

At the back of The Libertarian Communist (TLC) you will find a brief listing of groups of the anti state, non market sector. One of these is Red and Black Notes which unfortunately ceased publication in 2006. Ade Dimmick has sent in the following article on Red and Black Notes by Neil Fettes. The author lists experiences related to bringing out a small publication which certainly strike a cord with the editor of TLC.

Red & Black Notes

By Neil Fettes

Red & Black Notes was an independent socialist newsletter which appeared from 1997 until 2006. Over the nine years and 22 issues of its existence, the newsletter was published in Calgary and later Toronto, and carried material from a variety of sources in what might loosely be called the genuine “ultra-left” end of the political spectrum (as opposed to those called ultra-left simply because they won’t vote Labour). The newsletter ceased publication when the editor joined Internationalist Perspective and deciding to concentrate on that project instead. As said editor, layouts co-ordinator, writer, graphic artists, financier etc., Ade Dimmick, editor of *Hobnail Review*¹ asked me

¹ Hobnail Review: A guide to Small Press and Alternative Publishing from an Anti-Authoritarian & Libertarian-Left Perspective was published between 2003 and 2008. It is currently in a state of hibernation. The son of Hob was reborn as a radical pamphlet review column, entitled Hob’s Choice, which currently inhabits the pages of the class-struggle anarchist magazine Black Flag. Ade Dimmick, editor of both, describes himself as a libertarian communist with a penchant for council communism. He is a publisher of radical pamphlets, a member of the Black Flag Collective and the Anarchist Federation.

if I could write a short history complete with reflections about Red & Black Notes. Here, in much more detail than necessary is the piece.

Red & Black Notes came about, partly by accident and partly by design, but it was the product of a particular set of circumstances both geographical and political. I’ve been involved in organized politics since my mid-teens, and during my twenties, I was a Trotskyist. My organisational link with Trotskyism was the beginning of a long political odyssey in which *Red & Black Notes* played a large part.

In the months following my break with Trotskyism, I read and re-read many political books, and journals trying to put my critique of Trotskyism into focus. An issue of the US magazine *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* contained a review of the Grand Rapids, Michigan *Discussion Bulletin*. Interested by the description of the contents, I wrote to the *DB* and received a sample issue. The *DB* was published by a former member of the Socialist Labor Party and was a genuine political discussion journal; nothing in the magazine was edited or even re-typeset. People sent articles and the editor, Frank Girard printed them. What was remarkable about this magazine was that not only did it come out as regular as clockwork every two months, but it was amazingly non-sectarian. As long as people belonged to the fairly loose category of “non-market socialism” and adhered to a few basic rules of politeness, Frank was willing to publish their contributions.

The first issue of the *DB* I received had a reprint from *Collective Action Notes* from Baltimore. The clear and straight forward tone of the article really impressed me, and I wrote

to the magazine for more information. *CAN* eschew labels, but was often described as

council communist. The editor of *CAN* sent me back issues, pamphlets and computer disks with texts from the Dutch and German left communist movements from the 30's and 40's. (In 1996, it was nearly impossible to obtain these texts, and it felt a little like samizdat!).

The same year I moved from Toronto to Calgary, a city in Western Canada with no ultra-left activity. A few members of a Stalinist group, and a nearly defunct branch of the Communist Party, along with some social democrats were the only visible organized left (I later meet a group of Food Not Bombs activists, all of whom were at least 10 years younger than me and into the punk movement).

In Calgary, I began an intensive correspondence with like-minded individuals and groups. *CAN* led me to the French group Echanges et Mouvement and the French Ultra-left (with whom I had limited contact as I could not read French.). I also received correspondence with Subversion, the Anarchist-Communist Federation, Kamunist Kranti (I received then read their "Ballad against Work" while I was working as a substitute teacher), the International Communist Current, and many more.

In the Spring of 1997, the main grocery chain in Calgary and Edmonton, Safeway, went on strike. Although, Alberta has a reputation as being the most pro-business and anti-union province in Canada, Albertans generally seem to like rooting for the underdog; so in a confrontation between a big American grocery chain and its little group of underpaid workers, the strikers received far more support than they might have imagined possible. The Calgary and District Labour Council called a solidarity march for the strikers on May 1st 1997, and I decided that if I was going to be active in politics, this would be a good opportunity to do something. I wrote a short 'pro-worker' solidarity leaflet. At around the same time, I came across an IWW piece on the origins of May Day. This seemed to be a good idea, so I put the history piece on the back of my leaflet. However, now my I

leaflet ran to almost three pages. Looking over my bookshelf, I found a copy of Solidarity (UK)'s pamphlet "As we Don't see It." I picked the theses I liked best, and then

put them on the back. In a fit of inspiration, or desperation I don't know which, I put a title on the thing: Red and Black Notes. It seemed that everyone was publishing something with "Notes" in the title; that plus the red of Marxism and the black of anarchism and I was set. I handed the thing out at the demonstration, and I also mailed copies to about thirty people I thought might be interested. Later that month, I wrote a leaflet about an election urging people not to vote. *Red & Black Notes* was a go!

The first issue of *R&BN* was quite primitive by aesthetic standards. The most technically advanced part of the leaflet was that I had put columns in it, but with only left justification. The fact I was using a dot matrix printer where I fed in the pages one sheet at a time then photocopied it, didn't help much either. Still, the response was positive. People liked the idea of a new publication, and a number of people in Calgary and elsewhere made suggestions for the next issue. It became clear to me then, that this newsletter could serve a real purpose. There was nothing like it in Canada, so it did provide a useful forum for these issues. It was a great way to make contact with people, and it was also a way for me to work through these new political ideas.

Issue #2, which was published the following month, went smoother. I had discovered Word Perfect had a newsletter programme, and the issue ended up looking much nicer than the first had. The issue was still free, but I did ask for donations. It was four pages long. Just prior to issue #2, I began to consider renting a post office box. Now it was a real newsletter. Issue #2 also marked the arrival of graphics - albeit stolen from the same Solidarity pamphlet I used in the first issue.

With *R&BN* #3, things really began to change. It was the first issue that had a price on it, as well as subscription rates which remained ridiculously low to the end of the newsletter's run. The biggest single expense was postage, to the extent that every issue I posted cost me more than the cover price and

I lost money on every one - such are the joys of self-publishing! Number 3 also marked my attempt to set up a subscription list of some kind, but it was fairly haphazard. Although I had a data-base programme, I never managed to input all of the subs. I simply

typed in all of the names in a document and added it to every issue (when I stopped publishing, the list ran to about eight pages, with lapsed subs crossed out). I also never got the hang of address labels, and simply wrote them by hand.

People who had received the first issues as freebies were kept on the list - mostly because I wanted those people to read *R&BN*, and also hoped that they would either contribute an article at some point (or something rare from their archives), or feel a pang of guilt at getting something for nothing and send me some cash; some did both, some did neither. But then self-publishing isn't always about the money is it? (We all know it's really about getting stuff in the mail). If I lost contact with people, I did eventually drop them from the list.

The second group were the exchange subs. I think at some point I received about thirty different magazines from around the globe (I even accepted non-English language magazines, out of a sense of internationalist duty - Kamunist Kranti still send me their Hindi language bulletin, which my Indian-born wife *still* refuses to read to me). Generally exchanges went well, although sometimes people just stopped sending material - the Anarchist Federation apparently dropped me from their exchange list without a word of notice, and never replied to my requests for information.

The third group was the paid subscribers, who were always the smallest group of the three. Some people sent money for single issues or a four-issue sub, while others remained faithful to the end (one or two of the regulars even sent letters saying how much they would miss *R&BN* when I announced the end of publication).

Issues #3-15 were the most regular periods of the newsletter's existence. *R&BN* was generally eight pages per issue, and came out three times a year. It was in this period, I

grew more confident as a writer. As the magazine continued, I wrote more of the articles and relied less on reprinting historical articles. People also began to submit articles for publication. At one point during this period, I began to realize that *R&BN* had an influence and a name beyond my little internet circles. The publisher of *Collective*

Action Notes told me that the reason he began to publish was that he was tired of waiting for a new issue of *Echanges*. Later, people began to mention *R&BN* along with *CAN*. And finally, the short-lived *The Bad Days Will End* appeared, in part, due to *R&BN*. The newsletter was referred to in other publications, several publishers sent books for review and other periodicals sent sample copies for inclusion in the "Worthwhile Projects" section (many readers wrote to say this was the section they read first).

Letters from prisoners were generally polite and respectful when they asked for free copies (which I always sent) although one or two were ultra-nationalists or advocating bizarre conspiracy theories (One spent the better part of three pages railing about circumcision). And I eventually had to write a disclaiming at the front of the magazine noting that submissions were welcome, except for poetry!

The scariest thing I ever received was in the months after the anti-globalization riots in Seattle. I got a little package addressed to *R&BN* filled with Nazi propaganda. No threatening note was included, but it seemed like a warning. (Several other people I knew received similar packages). That's why it's a good idea to get a PO Box and use pseudonyms (and I used several throughout *R&BN* history).

Issues #16 to 22 saw the final transformation of *R&BN*. The newsletter format was replaced by card end pages (which looked much nicer but it cost more on postage). The articles were also longer and the magazine came out once or twice a year. I did raise the subscription price, but it made no difference to the financial end of the newsletter. I also bought a new computer and switched to Word, although I never used the newsletter programme - my technical skills had increased too (I now do the layouts for the

magazine *Inter-nationalist Perspective* so you be the judge).

Red & Black Notes #22 appeared in May of 2006, the final issue. When I began to publish *R&BN* in May of 1997, it was to work through new political ideas, and to connect with others who shared them. In November of 2005, I joined a group called Internationalist Perspective. I had corresponded with them

for several years, and been to their conferences on a number of occasions. Finally, I thought it was time to move on. After I joined, I decided that *R&BN* had served its purpose and it was time to wind it up.

It may just be reactionary nostalgia, but I like the printed word as opposed to the blog. I like the pamphlet and the booklet. Small publishing still represents something important. And maybe I'm being arrogant here, but I do think that small, independent presses and publications will continue to exist and may even survive in the age of the blog. *R&BN* was time consuming. I had a few nasty fights with people whose articles I didn't publish (I wasn't like Frank Girard!). I sunk a lot of money into the project. Overall...., I had a great time. Maybe, just maybe, *Red & Black Notes* will be remembered for its nine year history. I encourage everyone to try.

Let a hundred ultra-left magazines appear!
Let a hundred schools of ultra-left thought contend!

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