

Anti-Fascist Action

– an Anarchist perspective



By an ex-Liverpool AFA member

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Kate Sharpley Library

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What is Anarchism?

Anarchism is a political theory which opposes the State and capitalism. It says that people with economic power (capitalists) and those with political power (politicians of all stripes left, right or centre) use that power for their own benefit, and not (like they claim) for the benefit of society. Anarchism says that neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and that a society based on freedom, mutual aid and equal shares of the good things in life would work better than this one. Anarchism is also a political movement. Anarchists take part in day-to-day struggles (against poverty, oppression of any kind, war etc) and also promote the idea of comprehensive social change. Based on bitter experience, they warn that new 'revolutionary' bosses are no improvement: 'ends' and 'means' (what you want and how you get it) are closely connected.

Introductory Note

"Anti-Fascist Action – an Anarchist Perspective" first appeared – in edited/cut form – in late 2005^[A]. This is the full, valid, version, as originally intended, and with the original graphics. The article is exactly what it says it is – an anarchist perspective on Anti-Fascist Action, by an ex-member of Liverpool AFA. As such it's part history and part political analysis. It starts with why the article is being written, and finishes with a check on how things stood in early 2005.

As Note 3 in the article makes clear this article is the reviewed, revised, final version.

However, as there have been several attempts at editing, or partially re-writing this article, some further points need making – to make clearer what this article is, and what it isn't:

- This article is a summary of AFA's politics, history, and activities – from the early days to the end, from a Liverpool perspective. Much of the material isn't currently found anywhere else^[B].
- This article does *not* claim to be a 'full' history of AFA – either geographically, or in terms of what AFA did. This should be obvious. AFA activity ranged from the very public to the not public. A 'full' genuine history of AFA is very unlikely in the near future.
- This is an insider's view of AFA. It is partisan, and some of what is said is controversial in some quarters.
- There has, however, been a very strong attempt to be accurate in the article. It's made very clear which bits of the article are based on direct knowledge, which bits are believed to be true, and which bits are based on third parties. The issue of credibility of sources – in terms of proven militancy and political independence – is taken very seriously. The Notes are as important as the main text.
- This article can be read at several levels. The article is written to be understandable for people new to politics. The peer review group, however – ie people who can actually have a valid opinion about

what is said, based on ‘having been there’ – is, and can only be, ex-AFA militants. The Notes are aimed at both groups.

- This article is highly condensed. Words mean what they mean and for very specific reasons.

An ex-Liverpool AFA member,
November 2006

References:

A. *Black Flag* issue no 225.

B. This goes for public events as well. For instance, the Newcastle festival in 1993 was organised by TWAFa – then part of AFA; all the security was provided by AFA activists from as far as the south of England; there was an AFA banner on stage; this was one of several AFA festivals. None of this AFA connection, however, can be found on the TWAFa web site.

[www.twafa.org.uk].

Anti-Fascist Action – An Anarchist Perspective

Militant physical force anti-fascism has a long tradition in Britain – going back to the 1930’s, and the ‘Battle of Cable Street’ in London’s East End. From the mid-1980’s to the turn of the century, militant anti-fascism found its most authentic expression through the organisation Anti-Fascist Action. AFA was never an ‘anarchist’ organisation. However, the agreement of anarchists with AFA’s twin aims of ‘ideological and physical opposition to fascism’, and the anarchist emphasis on direct action as compared to electoralism, meant that, within AFA, much of the cutting edge on the streets was provided by anarchist activists.

The following is a brief summary and analysis of those years, and the aftermath.



With the 2004 publication of a book – “No Retreat” – by two former members of Manchester Anti-Fascist Action^[1], and the launch of a new physical force anti-fascist organisation – AntiFa^[2] – now [2005] seems as good a time as any to go over some old ground as to what Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) was, what it did, and why it eventually fell apart, from an anarchist perspective. This isn’t a ‘kiss and tell’, so names will be avoided, and specifics kept out where possible. It is also the perspective of an ex-AFA member active in Liverpool and the Northern Network, so it will mostly take a Northern angle^[3].

Confronting fascism in Liverpool

As has been written before, AFA was originally set up in 1985 as a broad front anti-fascist organisation. The main fascist organisation at this time was the British National Party (BNP). Various contenders for the title of the ‘real’ National Front also existed, following the demise of the original NF after Thatcher took power in 1979. Taking Liverpool as an example, the few attempts by the BNP or NF to hold public marches or meetings in the city centre during the 1980’s had been smashed into the ground by a large turn out from locals – notably from the Liverpool black community^[4]. The last attempt by fascists (NF) to march through Liverpool city centre was in 1986 – also an early AFA national mobilisation. This failure of big events, however, didn’t stop the BNP selling papers openly in the town centre on a regular basis, unopposed. This also didn’t stop them starting a campaign of violence against Left wing targets – in particular against the bookshop ‘News From Nowhere’, run by a feminist collective. After a few almost-successful attempts to burn the bookshop down, the windows being smashed in on Saturday daytime attacks – probably after a paper sale – and fascists generally strutting into the bookshop to intimidate staff and customers as and when they pleased, it was obvious something had to be done. Other fascist attacks at the time included smashing the windows of the Wirral Trades Council (over the water from Liverpool). BNP local activity like this was typical in any area in Britain where they were left unchallenged.

AFA was launched in Liverpool in 1986. At that time, Militant was still the strongest working class group on the Left (though in the process of being kicked out of the Labour Party). Neither they nor the Socialist Workers Party were interested in being organisationally part of AFA. The SWP, in fact, sometimes sold papers in Liverpool city centre at the same time as the BNP – though, to be fair, if a fascist march was likely both the SWP and Militant

would have a turn out. From an early stage the main organisers of Liverpool AFA were associated with the local anarchist scene. This became more explicit with the re-launch of Liverpool Anarchist Group in 1987.

Liverpool AFA was mostly anarchist – but it was never an anarchist front or a recruiting tool, except by way of natural influence. Anyone who agreed with the ‘physical and ideological opposition to fascism’ could be involved, and many did. Links were made with Trade Unions to raise money for specific events. Links were also made with Jewish and other anti-racist groups, and meetings were held to attract wider participation. In later years this non-sectarianism also meant a working relationship with some of the new Anti-Nazi League activists. Anti-fascists at the two universities also set up AFA groups at this time – a process repeated several times as students came and went.

Within a year or so, the Liverpool BNP went from boasting about how the ‘reds’ were always beaten in Liverpool when they tried to force the BNP off the streets (according to confiscated copies of the *British Nationalist*), to the effective collapse of the group. Years later, the BNP admitted in the *Liverpool Echo* that “they were driven underground by left wing extremists in the mid-80s” [Oct 1993]. This kind of effective shut-down of BNP groups – by any means necessary – was also typical of AFA in this period.

National AFA and the North

Nationally, meanwhile, the original AFA had collapsed due to incompatible political differences. Local and Regional groups (like the Northern Network) however continued, and national call-outs still occurred using existing contacts. AFA was re-launched in London in 1989, and in 1992 a national meeting was held in London to sort out a new national structure. The re-launch of AFA was as a militant ‘united front’ – ie an alliance of different political tendencies – orientated towards the working class, to reclaim working class areas then claimed by fascists as their own. The class perspective was agreed because, first, fascists don’t just play the race card – they address genuine fears of the white working class (unemployment, bad housing etc) and their success is often based on disillusionment with so-called ‘socialist’ councils. This propaganda needed a class-based answer. Second, it wasn’t enough to ‘defend democracy’ – if AFA didn’t say the system needed to be smashed, that would leave fascism as the ‘radical’ alternative. Third, the working class is the object of fascist attack once in power – only the working class can oppose it. AFA, it was agreed, wasn’t interested in ‘allies’ that were

part of the problem such as corrupt councillors. Links, it was agreed, would continue to be made with black and asian communities under attack, but AFA propaganda should be mainly aimed at the communities where fascists themselves aimed to recruit^[5].

Organisationally, it was agreed that AFA would be a decentralised federation based on a regional structure – building from the existing regions of London AFA and the Northern Network. The only national structure was to be a national coordinating committee of 2 delegates per region, to meet as and when needed, with no powers to make policy (or certainly to impose policy – some minor national decisions did have to be made over these years, but these were non-controversial).

London AFA at that time was mostly run by the marxist Red Action – in alliance with elements of the anarcho-syndicalist Direct Action Movement (DAM)^[6] ^[7], and the trotskyst Workers Power. There were also non-aligned independents – anarchists and other socialists – involved.

The Northern Network (originally the Northern Anti-Fascist Network) was a looser federation of Northern AFA groups – Bolton, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, South Yorks, Tyne and Wear, Preston, and others. Tyne and Wear were actually a Council-funded body set up before AFA. Of the rest, Manchester were run mainly by Red Action (the strongest Red Action branch outside of London as far as I can tell); a few groups – like York – would probably be best described as “non-aligned” independents. The rest were mainly organised by anarchists – sometimes in the DAM, sometimes not. Lots of anarchist activists at the time weren’t in any national organisation – or were involved mainly in other areas. This reflected the way the anarchist movement had grown since the early 1980’s – some became anarchists through the Left or Trade Unions, others through anti-militarism, others through animal rights. In the North things tended not to be as sectarian as in London. Apart from the regional groups of the DAM and Class War, there was also the general Northern Anarchist Network. There were often overlaps between different anarchist and activist scenes – people would join a call-out, but didn’t necessarily prioritise anti-fascism. Even the DAM didn’t officially prioritise anti-fascism – many or most of the DAM were trade union activists or shop stewards – though some groups definitely prioritised the anti-fascist fight more than others. In Liverpool, again, anti-fascism was only one area – in 1988-1990, anarchists were far more active against the Poll Tax, and in 1995-1997 more active in support of 500 locked-out Liverpool Dockers. For Liverpool anarchists, anti-fascism was never seen as an end in itself – only as part of the wider struggle.

It’s often a good indicator as to whether a movement is alive or in trouble – is there a wider periphery, or is it just the activists? AFA at its height was definitely far more than the activist core, and far more than just street fighters. AFA activism involved public speaking, magazine and pamphlet production, organising fund-raisers (gigs, carnivals), etc. A lot of people put time and effort into AFA-related activities who agreed with the aims, but weren’t particularly involved organisationally – or go to meetings. It should also be noted that at this time there was a working – and productive – relationship between the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* and AFA, partly because AFA was the only game in town. This included, in Liverpool, a *Searchlight* member from Manchester speaking at a Liverpool AFA re-launch meeting in 1992.

*A popular graphic of
the time*



AFA in action

At a Regional and National level, AFA actions were mainly based around countering known – or intelligence-indicated – fascist mobilisations. Remembrance Sunday in London was the first national focus point in 1986 – the National Front having made a point of marching to the Cenotaph on the day, then attacking Left wing targets – notably the Anti-Apartheid picket outside the South African Embassy. These militant AFA mobilisations had the desired effect – the fascists were stopped. In the North, meanwhile, the Northern Network mobilised against the BNP’s Remembrance Sunday meetings at Clifford’s Tower, York. The BNP chose Clifford’s Tower as it was the site where many of York’s Jewish community were burned to death in the middle ages. Some of these early AFA mobilisations to York were

relatively open, and quite large. In 1988, for instance, Liverpool AFA took a full coach and minibus – over 80 people – to the event, though on that occasion we were stopped on the outskirts of York and escorted all the way back to Liverpool by the police (the same happened to a coach from Newcastle). Echoes of police tactics in the Miner’s Strike of 1984-85... Later mobilisations tended to use just mini-buses. Again, after a few years, AFA tactics were successful.

Remembrance Sunday was only one day – many other AFA mobilisations occurred, in many parts of the country, over these years. This was especially so as new AFA groups were formed and new AFA Regions were organised (established Regions providing backup to new areas, such as the Midlands, when requested)^[8]. Tactics evolved and were constantly under review. A typical ‘event’ in the North would involve a call-out after intelligence indicated fascist activity – eg a BNP election leafleting would be taking place (mobilisations weren’t just about marches). AFA would meet, send out scouts, and act according to intelligence gathered on the day. Sometimes AFA leafleting of estates was not just to counter fascist propaganda, but also to provide a legal excuse for being there. As time went on, in the Northern Network (London AFA operated very differently), each local group elected a delegate during mobilisations. Delegates from each group got together on the day and coordinated events. Usually, but not always, the unofficial ‘chief steward’ was the one in whose backyard the nazi mobilisation had occurred. Near Manchester this was likely to be someone from Manchester AFA/Red Action, but even close to Manchester this wasn’t always the case – for instance, an anarchist from nowhere near Manchester was the chief steward at a mobilisation at Colne, Lancs^[9]. Coordination, anyway, was more based on informal working relationships and trust rather than any official positions, and once the fascists were located, what happened next had more to do with personal initiative and ‘bottle’ than a ‘commander’.

The main national public AFA events over these years are reasonably well known (or used to be), but are worth outlining:

In London, Blood and Honour – the nazi music front – was beaten off the streets in 1989 when they tried to organise publicly. In 1991 an AFA Unity Carnival in London – attended by 10,000 in September – was followed on Remembrance Sunday by a 4,000 strong confrontational ‘National Demonstration Against Racist Attacks’ through the East End. From reacting to the fascists, AFA was seizing the initiative. This was the biggest anti-fascist demo in years – AFA seemed on the verge of some kind of breakthrough.

Instead, seeing the way the wind was blowing, within months the SWP had re-launched the Anti-Nazi League (a very different animal to the original ANL of the 1970’s^[10]), Militant launched Youth Against Racism in Europe, and Black Nationalists in the Labour Party launched the Anti-Racist Alliance^[11]. The end result of this was that, while these new organisations brought in new faces, anti-fascist unity had suddenly become a competitive market place, with organisations which were better funded, and better-connected in terms of media publicity than AFA. AFA did continue to help organise and provide stewards for specific broader anti-racist marches – such as the 1992 ‘National Demonstration Against Racist Murders’^[12] – but there were no more AFA marches. By 1993, in big national anti-fascist marches, like the marches to the BNP headquarters in Welling, organised by all the ‘big names’ – the biggest of 40,000 in September 1993 – AFA activists either organised separately to track down any BNP groups (eg London) or joined the

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