

Open Letter of resignation to Counterfire.

by Amy Addison-Dunne on Wednesday, May 2, 2012 at 9:44pm ·

Dear members of Counterfire,

It is with great regret and a lot of thinking that I have come to the conclusion to resign from Counterfire. Whilst it may be relatively new to the British left, I have always felt that Counterfire has had considerable potential to achieve a great deal on behalf of the people organisations like it exist to defend. It contains a great many valuable, hardworking, and dedicated activists; however I have come to the conclusion that the efforts and the potential of these activists are being diluted by a number of core structural issues that thus far the organisation as a whole has failed to address.

My first criticism forms in itself the reason why this issue has become something to resign over as opposed to something to simply deal with within the organisation, it is the issue of internal democracy and democratic structure.

Counterfire started off as 50 people, but has now grown to hundreds, yet the organisation has done little to correct the structure to accommodate this. For example, when I first tried to air my concerns to Counterfire, there was no formalised space or institution through which I could express concerns or policy ideas, so I ended up having an 'informal chat' with a member of the Editorial board, which did not at all address the issues I was trying to bring up, but simply made me feel that my concerns were not important. Granted, I understand that a disputes officer has been appointed, nonetheless the prevailing attitude towards internal democracy I have thus far experienced constrains the amount of hope I have for the effectiveness of this new position. The absence of such a structure at Counterfire's inception has led in my view to an institutional disconnect between the organisation's 'centre' and 'periphery' that the appointment of a single functionary is unlikely to resolve.

As we all know, the size and concentration of activists in London has led to a somewhat London-focussed political culture across the left; and therefore the assumption that issues that occur between individuals and groups in London will and should automatically replicate across the country. In actual fact, political

culture and relationships vary across cities and branches, and whilst an integrated organisation is something to strive for, so is one that takes into account the mode of operation of local activists. This manifests itself as a concrete problem in the presence of my initial criticism (the lack of internal democracy) when the 'centre' (both geographical and metaphorical) attempts to dominate the periphery. For example, the political landscape in London is very different from the one in Bristol. With seemingly little awareness of this, individuals from Counterfire's 'centre' regularly intervened to the point at which I felt unduly ignored, out of the loop and contradicted; my position as one of Counterfire's key local activists not recognised. This reached a head in December 2011.

As a Counterfire member, I ended up working closely with the University of the West of England's Socialist Worker Student Society, and we mutually agreed to attend each other's meetings, contribute and maintain an amicable and constructive relationship (to prevent counterorganisation, sectarian disputes etc). All the meetings that the SWSS hosted were friendly, open and informative, and I lament to say that when I attempted to return the favour, their reception at the public Counterfire meeting that I had invited them to was less so. The London members who came up to speak at the meeting were openly sectarian towards my UWE colleagues due to the fact that they were members of the Socialist Workers' Party, constantly criticising the SWP and at one point caused a colleague of mine to leave in a rage due to this relentless criticism which bordered on the personal. When I met them a few days later at one of their meetings, I casually asked if they'd enjoyed the meeting and screening of the film *Debtocracy*, and was met with accounts of being made to feel uncomfortable, attacked and unwelcome at this public meeting that I had invited them to, in good faith that Counterfire members would be above the London-centric disputes between SWP and Counterfire members. I for one, was mortified that my guests and fellow activists could be made to feel that way for the sake of a dispute that occurred in 2008, whereas many of them joined after the split, so therefore had nothing to do with it. The incident raised concerns beyond that of centre-periphery relations within Counterfire (that a London activist would casually disrupt a careful attempt to build strong working relationships) but the wider issue of the apparent institutional obsession with the SWP.

At the majority of Counterfire meetings I have attended, the Socialist Workers' Party has constantly been brought up in order to criticise. Many of Counterfire's members are not former-members of the SWP, therefore do not understand (and probably don't want to, as it is unnecessary) the constant sniping at the SWP. Indeed, a near-constant dwelling on the SWP is damaging and off-putting to newcomers to events (which surely Counterfire aims to attract), as well as widening the gap between the centre and periphery further. It often appears as if being 'not like the SWP' has taken precedence as opposed to actually forming an independent sense of direction. Whilst this gives a bad impression to uninvolved members and potential members who attend meetings, this also puts Counterfire in a difficult position on the left. As I'm sure you're aware, Counterfire and the SWP share an identical ideology (anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, green, et al) with the only differences being ones of method.

However, I believe Counterfire's extremely vocalised sentiments about the SWP are hindering Counterfire-dominated 'united front' organisations (and when I say 'Counterfire-dominated' I mean the key and leading activists in the organisation are staunch Counterfire members). Whether anyone likes it or not, the Socialist Workers' Party are the largest revolutionary party in Britain, and are a valuable asset to have when it comes to building 'united front' movements like Stop the War and Coalition of Resistance. SWP members are put off participating in these movements often due to the hostility expressed by Counterfire towards the SWP. Awareness, let alone interest in or an informed opinion on, small-scale differences between organisations is confined to a fairly small number of people, and the tenacity with which Counterfire seems to cling to such things is a perfect formula for new activists to either lose interest or become institutionalised into unnecessary sectarian values.

My experience of the SWP has been nothing but positive. I've not once been excluded, bullied or taunted for my membership to Counterfire, but welcomed as a fellow activist. My opinion on the SWP and my views on Counterfire are nothing to do with my partner being a member of the SWP. I raise this as I know with certainty this is what some members seem to think my co-operation and work with other SWP members has been fuelled by. Not only is this at best patronising and at worst outrightly anti-

feminist, it also serves as a convenient escape valve for dismissing legitimate political criticism out of hand. Other concerns I have with this issue is the gloating that seems to occur when key SWP activists resign from the party. As I recall, a large section of a members' meeting was dedicated to 'what we should do' about Chris Bambery's resignation from the SWP, and ended in an article being written about the issue and his letter of resignation being published; from my experience, the SWP do not do this to Counterfire, as it really is none of their business and rightfully, not a priority to snipe at other leftist organisations in their publications. Actions that could be construed as rejoicing in the problems faced by another organisation breed resentment and hostility, are detrimental to the wider movement and are more commonly the practice of lunatic Stalinist fringe groups.

Quite frankly, the bigger picture needs to be seen, and no Tory or fascist or police officer is going to check what membership to X left organisation we hold and submit or otherwise respond to our demands based on that. In fact, the Right assume we are integrated and refer to us as one body- if only that were the case. My political philosophy has always been based on outcomes- the aim of removing troops from Afghanistan for instance, or the promulgation of protests and strikes against cuts and privatisation. Without an integrated and united left capable of resolving disputes without hostility, this is unlikely to happen. At the very minimum, fracturing the movement slows down action and results in hostility and the personal all too often being transformed into the political. At worst, the problem manifests itself in the form of substitutionism - and there has been a distinct trend within Counterfire at least - away from direct integration into the class. An organisation that hopes to be a vanguard in any meaningful sense of the word should hold to the idea that 'the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class' in practice as well as in theory. To do this one must either develop their own networks and intervention or tap into existing ones- the first does not appear to be a strategy Counterfire has thus far been successful at (I would argue there has been limited effort) and the second is outrightly damaged by sectarianism.

My final criticism is the lack of information sharing that occurs when something happens within the organisation. I, on a number of occasions have been informed of Counterfire internal politics by

outside parties, and when I questioned members of the Editorial Board about said information, it turned out that yes, an entire branch of Counterfire had defected, and yes, a number of activists had left for reasons that had not been shared or opened for debate with other members of Counterfire. If people have criticisms of Counterfire and leave for it, I feel that these criticisms should most definitely be open for debate. If we cannot openly criticise and share ideas on improving the organisation, then said organisation will never progress to become stronger and more successful, and it also breeds a culture of silence, as people will be (as I have been for a while) scared of sharing criticisms, in case of 'upsetting the apple cart', as well as (consciously or otherwise) maintaining the position of the people at the centre against newcomers and the political and geographical periphery. This is why I am writing my letter openly, so everything I have said is there, from the horse's mouth and completely open for people to debate my arguments.

I would very much like to continue working extensively in the wider movement, such as Stop the War Coalition and Coalition of Resistance, as these are issues that are very dear to my heart. I would also like to reiterate, that I have a great deal of respect for Counterfire members, and this is in NO WAY WHATSOEVER a personal attack on anyone, just a justification of my resignation and an expression of concern for the development of an organisation that I nonetheless would like to see grow positively. Not being a Counterfire member does not make me opposed to the organisation in the least, merely a separate part of a plurality of people and organisations pursuing common ideals and goals in ways of their own personal choice.

Hope to work in the future together,

Solidarity,

Amy Addison-Dunne