

# The Libertarian Communist

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A Discussion Bulletin for the Anti State,  
Non Market Socialist/Anarchist sector

Aim: the creation of a World wide Libertarian Communist Society.

£1

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**In Spanish Autogestion means to self manage and work co-operatively but are experiments such as worker co-operatives within capitalism any help in achieving a self managed libertarian communist society?**

The purpose of The Libertarian Communist is to promote discussion amongst the Anti State, Non Market sector irrespective of whether individuals or groups consider themselves as Anarchist, Communist or Socialist as all such titles are in need of further qualification. If you have disagreements with an article in this or any other issue, wish to offer comment or want to contribute something else to the discussion then please get in touch. If any article focuses on a particular group then that group has, as a matter of course, the right to reply. So please get in touch with your article, letters and comments. You can do this by contacting [lib\\_com.bull@mail.com](mailto:lib_com.bull@mail.com) or writing to Ray Carr, Flat 1, 99 Princess Road, Branksome, Poole, Dorset BH12 1BQ.

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## This Issue

The plan for this issue was to have two or three articles on the subject of worker co-operatives/worker self management (WSM) focusing on if it has any role in the movement for as a self managed Libertarian Communist society. Events have rather overtaken us as the response to the intended subject failed to materialise. At the same time we have received a reply from Robin Cox to Kathy Summerson's critique on his articles in issues 12 and 13 which we felt deserved inclusion. We also received an article concerning the procedures for accepting people as members of groups within the anti state, non market anarchist/socialist sector. Whilst Stefan's article concentrates on the World Socialist Movement (WSM) it has important implications for the whole sector and therefore is well worthy of inclusion. However rather than abandon our initial plan completely we are including an in house article on the subject of worker co-operatives/WSM in the hope that this will either invigorate people or piss them off so much that they will not be able to sleep until they have made some response.

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### **Workers Self Management and its relevance to a Libertarian Communist Society.**

Most anti state, non market anarchists/socialists would agree that the society they envisage would include common ownership of the means for producing and distributing wealth, production directly for use and free access to the common store of goods available. This is best summed up by the term from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs. Alongside common ownership most would agree on some form of democratic control. At the workplace this democratic control would supposedly take some form of self management that would replace hierarchical form of control that exists within in capitalism. This is not to say that the democratic process would not be extended to those who for some reason or other could not take part in the process by which goods are produced and distributed. But we have to assume that most would be involved in that process and so self management would be a vital factor in a free socialist society.

There are perhaps a number of reasons why the notion of democratic control is discussed less than that of common ownership, production for use, free access and so on. After all socialism will be a classless society, the means of production and distribution will belong to all, people will spend less time at work than they do in employment in capitalism, there should be a breakdown in the division between work and leisure. However people will still have to work in order to produce and distribute the useful items that we all need, even if only for a fraction of the time that they labour for within present day society. So the democratic control of the means of production is an important aspect of a socialist society and this means self management replacing the hierarchical control of capitalism. Therefore are experiments with workers self management (WSM) such as workers' co-operatives of any use in helping to achieve a free socialist society?

#### **Arguments for and against Co-operatives.**

In a debate via libcom.org Iain McKay argued in favour of worker co-ops as a response to the current economic downturn as an alternative to bailouts and nationalisation. If

done in the right way, he suggested, they could be used as a route to create a libertarian social movement which uses direct action and solidarity to change society. In support he uses not only Proudhon and Kropotkin but also Marx and Engels [**Iain McKay, Bailouts or Co-operatives, libcom.org**]. Whilst, McKay argues that co-operatives do not equal socialism he suggests that they have more in common with it than either bailouts or nationalisation. In response to this Joseph Kay argued that many anarchists focus too much on the vertical rule of workplace hierarchy rather than the horizontal way capital rules through market forces. They therefore see workers' control as a path towards libertarian communism, however, he argues **"it is not a stepping stone but a cul-de-sac"** Looking at his own workplace in financial services he stresses that in a co-op the same market forces would still dominate but there would be no boss to confront when the pressure came to increase the rate of exploitation due to a hostile market [**Joseph Kay, Co-ops or Conflicts, libcom.org**]. To the charge that moves for elements of workers' control such as co-operatives within capitalism merely lead to self exploitation McKay, in a further response, argues that his suggestion in favour of co-operatives was an attempt to encourage direct action by workers and the aim was not workers control within capitalism but workers' control as one tactic amongst others as a means to ending capitalism [**Iain McKay, Co-operatives and Conflicts, libcom.org**].

The basis of the problem seems to be in what way and under what circumstance do we see worker co-ops are a step towards a self managed socialist society? A system in which they replaced traditional capitalist enterprises would still be capitalism, or at least not be socialism, if their aim was still to expand their capital. As Buick and Crump argued; **"An enterprise may be a single individual or it may be a joint stock company, a nationalised industry or even a workers' co-operative. It is not its internal structure that is important for understanding the role of the enterprise in capitalism but rather the fact that it represents – incarnates, if you like – a separate capital, a sum of values seeking to expand itself through being invested in production"**. [**Buick and Crump, State Capitalism: the wages system under new management, pp.7-8, Macmillan, 1986**]

What can happen to co-operatives under capitalism is typified by the Mondragon co-operatives which are based in Spain but operate in many countries. The Mondragon enterprise FagorMastercook in Wroclaw in Poland which operates in a special economic zone and receives subsidies from the Polish state is a leading example. In 2008 a serious labour dispute broke out there. The union, August 80 had been in negotiations to gain a pay rise. After months of fruitless negotiations over 90% of the work force went on strike some union members and some of those who supported them were fired and other workers were subject to intimidation. Heavy security was utilised when members of the Wroclaw group of union syndicalists (ZSP) supported by hundreds of other protested outside of the factory. Mondragon Co-operative Corporation (MCC) is described as a typical capitalist employer. The FagorMastercook operates plants in low wage countries such as Poland, Egypt, Morocco, Mexico, Thailand and China. Some employees in other countries and even in Spain are not co-operative members and any co-operative can apply to the MCC to employ up to 40% of its workforce as non co-operative members [*FagorMastercook Protest, libcom.org 2008*].

### **Possible roles for genuine worker co-operatives in the present and future.**

So we are aware of the fact that a system of co-operatives competing in a market system which necessitates them operating as capitalist enterprises does not equal a self managed socialist society. We are also aware that if they are economically successful they will fail in terms of socialist experimentation or if they fail economically they will go bankrupt. But this is not the end of the story; much depends on how they are set up, what the motivation behind them is and whether they may fulfil a role in a much more advanced anti capitalist pro socialist environment. Schemes like the present UK government's which aim to set up co-operatives to provide public sector services can be immediately dismissed as can situations where owners hand their enterprises over to the workforce to be run as co-operatives. [*see Mutualism: Fake and Real, Ian McKay, Freedom, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2011*] It is also true that where co-operatives are set up just to save jobs they will probably suffer the twin problems of economic sustainability and the failure to provide a real alternative to a capitalist enterprise. The type of worker co-

operatives that are more likely to provide some type of alternative, (accepting that this will be limited by operating through the market system), are the ones set up by workers to avoid the alienating aspects of working in capitalist enterprises. In this case they are set up deliberately to experiment with day to day decisions being made by the workers who work in them rather than by line and higher management and maybe having at least some limited control over what is produced and under what conditions. Such experiments might not always last that long but as much experience of capitalism can be made through such alternative initiatives as by working for employers. Other ways of extending the experimentation with co-operative is by the formation of bodies that bring them together. Such a body could be used for trading purposes, to discuss common problems, to analyse forms of democratic decision making within their enterprises and so on. They may also be able to connect with community projects such as social centres. Overall it is important that co-operatives do not isolate themselves and become too inward looking but retain an awareness of why they chose an alternative form of working environment. It is important that any body linking co-operatives should come from and be organised by the members of the co-operatives themselves and not rely on some pro capitalist bureaucratic body with different objectives.

Whilst some of this could possibly happen in the here and now much of it may seem a bit utopian at present and difficult to operate in the present pro capitalist agenda. But what about in a situation where socialist ideas are spreading? In their circular of 1987, "*The Road to Socialism*" the then Guildford branch of the SPGB made some interesting observations of the role institutions such as co-operatives could play in a situation where socialist ideas were still in a minority but a far larger minority than at present. They argued that whilst things like communes or co-operatives are not inherently socialist inspired they do; "***constitute a suitable medium through which the invasion of socialistic relationships within the capitalist economy may be affected***". The following year in attempting to clarify their ideas they explained the role that co-operatives could play in a situation where socialist ideas were on the increase; "***But under the very different circumstances where there is a***

**mass socialist movement, we are talking about a very different proposition indeed. Then such forms will be able to feed upon and contribute to the growth of the socialist movement and through them we shall be able to orient production more and more along "socialistic lines".** It does seem that the points raised here are at least worthy of further discussion within various sections of the anti state, non market anarchist/socialist sector.

### **The Case of Argentina**

This discussion would be incomplete if we did not refer to the self management/ co-operative system that developed in Argentina a few years ago. The following information is based on a post submitted by Sam Sanchez on libcom.org which is taken from <http://www.rebellion.org/petras/english/worker021002.htm>. Its stress is on workers self management (WSM) in general rather than co-operatives in particular. Some of the elements we argued for previously such as worker co-operatives/self managed enterprises not being too inward looking but looking to link up with other social movements was practiced in the Argentina occupation/WSM movement. By 2006 Argentina had over 200 workplaces organized and controlled by their workers and a national co-coordinator of self-managed enterprises was in the process of being established. The WSM movement arose out of practical considerations rather than ideological motives. Workers were not being paid, or if they were paid their wages were reduced and the owners were in the process of abandoning the workplaces and having them stripped of machinery and equipment. So saving their jobs was a main priority but the difference was that this became a movement rather than being isolated to a few workplaces. Once the workplaces had been occupied the workers who were more political proposed in the general assemblies that the workplaces be operated and managed directly by the workers themselves. Internally many of the self managed enterprises such as the Brukman textile factory, the Zanon ceramic factory and the WSM enterprises established by the unemployed workers in Solano and elsewhere developed democratic structures where productive and distributive decisions were taken by an assembly of all the workers. But there were other encouraging signs as well. A high degree of solidarity as in the *slogan "an*

*attack on one, is an attack on all"* ("Tocas uno, Tocas todos"). The practice of self-management created as much class consciousness as the factory occupations had before and also lead to new forms of social organization through popular assemblies. The guiding principles of the movement were direct democracy, horizontality and autonomy. There was a mistrust of representative democracy which was caused by the experience of an easily corruptible trade union leadership.

Activists in the WSM movement guarded against becoming too inward looking and saw the need for solidarity with other social movements. Faced by the threat of eviction from their workplaces by the state they called for support from the neighbourhood assemblies and the unemployed movement in defending their workplaces. This support and growing co-ordination between the factory occupation movement and the unemployed workers movement developed especially in times of crisis and where the danger of state repression was at its highest. During the initial factory occupation, the organized unemployed workers' joined in defending the ceramics plant from efforts by the former owners to forcibly dislodge the workers. The mass united resistance effectively blocked them. Subsequently Zanon ceramics expanded production, and hired ten workers from among the unemployed movement. The Argentina WSM movement recognised the limitations of islands of workers' self management in a capitalist market. Whilst it was seen as important to construct organs of power at local level they also saw the need to be aligned to the construction of a political and social movement at national level.

### **Lessons**

So what are the lessons concerning experiments with worker co-operatives and other forms of worker self managed enterprises in relation to the establishment of a free socialist society? At the moment in a country such as the UK the prospects are not that good. There may be a few co-operatives that can develop democratic structures and a less alienating working environment and survive but they are unlikely to threaten the status quo. However they can provide valuable experience in self management for those concerned and if they are seen to be developing around sound democratic

structures and an anti capitalist culture there are not too many reasons why socialists should not encourage and support them. No support whatsoever can be given to so called co-operatives like the ones proposed by the present government, the ones handed down to the workers by their former owners or large institutionalised ones like Mondragon, these are part and parcel of the capitalist system.

The experience of places such as Argentina would suggest that movements for genuine co-operatives or other WSM experiments are likely to develop out of economic crisis and the need to preserve jobs. In such circumstances such a strategy has to develop as a movement rather than as one or a few isolated ventures as the latter will be doomed to failure. However a WSM movement that links up with other social movements such as people's, community, local assemblies and an organised unemployed workers movement, and we are seeing some of these developments at the present, could develop into a very powerful social movement and provide a chink of hope for those of us seeking a libertarian communist alternative to capitalism. It would be foolish in the extreme to dismiss such a movement as yet another attempted reform of capitalism. Of course it may have reformist elements within it but that can only be altered by injecting socialist ideas into it, not by looking the other way.

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### **Letter.**

The following letter focuses on two of the articles in issue 14 and thanks for the positive comments, Mike, the cheque is in the post.

Dear Lib Com

Thanks for Libertarian Communist 14. Excellent! Really strong, very punchy!

I found R.S.'s article to be very much in line with my thinking now. That said, I have doubts that his statements following, "*Well it depends who we are*" actually illuminate that thorny issue of identifying class membership all that much (and I thought briefly that the libretto of Pulp's "Common People" could be inserted seamlessly into the text at this point). His statements seem to imply something about mental attitudes defining class that goes needlessly beyond his

already crystal clear definition of "*relation to the means of production*". Anyway, "*If you are outside the class ... don't try to lead or direct the working class*", can only sound a wee bit odd if you then plan to quote Marx and Fred Engels. M and E clearly did not feel the need to follow the "*or, if you're really serious, join the working class*" advice in any meaningful social or economic way (i.e. getting into the appropriate "*relation to the means of production*"). Their chosen "*relation to the means of production*" was as distant as they could make it (easy in Engels' case, requiring a tad more ingenuity and rather more sponging in Marx's case). Nevertheless, to my mind he is absolutely right for the most part. There has been too much attempted organization of workers by 'revolutionary experts'.

Wow, Kathy Summerson is really into playing the man and not the ball. Robin Cox's original article seems pretty unobjectionable to me, but even if you didn't agree with it why be so personally abusive? I am struggling to discern how exactly this style of "blunt critique" takes the discussion forward (I am curious though; did Robin Cox really try to set up a "SPGB look-alike"?). And, for fuck sake, if you are going to be that hypercritical it might be nice to support your viewpoint with a smidgeon of rigorous argument! Appealing to the AF's 10th principle as being no bar to it being the "fastest growing organization" in the ASNM sector is close to perverse. The AF would be the first to acknowledge they're a tiny, tiny group and I've communicated with at least some AF members who regard the 10th principle as unhelpful (whether they are publically obliged to agree it is essential or not). That's not a plank of an argument that's a fucking matchstick. But Kathy is right about one thing, "the Marxist position ... is a matter of class and that alone". Capitalism has given the revolutionary role to the mass of the working class because of the relation it imposes on them as a class to the means of production. It is not because of their adequate grasp of "underlying principles". It is worth noting the quote from Marx's German Ideology given in R.S.'s article in which Marx proposes that it is only in the act of revolution that the mass of the class can be ideologically transformed. The trouble with "class consciousness" is that it is a nebulous concept that can easily lend itself to over defining and freighting with "underlying principles". All too often, the uneven development of ideas within the class is used to unfavourably juxtapose an immature mass of the

working class to an ideologically advanced conscious minority of the working class (those who think they are 'bearers of class consciousness'). However, it is essentially a concept, which if it is to have meaning at all, can only have that meaning within an extremely narrow socio-economic frame of reference, and is possibly best regarded as an effect rather than a cause. So when Kathy "speaks of "underlying principles, without which class-consciousness cannot be attained" your heart just sinks. Once again, the dear old plebs are going to be browbeaten for their sullen ideological recalcitrance. Frankly, Kathy's "hard ideological shell" commits her to a fairly dodgy pedagogic relationship with the vast mass of the workers. So, good luck with that as a practice and a "principle". Personally, I think it is unnecessary. And It seems to me that religious beliefs are most likely to fade away in the conditions engendered by a socialist society and not prior to that achievement. However, lacking a crystal ball, this remains an opinion belonging to best guess territory. Be that, as it may, making the abolition of religious beliefs a necessary condition for possessing that ill defined beastly "class consciousness" is inviting the actually existing working class to tell you to piss off.

**Really good magazine!**

Regards

Mike Young

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### **A Reply to Kathy Summerson, Lib Com 14 By Robin Cox**

Sigh. Well I guess it's too much to just overlook Kathy Summerson's (*what makes me think this is not his real name?*) lightweight, if not light-hearted, highly personal attack on me in Lib Com 14. A critical threshold in mischievous misrepresentation and carping criticism was passed which compels me to answer this derisory drivel with the contempt it deserves. Here's one of several examples: apparently, I left the SPGB some years ago in a pique after my "hare-brained scheme to set up a SPGB-supporters' club for bible-bashers was shot down in flames". Really, Ms Summerson? I've heard of poetic licence but this is frankly ridiculous! Not to say, pathetic.

What is so galling about the whole piece is its point blank refusal to deal, head-on with what I had to say, with reasoned arguments, presented honestly and straightforwardly. That I can respect but not this. What has become of the SPGB's fine, and indeed often well deserved, reputation for flooring its opponents with impeccable logic and undeniable facts? In this instance, at any rate, it seems to have degenerated into a series of mean-spirited, vitriolic and inconsequential thought farts. What we are treated to is a less-than-accomplished performance by someone who, it would seem, wants to self-consciously present herself/himself as some kind of entertaining wordsmith with a handy line in over-the-top, put-down ad hominines. Its all froth and no substance. It reminds me of one of those irritating little breed of dogs that constantly yap around your heels on the slightest pretext. You just want to put the boot in. Seriously.

The one and only serious attempt at theoretical justification, I suppose, occurs following Summerson's assertion that "The idea that the SPGB is not growing due to its opposition to religion is sheer nonsense". Apparently this is because the Anarchist Federation which similarly requires potential members to disavow religious beliefs is the "fastest growing organisation in the "Anti-State, Non-Market Sector". There are other points that Summerson makes which I shall not deal with here - for example, s/he has evidently totally misunderstood my point about "*resolution creep*" and that this is not an argument against lively theoretical debate at all (on the contrary!) - but let that pass.

Well, lets look at this claim about the SPGB's policy on religion, shall we? There are two big problems with this claim. The first is that, although the AF has a similar policy and is growing, this doesn't really mean a lot in terms of the overall argument. How big is the AF anyway and how fast is it growing? More to the point,

even if it is growing what is to say it would not grow considerably faster if it were to drop this restrictive condition on membership?

I looked at the link that Kathy Summerson provided <http://libcom.org/forums/anarchist-federation/questioning-af-aims-principles-02042009> and followed the discussion there on the AF's policy of refusing religious applicants. What is remarkable is just how similar the AF is to the SPGB. The same predictable justifications in support of this policy are trotted out: We are a "materialist" organisation and, since materialism is opposed to religion, we cannot admit religious people. Here we have precisely the same fundamental confusion over what "materialism" should mean in this context. It is historical materialism, not metaphysical materialism, that should matter. What we are concerned with is changing the course of history, creating a new kind of society by engaging with those material factors that will bring about this goal. Above all, class. We are not some kind of philosophical debating society concerned with spinning out some totalistic metaphysical slant on The Meaning of Life. That is just navel gazing, a distraction from the practical task of organising for socialism.

It is the complete absence of any kind of reasonable pragmatic approach to the question of religion that, I'm sorry to say, characterises the AF's outlook as it does the SPGB's. Ironically the dogmatic requirement that members should be atheists itself attests to a kind of religious fundamentalism. In the final analysis, all that should really matter is that members should want socialism, grasp what is meant by that term and understand what is entailed in terms of how we go about achieving that goal. If you as an individual want to persuade others to an atheist position, that's perfectly fine; I am just saying that this is not what a revolutionary socialist political organisation should be about.

I defy anyone to demonstrate that one cannot possibly be a socialist and simultaneously hold religious convictions. Indeed, some of the SPGB's most active supporters have been religious-minded. The more thoughtful members of the SPGB will readily acknowledge this but that egregious rump of narrow-minded traditionalists among which we must presumably now count our hitherto unknown, Ms Summerson, will prefer instead to avert their eyes from this inconvenient truth. It is dogmatically assumed that to hold religious views somehow puts one at risk of being fatally drawn away from socialist principles. In that regard, I have repeatedly put forward the argument which, to date, remains unanswered, that, if this were the case, if it was true that, were the SPGB to admit religious individuals, you would soon enough find these individuals espousing all sorts of crackpot political ideas clearly at odds with the party case and thus coming to threaten the revolutionary socialist nature of the SPGB itself. Well then, there is very simple way of dealing with, and putting a stop to this. If, for example, they started advocating nationalism or strong leadership and persisted in advocating such things then what you simply do is expel them. End of problem. You expel them not because they happen to be religious but because of what they are actually advocating which is clearly incompatible with socialism and the democratic method of achieving it. The point being that religion, at least as a set of metaphysical propositions - such as belief in an afterlife or god(s) - is no obstacle to socialism at all. Not in the slightest.

Quite simply, religion, as such, simply does not have any bearing on the matter. After all, its quite possible for an atheist to advocate nationalism and strong leadership too. So it is totally illogical to attribute these things to religion as such. It is perfectly true that the social outlook of, or the social policies advocated by, certain organised religions are not conducive to socialist thinking, This I have



never denied. Indeed, that is precisely what makes Summerson's suggestion that I wanted to set up a SPGB-supporters' club for bible-bashers so laughably ridiculous. Christian fundamentalists of this sort are probably the last kind of religious people that I imagine would be drawn to a socialist perspective but I can easily imagine others, for instance, many Quakers or Methodists becoming sympathetic. This is how I think some socialists went seriously astray. They observed the way established churches behaved and noted, quite correctly, how these upheld the status quo but then they generalised from this and came to the quite invalid conclusion that religion as such must therefore be antithetical to socialism. In other words, they failed to differentiate between the social content of religion and its metaphysical precepts. The social content of a particular religion does not stem from these metaphysical precepts but rather from its material and institutional relation to, and engagement with, a given society. Ironically, then, this totalistic rejection of religion and the requirement that applicants to the SPGB/AF should disavow completely all religious ideas is actually founded upon an idealist argument! It is assumed that the reactionary social practices and policies of certain religions derive not from their connection with surrounding society but from a set of metaphysical claims about the nature of existence. Otherwise the whole SPGB argument against religion would make no sense. But this is idealism. It is the belief that the idea of a god causes you to espouse certain social reactionary views about society.

Here we touch on another weakness in the SPGB/AF's policy on religion. It makes no distinction at all between one kind of religion and another - not even the very obvious distinction that can be made between personal and organised religions. It is, as I said, a metaphysical objection to religion that is being put forward, not one grounded in historical materialism. A historical materialist approach would acknowledge that there nothing

fundamentally incompatible about holding religious ideas as such and wanting to radically change society. Look at Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers for example. This utterly simplistic crude assumption that underlies the SPGB/AF's policy on religion - that being religious somehow prevents one from looking at things in an objective, scientific and rational fashion - is sheer nonsense. Many scientists are practising religionists. Their religion simply does not get in the way of their science. Nor is there any a priori reason why it should. On the other hand, embracing an atheist outlook is no guarantee at all that one will become a socialist. On the contrary there is a strong prima facie argument for saying that atheist ideas, and atheists themselves, have played an important role in the development of capitalist ideology. Does that mean the SPGB/AF should therefore refuse to accept atheists within their ranks? Of course not. That would be as absurd as their current policy on refusing religious applicants.

The point is you simply cannot generalise about religion in this way and that what we really should be guided by in our attitude to religion is not the metaphysics of a religion but its concrete social outlook. We are trying to bring about a fundamental change in the basis of society, after all, not convert the world to atheism (anyone who thinks there will no longer be religion in a socialist society is almost certainly deluded). By denying religious individuals a practical role in bringing about this change and by identifying the socialist project with atheism you are, in effect, pushing them away from socialism into the thankful embrace of capitalism. That is what is so insane - bordering on the criminal, frankly - about this policy on religion. You are actually assisting capitalism by default if not by design. Not only that, if I am correct in supposing that it is the social policies of specific religions that is the real problem, not their metaphysical assumptions, then what this means is that by not discriminating between religions in

terms of their social outlook you have no means, no leverage, by which to encourage or induce individuals to forsake those more conspicuously reactionary religions for more enlightened ones - or, indeed, to move away from organised religion altogether, to some perfectly innocuous personal religion that increasing numbers of people seem to favour these days. In short, instead of promoting social change and influencing the development of ideas in a positive way you are forestalling and impeding these things. You are in effect helping to shore up the status quo.

None of these arguments were touched upon by Summerson. All we get instead is the crass assertion that it is nonsense to suggest that the SPGB's lack of growth - actually we are really talking about a quite significant decline - has anything to do with its prohibition on religious applicants because the AF too has such a prohibition and yet is probably the *"fastest growing organisation in the Anti-State, Non-Market Sector"*. If we are to be persuaded by that sort of flimsy evidence then presumably that means we ought to be equally persuaded by the AF's rejection of parliamentary electoralism as against the SPGB's support of it. After all, who is to say that the AF is not growing because of its anti electoralism rather than its attitude to religion? Indeed it may well be growing in spite of, rather than because of, its attitude to religion. Summerson has evidently so tied herself/himself up in knots on this point and has not been able to spot this obvious problem.

In any case, as I say, the fact that the AF may be growing is no reason for saying its policy on prohibiting religious applicants is desirable or justified. It does not touch on the counter claim that it might very well grow much faster were it not to have such a policy in the first place. In fact, if Summerson actually followed the debate on the link provided s/he would have noticed that quite a few people participating were opposed to this policy. Some of the arguments I've mentioned

here were mentioned there as well. Presumably, some of those making these arguments would be in the AF were it not for that policy. It's the same with the SPGB. We know some people who apply to join are rejected because they hold religious views. What we do not know is the number of individuals - sympathetic but religiously inclined, who, on discovering the SPGB's hard-line approach to religious applicants simply do not bother to apply and, indeed, on the contrary, drift away out of the orbit of the SPGB altogether. I wouldn't mind betting that over the years this figure has probably amounted to many thousands. The SPGB has lost out on the opportunity to become a much more significant social force than it is because of its blind adherence to what is frankly a rather stupid dogma. That is such a pity because in so many ways the SPGB stands head and shoulders above virtually any other organisation I can think of in terms of its commitment to revolutionary socialism and the force and strength of its arguments.

However, it's not just because of its policy on religion that the SPGB is not growing and this is the second big problem with Summerson's argument. S/he asserts that the idea that the SPGB is not growing due to its opposition to religion is sheer nonsense. But that is not what I claim! What I claim is that this opposition to religion is only one of several reasons why it is not growing. This shows a lack of due care and attention to what is actually being said. Another reason why the SPGB is not growing or finds it difficult to grow is what I call the "small party syndrome". I touched on this in the piece that Summerson criticises but has obviously overlooked. This is about the dynamics of organisation building. It is the very fact that an organisation is small that actually impedes its growth and makes for a degree of inertia. The smallness of an organisation means that outsiders don't see it as being credible or worth committing themselves to whereas the ideas it espouses should really stand or

fall on their own, independently of the level of support they attract. In one sense this is a rational response - it is based on a considered and calculated concern with the opportunity costs of one's actions - but in another, it is wholly irrational.

This too is a massively important reason why the SPGB is not growing - and there are others besides. But it does point to the need for the SPGB to maximise its effectiveness at this stage so as to more rapidly reach that critical threshold when the "small party syndrome" starts to weaken in its effect and where a momentum of growth will start to kick in. Amongst other things, scrapping the SPGB's irrational policy on religion will certainly expedite efforts to reach that critical threshold of support, much sooner rather than later.

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### **How strict should requirements be for membership in a socialist organization?**

#### **Political biography**

I joined the SPGB in Muswell Hill (London) in the mid-1960s, when I was 16. I was among those expelled in the early 1970s who formed Social Revolution (SR). Doubts about socialist politics led me to refocus on personal and academic matters (I went into Soviet Studies), though in the early 1980s I was active in the nuclear disarmament movement (CND, END). In 1989 I moved with my family to the US to take up a faculty position at Brown University, Providence, RI. In recent years I have worked mainly as a formally self-employed translator.

Re-radicalised by exposure to American reality, I happened to hear from Adam Buick of the SPGB and decided to rejoin the WSM via the World Socialist Party of the US. I contribute to SPGB and WSPUS literature under my old pen name of Stefan. I belong to the WSM as a channel through which I can do useful work for socialism. My first concern, however, is

the growth and effectiveness of the anti-state non-market sector as a whole.

### **Background**

The WSM is unusual in setting strict requirements for membership. If you want to join, you have to sign an application form signifying acceptance of the Object and Declaration of Principles (DoP) and pass a test to demonstrate that you understand and agree with the positions of the movement.

The SPGB normally examines an applicant orally at a branch meeting. I recall enjoying the experience, but if the applicant feels nervous the branch may appoint a small panel to examine him or her instead. Applicants who don't live near a branch complete a written questionnaire (12 questions) administered by the Membership Applications Department of the Executive Committee.

The WSPUS, which is currently very small and dispersed, includes a questionnaire with the membership application and follows up with an interview by conference call. The applicant is asked to write 2—3 paragraphs in answer to each of 8 questions. If answers are too laconic, an attempt is made to "draw the applicant out" by telephone or e-mail. The process is controlled by the National Administrative Committee.

In view of the emphasis given to the Object and DoP, one might expect that agreement with them would be both necessary and sufficient for membership. In fact, the applicant is required to accept "basic political positions not directly covered in the Principles" (<http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/june04/splinters.html>). Religion must be rejected and the social system of the former USSR defined as state capitalism, though there is nothing in the DoP on either of these matters. As Robin Cox argues in LC 12-13, resolutions passed at SPGB conferences on all sorts of issues tend to become established as elements of the "party line".

Conversely, nowadays not all points in the DoP are treated as obligatory. A pacifist stance is accepted even though Clause 6 clearly implies that a socialist majority could use force if necessary. In the first issue of Frank Girard's *Discussion Bulletin*, Laurens Otter pointed out that Clause 6 also clearly implies that government will continue to exist during the period when socialism is being established. Nevertheless, the idea of a "transitional" government has become highly controversial within the WSM, so that an applicant may even be denied admission for advocating this idea (<http://libertariansocialism.4t.com/db/db010703.htm>).

### **The argument for relaxing requirements**

The rationale for *some* kind of test for applicants is a cogent one. The WSM wishes to maintain both internal democracy and its socialist identity. A vanguardist organization can afford to let anyone join because ordinary members have no real say. Joining the inner circle that makes key decisions is much more difficult. In a WSM companion party all members have equal rights, so if non-socialists join it will gradually cease to be socialist. But this does not tell us how strict the test should be. It could be argued that the stricter the test the more reliably the movement's socialist identity will be protected. But a high price is paid. The scope for debate among socialists is unnecessarily restricted and the growth of the movement is impeded.

A demanding test is a barrier especially to the less highly educated. The WSPUS has lately received a string of queries from young workers attracted by our website. But what happens? A young man contacts us, full of enthusiasm to join in the work for socialism. Judging by the spelling and grammar, his educational level is fairly low. He gets a form asking him for lengthy answers to questions he almost certainly doesn't fully understand. Not all that surprisingly, we never heard from

him again.

Our loss of potential members isn't my sole concern. How has the encounter with us affected the emotional, intellectual and political development of those who fail our test? How has it affected their confidence in their own abilities, almost certainly already undermined by their schooling? Not for the better, surely. Are they still interested in socialism (however vaguely understood) or have we discouraged them for good? A partial solution might be to formalise the status of "sympathiser." Anyone who contacts us and expresses an interest in joining would immediately be enrolled as a sympathiser, invited to help distribute our literature, and generally made to feel welcome. The question of membership would be deferred until sufficient mutual understanding had developed.

### **Minimum requirements**

A discussion paper circulated by Andy Cox of the SW Region Branch of the SPGB suggests that requirements for membership in a socialist organization be limited to three "core propositions". I agree that two of these propositions are essential – the applicant must understand what socialism means and accept that socialism has to be established democratically by a conscious majority. More thought needs to be given to Andy's third proposition: "We must consciously forego any involvement in reformist activity as this will only sap our energies and resources." Indeed, deep involvement in movements working for goals that fall short of socialism (however worthy of support) can very easily displace work to develop and spread socialist ideas. There is ample historical evidence that this is a very real danger. It happened to SR as well. However, let us not rule out all hope of finding a productive and balanced approach to combining socialist with reform activity. The concern about "sapping energies and resources" can be addressed in a more positive spirit in a proposition like: "The main task of a

socialist organization is to develop and spread socialist ideas.”

Exactly how a socialist majority will establish socialism (workers councils, parliament, socialist unions, etc.) can be left open, at least for the time being. I see no reason why socialists with different views in this area should not work together. Nor do I see why socialists with different attitudes toward Marxian theory should not work together. What difference does it make in practice whether a socialist fully understands and accepts Marxian economics or has serious reservations about the materialist conception of history? Does it matter that socialists place varying amounts of emphasis on the class struggle? In the past the SPGB was wracked by bitter controversy when Tony Turner advanced the view that we should advocate socialism as being in the interest of all humanity, rather than as being in the interest of the working class. Since then the WSM has grown more tolerant in this regard and tends to view the “class approach” and “human approach” as equally acceptable.

Another question on which socialists need not take a uniform view is the nature of the Soviet-type economy – except for ruling out the view that it was socialist, as this indicates a failure to understand the meaning of socialism. I entered Soviet Studies partly to study this question in depth. I concluded that the Soviet-type command economy was not capitalism as analyzed by Marx. There may still be good reasons to call it a variety of capitalism, but if we do we must acknowledge that we are expanding the concept of capitalism beyond the classical Marxian categories.

### **Remarks on religion**

As Robin Cox says, one area where the WSM is unnecessarily intolerant is religion. In fact, the anti-religious theme seems more salient than it was when I was an SPGBer in the 1960s. Now every

issue of *The Socialist Standard* contains anti-religious articles, which often strike a tone of ridicule that believers must find offensive. In *Lenin As Philosopher*, the council communist Anton Pannekoek contrasts the directly anti-religious propaganda of middle-class materialists, among whom he counts Lenin, with historical materialism, which “does not fight religion directly” but undermines it by explaining it as a social phenomenon (<http://libcom.org/library/lenin-as-philosopher-pannekoek>). On this issue, the WSM and Lenin belong to the same non-Marxian tradition, though even Lenin advised against offending the feelings of believers.

How compatible are various religious beliefs with being a socialist? I see no problem at all with vague ideas of communing with a cosmic spirit. At the other extreme, beliefs that sanctify social inequality (e.g., the Hindu caste system) are clearly anti-socialist. In an article in the January 2008 *Standard*, I argued that belief in gods and goddesses that demand worship, obedience and sacrifice tends to foster authoritarian personalities. Yet it is logically possible to combine submission to God with the idea that humans are “equal before God.” To be a “Christian socialist”, say, is not self-contradictory. Indiscriminate opposition to religion is especially constricting in the United States, where only 10-15% of the population are non-believers, compared to 40% in some European countries. It is of interest that the WSPUS has decided to admit Wiccans to membership.

### **Changing the WSM**

Can the WSM evolve into a more tolerant and effective socialist movement? In principle, why not? And it has evolved – in most respects in the right direction. However, resistance to change is such that attempts to recast the movement’s philosophy in a radical way have always failed, producing only bitter dissension, disillusionment and short-lived splinter groups. This is an outcome to be avoided

if at all possible.

*So would it not be wiser to seek gradual cumulative changes in the WSM? Instead of replacing the DoP by minimum requirements for membership, I would suggest:*

**-- putting forward a resolution that agreement with the Object and DoP is a necessary and sufficient condition of membership. This would automatically make other unrelated political positions optional.**

**-- pressing for explicit and open recognition that other socialist organizations can and do exist outside the WSM, differing with the WSM (and one another) on various matters but sharing the same socialist goal. This means recognising that the WSM forms part of the anti-state non-market sector. It means that the WSM could usefully cooperate with other parts of that sector, at least in certain areas. Quite a few members of the WSM already understand this very well.**

*-- proposing the following changes in the DoP (the Object remaining unchanged):*

**\* replace "the SPGB" (or other companion party) by "the World Socialist Movement"**

**\* expand Clause 5 to read: "That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself, consciously and democratically organized for this purpose."**

**\* delete Clauses 6, 7 and 8. This eliminates the hostility clause and allows for a range of acceptable positions on the use of parliament.**

### **Toward a socialist pluralism**

To this it may be objected that time is short. Rapid growth and development of the socialist movement are crucial to human survival. However, I do not equate development of the WSM with development of the socialist movement in the broader sense of the anti-state non-market sector. I hope that socialists who for one reason or another are unable or unwilling to work for socialism within the WSM will organize themselves to work for socialism outside the WSM. Perhaps it would be useful to establish a World Socialist Association for this purpose. Religious socialists could either join such an association or create their own organizations (Christian World Socialists, say).

The socialist movement has much to gain from the emergence of a socialist pluralism in which a range of socialist organizations appeal to different target audiences in different ways and explore alternative approaches to the common task, assisting one another where feasible. As for those who think that such pluralism is superfluous because they already know how socialist consciousness arises and socialists who take a different approach are wasting their efforts, I respectfully ask them to consider: Would humanity be in the situation it faces today if *any* of the existing approaches were adequate?

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### **Stefan**

Want to write something for a future issue either by responding to something in this issue or a previous one or something on a fresh subject or would you like to make a financial contribution to keep The Libertarian Communist going? See page 2 for contact details and please note the change of email address the old one is now void

**Contact Details for Groups in Anti State, Non Market Sector.**

**worldsocialistmovement/SPGB:**

worldsocialism.org/spgb: Postal address:  
52 Clapham High Street London SW4  
7UN.

Email [spgb@worldsocialim.org](mailto:spgb@worldsocialim.org)

**Promotional Material for the World Socialist Movement**

**Tee-shirts Blue** with a polar bear and "If You Were a Polar Bear, You'd be a Socialist, **Yellow**, with blue and green globe and "The World is a Common Treasury for All". **Sizes S, M, L, XL, XXL State size when ordering. £7.00 Plus postage and packaging. (P&P).**

**Mugs:** Standard size, red and white. On the front, "Only Sheep Need Leaders" and on the reverse side, "Famine? War? Pollution? Capitalism is the Problem, World Socialism is the Solution" **£5 Plus P&P.**

**Pens: blue and white** with blue ink; "Only Sheep Need Leaders" and a sheep. **Red and white** with blue ink with "Workers of the World Unite" **Black** with black ink, "Only Sheep Need Leaders" and a sheep. **50p each Plus P&P.**

**Baseball Caps:** Navy blue with embroidered "World Socialist Movement". **£7 each plus P&P.**

**Balloons:** different colours with "World Socialist Movement. **15p each plus P&P.**

All items carry the WSM website address. Cheques and Postal Orders made payable to SPGB SW Regional Branch. Also available, a SPGB enamelled badge, "The World for the Workers. £10.

For further details on all items contact Veronica at [veronica.clanchy@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:veronica.clanchy@hotmail.co.uk) or phone 01202 569826

**Now available issue 22 of the World Socialist Review: Publication of World Socialist Party US.** "Socialists take a look at Obama" "Is Obama a socialist? He does not regard himself as one. Neither do we. This issue of World Socialist Review examines Obama's outlook and life story, his packaging as a politician, and his policy in such areas as healthcare, the economy and the environment. It also places Obama in the context of world capitalism and the American political system."

**World Socialist Party US (WSPUS) website [wspus.org](http://wspus.org) Postal address: World Socialist Party, Box 440247, Boston, MA 02144.**

**A couple of places to purchase Literature and help support the ASNM sector.**

**"there is an Alternative!"**

**STIMULANTS:** A collection of material highlighting an opposition to the Mantra that "There Is No Alternative" to how we live today. Journals, Pamphlets, Books, DVDs and Cds etc available [www.radicalbooks.co.uk](http://www.radicalbooks.co.uk)

Libertarian Communist Literature has a selection of pamphlets and journals related to the anti state, non Market sector. Journals Include: **Black flag, Aufheben, Socialist Standard, Organise** and others. We have a variety of pamphlets and a few books.

If you are interested please contact the postal or email address on Page 2 with your details so we can send a full list of the literature we have in stock including their prices. This list is also included in our blog which can be found at <http://lib-com.blogspot.com/> (easier to contact via a Google search) This also includes all issues of The Libertarian Communist which can also be found at [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com)

**World Libertarian Socialist Network**

An excellent resource with a similar aim to this bulletin to bring groups in the ASNM sector together. Website:  
www.libertyandsocialism.org

**World In Common:**

[www.worldincommon.org](http://www.worldincommon.org)

Email

[worldincommon@yahoogroups.com](mailto:worldincommon@yahoogroups.com)

[www.Libcom.org](http://www.Libcom.org);

**Red and Black Notes**

You can obtain some RBN items from libcom.org as listed above. If you want to know more than read issue 6 Of The Libertarian Communist and the article by Neil Fettes pp.4-7

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**Red Anarchist Action Network (RAAN)**

[www.redanarchist.org](http://www.redanarchist.org)

**Radical History Network of North London.**

For details contact Alan Woodward on 020 8292 8862 or RaHN at

alan@petew.org.uk

Email: [radicalhistorynetwork@googlemail.com](mailto:radicalhistorynetwork@googlemail.com)

This group have published a series of articles to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spanish Revolution this can be found at <http://radicalhistorynetwork.blogspot.com/>

**Northern Anarchist Network (NAN)**

If you want further information about this group contact: **Brian Bamford, 46 Kingsland Road, Rochdale, Lancs O11 3HQ or email [northernvoices@hotmail.com](mailto:northernvoices@hotmail.com)**

**Anarchist Federation:**

[www.afed.org.uk](http://www.afed.org.uk): Postal Address **BM Arnafed, London WC1N 3XX. Email [info@afed.org.uk](mailto:info@afed.org.uk)**

**The Commune**

**For workers' self management and communism from below.**

Website: [thecommuene.co.uk](http://thecommuene.co.uk)

Postal address: The Commune, Freedom book shop, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX

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The following three groups are industrial unions. They offer an anti bureaucratic alternative to trade unions. You can join either as an individual or if there is support for organising at your workplace.

**Solidarity Federation.**

[www.solfed.org.uk](http://www.solfed.org.uk) or **PO Box 29, South West P D.O Manchester M15 5HW** Email: [solfed@solfed.org.uk](mailto:solfed@solfed.org.uk)

**Industrial Workers of the World:**

**[www.iww.org](http://www.iww.org) Or P/O Box 7593, Glasgow, G42 2EX** Email:

[rocsec@iww.org.uk](mailto:rocsec@iww.org.uk).

**Workers International Industrial Union.**

[www.wiiu.org](http://www.wiiu.org) or

[www.deleonism.org/wiiu.html](http://www.deleonism.org/wiiu.html) or see the article on Industrial Unionism in issue 9

**Wrekin Stop War**

This can be found at

[www.wrekinstopwar.org](http://www.wrekinstopwar.org) or contact

**Duncan Ball, 23 Sunderland Drive, Leegomery**

**Salop, TF1 6XX** email:

[Duncan.ball@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:Duncan.ball@blueyonder.co.uk).

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Andy Cox has developed a website to look specifically at how socialism might be developed:

<http://socialistmatters.webs.com/>.

See also: Institute for Anarchist Studies, the similar but separate, Anarchist Studies Journal and Anarchy Archives. See also the Socialist Labour Party of America ([www.slp.org](http://www.slp.org)). Not to be confused with the Scargill mob and the Marxist Internet Archive Library.