

Table of Contents

In the Middle 1

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By Brian Ashton

The working class and intellectuals speak different languages, and working class activists are caught between the two. It's time for theory to reconnect with practice, says Brian Ashton

This piece is adapted from something I wrote back in 2004 and is an attempt to get some discussion going around the subject of alienation, in particular the alienation felt by many working class activists like myself. I am someone who, after declaring himself a communist while serving in the British army, cut his political teeth in the car industry struggles of the 1970s.

Like everybody I bring along my history to any debate that I take part in. I am working class and I am also a Marxist, although I have held anarchist positions in the past. I feel that there are two discourses running through me, and it is a struggle to bring them together, and they do need to be brought together. I have one discourse with my mates and another with leftist intellectuals; it has been so for 36 years and the gap between those two groups seems wider today than when I first became active. Why is that? And where does the fault lie, if it lies anywhere? The working class and the intellectuals speak different languages, and we working class activists are in the middle trying to translate for both, a task that gets us down at times.

In the '70s the left groups went to the factory gates and into working class communities to try and make contact with people like me. They tried to start dialogues around the issues that concerned us, or rather, some of them tried, others just came to preach. Some are still preaching, about the party, god and even the wonders of capitalism. (One of my old preachers became a right wing economist while her husband became a speechwriter for Thatcher.)

The interaction between us produced a vocabulary of dissent. We learnt new words and ideas from the 'commies' and they learned about working class life, both inside and outside the factory. Then they went away and produced new theories based on what they had learned. Their erudition impressed us, if not their drinking ability. And some of us started reading the books and pamphlets that became available. The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was good and got passed around, but Marx on Feuerbach didn't catch on. Gradually we became more articulate, more confident, and we started to develop the language that had sprung from our subversive discourse. We became the voices of dissent within the class. In the workplaces we challenged the union and its shop stewards, standing in opposition to the social democrats and communist party members in elections. And sometimes we won.

Organisations like Big Flame and Solidarity opened our eyes to the struggles taking place around the globe and we discovered that Italians, Germans and others spoke the same language as ourselves, even if they spelt the words differently. We learned that Gianni Agnelli shat on Fiat workers from the same great height as Henry Ford dropped on us. The only difference was that one measured it in metres while the other used yards. And like our *compagni* and *kameraden* we learnt to throw the shit back.

There were those, though, who had both the answers and a ready-made language. They didn't want us to develop a new lexicon, they wanted us to swallow theirs and some of us did, hook, line and sinker. Our linguistic development was choked off and we became proletarian parrots in the cages of democratic centralism. Our leaders taught us slogans to squawk at our enemies, who turned out to be our old mates off the night shift who had joined the other revolutionary party. We learned to feel righteous and superior, we became cursed with certainty, and it was many years before we became blessed with doubt.

Some managed to escape from their cages and flew off in search of the truth, not realising they were still cursed with certainty. They discovered Bakunin and Malatesta, Otto Rühle and Herman Gorter, while others with a quiet madness became disciples of Bordiga. The certainty of their new beliefs was, alas, of a greater magnitude than that of their old ones. And marinating in bitterness small groups were formed and met in the back rooms of smoke filled pubs. Texts from the German Workers movement of the '20s were studied with rabbinical zeal, while any potential recruit to the sect was quizzed on his knowledge of the group's manifesto, if he failed the exam he couldn't join. Cast out into the wilderness the poor bugger would be at the mercy of roaming packs of 'counter-revolutionary leftists'. A fate too horrible to describe, dear comrades.

Now, while some of the above is tongue-in-cheek it does have a serious point to make.

The working class activist is both attracted to and repelled by the language of the left. He or she can be intimidated by it and can also fall into the trap of using it to intimidate other workers. Just listen to a worker who is a member of a Trotskyist group argue with another who is new to politics and is inclined towards another group. It is something I've heard many times over the years. And I have to admit that some of the language that I come across in autonomist circles intimidates me. Now I know that many scientific disciplines have their own languages, as is evidenced by a glance through journals in the public library, but the revolutionary movement has a duty, surely, to speak clearly and concisely and to be mindful that its words must, ultimately, resonate on working class ears. We are trying to create a new way of living, trying to develop new ways of relating to each other. We have to live today as we want to live tomorrow, which is a hard thing to do in the present political climate, but it's how we take the struggle forward. We have to create a new language for that struggle, a language that encompasses rather than excludes.

The language that was developing in the '70s through the interaction between the working class and the 'commies' has, I feel, had its development stunted. This has had a negative effect on both. In listening to some of the discourses on the left I get the feeling that I don't exist anymore. Can I only exist as part of the multitude? I feel that the multitude hides more than it reveals. The concept of the mass worker came under criticism because it privileged a particular composition within the class; the struggles of women and social groups on the periphery were given less respect than they deserved, a hierarchy of struggles developed. Today I feel that there is still a hierarchy in existence, one constructed, as usual, by middle class left wing academics (The new proletarians). The class that makes things, is it redundant now? Is its significance only of historical interest these days? If your answer to those two questions is yes, then who the fuck is making all the commodities that crowd the shelves, who transports them, who stacks them on those shelves? The struggles of workers seem to be lower down the scale than the struggles of academia.

Towards the end of the '70s I started to take a close interest in political developments in Italy. I started to read the works of Sergio Bologna, Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Toni Negri; I also came into contact with activists from Bologna, Milan, Padua and Rome. Many of the discourses that were taking place during that period seemed to be taking the language of dissent forward. The links between the workers and the intellectuals seemed stronger, and the activists in the workplaces and communities pushed at the political barriers placed in their way by the historic compromise of the Italian Communist Party. The language of change bubbled on the tongues of many as they learned to express their desires. What a pity it had to be drowned out by the discordant music of state repression. In that bubbling language lie the necessary words to enliven the discourses of the present, it's a pity therefore that the language of many intellectuals is so esoteric these days.

I am of the mass worker generation, although we in Liverpool saw ourselves simply as working class communists. Along with my workmates and comrades I fought in the battles that took place in the factories and working class estates. It could be said that we didn't fight hard enough, that we stopped at the gates of the citadel instead of breaking them down and storming the edifice. It could also be said that the sectarian machinations of the self-appointed political vanguards acted as the lock and chain on those very gates. The bitter prize for that failure was defeat and dispersal. And now, seemingly, the intellectuals expend their energies on the globalisation movement while we look for space in some labour history museum.

You sometimes read in newspapers that older people feel neglected and at a loss when their working days are over. They feel their experiences and skills are going to waste. Well that's how we relics of the old movement sometimes feel. We could travel the globe to places like Seattle and Naples and protest as the thieves sit down to cut up the cake that our class baked, but we feel that there is work to be done nearer to home. Besides, as governments attack the long-term unemployed it becomes difficult to leave your own city, never mind leave the country.

The age of the mass worker may be over,* but we haven't gone away, we haven't dropped dead, we are still here, millions of us. Organisations like the British National Party (BNP) recognise that fact, that's why they are recruiting members and winning council seats in the old mill towns of Lancashire, and gaining some 800,000 votes in the European elections. And to bring this article up to date, winning 13 seats on Dagenham council, and holding union positions in Ford's Dagenham factory.

The BNP has over recent years tried to obtain a foothold in the trade union movement. In the January 2003 members bulletin they said 'if you are not in a trade union, then join'. Members were advised to hide their politics in the workplace, but to tell union members they were in the BNP. The aim in 2003 seemed to be to get their members expelled from unions and then sue for compensation. They used section 174 of the 1992 Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act to this end. One case brought against the train drivers union, ASLEF, went as far as the European Court of Human Rights. The court upheld a British Appeal Court ruling that ASLEF had a right to expel or refuse membership to people it saw as holding views incompatible with its statutes. The Labour government has since changed the 1992 law after pressure from the unions.

The BNP seem to have changed tack since the ruling. They have had two attempts at setting up unions, one, the Train Crew Union, has died a death, the other, Solidarity, is still in existence, as far as I know. BNP sympathisers and voters do work on the railways in the Merseyside area, although they aren't attempting to win positions within union branches, as far as this writer knows. The BNP did attempt to gain a foothold in the Vauxhall car plant in Ellesmere Port, Merseyside, last year, but were seen off by the T&G union. The unions are taking the threat of BNP infiltration seriously, 28 unions are now affiliated to the anti-fascist journal Searchlight through the organisation Trade Union Friends of Searchlight.

The BNP are speaking to a class composition that the 'commies' seem to have written off. They are engaged in a discourse with people who once spoke the language of struggle. Isn't that how the Nazi's got their foothold in the working class communities of Germany? A working class that was politically decomposed or decomposing. Perhaps autonomists think that when a segment of the class is decomposed then it is dead and of no use, when in fact it is the source of new life. It is the provider of the essential nutrients for a successful class struggle - experience, history and imagination.

Theory is not something that can usefully exist on its own, it needs a transfusion of working class struggle to develop. At the moment I feel that the intellectuals are floating away from us like an iceberg that has broken away from the Arctic ice mass. I said earlier that I had started reading Negri in

the late '70s; what I didn't say was that his work had a profound effect on my thinking. It helped me make sense of much that I had been involved in during that time. I worked on the lines at Halewood, Ford's factory on Merseyside, for the first seven years of the decade; the last three were spent doing support work for the Ford Combine rank and file group. Today I feel that Toni and his mate Hardt are on the iceberg floating away into the distance, and it should be remembered that the further the berg moves away from the mass the faster the rate of its decomposition. There has to be a reconnection between theory and practice; if the intellectuals spoke in a language we could all understand it would be a start.

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*A close study of modern supply chains would be a good way to understand class composition in the present period; it certainly wouldn't be an immaterial exercise.