

The Third Annual Belfast Anarchist Bookfair and other bizarreness: an outsider's view of events

Seventy-two hours without sleep, and then your eyelids flicker open and Patrick Kielty grins at you: George Best is closed, we've been circling for an hour-and-a-half and we're being diverted. Eh? Patrick's isn't the first face I would want to see when I wake up... and surely the book on George closed a few years back. It has to be a nightmare.

Wake up with my spine in my mouth. Patrick's grin widens, as he tells me that this is a standard "bad" landing at George Best. I point out that the engine covers have been worked loose by the jolt. I try to persuade myself that this is just sleep-deprivation induced paranoia as I'm leaning out the chair looking for Lockerbie-style debris along the runway. Whatever, trust the South London bullshit detector, and lose the stripy-shirted lottery announcer. Just get out of the seat and get into Belfast and as far away from this peroxidized preener as fast as I can.

Welcome to Belfast: Kielty's doing a stand-up show locally and his supercilious visage is on every street corner superimposed on a deconstructed union flag. I grab a map at the bus depot and head for my hostel in the University district, avoiding Kielty's eyes; I need to check in and grab a few more hours kip. The overly friendly receptionist at the hostel, obviously keen to befriend someone around her own age rather than the interrailers who are filling the foyer with their mid-Atlantic accented eurobabble, insists on recommending various tourist sites to me. As I politely inform her that I'm here for "a conference" and to meet some local friends, she starts to tell me that the locals don't really know the tourist spots. I become transfixed by the poster behind her: it's a sightseeing tour in a black cab around all the sectarian murals and other famed sites from "The Troubles". I find it vaguely troubling this woman doesn't find this conversation disturbing. The situation is resolved when I offer up the street name for the *Organise!* office - she doesn't know of it and it isn't on her map. The locations of The Pavilion Bar and the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre are also mysteries. Never mind, when I get into my dorm and find that my assigned bed is still occupied - at two in the afternoon - I realise I've got plenty of time, if not much energy, to get my bearings. It takes a whole ten minutes to locate the Pavilion Bar, and four of those were spent staring bemusedly at all the Ulster and Union pennants lining Upper Ormeau. I wonder if there's some sort of Bank Holiday festival about to take place. (The following day I got lost, found myself in the Falls Road, and correcting my direction wandered blithely into the middle of Shankill; the last time I saw that many Union Jacks was the during the Queen's Silver Jubilee. This time around it actually felt quite oppressive - particularly when two guys stopped me for directions to a local Cathedral).

It starts to rain heavily, just as I make contact with the *Organise!* co-ordinators.

When I get escorted to their rather lovely office space, I get to relax; I'm not alone, there is a palpable sense of mild panic present here. Time constraints - and the fact that a number of the *Organise!* 'cadre' are double-booked due to agreeing to perform at the associated fundraiser for The Warzone Collective, childminding commitments, or due to leave later for football practise - create an instant camaraderie as everybody is pulling together to get the evening's events set up in time. Installing the exhibition of Abel Paz's photographs is deferred until the next day, as the priority is to get the equipment for the advertised films set up in time. It takes under ten minutes to set up the projector. It takes nearly forty minutes to put up the material to block out the light as brilliant sunshine pours through the enormous office windows mocking our attempts to get a clear picture on the opposite wall. Of course, once we've created a curious set of curtains from a combination of cloth and cardboard the rain returns with a vengeance. Having seen the advertised Spanish Civil War movies I offer to play at doorman when we realise the building's main door can't be left open due to the large number of mountain bikes left in the hall. It's cool. I get to smoke cigarettes, and my disappointment at the poor attendance that the sporadic rain and poor signage causes is lessened by what has to be one of the bizarrest conversations I have ever had; I'm approached by a large crew-cut in a shell suit who thrusts his mobile phone at me and demands to know what the displayed text means. It seems his sometime girlfriend is using a weird combination of text abbreviations and rap-slang to ask him not to dump her. I give a polite translation and am obliged not to giggle when he comes back fifteen minutes later to let me know he's off to see her - rather charmingly, he also gives me a brief description of what he's about to do with her too. And then it's all over and we're off to the pub for a few pre-gig drinks.

With hindsight it was probably a mistake - for me at least - to go to the trashpunkmetalhardcore mayhem at the Pavilion on the first night. I got instantly trashed, babbled a bunch of gibberish about tattoos and piercings in pre-school "Show and Tell" style session, and then went on to play pool, get utterly confused by the strange appearance of one of the Mighty Boosh guys, go back to someone's house to drink more and then get utterly lost after I insisted I knew my way back to the hostel. Still, these events are about making an impression right? The impression I made was, it became apparent after the second of the midday texts asking where I was, that I was probably - if not deservedly - dead or injured somewhere. Hindsight kicks in pretty quickly at that point.

Reaching the bookfair I was impressed by the selection of groups and their displayed texts, and reassured by the weary-eyed looks on some of the stallholders' faces. I wasn't the only one

suffering from late night self-abuse. Again, I was a little disturbed by the poor turnout but after my second cup of coffee I realised had completely overlooked the thirty people engaged in intense debate in the meeting room. I knew the debate was intense because it was already running twenty minutes over time. And it had started early as the first speaker was obliged to reschedule due to travel difficulties. As the hangovers collected at the Warzone event dissipated the attendance increased dramatically - I would guess about three hundred people passed through while I was present.

Themed around "Equality" the presentations were on diverse topics such as the failure of recent Northern Irish legislation to provide adequate protection to those outside of the "traditional" sectarian social divide (illustrated by the responses to a spate of recent racist attacks on Belfast's Roma population), and how - having been put in place a good twenty-five years after the raft of English anti-race discrimination laws - these gaps were all the more obvious and iniquitous; there was also an excellent debate on the comparisons between the English and Northern Irish education systems. Against a similar background of University staffing cuts and simultaneous, if seeming contradictory demands to increase student fees to "maintain the quality of education provision", the systems were still astonishingly diverse as the creeping influence of business funding in the English Academy schools was mirrored in Northern Ireland by the roles of the religious schools and the prevalent rise of creationist teachings.

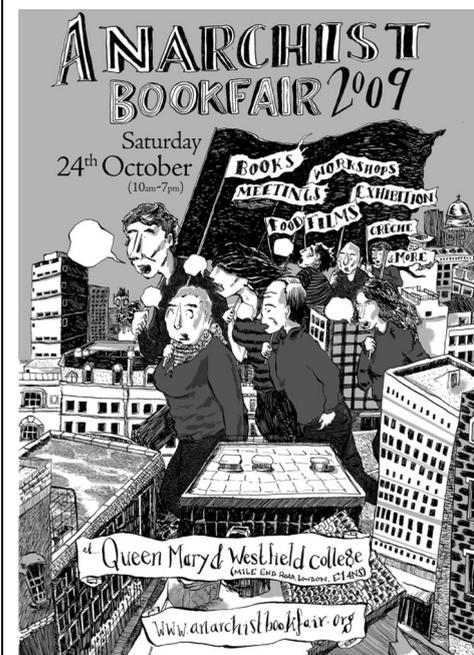
As a previous attendee of the London anarchist bookfairs I was also struck by the sheer quality of the debates. Questions directed to the speakers were well-presented, without the self-interested inflections that occasionally mar the London debates where questions are often prefaced by the questioners' affiliations, or the speaker's response is interrupted by further queries. Certainly, I felt that both the floor and the speakers were respectfully treated and debate was allowed to grow organically - a good example I witnessed of this was an invitation from a London based teacher to a local parent to express at length a campaign at her child's school.

This suggests that there is every chance for the Belfast bookfair to expand in the future - definitely a good thing in my opinion - as there is a core interest opening up there in leftist debate and anti-capitalist tactics. After I had made my excuses and slipped away I definitely recall smiling and thinking it had been a worthwhile trip as I slipped into a coma-like sleep back at the hostel.

Nic

Thanks to Conor, Garth, Jason, Jack, Weeler, Wee John, Catherine and Julie and everyone else for showing me such a good time.

London Anarchist Bookfair



Saturday October 24th saw the annual London Anarchist Bookfair. Members of Organise! attended, sharing a stall with Solidarity Federation (the UK section of the International Workers Association), who were kind enough to let us use a corner of their table to distribute copies of *The Leveller* issues 1 and 2, as well as our 'bookfair special', complete with spectacular typos such as 'cre4ation', and references to articles which it did not contain.

Although annual bookfairs in other towns and cities have sprung up in the last number of years, the London event is still probably the 'main event' in the UK, certainly the biggest in terms of numbers of stalls and quantity and range of meetings and workshops. Important meetings this year included support for the ongoing strike action by postal workers, and meetings for education workers in the aftermath of the Tower Hamlets industrial action and formation of the London Education Workers Group.

The bookfair is, of course, by its nature a bit of a 'big tent', so as well as class struggle groups like SolFed/Organise!/AF, you'll find green/feminist/prisoner support/animal rights/punk stalls and if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time you might even come across the SPK (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Patients'_Collective). Indeed, if you fancy some fresh air you could go out the front and check out the stall by the International Communist Current, who are not allowed inside. At least this year Active Distribution didn't have their '9-11 JUST DO IT' T-shirts.

The bookfair is of course also a chance to meet up with comrades from other parts of the country/world (again or for the first time) and have the customary curry and a few drinks. Indeed, some of the better political discussions end up continuing or taking place in the pub afterwards.

Thanks again to SolFed for sharing their stall with us, and despite stiff competition from 2 SolFed members in particular, this writer is confident of having won the 'Most Obnoxious Top At Bookfair' title.