Touch That Dial!

ON JANUARY 24, POLAND'S underground Radio Solidarnosc (RS) was broadcasting again, even if it was for only twenty minutes. It brought uncensored news and support for the nine militant Solidarity union leaders still incarcerated by the martial law regime.

The illegal broadcast was brief, but it was a victory in the struggle to keep the airwaves open to the public conscience alive in Poland. It was the first word from RS since July 6, last year, when two Polish RS workers, Vyacheslav Romanov and Joanna Szczena, and the Belgian anarchist Roger Noel were arrested while making illegal radio broadcasts in Warsaw.

Noel, who entered Poland with a Belgian food convoy, had been using his knowledge and experience in setting up portable "pirate" radio stations to aid the popular underground union movement. After his arrest, he was repeatedly interrogated and in the end heavily fined, released from prison and deported in December. Noel’s two Polish comrades are still imprisoned facing sentences of 3 to 12 years.

The severity of charges against the RS workers underlines the seriousness with which the State takes its monopoly of the airwaves and its subsequent ability to control information, ideas and culture.

It has been said that freedom of the press is afforded only to those who own one. The same principle is even more applicable to radio broadcasting which until recently has been exclusively controlled as a private preserve of the State in each and every country of the world.

With the development of inexpensive portable broadcasting equipment, the use of the airwaves by ordinary people has been greatly liberalised. However, actually using the airwaves has proved to be another matter. Where the monopoly situation has been challenged it has taken direct action — the uncontrollable proliferation of illegal broadcasts and stations — to change or circumvent the laws.

Illegal radio broadcasts were dubbed "pirate radio" when "Radio Caroline" began broadcasting in 1964 from a ship off the British coast, challenging the strict State monopoly of the BBC. For three years off-shore pirate radio broadcast from Radio Caroline and a number of imitators, contributed heavily to the creation of a pop music culture until pirate radio was silenced by the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act in 1967.

The free radio movement in Europe got underway in a big way in Italy at the end of the '60s when illegal, low wattage, campus and neighbourhood radio stations managed to break the State's broadcasting monopoly. The result was de facto deregulation.

The Italian stations, established and disassembled at will, proved particularly useful in maintaining instant communication with the population during popular uprisings, student rebellions, the self-reduction movements and strikes which occurred frequently during the '70s.

Radio Libertaire

The recent experience of the anarchist operated Radio Libertaire station in France is a good example of how to get a piece of the airwaves and hang on. At the end of the '70s, after a long battle won by the proliferation of pirate radio stations, the French government caved in and legalized broadcasts by any group, movement or association regardless of their financial solvency or technical ability.

Since the Socialist government of Mitterrand has taken power there has been a further explosion of stations of every type. The government, surprised by the magnitude and speed of the phenomenon, has been unable to close the floodgates — particularly since the new president of the Republic has himself participated in pirate broadcasts.

Radio Libertaire was initially set up by several militant anarchists in April 1980 as a libertarian station on l'île de France in the Paris Basin. A year later, funded with loans from militants and sympathizers they were able to set up a studio and broadcast four hours per day. Even today, with 114 hours of weekly programming the station operates without a station chief, relying on weekly meetings of everyone involved. Decisions are made by consensual and put into practice by affinity groups or teams, each responsible for its air-time or area of activity. Presently Radio Libertaire has 54 people who can share or less do all the necessary jobs to keep the station going.

Radio Libertaire is now in the top ten most popular stations in the Paris Basin but the situation is not so bright for many of the other 117 stations operating in the Basin who cannot maintain an audience of ten thousand or more. Radio Libertaire warns that the high operating costs of maintaining a non-pirate station will eventually allow a monopoly of the strong to once more emerge.

As it stands, Radio Libertaire is broadcasting seven days a week, to an officially estimated 100,000 listeners. It is the first anarchist radio station since WW II; prior to that the Spanish anarchists operated their own radio stations. Under its roof, Radio Libertaire regroups all strands of anarchist thought and opens its doors to all movements with similar struggles: anti-militarist, ecological, feminist, etc. They do not attempt to keep their audience under the rug and they make a special effort to respond to their listeners' suggestions.

Pirate Radio

In England, where pirate radio got its name and then was snuffed out, there is now a redoubled interest with over 100 illegal stations operating in all formats. With numbers like these and the inability of the Home Office to control them it would seem likely that the U.K. government would bring in legislation similar to that in France — legality, but government regulation.

Unfortunately, this bastion of Western democracy and freedom seems intent on moving in the opposite direction by increasing the present penalty for illegal broadcasting from three months in prison and/or £800 fine and/or seizure of equipment to a £2,000 fine and/or the rest. In addition, they are contemplating two new offenses 1) Deceptive Interference, and 2) Misleading Messages, with sentences of two years and unlimited fines.

One dedicated pirate, operating out of RBL station on the French coast, which beams programs into England, explains the situation this way:

"There is no loophole in the English law that gives the individual the right to transmit. People have been looking and there is no chance of deregulating the law like it in Italy. This makes it very important that people make and transmit programmes — concentrated illegal pressure will pay off."

At present in Britain there is a "Free