Joining the WSM

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June, 1998. I'm sitting on my own in the corner of the upstairs lounge of the Bachelors Inn, feeling slightly foolish. Five minutes ago, I had stood up and announced to a meeting of a half-dozen members of the Workers Solidarity Movement, in the dark and dingy back room of the pub below, that I wished to join the group. I did not know what response I expected, but whatever it was, it was substantially more rousing than the awkward silence that greeted my declaration. I stood there, feeling like an idiot, awaiting a response, for what seemed like an age. Eventually, one of the group, Conor McLoughlin, mumbled that I should now leave the room to allow the meeting to consider my application. I fumbled my way out the door, crestfallen, into the dark stairwell and up to the lounge where I ordered a pint of Guinness to occupy me while I waited nervously for the group's response.

Five minutes later, the WSM members entered the lounge, pausing to order drinks at the bar before taking seats in the corner near where I was sitting. Two members, Conor and Andrew Flood, sat next to me. Andrew told me that they needed to go through the membership requirements with me. I had indicated to Andrew in advance of the meeting that I was interested in joining and he had prepared by printing out several documents from the WSM's website. Aided by these print-outs, he led me methodically through the membership requirements, described in seven numbered sections and fifteen subsections of the WSM's recruitment policy paper.

"Subs"

The first requirement was relatively simple and came from the organisation's constitution. It specified that I would be required to pay at least 5% of my gross income as a membership subscription – known as 'subs' – to the organisation each month. This did not phase me and I readily agreed. I had read the constitution on the WSM's website and had noted the monetary requirement. Furthermore, I had just got my first proper computer-programming job. In comparison to what I had been used to as a student, I considered myself to now be fabulously wealthy. I was happy to be able to contribute the sixty pounds or so per month that was asked of me and was even a little proud that it was a substantial sum compared to many of the existing members' contributions.

Reading List

The second requirement was that I should complete a reading list, containing material that introduced the basics of the strand of anarchism with which the WSM aligned itself – "platformism". The list consisted of four books, all classic anarchist and platformist treatises that had been first published between 1926 and 1953; two pamphlets written by WSM members in the mid-1980s; one article published in the WSM's newspaper, Workers Solidarity, in 1991; and the entire collection of position papers and policy statements of the WSM, some thirty-five documents in total, each formally laid out in numbered paragraphs. This reading list was not entirely mandatory – it was described as a "recommendation" of what an applicant was "encouraged" to read before being admitted as a member. In the case of one of the 'recommended' books, however, the applicant could choose between two different options, suggesting that the list itself was somehow less than optional.

In the year leading up to my decision to apply for membership, I had spent a considerable amount of time browsing the WSM website and, while doing so, I had come across the reading list. However, I had paid little attention to its contents, as I had been voraciously reading anarchist literature for the previous three years and was blithely confident that I would have read far more than whatever basic material the WSM required to ensure that their members were reasonably well informed about anarchist politics before joining.

Now, looking through the list in detail for the first time, it dawned on me that I had actually read almost none of the specified material. I had read one of the WSM pamphlets and a few of the position papers, but none of the books. However, I still considered myself to be well-read on anarchist theory and history and felt that I really did not need to go over the basics again. I was keen to join and did not want to have to face a delay of several weeks while I read my way through the pile. Moreover, the prospect of ploughing my way through these archaic treatises of political theory was singularly unappealing to me.

I have always found books of anarchist political theory from the early 20th century to be insufferably boring and, even after many years within the WSM, I never did get around to reading more than one of the books on that list, and even that was fragmentary. In later years, other long-standing members of the WSM admitted to me that they had also failed to read any of that material, due to its unappealing nature. I thus argued forcefully that, although I had only partially read the material on the list, I was familiar with all of the basic ideas presented in it. In doing so, I confess to having created a greatly exaggerated impression of the proportion of the material that I had read.

Happily, Andrew's examination of my understanding of the contents of the literature was far from inquisitorial. I knew enough to be able to make reasonable guesses at the contents of the various books and pamphlets and, where I couldn't, it was easy enough to put it down to a failing of memory. Most importantly, it was probably eminently clear to Andrew that I understood the basic political ideas and that was what he was mostly interested in. Within ten or fifteen minutes, the scrutiny was completed, I promised to fill myself in on some of the fragments that I had missed. It seemed that I had passed the test.

Participation in WSM activity

The third requirement was that the applicant would be *"encouraged"* to participate in *"all WSM activities [...] for a period of six months (or less where possible)"* at which point the aspiring member would *"outline any differences she/he has with [the WSM] policy documents"* at a national meeting of the WSM. The application would then be considered in a session from which the applicant was specifically excluded. In my case, as I had been in contact with the WSM for several months and was in broad agreement with the organisation's politics, my application was fast-tracked to the next national meeting, due to take place in a couple of months. Although I had been active within the anarchist movement for the previous three years, I had generally considered myself to have been little more than a dilettante observer of a cultural scene rather than a political participant, which I wanted to become. Finally I was on track to becoming a real anarchist militant. All that I needed to do was to take part in the organisation's activities for a few months and I would be accepted as a fully signed up member of the WSM.

I had never before joined a political organisation, or indeed, with the exception of college societies, a formal group or club of any kind, and I had no real idea of what their membership procedures tended to be. Consumed as I was with the desire to become a real militant, I barely reflected on the membership procedure. In retrospect, however, it is clear that it was an extremely unusual process for recruitment.

To the individual applicant, the basic proposition looked like this: first you will be examined on political theory by a world-expert. If you pass that test, you must go through a six month probationary period during which you will be expected to devote large quantities of time and energy to the organisation, at least as much as if you were a member. At the end of this period, you will be expected to deliver a critique of the organisation's political theory to the entire organisation. Then your character will be openly critiqued at a large meeting from which you are excluded. If you are deemed to have passed this review, you will be accepted for membership and 5% of your gross income will be taken from you.

To a very large majority of people, this process contains several elements that would make it a stressful ordeal. Examinations strike terror into many people, as does the idea of their potential short-comings being openly discussed in a group, especially when political theory is the focus. Moreover, submitting oneself to a period of scrutinised probation is something that few people would choose. "one might design such a process if one wanted to ensure that the membership was exclusively made up of extremely committed, intellectually capable, highly ideological anarchists"

It was almost as if the process was designed to discourage anybody who was vaguely considering joining. Only somebody who was extremely committed to the idea of becoming a member of an anarchist organisation would put themselves voluntarily through such an ordeal. Furthermore, those who were less well educated, or less intellectually confident, would be much more likely to be intimidated by the emphasis on political theory in the process. One might design such a process if one wanted to ensure that the membership was exclusively made up of extremely committed, intellectually capable, highly ideological anarchists, and sure enough, that is what the process produced in the WSM.

The WSM's rationale for the arduous recruitment journey emphasised the democratic nature of the organisation. The process was designed to ensure that all members properly understood the organisation's politics, while also providing them with an explicit opportunity to express their political differences before joining, to enable them to fully participate in the organisation once they became members. However, whatever the organisation's explicit rationale was, there were deeper reasons, rooted in the organisation's traumatic early history, which made the WSM excessively cautious about recruitment and content to deter those who were less than committed ideologues, but it took me some time before I understood this history properly. In the meantime, however, the process turned out to be much more stringent on paper than in practice. The organisation went through the motions of obeying the rigorous process, but the individual members who oversaw it were uniformly willing and eager to give the applicant the benefit of the doubt and interpret the regulations in as flexible a manner as possible. Nevertheless, I was determined to demonstrate my dedication to the cause by throwing myself into activity in advance of the national meeting that would rule on my membership. This meant stepping far outside my comfort-zone and embracing my new role as a foot-soldier in the movement. Along the way, I learned an awful lot about how political action works in practice, which turned out to be far removed from the intellectual world of political theory.

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