

IF NOT THIS WAY, HOW? IF NOT US, WHO?

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

AFA - IWCA CONTROVERSY POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

Since the Northern Network meeting in Sheffield on September 23 1995 there has been much conjecture mis-information and dis-information in regard to what the relationship between AFA and the IWCA already was, was likely to be, or should become. The validity of the meeting itself has been challenged. Some have claimed that it was not a Northern Network meeting, that it was in fact 'an IWCA meeting' etc. This despite the fact that the meeting was organised within the Northern Network, had 9 branches represented and over forty people in attendance. It was addressed by London AFA on the basis of an internal AFA document and as far as we are aware nobody in attendance was from organisations outside AFA.

The meeting lasted over three hours primarily a question and answer session on the nature of the IWCA, its structure, its proposed method of operation, the reasons behind it, AFA's relationship to it, etc. We asked for specific questions to bring the greatest clarity to the discussion and got them. Indeed much of the discussion was involved not about AFA's problems with the IWCA, but with the potential problems the IWCA itself would certainly face; its relationship with the Left, the state, with working class communities, with hoods, drug dealers etc.

Our understanding was that by the end of the meeting, all questions having been answered to the apparent satisfaction of those asking the questions, the consensus of the meeting was that indeed something of this nature 'had to be done'. (This was at time when the IWCA had not actually come into existence even on paper) There was no moves for a vote, and as far as we were concerned an 'agreement in principle' had been secured. Though there was to be further discussion in the branches etc there were no plans for further meetings until there were further substantial developments. If any further clarification was needed, London AFA promised to supply it, and keep people informed of substantial developments.

While prepared to acknowledge that information from London on developments has not been that remarkable, neither have we in truth received any verbal or written requests for further information. Rumours apart, the only two documents we have got hold of are one from Liverpool AFA which argued that while something was needed "this [IWCA] was not it". There is no further exploration of what it might be. An offer from London AFA to travel to Liverpool to answer any questions and correct other misunderstandings in their document, which was made at the national meeting in Wolverhampton on March 17 has to date, received no response.

Yet the rumours continue. Liverpool delegates at the meeting in Sheffield distinguished themselves by asking no questions whatsoever - but produced a document. Huddersfield AFA who did not attend, have so far produced - two. Nevertheless, as delegates to the IWCA from London AFA we welcome their efforts, as it affords us an opportunity to address in writing many of the same questions which we addressed verbally last September, and also bring people up to pace with all developments since then. The resulting document will prove (a) that there is no hidden agenda, and (b) that the support for the ideas have up to now, either been largely misunderstood or misrepresented. For the purposes of convenience and easy access we will do this in a Question & Answer format. For the purposes of convenience as well the Huddersfield AFA documents will serve as a surrogate for the reservations and criticisms of others yet to put pen to paper. Again for easy access we will try and deal with the points made in a chronological order.

STATEMENT FROM HUDDERSFIELD AFA
(Reply to London AFA Strategy Document) LAFA delegates respond

Hafa: AFA's strength is its broad base and simple anti-fash message.

LaFa: One of AFA's strength's in its formative years was its limited platform; the single issue. However during the Isle of Dogs campaign the single issue exposed AFA's limitations. AFA had nothing to say on the principle business. With the election of a Labour government the Isle of Dogs scenario could be repeated on a national scale and all our good work in the last decade would be undone at a stroke.

Hafa: Some members are involved with various political and social movements and parties/organisations.

LaFa: "[The IWCA] will continue to seek to absorb and unite groups (without demanding they abandon their distinct positions or organisations) and accommodate individuals on the basis of that [anti-Labour] platform." (IWCA founding statement 11/9/95.) The IWCA's basic stance is pro working class/anti-Labour. The other distinguishing strategical feature is that the orientation is toward where the working class live rather than where the working class work. The basic design is to make a difference rather than just propaganda: to change reality instead of adapting to it.

Hafa: If AFA sets up or becomes part of a new political party this would create divisions amongst AFA militants and alienate sections of the dispossessed white working class youth who both ourselves and the fash try to recruit.

LaFa: A political party with all the connotations that suggests is not on the agenda, nor is it being suggested that AFA disband and becomes this organisation ...neither is it being suggested that AFA create this new organisation. This would hardly be possible in any case. What must be recognised is that it will happen with or without AFA. It is absolutely vital that in order to shape it in its own image AFA is in from the very beginning. Consider a situation where a 'socialist' Labour government are attacking the working class, where the right and the BNP etc are attacking Labour, and AFA are attacking the BNP. Working class youth dispossessed or otherwise are not likely to be overly enamoured for long with the working class credentials of any group whose sole activity results in Labour being allowed a free run. To pretend to a UN like neutrality would play into the hands of the fascists; it would be also be false, dishonest and tactically inept. In such a scenario the only hope of victory lies with working class militants not simply out-violencing the far-right but out-radicalising them.

Hafa: We would like there to be a distinct difference between AFA activity and activity around this new political party.

LaFa: "It is as vital as ever that AFA maintains its own structures and agenda." Filling the Vacuum (F T V)

Hafa: Though individuals from this branch are willing to be involved with this new organisation, this branch as a whole is against AFA moving away from its core work and principles.

LaFa: "The ambition of militant anti-fascism is not simply to see the far-right defeated and removed from working class areas: the ultimate solution is to see them replaced there. The BNP's attack on Labour is from the right and is racist ultra conservative and anti-working class. Our primary role is to guarantee that a successful challenge to Labour come only from the Left...purely from an anti-fascist point of view, as the best insurance against a Nazi renaissance, it would be the duty of militants to offer protection to any genuine working class revolt against Labour" (Don't believe the Hype 1994) (This duty does not apply only or exclusively to the IWCA)

HUDDERSFIELD AFA STATEMENT ON THE IWCA Members of London AFA Reply

HABA: Huddersfield AFA believe that our non political stance has been the major factor in our success. AFA is a broad based organisation that has survived ten years while containing a wide variety of view points...the simple reason is that politics have been kept out of the movement.

LABA: While there is a grain of truth in this line of argument it is also naive and totally inaccurate. AFA has always been "political" internally and externally. At only its second national conference in 1986 one group was expelled while two, others walked out in sympathy. In 1987 there was allegations of vote rigging and racism. By 1988 the organisation built mainly on the back of students and Labour party types had virtually collapsed. Proposals that AFA propaganda implement a class message, a democratic structure, etc led to further accusations of racism, Trotskyism etc from the conservative elements resistant to change. When AFA was relaunched in London in September 1989 it was accepted that while "AFA was still organised around the single issue of anti-fascism, AFA propaganda must contain a class message to negate the efforts by fascists to present us as a bunch of middle class outsiders...working in the long term interests of the status quo". The logic of this argument caused ten, (mainly paper or state funded organisations) to withdraw. But two actual organisations, Workers Power and the DAM joined with Red Action on the strength of the class message and the democratic structure. It was on the basis of this highly political, but non-ideological strategy that the national organisation was built. Bending the knee to ideology is the fountain of all sectarianism. It is the absence of ideology which reduces everything to a matter of tactics that has been the real key to AFA's recent harmony. Once ideology (dogma) is allowed to enter a debate, experience shows that goodwill, honesty and common sense go out the window. In the last century ideology has been at least as destructive to working class unity as any other reactionary manifestation. Had AFA not adapted to reality, the AFA of the 80's would have become the ARA of the '90,s. AFA, is now we believe at the crossroads once again.

HABA: If we back the IWCA this will put AFA in dispute with other pro-working class organisations. We do not see how criticising other working class organisations is going to help AFA's cause in fighting fascism.

LABA: This is hardly accurate either. In the past AFA itself has vigorously defended its position and tactics. Not only attacking the entire Trotskyist movement but has also been justifiably and bitterly critical of other anti racist /anti fascist groups; SWP/ANL, Newham Monitoring Project, Searchlight Militant/YRE etc. The reality is that simply existing, puts an organisation in conflict with the competition. You have to ask yourself is AFA stronger or weaker through the proclamation of its position and activities through Fighting Talk, leaflets, media etc. If AFA is justified in proclaiming precisely where we stand, it is unrealistic to expect the IWCA not to do so.

HABA: Our [AFA's] role is to maintain the vacuum, not to sit in judgement and decide who is fit to fill it.

LABA: This statement, not to put too fine a line on it, is complete bollocks. In the first place it is naive to believe that the vacuum can be maintained indefinitely. A new Labour government will change everything. It will be a massive shot in the arm for the far-right. There is also the strong possibility that the Conservative Party itself will split either from the left or the right. The BNP are themselves planning to advantage of the new opportunity. At the moment AFA is still in pole position. Is it seriously being suggested that we must sit still while everybody else is involved in manoeuvres? As working class militants we cannot and will not stand on the sidelines wringing our hands hopelessly. That would allow the middle classes on either right or left once again to set the agenda. It would be criminally negligent to allow our adversaries either on the left or right, yet another attempt to fill the space we have created and maintained in that time. One of the more credible organisations on the left, Militant stood in Tower Hamlets

in May. They came fourth behind the Tories! The last time they stood they got a fifth of the BNP's vote! Is that what we are fighting for? AFA is not a club. Militant anti-fascism is not a hobby, it is a means to an end. The means are physical opposition, the end, working class power in working class areas. The physical side has proved itself effective many times over; the new situation demands that the politics do as well.

Hafa: We accept AFA members should be involved in the wider struggle...we should work towards promoting autonomous working class organisations...we believe that it is necessary for the vacuum to be filled by left wing groups but why the IWCA?

Lafa: In the first place the IWCA is not being designed as a left wing group. It is designed to accommodate the working class proper. Secondly left -groups cannot fill the vacuum. The vacuum is huge and growing. Individually all are too small to do so. The majority in any case you seem to forget, deny there is a vacuum. The entire Trotskyist Left is pro- Labour to one degree or another.

Many of what are left are dominated by out-moded ideologies that cripple their objectivity. They tend to see the world through their eyes only. Through the warp of their own analysis they might see where they think their own short term interests lie, but invariably the long term interests of the working class are rarely considered. Invariably such sects are built on the basis of personal conviction (a belief in their own programme of principles) rather than defining their role in relation to the core working class issues.

Mostly they can only hope to grow at the expense of each other rather than any impact being made either on their adversaries, or from influence with their self declared constituency. And because the working has no real relevance for the Left, the Left has no relevance for the working class. The consequence is that much of what occupies them would properly come under the term of extreme liberalism, rather than Trotskyism, Anarchism or Marxism. The IWCA approach is to be pro-working class first, the programme of principle will follow.

The following is an excerpt from an early IWCA document which illustrates its analysis. (For revolutionary programme, should also be read programme of principles)

"At the heart of the proposal for a politically independent working class lies the concept of working class self determination. So the question of a revolutionary programme does not arise, as this would mean the collective will of the sponsors being imposed in advance. A complete negation. For around the last 50 years the British Left along with their European counter parts have been with varying degrees of enthusiasm attempting to build a party for the working class based on the appeal of its revolutionary programme. When the project ran into difficulty, simple adjustments would be suggested to the programme, resulting in splits and so on. Such were the theoretical concerns it was rare that anything practical was done.

The basic contradiction that generations have ignored is that an authentic revolutionary party cannot be built for the working class. It could be built by them or with them. To attempt to build it for them, is to attempt it without them. That in a nutshell is what the Left have been doing since 1945. The utter futility, and indeed damage caused is there for all that want to see. Throughout Europe only the right and the far-right are accepted as genuinely radical. The Left are regarded as figures of fun by rich and poor alike. A spent force.

In Britain in particular, the evidence of the emergence of a new class; 'nouveau lumpen' should help dispel any complacent notion that time and tide is on our side. Already they control many working class areas. Should this development manifest itself politically, it will undoubtedly be as an ally or tool of reaction. In the short term there is only one way to halt the slide. Rather than continue the activity of building the party, be it Stalinist, Marxist or Anarchist based on a revolutionary programme but without the involvement of the working class we propose instead to, invert the process and build an activist organisation based on the working class but without a revolutionary programme.

Hafa; Why doesn't AFA directly back Class War or DAM both groups which act in working class interests and have just as much claim to our backing as the IWCA?

Lafa: With all due respect to the organisations mentioned, neither have any claim to AFA backing. Neither is involved in AFA nationally. As for working in the interests of the working class, etc, there is no evidence that the working class agree with you. And like any other left group they are handicapped by their own histories, reputations and ideologies. Because of these factors they can never hope to fill the vacuum, and so must also recognise that on their own they will never make a difference. What is true of them is true to one degree or another of the entire British Left. The simple fact is the Left has failed. The IWCA is designed to learn from the mistakes of others. It is non ideological, and there is room for every tendency in it. The only criteria is that in a breakdown of the Left, Labour and its allies are recognised as being on the wrong side of the demarcation line. Nothing could be simpler. It is not for us to say why these groups have not joined only they can explain their reasons.

Hafa: We would also question the validity of some of [IWCA] tactics. One tactic that caught the eye was the standing of candidates in elections, We would be interested to hear the IWCA's reasoning for this tactic.

Lafa: "The question of elections will be settled in a pragmatic fashion with local rather than national issues to the forefront. Then question is then reduced to a matter of tactics rather than strategy. On the plus side putting up a candidate introduce the aims of the organisation to the working class public and provides the organisation with the opportunity to establish a local mandate etc. On the minus side it can be as much an assessment of weakness as strength." Taking part in local elections is not ruled out as a tactic, but neither does it figure as an essential part of the IWCA strategy. (IWCA Doc 2 We have to start somewhere) Because the IWCA will have a regional structure the use of this tactic will be decided locally rather than nationally.

Hafa: Why shouldn't AFA if they do decide to back a parliamentary group back the SLP, a party which obviously has much greater resources, more grassroots support and a much higher profile than the IWCA?

Lafa: Why shouldn't AFA fold into the ANL, an organisation with much greater resources, numbers higher profile etc? The reasons are the same. The SLP like the SWP/ANL is controlled from the top down. Influence within the organisation is impossible to achieve. The SLP is working to the same tried, tested, and failed formula. Their programme is almost identical to Militant's. We have already seen the evidence of its resonance in working class areas. The IWCA on the other hand is actually designed for AFA, largely by AFA. It is non ideological and wide open. It is non sectarian. It will be built from the bottom up. The structure in fact is identical to AFA's. The involvement of AFA members in the IWCA would be a compliment rather than a deviation from vigorous anti-fascist activity

Hafa: The Filling the Vacuum article states that since the BNP are trying to present a respectable face we must follow them and fight them via elections or we will be criminalised.

Lafa: In regard to the BNP and respectability etc, FTV says the direct opposite. "...the BNP declared in April 1994 that here would be no more marches meetings punch ups. A year on this must now be regarded as a serious change of strategy.. something other than an effort to court respectability". ...There is no mention in the document or even inference of elections in relation to AFA and the need to adapt to changing circumstances. It does ask "if the BNP operation is made entirely legal and if AFA physically oppose them then our operation is defacto illegal...what of AFA's reason for being if the BNP decide they don't want to play anymore?" There is a big difference between a concern for respectability and the ability to operate successfully, faced as we are in London these days with summary mass arrest. (London April 27 a recent example) Furthermore that the BNP are on the point of decisively changing strategy is no longer a matter of speculation. In a recent Spearhead Tony Lecomber outlined his favoured option.

"The BNP won (Isle of Dogs) for the very good reason that it employed Euro-nationalist methods on an experimental basis in Tower Hamlets - and the party must take that on board. Even today there are

some in the party that do not understand that concept. It was never a case of going on the street and bel-lowing "Rights for Whites " while striking a nationalist posture; it was one of actively going into the com-munity and talking to people, listening to what they had to say and then articulating their problems, iden-tifying solutions etc ...no one can deny that until Tower Hamlets BNP adopted Euro-Nationalist methods, Nationalism had failed to win a single seat in this country in straight elections. All the successful nation-alist parties in Europe are modern Euro-Nationalist. There is a new way of doing things, a new politics. The new politics mean success, the old failure".

The BNP are changing tack. If they do not do so then somebody else will. Lecombers argument is to switch the arena from the streets to the estates. No longer then a battle for control of the streets, but instead a battle for hearts and minds. The retention of the ABF formula (Anybody but Fash) would leave AFA as hamstrung nationally as London AFA were in the Isle of Dogs in 1993. And of course once you begin to lose the political argument, even by default, you eventually lose the physical argument. Nor should it be forgotten, that the working class is still, theoretically at least, our constituency.

Hafa: This statement that (we must fight elections etc) would suggest that the IWCA is prepared to abandon AFA's "No platform policy" ie that anti-fascists will not share a platform with fascists.

Lafa: To repeat, nowhere in the article does it say that we must fight elections. Secondly the IWCA has no policy on this, or on any other issue-to abandon. Thirdly "No platform" never meant only anti-fas-cists physically sharing a platform. It is a metaphor for a basic denial of free speech to fascists, or those that might wish to debate with them. It is not a liberal concept. In the past AFA has even broken up debates hosted by people like the Labour party.

Hafa: The suggestion is made that Combat 18 is a state controlled counter gang...this may be the case but while C18 are making attacks on innocent people we don't believe that we can stand by on the grounds that it may be an intelligence conspiracy.

Lafa: Once again no such suggestion can be attributed to FTV. What it does say is that "the ideal solution for the state would be for AFA to get locked into a clandestine gang war with C18." As for attack-ing innocent people, etc, this is largely propaganda (C18 have done very little) though with the political turmoil following a Labour government this may change. That being the case AFA would probably be far more concerned in them attacking people who aren't so innocent!

Hafa: To summarise as a group we feel that: 1) We would be interested to hear the IWCA's explanation for saying they have the backing of AFA without any mandate from large sections of the movement.

Lafa: In the first place the IWCA never said it had the "backing of AFA". AFA along with the other groups who had lent the project tacit support was listed as a sponsor on propaganda produced for distri-bution amongst the Left. The only area not counselled for opinion was the Southern Region, simply because it had proved impossible over the previous 2 years to actually get the branches to attend region-al meetings. On the strength of the London AFA FTV document, all other areas were invited to contribute to the debate.

The details were fleshed out during those meetings; with the London AFA members involved, inviting specific questions to the get to the core of peoples reservations. Those meetings, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Birmingham, and of course London gave their verbal consent and conceded to the logic of the arguments put forward. This of course was on the understanding that all AFA regions would be consult-ed again once the first stage of dealing with the Left had been completed. We are now at that stage.

Hafa: The whole area of expanding AFA's politics has not been adequately discussed

Lafa: AFA's politics is not expanding and cannot expand. That is why a new organisation (the IWCA) has been brought into existence .

HAF: IF agreement is reached that AFA should support more explicitly political groups, there is a need to clarify the exact nature of this support. Will we back just one group? Should we back any group that we believe is acting in the best interests of the working class? What position will AFA take in regard to disputes between these groups?

LAFA: From here on in the IWCA will not be interested in 'political support'. No sponsors will be carried on future propaganda. What is now required is practical support. How much support AFA provide in practice will depend on whether or not AFA members accept the analysis put forward on the previous pages.

In 1990 at a public meeting in east London AFA declared that "the success of the far-right is due to the fact that the left are not seen as a credible option. AFA are committed to creating the space in which one [a credible alternative] can develop." Six years on we have created the political space. The IWCA is designed to be that credible alternative. We believe that it has the potential to do so.

We have long recognised that victory will elude us until we develop the ability to deal with BNP, etc, at source. Until we can get to the root political cause, we are condemned merely to deal with the symptoms of social injustice. Fascism is not the cause of the Left's failure it is the consequence of that failure. Political support for Labour leaves the left unable to address itself honestly to the primary cause. The essential contradiction is support for Labour and the working class. The interests of the two are now clearly irreconcilable. The far -right capitalise on this.

So the IWCA is a vehicle for AFA to do likewise. The IWCA is an holistic or overall approach to the same problem. It will for the first time allow us the advantage of political offense as well as defence. If the political space exists the IWCA can exploit it. If the space is already occupied by fash, AFA can contest it. Following a successful AFA campaign to cleanse an area of fascists the IWCA would work to ensure a political alternative exists to fill the void. Establishing a working class alternative is the best, indeed, the only guarantee in the long run that the cycle of constantly being forced to respond to ever increasing fascist initiatives can be reversed.

The mere existence of the IWCA in any area would not immediately end the conflict, but would if successful force the fascists for the first time to respond to a pro-working class agenda. A significant step in the right direction.

In the 1930's anti-fascist fighters came from the ranks of the large revolutionary and progressive organisations. They were communists, anarchists, socialists first, the need for anti-fascism being an admission that they, and the Left in general, were being forced to respond to an agenda other than their own. It may have been regarded only as a temporary set-back then, but the fact is the Left lost the fight and have never really recovered. AFA which in tactics, social base etc is has direct lineage to that militant anti-fascist tradition is significantly, not made up from the main organisations on the Left.

This is because the SWP/Militant are neither representative of the tradition, the revolutionary ambition that inspired it, nor of the working class itself. It is as vital as ever that there is a political organisation representative of the working class that reflects the immediate interests of the class. And while in the past the anti-fascist movement was created by the Left, today the situation is such that, a credible working class Left can be recreated and sustained only by the militant anti-fascist movement. In straight forward terms, AFA is not being asked to support the IWCA; AFA members are being invited to be - in it! The IWCA is an independent organisation, only by being joining it can we hope to influence it.

Throughout Europe the old Left is in meltdown. In France the FN is now the biggest working class party. We can prevent the same happening here, but there is also possibly an opportunity to put the whole process of failure into reverse. At the end of the day it is up to each of us an individuals to decide precisely what we intend to about it. The presumption that we as AFA can carry on as before; can survive and remain effective without this distraction from the real work is simply an illusion. An illusion, that has substance only because up to now, we have been all of us, almost always on the winning side. Where will the unity of purpose, motivation and recruits spring from if AFA begins to sustain a fraction of the defeats and setbacks sustained by the BNP? Tactically AFA has always been a step ahead, now, would be very bad time to start believing our own propaganda.

In regard to who AFA should back etc AFA should back the organisations who are at the sharp end of the class struggle; the organisations who have grasped the nettle and are attempting to make a difference. To argue otherwise would be to renege on the founding statement. That must always remain our remit. If in the long term this proves to be an organisation other than the IWCA so be it. Of course how quickly the IWCA develops will depend to a large degree on the level of AFA's commitment to it. The IWCA which has taken twelve months to put together is specifically designed to threaten no one and include everyone. With time running out, if we in AFA are agreed that the vacuum needs to be filled, then the following are the only questions that remain: If not this way how? If not us who? If not now when?

SUMMARY

(1) Since 1989 AFA has a clearly stated we are not fighting fascism to maintain the status quo - we are pro-working class.

(2) AFA's role was to create the space for progressive organisations to fill the vacuum in working class areas.

(3) No one from 'the Left' has filled the vacuum.

(4) A new organisation must be built

The Present Situation

(5) A Labour election victory will see vastly increased fascist activity particularly in working class areas.

(6) Activists within AFA suggested building the IWCA based on AFA's democratic structure, commitment to real change and class composition.

(7) It is in AFA's direct self interest that a bona fide , working class organisation exists to politically challenge the influence of the far-right particularly amongst our own constituency.

(8) The IWCA is as yet an idea that needs to become a reality and AFA militants should join to ensure its success and direction.

AFA and the IWCA

(9) AFA is an independent organisation and will remain so.

(10) It is not a condition of AFA membership that branches or individuals join the IWCA.

(11) The IWCA is an independent organisation. To have influence on it, AFA members must be in it.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

If we agree that the vacuum must be filled then: (a) If not this way-how? (b) If not us-who? (c) If not now-when?