

# A Day in Stepney

Up The Anti: Reclaim the Future Conference

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*"Some people are just no good at anything.  
Yet successful cooperation often requires the  
participation of the inept."*

Robert N. Johnson  
*Self-Improvement: An essay in Kantian Ethics*

The conference was opened by a person who called for “free PhDs” and referred to working people as “your average Joe and Jane”. The day was punctuated by other idiocies. When a sensible person argued that we should think about how to engage with racist opinion, they were struck down by a fool in full flood who, using the student union rhetoric of “No Platform”, made it clear that there was to be no truck with “racists or Zionists” – I was left wondering how we are ever going to be able to speak to your average ‘Joe and Jane’, quite a few of whom have entirely disreputable views of immigrants, Arabs, and, incidentally, Jews.

A gay guy obliquely raised the issue of homosexuality by ambushing us with a paralyzing minute’s silence for all the victims of Aids. A bloke who was, as it happens, a confident and excellent speaker, decided to share with us how he’d rather sit in a circle than be in an oppressive top-down sort of environment. Surprisingly, the average age of the hundred or so people present was, maybe, 35 or 36 – teenagers and those in their early twenties were noticeable by their absence, along with anybody who was not white or British. The full participation of women was talked of, when it was mentioned at all, by asides made by “paunchy white guys, over forty” at the top table, making dreary comments about “paunchy white guys . . .” Oh, and the “Green Agenda” was not spoken of at all.

This self-isolating nonsense was of a piece with the catering arrangements – no tea or coffee, buns, bagels, pretzels, or even water. Lunch amounted to a 200-meter dash to a freezing queue beside a veggie van, unaccountably

parked on the Mile End Road. I have no doubt at all that this had much to do with restrictions imposed by the venue's managers, but astonishing, nonetheless, that the organizers didn't find a better solution.

Now, having got all that off my chest, I have to confess that I arrived at 10:30 and didn't leave until eight in the evening. Not at any time did the idea of leaving early enter my head. The organizers and session convenors kept the discussions moving along well, and more or less kept everything to time. The day was fascinating, and it was evident that most of those present were serious, experienced activists and militants, from a variety of different organizations and struggles. To those of us with very long memories the absence of sectarian strife was striking – from time to time there were some amusing surreptitious swipes – but it was clear that people respected each other and were ready to engage in genuine discussion rather than wrangling and point-scoring.

Of course, I could only attend four of the twelve time tabled sessions, and the two plenaries (Oops, I mean “assemblies”), but all of these were both well attended, and led by well-informed capable speakers.

If the prime motive of the Anti-Capitalist Initiative in pulling this conference (and its sponsors) together was to help create a unified anti-cuts campaign I think they've made an excellent start. Now, I think they should use the links they've established with this event to help them put together a national gathering of anti-cuts campaigns with speakers and participation from as many single-issue groups as possible. No doubt this would be a much more rumbustious and truculent affair, but essential all the same. I have no doubt that the ACI has the right people and sufficient tact and political acumen to pull this off.

On the larger issues concerning the nature of the crisis and discussion of mounting a sustained political challenge to the powers that be, we need an entirely different sort of engagement – one in which activism and the day-to-day problems of campaigning are put to one side. As vital as a united federation of anti-cuts campaigns, capable of national

initiatives and coordination is, it will never be a substitute for the development of a thorough going critique of contemporary capitalism. At the risk of sounding somewhat Leninist – this can only be done by those committed to theoretical work and analysis – work which can help to inform wider campaigns and the movement as a whole, but it is not work that will emerge spontaneously from direct experience of struggle. However, this does mean moving beyond the scope and constraints of Marxology and the work of leading Marxologists in the universities, but there is a rich vein of scholarship to be mined and turned to good account by the new radicals and the new revolutionaries associated with the Anti-Capitalist Initiative and with this conference.

Nick Wrack of the Independent Socialist Network laid out the scale of our problem when he said that: “The majority of people in this society have to understand (1) that we need a revolution, and (2) that they’re the people who are going to carry it out.” Nick linked this observation to the necessity of getting millions of people to vote for revolutionaries at local and general elections. Aaron Peters, I thought, gave this kind of concern much greater substance in an extremely brief but coherent contribution when he argued that the construction of a new mode of production requires radical engagement with the mental conceptions, forms of social reproduction, and the production process itself – including in the field of technology – of existing arrangements. He seemed to be saying that nothing but a thorough-going understanding of the contemporary capitalist mode of life will suffice if we want to be able to posit a new mode of production.

So my abiding impression of the conference is this: that the problems of the relationship between anti-capitalist activism, and theory, needs to be openly and explicitly acknowledged. Although activism must to be promoted and coordinated, it arises more or less spontaneously. On the other hand, the scope of a serious political-theoretical engagement with the nature of the system also needs to be clarified and resolved. This cannot be done as an aside at an

activist conference, or muddled up at all with the anti-hierarchical sentiment and ultra-democratic spirit essential to effective campaigning. There is a homological relationship between theory and practice – they are not the same thing - neither can be accomplished effectively, unless the way the two streams must develop separately, and yet mingle by always informing each other, is properly understood and acknowledged.

When all is said and done, it was a great day in Stepney – and the leading comrades (no irony intended) who took the initiative, and did most of the work, are to be thanked and congratulated.