

A Short and Incomplete Guide For New Activists

or: how to get started by getting started

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A couple weeks ago, I was talking to my friends who run the podcast It Could Happen Here. “Summer is coming, and an awful lot of people are newly radicalized. You all should put out an episode about what the next steps are,” I told them.

“Perfect,” someone replied. “Write it and record it by May 20th.”

So I wrote a short and incomplete guide for new activists. You can hear me present it in audio format if you’d like.

I’m coming with my own biases which I want to get out right up front: I’m an anarchist, and it’s also been decades since I broke into the movement, because I’ve been doing this stuff since 2002, when I dropped out of college to join the alter-globalization movement. So my direct experience is not recent, and I have biases against authoritarian organizing and electoral organizing, biases towards direct action and autonomy. I believe that the way that you build a freer and better world is by practicing freedom along the way.

That’s not to say I have any interest in guiding people towards specific paths, specific actions, specific issues and movements. Exactly the opposite.

Right now, the world is in serious trouble. It’s always in serious trouble, sure, but it’s extra in serious trouble right now. We are in desperate need of people who dedicate their time—part of it or all of it—to trying to stop the terrible things that are happening and to trying to build beautiful things, beautiful alternatives.

So how do you get started?

To start, I want you to think about a few separate things. First, what do you care about? Second, what do you want to do? Third, what risks are you willing to take? If you have a sense of those before you throw yourself into the fight, you’ll start off strong.

What Do You Care About?

What movements and projects speak loudest to you? A ton of causes are interconnected—the fight for Palestinian liberation is not, at its core, a separate project than the fight against policing in the United States, for example. The rise of a global police state is everyone’s problem, and so is the US and Zionist imperial project. Causes are interconnected, but you can rarely start by just trying to fix, well, everything.

You don’t climb a mountain by just willing yourself atop the mountain. You climb it by picking a place and then starting to climb.

Maybe you’re concerned about the police state, or surveillance, or the erosion of abortion rights. Maybe you’re looking to fight for Palestinian liberation, or for prisoners in the US to have access to books, or for LGBT rights, or for the safety of migrants at the border, or for the protection of the remaining natural ecosystems. Maybe your concern something hyper-local, like the destruction of a park or the sweeping of homeless encampments. Maybe it’s something a bit broader or more abstract, like you want to get involved in explaining the need for police abolition.

There’s something, though. Something you want to change. Everything is interconnected, but you still want to pick a place to start.

What Do You Want To Do?

What is your skillset, or what skillsets do you wish you had? What do you have to offer the revolution, or what do you wish you had to offer?

Are you in med school or have other first aid and medical experience? Maybe you want to plug in with your local street medics. Are you studying law? Movement lawyers need paralegal help and there are groups that can use volunteers to get people out of jail or through difficult court cases.

Is graphic design your passion? Basically every group that exists needs help with their flyers or instagram slideshows or whatever. Spend all day on twitter? Well, a lot of activist groups can't find someone to run their social media.

Sometimes just being an extrovert is a super power... building strong movements means building strong communities, and every meeting and party needs someone willing to introduce themselves to the new people and help them figure out where to go. The best activist meetings I've ever been part of have someone who sits next to the new people and explains what's going on.

If you can plan a party, you can plan a benefit party to raise money for bail funds.

The quickest way to sum all of this up is to say "think about what's wrong and think about what you're good at, then get together with other people and apply what you're good at to stopping what's wrong."

What Risks Are You Willing To Take?

It's very easy to get swept up in the moment and go beyond your comfort zone in terms of risk. The more you have sorted out ahead of time, about what kinds of actions you're comfortable with strategically, morally, and personally, the easier it is to stick to your decisions when things get hard.

For example, you might tell yourself "I will not get arrested on purpose, because I have a massage license I do not want to risk lightly" (or you have kids at home, or you are undocumented, or you just don't like the idea of going to jail, whatever). You might be willing to *risk* arrest, like being in a hectic riot, but are not willing to lock your neck to a bulldozer. So when you go to the planning meeting for the action, and you're trying to figure out who wants to lock their neck to the bulldozer, you have already made up your mind and are less likely to pressure yourself—or be pressured by others—into volunteering.

If you know what your risk models are, you can make better decisions. Maybe you're fine with a spirited march, but once windows start getting broken, you decide you want to leave so that if you do risk arrest, you don't risk being framed for property destruction.

It's also important to know your risk levels (which can, of course, shift) because there are, well, predators in the ranks of direct action activists. There's this shadowy, unaccountable group that tries to get people to break laws... they're called the FBI. They have a history going back decades of entrapping people by coming up with bomb plots and arson plots. Of course, they also have a history of spreading paranoia—fear of informants and entrapment are often more paralyzing to social movements than the actual presence of informants is.

This is not to say that your risk level shouldn't include more serious action. It's just that that should be a conscious choice. And as a general rule, don't break any felonious laws with anyone

you haven't known for years, and don't break any felonious laws your first couple years in the movement anyway. It's better to know what you're risking, and what you're risking it for, in a way that is hard to know without the context of time involved in the movement.

Get Started

Okay... so now you know what you care about, what your skills are, and your risk analysis. Time to get started.

How?

The two basic ways you can do that is you can plug into something that exists and you can start something of your own. Both are valid. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and it is not a dichotomy.

Plug Into Something

There are structures and movements in place that are desperate for your help. There's a catch: most, but not all, of the reasonable groups can be challenging to break into. Very few groups have truly open-door policies, and those that do are sometimes suspect. Some of those are trying to use you, to suck you into a political cult or to basically use your energy and burn you out for some vaguely-progressive politician or activist cause.

So either way, you'll need to exercise some common sense and do some reading and research about what you're getting into.

The best publicly accessible groups and movements are ones that are organized from the bottom up, because the participants themselves have a say in what's happening. It's convenient and easy to join a group that will just tell you what to do. It's nice to imagine there are benevolent people who can do the hard part of making decisions and you can just clock in and listen to what they have to say and make the world a better place. That is rarely, if ever, the case.

Some movements maintain everyone's autonomy by, essentially, not being a group at all, just a movement. The uprisings of 2020 had this character—people and small groups worked together, sometimes coordinating formally, sometimes informally, acting as they saw necessary.

Some groups maintain everyone's autonomy by being structured horizontally. If you find yourself working with a local Earth First! chapter, for example, you will be part of deciding what you want to do. Before you lock your neck to a bulldozer, it's best to have been part of the planning of locking your neck to that bulldozer... after all, it's your neck on the line.

This is the best joke in this whole essay, which is really just embarrassing to admit.

Plugging into existing projects is often a really good first step. Myself, I started showing up to the meetings of this radical media project, Indymedia. I had some film skills, so soon enough I found myself in the film collective. I spent a year or two bouncing around from demonstration to demonstration, coordinating with all the radical videographers to collect everyone's footage and edit together news videos about what had happened, while we all collectively fostered a culture of respectful riot videography—not filming people's faces, for example, as well as coordinating “runners” who would get footage out of riot zones to make sure that our tapes didn't fall into the hands of the police.

I started off that work by joining an existing group, but within a few months I was doing it independently, coordinating with various groups that came together at all of these various summit protests.

It was fun. I dropped out of school where I'd been studying film and photography, and before I even would have graduated, a film I'd edited sold out a movie theater in Portland—we didn't have youtube so we organized in-person screenings of our work.

Getting into certain types of groups though is like applying for a shitty job—jobs that will take you without references will often treat you like shit, and jobs worth having require you to somehow already have been doing the job. Once people know who you are, it's a lot easier to find folks to work with.

There *are*, however, some groups and projects that are specifically public-facing and designed to be easy to get involved in. They'll be different everywhere. Food Not Bombs and prisoner letter writing nights are perennial favorites.

You can also start by going to public events, the sorts thrown by various community centers, infoshops, radical bookstores, and the like. This might give you a sense of what's going on and give you a chance to be known by folks in town. You can follow groups and movements on social media and look for events... there are often talks and fundraisers to go to, as well as public actions—you don't always have to join a group in order to go to and support its actions. In general, it's best to go to actions with friends, especially when you're first getting started, but that's what I'd call a guideline and not a rule personally. I would say that if you're going to actions and you're new, remember to both be brave and cautious... if you tend towards recklessness and being swept into things, maybe make sure you take a less frontlines role until you get your legs under you. But it really is okay to be brave—we're asked by the times we live in to be brave.

Some groups are semi-open, where you can contact them and express interest, then they might do some basic screening to make sure you're not a nazi infiltrator or whatever. I'm in that process right now with clinic escorting—I live in a place where abortion is uh... not really popular with the right wing. I submitted my name and my social media accounts before I can go to a training.

In general, for groups that are grassroots and non-authoritarian. Watch out for electoral campaigns. Watch out for nonprofits. There are local political campaigns that matter, for sure, and there are nonprofits that do good work—some of the best political work I ever did was two years at a nonprofit. But structurally, those systems are set up to take advantage of new people's energy and profit off of it, often to accomplish goals that are tangential to or even counter to the goals they claim. After all, both politicians and nonprofits live off of donations... donations which are easy to get when they are seen as necessary. So a nonprofit has a financial interest in not-winning. Some nonprofits manage to maintain their focus and work to make themselves obsolete, but frankly they're the minority.

Look out for groups that are front groups for authoritarian groups attached to communist political parties. They generally go to protests and run events mostly as a way to recruit people into their hierarchical structure. These groups will often try to control the broader movements they're involved in, telling people how they can and can't protest, and try to essentially own movements that were built by others.

Or, you can just not worry about any of that stuff and just start something yourself.

Start Something

It's not always "easy mode" to get into the movement by starting your own projects, but it sure is rewarding. It's like freelancing rather than looking for a job—there are no gatekeepers to cross, and the only person who might take advantage of you is, well, you.

In essence, the idea here is you say "okay, what's wrong, and what are we willing to do about it," and then you get together with your friends and start doing something about it. This can look like, well, anything. A mutual aid group, a radical bookstore, an antifascist gym to train to defend yourself from fascists, an illegal HRT distribution network in ban states, a direct action abortion collective, a zine distributor that goes to shows and parties with free literature about anarchism, a podcast about how things fall apart and how to put them back together again, a clique of saboteurs who attack billboards, a group that draws attention to international movement prisoners and supports them... the sky is the limit.

Of course, the difference between "start something" and "join something" is often blurry. You can unionize your workplace—and you probably should—but you might want to do that in the context of an existing union like the Industrial Workers of the World (or whatever the most interesting union in your industry is).

If you're going to start something aboveground, it's worth looking around and making sure that need isn't being met by someone else already—sometimes it's better to figure out how to help an existing bail fund rather than starting another, but sometimes well, it's better to start another different one. Harder for the police to raid, anyhow.

Another pitfall to avoid is... any group that involves money will at some point have someone from that group steal the money. I have seen the money from a benefit show stolen more times than I can count, often by experience and trusted organizers. Often, the organizers don't even quite conceptualize what they're doing as stealing—they'll pay it back, they promise, they didn't realize anyone would notice it was missing. If there's money involved, it's best to make sure there are multiple eyes on it at any given time and that it's accountable to the broader group.

Affinity Groups

One organizing model that's worth considering is the affinity group. This is, basically, you and some of your closest friends that you feel safe doing actions with... whatever the scale of the actions. If you are in a riot—by choice or by accident—it's quite a bit safer and more comfortable to be there with two or seven of your closest and most trustworthy friends. These are the people who are the most likely to dearest you, the people who will notice if you're caught and will organize your bail. They're the people you'll be in direct communication with during a protest so that you can coordinate your actions together.

Existing Protests

Movements ebb and flow. Protests are contagious, especially when they are rowdy and show that they take themselves seriously enough to not just go along with what professional protest managers tell them to do and take themselves seriously enough to resist the police and authorities.

It's more or less impossible to know which protests, like sparks, will catch a larger fire. It's good and useful to cast sparks to see what catches, or to notice when something is starting to spread and to help it.

However you decide to do it, it's worth getting yourself ready to see what's coming and figure out how to be useful. The world ain't getting any better on its own.

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