

STUDENT ANARCHIST ACTIVISM - THE DRAGON REAWAKENS

by Red Bingham - co-founder of the Monash Anarchists



How it Began

The Monash Anarchist Society was created in 1973. However, student anarchist activism was already well established on and off campus throughout Australia by the mid 1960's. The growth of student anarchism paralleled that of that of the anti-war, environmental and feminist groups with the anti-Vietnam War movement being the major catalyst for the development of Australian libertarian movements. I was active in the anti - Vietnam war movement when I was still in secondary school and it was through this movement that I defined and refined my political identity. My mother was in an organisation called "Save our Sons" which was a women's group opposed to conscription and to war. Most of the members of S.O.S. were from Marxist or ALP backgrounds. Some of their meetings were held at our house in middle-class Burwood and their ideas (which included support for grass-roots activism and militant unionism) had a profound effect on me. I was also strongly affected by George Orwell, whose "1984" I first read when I was 14. Another important influence, were older brothers and sisters of my friends who were at uni. and in organisations like the Monash Labor Club, which I was later to join in the early 1970's.

It was all happening in the late 60's when I was in my final years of High School..... in 1968 was the Tet Offensive in Vietnam - when the West first began to seriously doubt that The U.S. was as invincible as its propaganda made it out to be. It was also the time of youth revolt, long hair, the Beatles, Janis Joplin and Jimmy Hendrix, marihuana and LSD. In Paris anarchist students were taking over the Sorbonne and daubing walls with slogans like, "The ground you are standing on is a liberated zone - Defend it!" That word "Liberate" would emerge and re-emerge for the next decade in countless contexts I liked the word. It was the call of the wild and I wanted to be part of the process.

By 1970 I was going to a house in Palmerston St Carlton where members of S.D.S. (Students for a Democratic Society) lived and organised. This was an organisation of tertiary student activists who generously shared their resources with secondary students. I was in my final year of high school and I was editing an underground anti-war newspaper called "The Angel of Death". I distributed the first copy just before the First Moratorium in May 1970 when over 100,000 people marched in opposition to the Vietnam War. This may well have been the high-water mark of mass opposition to the State- although there are many around who now pooh-poo the significance of that Moratorium, it did lead to significant domestic change. For the first time, thousands of people became aware that there were communities involved in organised opposition to the government of the day and that here was potential energy to be directed. The problem was that a large number of the groups involved wanted to direct the energy into building up the ALP or the Heinz 57 varieties of Marxist parties rather than transforming society. At the time, however, I was an idealistic 17 year-old who thought that we could all just be friends that we were all working for a better world.

In 1971 I enrolled in the Arts Faculty at Monash and it was there that I was exposed to the full thrust of student radicalism - I became a draft resister and participated in the anti - Springbok demonstration where police violently attempted to suppress a huge anti-apartheid demonstration. They couldn't, but they did make mass arrests of such an arbitrary and brutal nature that I finally discarded my non-violent moderation. I then realised the inevitability of conflict when people are effecting genuine political change..... if we take on the State, we have to realise that the bastards will use whatever it takes to stop us - whether it be lies, violence or even homicide. For the Liberal Party, the Springbok demonstrations were yet another reminder that their game was about played out. Despite the fact that the economy was chugging along nicely (only 2% unemployment), they were unpopular. A real feeling of the need to reform society resulted in the ousting of the Liberals in December, 1972 (after 23 years in office) and the election of the ALP. Gough Whitlam immediately on assuming power, announced an end to conscription and the withdrawal of all Australian troops from Vietnam.

Student anarchism surged ahead in the next few years. The Marxist groups had done well in terms of recruiting activists in the 60's. The Maoists in particular, had been extremely active in organising against the war and the Springboks. They found it hard to adjust to the "peace". Not that there was peace exactly - there were still lots of issues but now various issues were coming to the fore - aboriginal rights, uranium mining, abortion, gay liberation, etc. and the Marxist groups were slow to take a stance on them - or took a reactionary stance. More importantly, people were sick of the authoritarian rhetoric of Marxists and the opportunist drivel of many ALP hacks. Personal liberation was seen to be as important as political liberation. After several years of flirting with various leftist groups on campus, I realised that I was an anarchist. Visiting the "Free Store" in Collingwood was the trigger. It was there that I met Gavin Murray and PJO (a notorious Collingwood street poet). Discussions with them and just looking at how genuine the attempt at setting up that anarchist alternative was, convinced me that I should do something at Monash to put anarchism on the map.

The Formation of the Monash Anarchists

In 1973, I was in the Monash Labor Club which was still controlled by Maoists but there were Communist Party of Australia (CPA) students, left-wing ALP supporters, Trotskyists and a few anarchists in it. It was still a time on campus, when you were expected to have an ideological "label". I was publications officer of "Spark" the Labor club newspaper, but despite my official position, my articles didn't get published. I wasn't "correct line" enough for the Maoist executive. I decided, therefore, to get ten signatures and found the Monash anarchists so that anyone with an interesting and radical point of view could get his or her ideas published. About 20 people came to the inaugural meeting and I published the first edition of "Liberty and Bread" announcing our presence. Stephen Forbes an environmentalist, published a second edition entitled "Liberty and Cake". The Labor Club had had its day and the separate factions formed their own political clubs in response to the growing ideological diversity. Because the anarchists were genuinely committed to human (and species) liberation and opposed to the wasteful and destructive systems of Capitalism and State Capitalism, anarchists found that they were involved in many actions (often in association) with other left-wing groups on campus. Some of these were:

- Demanding a greater say in the running of the university and the Union. At one stage we occupied the University administration building for ten days and held our own open university. We also removed parking signs that the university had erected (of course without consultation) and returned them only when the authorities agreed to consult students.
- Opposition to multinational mining companies. When Gabriel Lafitte, another founding member of the Monash Anarchists, informed Monash students that BHP's steel can recycling scheme was a hoax, I suggested that we dump a whole pile of cans in the City offices of BHP. Of course they had locked the doors when we had got there so we pelted the huge glass walls with steel cans. It made excellent television and what's more, BHP had to start recycling. We also took out a miner's right and started digging up the turf outside the Administration Building in protest at CRA's violation of aboriginal sacred sites and environmental destruction.
- The Anarcho-pantomime horse alliance. Several Monash Anarchists - notably Andrew "Gum" Collins dressed as a pantomime horse ran across the tally board

during the State election crying out "Put a horse in the House". Result - we were escorted out of the building. Another attempt to enliven fundamentally boring elections.

- The Dairy Liberation Front where milk bottles were liberated from the upper-class areas of Toorak and redistributed to working-class areas in Brunswick etc.
- Lots and lots of graffitiiing of offensive signs.
- Lots and lots of demonstrations. We were active with the Latrobe anarchists who had also grown to be a significant force in Latrobe student politics in reviving May 1st marches.
- Participation in the Federation of Australian Anarchists. This organisation lasted only about one and a half years but it suggests what can be achieved if the will is there to do it. We participated in several national conferences with delegates from interstate. It was at the inaugural FAA Conference in Sydney that I first met Joe Toscano, then in the Brisbane SMG (Self Management Group).

1976 - The Split

The sacking of Gough Whitlam by Sir John Kerr (with the help of the CIA) had a critical effect on the entire labour movement - including the anarchists. Four months after the ALP was soundly beaten in the December 1975 election, the Federation of Australian Anarchists held a conference at the Unitarian Peace Church. The Whitlam sacking had traumatised the left. They were halcyon days between 1972 and 1975, where people experimented with all sorts of ideologies, lifestyles and drugs. Reality closed in 1976. There was a price to pay and there were scores to settle within the anarchist movement. Here was a mixture of industrial workers, student activists, student bureaucrats, druggies and others. There was much less tolerance of other ideologies and other lifestyles. Many people wanted change - change in a more serious direction. Several "Sydney Individualists" as they were dubbed at the conference had spray painted "God is dead" type slogans on the walls of the Unitarian Peace Church. The organisers of the conference were furious and people demanded a "Split". A split duly occurred. The two sides (of roughly equal size) to emerge after the split were the "Libertarian Socialists" and the Anarchists. The Libertarian Socialists comprised both genuine anarchists and ALP - leaning bureaucrats who were later to become trade union officials and Labor Party "heavies". Needless to say, the internal contradictions of the "Libertarian Socialists" scuttled the group after a few years. This left the anarchists - who, of course, still comprised all the diverse tendencies and lifestyles that existed before the split. The result was that the FAA as an organisation was seriously weakened and it held its last conference in December 1977 in Brisbane the Anarchist Jamboree, (which was a really successful swan song).

Monash Anarchists on the Defensive

Most of the Latrobe Anarchists had become "Libertarian Socialists". The name may have sounded better but what did it mean? Was it into electoralism? Well Latrobe was in a big way. Latrobe anarchists virtually ran the SRC and the student newspaper, Rabelais. What about the Monash Anarchists? Well, they too had succumbed to electoralism in that the anarchists had formed a loose coalition of groups called "Left Unity" to stop the encroachment of right wing students into the student bureaucracies. Although this meant that the anarchists were a highly visible and respected group within "Left Unity" we were inevitably compromised by it. In hindsight, it would have

been better to have remained an activist body completely outside the student bureaucracies and interfacing more with the "real world". At this time, antagonisms between the Marxist groupings were forcing a split in the Australian Union of Students, (AUS), with the China-liner "Students for Australian Independence" siding with their erstwhile enemies, the Zionists and the Liberal Students, to bring down AUS. The Monash Anarchists were caught up in the defence of AUS which finally went down in about 1979 to be replaced by a more "moderate" National Union of Students (NUS).

After 1975 there was a new breed of student on campus - more self-centred and cynical who spurned the left-wing ideologies in favour of "a good job". However, the Monash Anarchists continued to organise demonstrations, publish articles and generally challenge stupid, conformist and authoritarian ideas. In fact the organisation was one of the last political clubs to survive on campus. It died out in about 1992 - it had survived 19 years. Student apathy has dominated the last twenty years but that may soon change as the class war begins.

The attacks now being made on student unionism (and on unions in general) are the culmination of more than twenty years of New Right attempts to destroy unions. Ironically, the New Right will succeed in reviving unionism (and possibly, for a short time, rescuing from the moribund hands of the bureaucrats). There is plenty to do right now to awaken people to the lies and bullying all around us.

What are the lessons to be learnt?

I think that the main one is, that if you have a vision and can persuade others to share, it you can accomplish a great deal. Don't be distracted by insults from rivals. Moreover, don't be sucked in into compromising your position by "allies". Avoid being caught up in student bureaucracies and organise your own agenda. I am very pleased that the Monash anarchists helped create the Monash Book Co-operative and The Wholefood Restaurant. What we need to do is to create things that will empower people : co-operatives, collectives and communes..... things with an economic foundation. One co-op is worth a hundred demonstrations. A collective that works is worth a thousand sit-ins and occupations. This doesn't mean that political struggle is worthless! Far from it! But we have to consider what will really undermine the foundations of Capitalism and that is - demonstrating in a practical way, how easy it is to organise viable economic units without the need for bosses. For this we don't need so much to protest as to do. (And that's the hard part!)