third Worldism' or Socialism", Vol.6, No.3, Jan. 1970, for example). Haven't black people come up with their own analysis of the specific forms of their oppression?

Conclusion

What are our conclusions? Solidarity is dominated by Solidarity (London). This group has a centrist structure, theoretically, organisationally and editorially. It has been pre-occupied with maintaining what amounts to its 'theoretical purity' and this has prevented any increase in size of the group. This failure to expand, coupled with the fact that the type of politics advocated by Solidarity has, we agree, generally been gaining ground, is the empirical evidence that Solidarity has not created the right organisation. We believe, and this is many people's experience, that the centre of Solidarity (London) is not geared to any expansion of the group and the federation, and has effectively blocked or deflected any such moves in the past. Given the centrist nature of the group they were able to do this.

Solidarity started in the early sixties by giving the libertarian left in CND and the Committee of 100 a turn towards a libertarian revolutionary socialist analysis of capitalism and it has maintained a more or less consistent political stance since. But it has also, in practice, hindered the development of an effective national organisation by semi-deliberate machinations inside the Solidarity movement itself, by its sectarianism, and by its inadequate structure, practice and theory. Part of this is the fact that Solidarity has always had its fair share of personality clashes which would not have been so divisive in a democratically structured and run organisation. The lack of this democratic structure exacerbated and often precipitated these clashes.

The absence of a worthwhile practice apart from its publications has led the group to fetishise its pamphlets and the sales and translations of them. Further it has led to a fetishisation of the organisation itself and of its ideas. It is indicative that there is little to learn from the history of Solidarity.

We believe, as does Solidarity probably, that there should exist a national organisation of federated, autonomous base groups with political agreement on 'basics' between them. And there are many individuals and groups within the Solidarity movement with whom we wish to have a co-operative and close working relationship. But we believe this is best done outside Solidarity because we don't think that Solidarity provides the right structure. We wish that this was different, because the task would be that much simpler and the movement that much stronger.

K. P. got from: -

Bookshop 85
85 Regents Pk rd