

A Practical Guide to Anarchist Organisation

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This text is a draft of a very practically orientated manual for anarchists who wish to get organised.

For absolute beginners and isolated individuals (or groups of 2 or 3)

A common experience for people, particularly young people who come to anarchism in the English speaking world is one of isolation. In my own case I came to anarchism through reading 'Homage to Catalonia' and then the very few anarchist books I could obtain in my city. These were nearly all liberal academic histories or reprints of texts from the 19th century so for quite a while I was unaware that the anarchist movement still existed. It took me a year to find other individual anarchists and another year to discover there was actually a small anarchist group in my city. It was another year before I took part in the formation of an organisation but even then we were very inexperienced. We ended up fusing with a much older anarchist group and it was only then that we reached the ability to undertake effective activity. I've written this text (with the help of others) in a way that I think would have enabled me and our initial small group to become effective much, much faster.

- How to find an anarchist group where you live
- How to evaluate any group you find
- Contributing to an anarchist group
- Setting up an anarchist group (the basics – people, politics, money, commitment.)

For people with some experience of anarchist organisation

Internal organisation

- Organisation policy
- Internal local meetings
- Finance

External activity

- Publications
- Building Links between movements

DIY Anarchist publication and distribution

One thing anyone can do is use a PDF library to print out and distribute anarchist material locally. It's a great way to start to promote anarchism where you live or inform people of what anarchists think and do today.

Two PDF libraries worth checking out can be found online at: www.struggle.ws or www.zabalaza.net

Feedback welcome

This is very much a 'work in progress'. I'd appreciate feedback on it. To do this, please email andrewflood@eircom.net

Other useful articles on anarchist organisation in this pamphlet

- Decision making and some problems of consensus methods
- Forming Local Anarcho-Communist Collectives
- Communication: Getting the Word Out

How to Find an Anarchist Group Where You Live

A good first step is to try and find out if there are any anarchists in your city or in other cities near you. It is very hard for a small group to be visible in a city so its worth spending some time looking around for one before you begin the harder step of forming one.

Check any radical bookshops you know of and look for anarchist papers or leaflets there. If the local group is fairly healthy they should be publishing something regularly. Check national anarchist papers for local contact addresses as well. Check a few times as smaller groups may only be publishing every few months and check all the bookshops you know of as some bookshops, particular those controlled by authoritarian socialists will refuse to stock anarchist material. If you find a bookshop that stocks a lot of anarchist stuff ask at the counter if they know how you can get in contact with local anarchists, it may well be that there is an anarchist working there.

Keep an eye out for old posters or stickers that may have a venue or an address on them. If it's a venue but you have missed the meeting try checking it at the same time on the same day of the week as often a group uses the same time and place for both public and private meetings.

Your best chance is probably demonstrations, particularly big ones that have been called by several groups (a lot of anarchists don't turn up to Leninist front demos (i.e. demos called by just one group)). Depending on how organised they are the anarchists may have a banner, leaflets or be selling papers. They may also be marching with a general community or campaign group. Some groups won't have anarchist in their title so look out for:

- Black and Red Banners, particularly ones based around the anarchist flag
- Banner titles that include words like 'libertarian' or 'solidarity', symbols like circled A's (obvious!) or a cat with its back arched (wild-cat) — a common logo for groups that are trying to build 'revolutionary' unions.

Generally if you fail to find a local group by any of these methods then there is not one worth finding! You can also use the internet to try and find local groups but very often small local groups will not have any internet presence at all. You could email any national groups that are in your country and ask them but keep in mind that they also may not know of any local group or if they disagree with them may not tell you how to contact them.

Once you have located a group, you will want to evaluate it to see if its worthwhile being involved in and what sort of contribution you can make to it.

While doing all this you should also start to engage in activity by yourself in case you don't find anyone else. This should also give other isolated anarchists a way of finding you.

Evaluating an Anarchist Group

Once you have found an anarchist group the next thing to do is to work out whether or not you should get involved in it. If the answer is 'no' (and sometimes this is the right answer) you'll need to look around for another group or try and set up a new one.

In many countries where anarchism is weak and has no real recent history, groups may exist which call themselves anarchist but don't really have a lot to do with anarchism. It can just be a trendy label. Or sometimes a group just runs out of energy but keep going for social reasons (i.e. because the people like meeting up for a drink). Problems you should look out for include:

- Attitude to the working class; Is the group based around trying to get the idea of anarchism out and help working class people organise or is it just into 'fringe' issues with no central political aim?
- Does the group try and enforce a particular life-style on people involved, is it only interested in 'drop-outs', squatters or vegetarians? There's nothing wrong with being any of these but if you are expected to live this way then the group is more concerned with life-style than anarchism.
- Is the group composed of people who like hearing their own voices but are unwilling to engage in activity. Does it take part in struggles, unions and demonstrations?
- Is the group democratic in scope, does everyone have a say in decision making or is it run by a Guru whose decisions are unquestioned.
- Are important decisions made at meetings that everyone has an input to or do they seem to be made by a sub-group of friends elsewhere?
- Do they have a public face, do they have a publication, leaflets and public meetings or are they just activists content to do work for others?

If any of these things are problems in the group then you should check around to see if there are any other anarchist organisations around. If there are not or they share the same problems then you probably will have little choice but to get involved anyway and try and change the way the group functions. You may well find this is impossible though. If so, recognise when you are beaten and rather than get demoralised look at the possibility of setting up a new anarchist group. If you feel this way then the odds are other people do as well.

Contributing to an Anarchist Group

Now that you're a member of an anarchist group it's time to start thinking about what sort of contribution you can make to the group. Don't allow yourself to sit back and blindly follow what others suggest, respect the experience of other activists but recognise that you have a contribution to make in all aspects of the group and also a unique perspective on its functioning.

- Is there a theoretical area the group is weak on? If this is the case then perhaps you could research this and explain it to the others through internal educational talks or articles. It's generally impossible for everyone to know everything so its a good idea for people to specialise a little providing they also explain what they discover to everyone.
- Is there a practical skill (e.g. Desk Top Publishing) the group is lacking that you could learn or already know? Can you teach this to others?
- Is there a struggle you can get involved in that no-one else is currently involved in? Perhaps help is needed in particular struggles the group is already involved in. Perhaps you should get involved in a particular area of struggle to confront you own prejudices or just to find out how things function.
- You should start slowly, volunteer for simple stuff first and as you understand how things work (and how much you can sustain) take more things on.

These are practical contributions you can make to building the group and really you should be looking for ways to do one of each. A lot of them are things you can do right from the start.

Setting up an Anarchist Group

There are four simple requirements for an effective organisation

- people
- politics
- money
- commitment.

People

People is pretty self-explanatory. To have a group you need more than one person and really at least five before it becomes sustainable. In most places anarchists are not very hard to come across, in most countries at least 1 in a 1,000 to 1 in 10,000 people might consider themselves an anarchist. So even in fairly small towns there are likely to be at least a dozen or so 'anarchists'. Unfortunately the next step most groups take is to try and set up a group which includes just about everyone that adopts the label. This may seem like the logical thing but problems arise when we look at the next two requirements.

Politics

For a group to be effective it has to have a clear idea of what it is fighting for, not simply what it is fighting against. And it must be agreed what the best tactics are to use and that everyone in the group will use the agreed tactics. This will be discussed at length later.

Money

In order to function, an organisation needs a paper, leaflets, rooms to meet in, money for mailouts and a dozen other items that require lots of the green stuff. Ways of tackling this requirement include:

Ignoring it

Which means things only take place if someone is willing to fund them out of their own pocket. This is pretty common but of course results in things not getting done. It also gives the funder undue influence.

Use 'criminal' means to raise money

This sometimes happens but is generally not a good move as sooner or later people get caught and end up in prison or worse. What's more, if you come under any sort of police investigation it will rapidly become apparent that you are getting funds from some dodgy source which will in itself attract further investigation. It also gives the state a good excuse for a 'non-political' clamp down.

Organise fund raisers

Although I think this can work well for special purchases, like say a printing press if its used for regular bills (printing, rent etc.) it soon turns into a massive drag and waste of resources. You can spend half of the time just discussing jumble sales and disco's which is off-putting.

Membership levy/subs.

This is what the WSM uses, members contribute 5% of their gross income on a weekly or monthly basis. A percentage system is fairer then a flat rate as an unemployed member (on 100 dollars a week, the state welfare) pays 5 dollars where as someone working and earning 500 dollars a week pays at least 25 dollars. This gives us an income to pay for our paper, magazine, leaflets, rooms and even to subsidise travel to demos for unemployed members. Of course it also has a negative effect on the first requirement, people, as some people may be unwilling to loose the equivalent of a couple of beers a week. Which brings me to the fourth requirement, commitment.

Commitment

The amount of work you do and the amount of money you are willing to put in depends on you feeling good about the organisation. It is adversely affected if you feel you are being used, or that other people are not willing to contribute their share. That much is obvious. However its also true that your commitment will be dependant on how much you agree with what the group is doing/saying and whether the groups seems to be going somewhere or just treading water. It's easy to keep people around when lots of stuff is happening, the difficult thing is the periods in between bursts of activity.

I favour a high commitment oriented group over a 'as many people as possible' one. With time I think the high commitment one can come to involve a lot of people where as I don't think the reverse can be true. Enough background, here's some concrete ideas:

- Find another four or five people that are willing to do something serious. You may know this many already. If not, get an address you can put on leaflets and start leafleting demo's etc. with anarchist stuff. Get a flag or a banner together. Maybe call a public meeting on anarchism and see who turns up.
- Once you get your four or five people be prepared to spend a couple of years getting your act together before you start to expand. Agree on a membership levy and conditions of membership. Write down agreed perspectives and strategy for promoting anarchism and

getting involved in activity. Start publishing a regular paper arguing these ideas. Sell it through bookshops, campaign meetings and demos. Get involved around struggles and develop respect for your group as good activists and people with good ideas. Don't concentrate on talking to anarchists, concentrate on talking to activists. Find out about the national groups and travel to nearby demos/conferences. Make a banner you can bring on marches. I know all of this is possible with as few as five people because I spent the period from 1989–91 doing just that here.

- Above all you need to be patient. A big problem is the 'revolution next year' syndrome where you hype yourself up to expecting a lot and then get disappointed when it does not materialise. Work out where you are going but be prepared to go there slowly, as I said above, it is likely to be two years before you get any serious return on your work.

The Policy of an Anarchist Organisation

There have been and are large disagreements within the anarchist movement over how anarchist organisations should formulate policy and whether or not agreed policy should be binding on the members of the organisation. I come from a tradition within anarchism sometimes called 'platformism'. Central to this tradition is the idea that to be effective the anarchist organisation must debate and agree on organisational positions and that the members of the organisation should then put this into practise.

It is obvious that if you are going to be involved in struggles as an anarchist organisation (rather than a loose collection of individuals), and you want to have an influence on them that you will then need to do so all together. To do this you need to agree what it is you are fighting for within the struggle and what tactics you think that struggle or movement should be using.

We find the best way of doing this is to start by a process of education and discussion around the issue and then move onto creating written policy that can be debated, amended and if necessary voted on point by point. If you have a look at our 'Position papers' you will get an idea of the sort of policy this method generates. The big advantage of this method is that once things are written down in this way it becomes very clear what exactly has been decided. But it should be understood that these positions should never be seen as 'the end' of a particular debate. They don't represent perfection but rather the best collective understanding and tactics the organisation could generate at that particular time. They should always be open to further debate and amendment as circumstances and knowledge changes. Although it is a good idea to limit major modifications to national conferences so when there is a lot of disagreement you don't end up doing nothing but amending position papers!

As well as deciding tactics for particular struggles this way it is also a very good idea to have agreed position papers on the organisations approach to key political/social issues like racism and sexism. Agreeing on these general positions will make it far, far easier to rapidly reach agreement about how the organisation should involve itself around specific struggles that arise from these issues.

Finally and perhaps most importantly it's a good idea to have a constitution that lays down how these positions are drawn up. A general set of perspectives that seeks to describe what the organisation thinks it can do over the next period and how in general it expects a revolutionary transformation of society to occur is also a good idea.

You'll also want to work out how much agreement you will expect new members to have with the position papers before they join. After some experimentation we have drawn up a brief document that outlines some core points that we think new members must agree with and then we say that they must be willing to implement the strategy in the position papers. This allows for healthy disagreement and debate to exist within the organisation. You'll get a much better idea of the thinking behind all this by looking at our position papers, some links to these are below

- WSM Constitution www.struggle.ws

Position Papers & Policy statements

- [Our Perspectives struggle.ws](#)
- [Role of the Anarchist Organisation struggle.ws](#)
- [The Trade Unions struggle.ws](#)
- [Fighting Racism struggle.ws](#)

Internal Meetings in an Anarchist Group

One thing central to any functional anarchist group is regular internal meetings. In a healthy organisation almost all decisions will be made at these meetings and there will be a sufficient level of discussion to ensure all those attending have a good idea of the activity and arguments in the different struggles the organisation is involved in. Internal meetings should also have some time given over to education.

Frequency and location

A new group or one engaged in a lot of activity should meet at least once a week, at the same time and day. As soon as possible you should try and find a regular venue for meeting that is not someone's home. You'll want a space that's private enough for you to have strong disagreements in and where only the members of the group will be while you are using it. In Ireland this means most groups use private rooms in quiet pubs that are glad for the additional customers on quiet nights!

Decision making

Arguments about how best to reach decisions are fundamental to anarchism. What I have found works best is to allow plenty of time for discussion in the hope of being able to reach a consensus. Only when it becomes obvious that this is not possible should you move to a vote. If time permits it may make sense to postpone making a contentious decision to the next meeting to give people a chance to think things over (and calm down!).

Conduct of discussion

Even with a small group its normally a very good idea to have someone to chair the meeting. Being able to chair a meeting well is quite difficult, in particular you need to be very careful not to abuse your position in a strong argument. But its also important that the same person does not chair every meeting. Perhaps the best way is to have a list of everyone willing to chair and each week take the next person on the list.

Basically a chair should:

- try and arrange the room so that everyone sits in a circle and make sure you are seated where you can see everyone
- if there are new people there start off by going around the circle and getting everyone to say their name

- at the start of the meeting ask people for items for an agenda and then stick to that agenda. If people start speaking on topics rather than the one under discussion interrupt them politely and tell them you are adding that item to the agenda
- ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to speak
- generally it's a good idea to ask people to put up their hand when they want to speak and then to take a list of people waiting. In most situations it's a very good idea to put people who have not yet spoken to the top of this queue.
- if the discussion is just taking place between a few people and in particular if it is just between two, it is often a good idea to suggest going around the circle and giving everyone a chance to speak
- pay attention – people who are less confident about speaking will often indicate that they want to speak in a minor way (eg briefly half put up their hand). A good chair will spot this and encourage them to speak
- control yourself – while the chair can speak in debates you should try and speak the least and always put yourself at the end of the queue. There is nothing worse than a chair who feels they are entitled to comment after every single speaker. Be very strict with yourself
- don't allow people speaking to insult other people in the room. If they do interrupt and make it clear that this is not acceptable
- if the discussion is going around in circles with the same people making the same points again and again you should point this out and ask if people want to continue the discussion or 1) Move to a vote 2) Postpone the discussion to later in the meeting or the next meeting
- if there is any disagreement on what to do you should call an immediate hand vote on whether or not to continue the discussion and then on what to do with the discussion.
- if it appears a decision has been reached (i.e. everyone is agreeing) then write down what you think the decision is then read this back to the meeting.
- if it appears a vote is necessary then make sure the exact question to be voted on is written down and then read this question back to the meeting before taking the vote. This is very important in case there is later disagreement over what exactly was decided.

Agenda

If its known who is chairing the meeting in advance it may be a good idea for that person to start the meeting with a suggested agenda. In any case the agenda should almost always include

- minutes of last meeting
- correspondence to be dealt with
- decisions that have to be made

- other issues people want discussed
- AOB at the end for minor things people want to mention or things they have 'just remembered'

If there is any disagreement over the order of the agenda then this should be quickly discussed and voted on at the start of the meeting. If the chair thinks there is a lot to get through it may make sense to set a maximum amount of time that can be spent discussing particular topics right at the start of the meeting.

Minutes

Someone should be responsible every week for keeping minutes of the meeting and preparing these to be read at or distributed before the next meeting. Minutes need not be very detailed (you don't need to write down what everyone says). They should include

- a list of who attended the meeting
- a list of topics discussed
- a list of decisions reached for each topic, this should be a copy of what the chair reads out
- a list of who has volunteered to do what
- a list of items to be discussed at the next meeting
- further comments

It is important that meetings start on time and end before or at the time they are advertised to end at. Certainly they should end once they have reached the advertised time and somebody needs to leave.

Financing an Anarchist Group

Unfortunately under capitalism finance is one of the most essential things to get right. In setting up an anarchist group I discuss some basic finance strategies and argue that the best method to use a system based on a Membership levy/subs.

This is where all members are required to contribute a percentage of their (gross) income on a weekly or monthly basis. A percentage system is fairer than a flat rate as an unemployed member (on 100 dollars a week, the state welfare) pays 5 dollars whereas someone working and earning 500 dollars a week pays at least 25 dollars.

In '1st world' countries this should provide enough money to run an organisation without the need for additional fund raising for routine use. However in serious organisations outside the '1st world' it is not unusual for members of a small group to have to donate much larger percentages of their income in order to keep their group functioning! For this reason if you are in the first world you might like to set aside a percentage of the group's income as an international solidarity fund.

Each local section of the group will need a treasurer to keep track of the payment of subs and to keep track and account for any expenditure by the local section. These accounts should be available for any member to inspect although in terms of income you might want to decide that while individual subs should be listed, no name should be attached to each item. This is essential as suspicion over the misuse of funds can easily destroy a group.

On a regional/national basis, a national conference should decide that a certain percentage of each branch's income (perhaps 50%) should go to a national account and be supervised by a national treasurer. This national account can be used to pay for national expenditure (printing of papers, books etc), perhaps helping small branches with low income/unemployed members to carry out regular activity, and helping individual branches faced with local opportunities to make the most of them. Again these accounts should be open to inspection by all members and a summary listing major items should be regularly circulated to all members.

Producing an Anarchist Publication

Probably one of the most important things you can do as an organisation is to produce anarchist publications. This can be a way of explaining your ideas and the ideas of anarchism to far more people in your area than you could reach by any other means. Let's start by looking at some different types of publication.

A single sheet leaflet or, as it's called in the US, a pamphlet

This is by far the easiest publication to produce and, because it's short, also by far the cheapest. Basically anyone with a computer or even a typewriter can write a leaflet, bring it to a local stationary shop and photocopy as many copies as they can afford. Most of the time leaflets are produced to advertise a particular event (a march) or to try and mobilise people around a particular issue. (For instance at the time of writing we are considering producing 20,000 leaflets urging a No vote in a referendum.)

The disadvantage with a leaflet is that you can't say very much — there isn't enough space. So while they are useful for promoting a single idea/event it's difficult to do much more. Have a look at some of the 'Anarchist News' leaflets we produced which, as well as addressing particular issues, also try and introduce some explanation of what anarchism is.

An anarchist paper

Most groups try their hand at some point at producing an anarchist paper. Here, over a number of pages, you can combine articles on anarchism with articles about particular issues. But the higher cost of producing a paper means you will almost certainly have to sell them to people rather than giving them away. Although with a good sub structure, a few members in full time employment and a thin paper you may be able to do this — currently we are doing this with 'Workers Solidarity' allowing us to distribute 6,000 copies six times a year.

A paper should really be directed at people who are not convinced anarchists and perhaps who don't even see themselves as left wing. So it needs to address issues that concern the 'person in the street' in a serious way. A lot of anarchist papers don't do this very well, they tend to be full of articles that are relevant to the anarchist movement or which simply sloganise about particular aspects of capitalism.

Articles should be written as if they are going to be read by your non-political friends, relations and work mates. In fact you should be quite happy to sell these people your group's paper and feel that they will get something out of it. Generally this means that you need to avoid 'jargon' and address issues in a way that will make sure they read to the end of the article rather than throw the paper into the corner after the first paragraph.

If you are saying something ‘unpopular’ for instance (and a lot of the time you will need to) you need to carefully argue for your point of view and back it up with as many facts as possible. And when you’re using facts its often a lot more convincing if you can say they come from a source people accept as valid. So for instance rather than simply saying “top executives earn 419 times the average wage of a US blue-collar worker” you should say “Business Week reported that in 1999 top executives earned 419 times the average wage of a US blue-collar worker.”

A magazine

We publish a magazine called Red and Black Revolution. The idea of this magazine is that we can publish quite long articles (up to 7,000 words) that can look at issues around anarchism in a lot of detail. This is quite useful if you want to influence the thinking of other sections of the anarchist movement and also to demonstrate to activists here that anarchism is not just a couple of nice slogans but can uniquely add to our understanding of historical and current struggles.

This means that a lot of the articles require some real original research in order to be written. Rather than writing articles in a few days or weeks as you can for a paper, the articles often need to be researched and written over months.

I think this sort of magazine is quite ambitious, definetly something you shouldn’t try until you have established a regular paper. Apart from anything else it appeals to a much narrower layer than a paper can. Many of the technicalities of publication though are the same for a paper, you just need to leave a lot of extra time for each stage.

Pamphlets (short books)

In Ireland a pamphlet means a short book of 20 or so pages. These are a lot easier to produce than a magazine but allow you to cover a topic with the same sort of details. Arguably the first thing you should consider producing is a pamphlet that explains what anarchism is and how it would work using local examples. This is particularly the case if you leave in a region where people know very little about anarchism.

Editing

Something that you should have with every publication is an editorial procedure. In a very new and small group it is often a good idea for the entire group to edit the groups publications as this will help to develop skills and also will procedure a useful mechanism for discussion. There are several important aspects to an editing procedure

Political content

Is the article in general agreement with the groups position, if it’s not should it be published anyway with a note saying it is the writers view. Often the writer may just have not fully thought through what they are saying so then the best thing is for the editorial group to make suggestions about how the article could be changed. Sometimes though the writer may want to publish an article that disagrees with aspects of policy — the group will need to agree how this is to be done.

Some anarchists are nervous about this sort of political editing. But I can say after having gone through many years of it both as a writer and as an editor it is actually extremely useful to the writer as well as the organisation. It is often difficult to spot all the implications of everything you write. Something you read one way maybe read in a completely different way by someone else. Often I forget to cover particular details or get distracted and waffle on about stuff that is not all that relevant. A good editorial procedure not only corrects this but also helps me write in a better way in the future (at least I hope so).

Article balance

The editorial group should make sure the overall composition of the paper is balanced. Basically its best if the organisation as a whole defines a guideline of what a balanced paper should look like. For instance this could be at least 1/4 anarchist history/theory, 1/3 local news (of which 1/9 should be about unions), 1/4 international news which should as far as possible be about victories.

For each issue of the paper the editorial group should first sit down and work out a list of articles that will reflect this balance. They should also give an idea of what points they think should be covered and how long the article should be (e.g. 400 words). They might also decide who should be asked to write each article or in a small group they could just bring the article list to the next meeting and look for volunteers.

Every now and again, the organisation should discuss the paper and tell the editorial group whether or not they felt the balance was right. Over a period of time this should help to develop a consistent paper quality.

Proof reading

A common problem with anarchist papers is that they are riddled with spelling mistakes and incorrect grammar. Now while this doesn't worry me much the world is full of people who will use this as an excuse not to take the ideas they contain seriously. Let's not give them that excuse!

After articles have been agreed someone from the editorial group who is good at 'proofreading' (basically spotting mistakes) should look carefully at them and either correct the article themselves or pass the corrections on to who ever is doing the layout.

Layout

While its true that the better your publication looks the more seriously many people will take it, today with the help of a computer and a little bit of time anyone can produce a nice looking publication. Include lots of graphics and don't make the text too small – this will encourage people to read it.

Printing

For small numbers of copies, up to a couple of thousand then photocopying maybe the cheapest way to produce your publication. But for larger number and for a better looking publication you will should get it printed. Start off by asking where other small left or community groups get their printing done. Odds are this may be the best choice for you as well. Failing this, ring around a

number of printers for quotes; check also if they are unionised, the last thing you want to do is do your printing via some union busting corporation!

Distribution

Any sort of public protest or left/union/community meeting is probably a goodplace to distribute or sell material. Also consider doing a street sale at a regular time every week or month which can also be a way of people getting to meet you. If there is a large workplace in your area which has clear shift changes this can also be a good place to distribute. Finally many groups distribute 'door to door', one advantage of doing this is that it means the same people can be given consecutive issues of the publication and so can 'get to know you'.

Its always worth encouraging people to volunteer to help you with distribution. Often people who don't have the time to be fully involved with the group will be willing to help give out or sell a few copies of each publication you produce.

By way of a conclusion

Producing a publication is pretty easy, the trick is not to be too ambitious and to aim at a level you can achieve. There is nothing wrong with starting off with a single page leaflet for instance. Or in producing a paper a lot of whose content you simply take off the internet to add to the few local stories you have time to produce. It's something you will learn as you go along, both in terms of how to produce your publication but also in terms of what to write about that people will find interesting.

Building Links between Movements

Aileen, Apr 2001

Talk given to the Convergence Conference 2001;

This is the text of a talk given to a Workers Solidarity Movement meeting. As such it represents the authors opinion alone and may be deliberately provocative in order to encourage discussion. Also it may be in note form. Still we hope you find it useful.

Some Questions that need to be answered.

- What has your experience been? What have you learnt from it?
- What is the big picture?
- Why do you want to build links?

Groups with shared Campaigning issues

1. What is the level of political unity you need?
2. What are the strategies you want to use?

What do you need to build useful links?

1. Information sharing
 2. Developing Strategy
 3. Carrying out activity
 4. Trust
- What types of links are useful? Tight links? Loose links?
 - How do you build links between groups that don't share a campaigning issues?
 - What other questions do we need to be asking?

When I was asked to give this talk, it made me think back on my own experience as an activist. This talk is structured around the questions above. I'll give some of my answers which derive from my experience. As you listen, you should be asking yourself, what answers you would come up with.

My first political act was probably writing to a women's program on RTE in primary school to complain that girls in my class had to go to sewing class while the boys were allowed to go out to play football. In secondary school, like a lot of people at the time, I was worried about the threat of nuclear war and joined CND. Activism didn't begin until I went to university. I arrived at the end of the eighties at a time of recession, high unemployment and cutbacks. The government embarked on a program of introducing fee rises for third level education. I became involved in the student union organised opposition. I remember marching up O'Connell street with only about a dozen others, behind the TCD Student Union banner. Over the course of the next year, student opposition grew. There was a two week occupation of one of the college buildings, and student marches would end with us running up Kildare street, overturning barriers, sitting down and getting arrested. I was involved in two other, for me, important events, the protests against the fascists Historian David Irving (which lead me to be sued), and an ongoing struggle for women's abortion rights. Throughout this time with a group of friends I became interested in anarchism probably initially through reading Orwells, Homage to Catalonia. During the summers I'd work in London, live in squats and meet up with English anarchists and buy anarchist books and magazines which were unavailable in Ireland.

I discovered that there was other anarchists in Dublin and joined the WSM. When I left college the recession was in full swing. One of the principals that I had come to believe through my college years was that you struggle where you are, as a student I was active in the student union. As a member of the unemployed I joined a small group called the Portobello Unemployed Action Group. These were pretty miserable years. There were only about a half dozen of us, we picketed and occupied, and generally got press attention, but little popular support.

Since then I've been involved in more campaigns than I probably remember. Some of the issues were Irish, such as the fight for abortion rights, through the X-Case and various referendums, the fight for Divorce, against the bail referendum, against extradition, against racism against Travellers and now racism against refugees. Some of the issues were local, such as campaign against the Water Charges and Bin Charges, or the support groups for strikes such as Pat the Baker and the Aldi strike. Some of them were international such as against the war in the gulf, against the imposition of the Death Penalty on Mumia Abu Jamal, in support of the Zapatistas in Mexico. And there were countless once off pickets in defence of prisoners or to protest some particular act of cruelty on behalf of some government of other.

Some of the issues were won, some were lost and many are still ongoing.

Anarchism; My Big Picture

My work on these campaigns has been motivated by my anarchism. Briefly put, I want the replacement of the current economic system, a system based on profit and hierarchy, with a system based on need and freedom. I don't believe the current system can be reformed to make it more human. In different ways, and on various levels, my campaigning work is aimed at creating the possibility of revolution. Revolutionary change is not as unusual as is often thought; in 1974

we had the Portuguese revolution, in 1977 Iranian Revolution, in 1979 Nicaragua, in the eighties we saw the collapse of the Soviet Union. What is rarer is the type of revolution that anarchists are seeking. That is a revolution that is democratic, that is organised by the bottom up, that rejects leadership of parties or individuals, that puts in place democratic structures with which to run society. For this to happen people have to believe that they have the power to bring about change, they have to be able to organise effectively, they have to have skill and experience. They also need to have an idea not only of what they are fighting against, but also what they want to put in its place. In all the single issue campaigns, my aim has been first and foremost to win, to make the things a little bit more comfortable or a little bit safer for myself or for others. But also, the aim has been to gain skills for myself and for others, to generate self-activity and empowerment, to create the network of activists, to politicise communities and groups, to build peoples political ability and confidence. An anarchist revolution is a revolution created by the mass of society, it is a revolution that is created by many different people, different groups, and different organisations. I am interested in building links between different groups and movements, because it is through these links that the many different groups in society can operate as one to bring about mass change.

Shared Campaigning Issues

That's my big picture, you need to ask yourself, what's yours. If the question is how do we build links between different groups and movements, the answer has to be another question. Why do you want to build links? In each instance, what is your aim. I say in each instance because it should be recognised that there are many different levels at which links between groups can operate. Before looking at the big picture, lets look at the smaller one, at building links between groups around a shared campaigning issue. Here, there are different levels of political unity, different levels of strategy and different levels of commitment.

Political Unity

Within many political issues, one of the first questions asked is, how broad should the campaign be, should we be building links with people we may fundamentally be in disagreement or opposition with? For example, in the US, anti-pornography campaigners built alliances with the religious right. In Ireland, the group who has been most targeted by the Public Order Act has been the fundamentalist catholic, pro-life group Youth Defence. Should a campaign against the Act, build links with these forces? The choices on offer are often not that stark. Can an anti-racist movement in Ireland incorporate those who support boarder controls within its midst? Given that Labour, Fine Fail, the PDs and Fine Gael have all at one stage or another been involved in governments that supported deportations, should an anti-racist movement include representative of these parties among its midst. On one hand, the argument is the bigger the better, the broader the focus, the more people are involved, the greater the impact. On the other, the broader the movement, the more dilute its politics, the weaker its arguments, the weaker its impact.

Strategy

Often the different political position of different groups is reflected in the different strategies they adopt. When I was involved in the Portobello Unemployment Action Group, our position was that the government policies towards the unemployed should be exposed so we focused on visible activity, on pickets and occupations. At the time many other groups, instead argued that negotiation was required, and so opposed any activity that might lessen their respectability in the eyes of the government (who were often their funders). In this instance, although different groups shared a common campaigning aim, the different strategies adopted were incompatible.

This is not always the case, often a decision will be taken to build a broader umbrella movement, but to create space, within the ranks, for a more radical element. The broader group focuses on media intervention, on lobbying politicians, on providing speakers for chat shows and articles for the papers, while the more radical group emphasises direct action, pickets and demonstrations. This was sometimes seen within the campaigns in favour of the various abortion referendums and operated to greater and lesser extent. At times the tensions between the two approaches made the usefulness of links questionable. Unity is not always strength.

Therefore, before building links I suggest, you have to know, why do you want these links? What do we hope to achieve? What is their purpose? Is there a point in building links between groups that have no interest in common? Is it meaningful to build links between groups that have opposing interests? Links should be seen as a tool, the link isn't the end-goal, but a means by which we get to the end. Some links are useful, some are not. Some have a meaningful existence, some only exist on paper.

Building Useful Links; Communication

Supposing therefore that you are clear about why you want to make links with other individuals, groups or organisations, what do you have to do to build meaningful links? Firstly, you have to consider information communication, what is the best way of communicating between elements in a network. Many NGOs, community groups or partnership organisations have offices and a permanent staff. Communication that is centred on these can be efficient but also can be problematic as the wider membership of the groups can be left out of the loop. In response to this some groups set up their own newsletter or paper, which is distributed among the membership. Increasingly websites and mailing lists are used to exchange ideas within and between organisations. For example, here in Ireland the Latin American Solidarity Centre a coalition of about five groups run a magazine and a mailing list. Here the individual groups can share with the others and with the general public the issues that are of current importance to them.

Building Useful Links; Strategy

The next level of communication is aimed at developing common strategies or approach. Here we are moving on from informing others about what we are doing and moving towards working with others on common projects. E-mail lists are again useful, as are workshops and conferences. Areas of common interest are explored as are areas for joint action, tactics and approaches to resolving problems. Currently I am involved in a campaign that is aimed at defeating the imposi-

tion of a refuse tax in Dublin. The campaign will soon have to decide what is the best strategy to adopt in order to do this. Should the campaign be built around non-payment? Should we use it as an issue in the General Election? How should we be building local campaigning groups? If the different elements of the campaign are to work together these questions will have to be resolved at a general meeting or conference.

Building Useful Links; Activity

Links are given life when activity is undertaken between the different groups. A common type of activity is solidarity activity, activity aimed at aiding one element in the network. After the Prague demonstrations, a number of Czech, Hungarian, Pole, Danish and English activists were arrested. In a number of ways, the elements in the network worked to offer them support, appeals were sent out to activist mailing lists, sample protest letters were prepared, distributed and returned. Embassies were picketed, in Ireland three different sets of people picketed the Czech embassy. We arranged for a Czech anarchist to come on a speaking tour of Ireland and made collections for legal costs at the meetings. As a result, all those in prison were released, though some are awaiting court trials. As can be seen from this example, the links between different elements in the network need not be particularly strong. The different Irish groups were responding to international calls but within Ireland, there weren't lines of communication.

Many of the Irish campaigning issues, abortion, racism, water-charges, bin-charges, the S26 collective, have involved coalitions of groups working together to organise leafleting, pickets, marches and demonstrations.

Building Useful Links; Trust

It should also be noted, that in some cases, campaigns that appear to be broad based are instead initiated and controlled by particular organisations (for example the Anti-nazi League owned by the Socialist Workers Party, Youth Against Racism in Europe owned by the Socialist Party). Links have to start somewhere, and usually it is when a particular individual, group, organisation or party, look for others to become involved in a collective endeavour. There is a difference between initiating a campaign and manipulating a campaign. In the former, the links that are being formed operate in both directions, all elements within the network have an equal role in building the resulting campaign, in deciding its scope, its directions, the goals it will focus on and the tactics it will develop. In the case of 'front organisations' described earlier, the communication goes one way. The initiating group retains control, the other elements are not able to influence policy or strategy. This is a fundamentally dishonest and disempowering method of organisation.

A link between any group or organisation should also be seen as a form of relationship. In order to survive there must be a level of trust between the groups. Much of the work in building links is based around developing working relationships in which the various elements can trust each other and will not act out of self-interest in a way that will reflect badly on the network as a whole and on the elements that make it up. Often links are not formed because groups can not be trusted to follow the democratic mandate of the campaign.

Types of Links

From the examples I've been citing, it becomes obvious that links between groups and organisations vary. They vary in terms of the strength of the link, the level of resources allocated to it and the time scale within which they operate. The strongest type of link is probably that between members of a particular political organisation. Here individuals share a common political position on a wide range of issues, they carry out activities together, and they meet each other on a regular basis, normally once a week and are committed to the organisation over a long period of time, often a lifetime. At the opposite end of the scale, individuals come together for a once off picket, say for example the picketing organised to protest the US sanctions against IRAQ. Here people are unified on this issue. Though they more than likely are also generally leftwing or liberal, these other political positions are generally not communicated or developed. They are together only for an hour or two. They support this particular tactic but again there is no working towards a continued strategy. The links formed are brief and weak, they meet, protest and go home.

In between these two extremes a range of networks exist. There are the single issue campaigns, which meet regularly sometimes over a few months, sometimes over decades. Politically there is agreement over the one particular issue that defines their group.

There are also the linkages between groups. An example of this is the Zapatista Encounter Network. Jan 1st 1994, in Chiapas, Mexico, there was an uprising of indigenous people, organised into a group called the EZLN. As has happened following other central American uprisings through out the world, support groups were set up aimed at preventing the worst excess of the Mexican State. In response to these support groups, the EZLN put out the call, 'be a Zapatista wherever you are'. What they were saying is, we don't want support groups, looking towards Chiapas, instead we want groups of activists following our example working within there own countries. The Zapistas called a general conference in Chiapas. The issue under discussion was not just what was happening in Chiapas and in Mexico, but what was happening in the world in general. This was followed by another conference in Spain. At the conferences, the individuals from different counties met each other, shared experiences and built relationships. In between the conferences, a few formal networks were set up, but informally the individuals and groups kept loosely in touch, mostly through e-mail. A significant section of people organising the current wave of anti-Globalisation protests that have occurred in London, Seattle, Prague, Washington and next month in Quebec and in Genoa in July are people who first came in contact with each other through the Zapatista Encounter networks.

Here you have a network that is loose and informal, that is based on a shared opposition to neo-liberalism and that varies over time, increasing in intensity as the next meeting of world powers arises, falling away in-between.

The point of these examples is to argue that it is not that one linkage is better than another, as such, but that some links are more appropriate means to achieve particular ends.

Conclude

Finally how do you campaign for wider goals? One approach is to broaden a single issue campaign scope from a single issue to a wider goal. This is a problematic approach because it

assumes that those involved in the particular single issue share a wider goal, when in reality most of them don't. A single issue campaign can be successful within its own terms, but often because the unity that exists is only on those terms. Changing the goals, can destroy the co-operation.

Another approach is to try and build links between the single issues.

For me, this what the role of a political organisation is. It is to look for areas of common interest when these aren't immediately obvious, to bring experiences from one area to another, to show how issues that are seemingly different are in fact a product of similar economic pressures. In fact this is almost the definition of a political organisation, a group of people who share the wider goal and work together to achieve it. I am not counterpoising single issue campaigns to political organisations. It is not a case of being for one or for the other. I should also point out that I'm not proposing that there should be one organisation that works for all of us. Unfortunately, the word political organisation is often identified with the political party, the idea that there can exist one organisation, which will lead the way. Political diversity is not a problem for anarchists. Rather, I am proposing that if the wider goal is your concern, it is through political organisation that you will meet people who share that concern. It is through political organisation that you can share experiences in different campaigns and maximise your resources in terms of times and energy. A political organisation should work to develop peoples skills, in public speaking, chairing, writing articles. These skills can then be brought back in the various campaigns.

Finally what you get from a political organisation is support. You are working with people towards the same goal – and you suffer the defeats and victories together. You get on with the next job at hand and you are working together for the prospect of a better society – towards a better future for humanity.

You don't get that from a campaign – and once the campaign is over you are back to being a single individual in a fucked up world.

To conclude. Most of this talk has been about building networks, but part of that process, is the building of organisations. I'm not talking about any one particular organisation, but of building an organisation that reflects your particular beliefs. Organisations are the cement that join the building blocks of campaigns together.

On Organisation by Tom Wetzel

“Consensus” has had a certain popularity as a decision-making method among social change groups since the ‘60s, especially within the anti-nuclear movement but also in anarchist and radical feminist circles. I think we can understand why if we consider what sorts of organisations exist in this country. Mass organisations in which the membership directly shape the decisions are hard to find. How often have members been ruled “out of order” at union meetings by an entrenched official? Most leftist political groups also have a top-down concept of organisation, as befits their preoccupation with “leadership.”

On the other hand, this sort of alienation and lack of control appears absent in activities organised through small circles of acquaintances. Those who engage in an action together typically reached a common agreement after talking it over informally. This leads to the model of the small, informal group — no written constitution, no chair of meetings, no elections for delegated tasks, no careful definition of jobs, no written minutes of meetings. Decisions are made by having an unstructured discussion until consensus is reached.

But informality does not eliminate hierarchy in organisations; it merely masks it. To the insiders, everything appears friendly and egalitarian. But newcomers do not have the same long-standing ties to the group. And having no clear definition of responsibilities, and no elections of individuals who carry out important tasks, makes it more difficult for the membership to control what goes on.

Fortunately, the “small, informal group” is not the only alternative to the dominant hierarchical model of organisation. It is possible to build a formal organisation that is directly controlled by its membership. Being “formal” merely means that the organisation has a written set of rules about how decisions are made, and duties of officers and conditions of membership are clearly defined. An organisation does not have to be top-down in order to be “formal” in this sense. A libertarian organisation would have a constitution that explicitly lays out a non-hierarchical way of making decisions.

Delegating Responsibilities

Sometimes people have the idea that setting up elected positions with defined responsibilities is a “hierarchy,” as if any delegation of responsibility creates a boss. Yet, informality does not avoid delegation since some people will inevitably do tasks on behalf of the group, such as answering correspondence or handling a bank account.

It is possible to elect people to perform delegated tasks without creating a top-down organisation.

Here are a few guidelines:

- The scope of authority of an elected position, such as correspondence secretary or treasurer, should be explicitly defined and delimited, so that everyone knows what this person should be doing, and with the requirement of regular reports to keep the membership informed.
- The person should be elected for a limited term, such as one year, and should be subject to recall at any time by majority vote of the membership (but with a requirement of adequate notice to ensure that this is not “sprung” all of a sudden by those members least favourable to the person currently doing the job).
- If at all feasible, there should be a requirement of mandatory rotation from office. This is especially important for any position of acting as spokesperson or representative of an organisation or body of people. If an organisation is very small, however, it is sometimes difficult to rotate responsibilities. Even so, the person carrying out responsibilities can report regularly to membership meetings and can be thus directed by decisions of the membership.
- Nobody is to be elected to set policy for the organisation, but only to carry out those responsibilities that have been assigned by the membership. The general membership meeting of the organisation must remain the supreme decision-making body and can over-rule any decisions of elected officers.

The idea is that the main decision-making responsibility of the organisation is not to be delegated to some “steering committee” or executive but is conducted directly by the membership through their own discussions and votes; this is the heart of the libertarian concept of organisation.

Since many leftists define social change in terms of putting a particular leadership into power – such as the Leninist concept of “the revolutionary party taking state power” – it is no surprise that even organisations formed, or influenced, by leftists may have a hierarchical set-up where the power to make decisions is concentrated in some executive board or steering committee. While libertarians oppose this practice, and pose the alternative of direct decision-making by the members or rank-and-file participants, it is, nonetheless, not necessary to oppose all delegation of tasks or responsibilities.

The real question should be, “What is the relationship between those vested with responsibilities and the rest of the membership?” If the center of decision-making lies in the general meetings, and those with responsibilities must report to these meetings, and are instructed by them, and (where possible) jobs are rotated, then we do not have a top-down structure, but an organisation where decision-making is from the bottom up.

A Chair is Not a Boss

Often people who favour the “small, informal group” model of organisation also oppose the practice of electing someone to chair a meeting, even if the meeting is a larger gathering. It is easy to understand what they are afraid of. Consider union meetings where the chair is a paid official. He has certain entrenched interests to defend. To serve his ends, he may rule “out of order” motions from the floor on matters of concern to the rank and file, or manipulate the meeting in other ways.

But here the problem is that there is an entrenched bureaucracy; chairing meetings is only one of the ways they control the organisation. The situation is different if the chair is elected at the beginning of the meeting by those present, and if the chair can be removed by majority vote at any time. Being chair of a meeting does not convert someone into a bureaucrat.

I've sat through chairless meetings where people interrupt each other, voices get louder as people try to express themselves, discussions get side-tracked into numerous tangents, and important decisions are put off or hurriedly decided at the last minute. This experience has made me rather frustrated with the prejudice against having a chair of meetings.

If a meeting only consists of a few people, then obviously it does not need to have a chair. But once meetings achieve a certain size, a chair becomes necessary in order to ensure that the meeting stays on track and moves through the agenda in a reasonable amount of time, while making sure that people have an opportunity to speak.

I've heard opponents of chairmanship argue, "It's the responsibility of each individual to make sure that the meeting stays on track and individuals don't get out of hand." But even with the best of intentions, this is difficult to achieve in practice. When you're thinking about what you want to say next, it's hard to also be keeping track of whose turn it is to speak and of what the agenda is.

The rationale behind having a chair is that we delegate to one person the responsibility to concentrate on such things as the agenda and the order of speakers while the rest of us are free to concentrate on what is being said. Of course, it can happen that a chair is manipulative, favouring one particular "side" in a matter under dispute. But in such a situation, a motion to replace the chair would be in order.

The Right to Dissociate

In working out a libertarian concept of organisation, we need to remember that the individual members not only have rights that must be respected by the organisation, they also have obligations to the rest of the membership. Since the majority have the right to control their own organisation, individuals must conduct themselves so as to respect this right of the majority.

For example, if an individual makes public statements that claim to speak for the organisation, but state only the viewpoint of the individual, not a viewpoint actually discussed and agreed to by the majority, then that individual is acting irresponsibly and anti-democratically.

There is, however, no reason why an individual should be required to keep quiet publically about disagreements within the organisation. As long as the individual makes clear that the stated viewpoint is his or her own, public disagreement with the position of the organisation is not irresponsible.

A libertarian concept of organisation must allow for diversity of opinions. This means that members must try to maintain a climate of respecting the opinions of others in the organisation. But what happens when members do not respect the rights of others? What happens when members are threatening to others, or conduct themselves in ways that are very disruptive to the life of an organisation? In such a case the majority may have to consider disassociating themselves from that individual. In other words, the rights of the majority include the right to expel individual members.

To some anarchists, expulsions are always a “purge.” The authoritarian connotation of the latter term are meant to suggest that any expulsion is a violation of freedom, an illegitimate act. But the position of these anarchists is actually self-contradictory. For, it is a very basic libertarian principle that the membership of an organisation have the right to directly control it. And this means that no individual has the “right” to act in ways that prevent the majority from accomplishing the purposes for which they got together. If the majority in an organisation did not have the right to expel disruptive individuals, this would mean that they couldn’t control the conditions of membership and direction of that organisation. Freedom of association implies the freedom to disassociate.

On the other hand, the power to expel members should never be delegated to officials. For, if elected officers can expel members on their own, they can expel critics of how they are conducting their responsibilities. Expulsion certainly is used by officials in hierarchical organisations as a means of maintaining their top-down control. What is illegitimate in such cases is not the act of expulsion in itself, but the top-down way it is carried out.

The point here is that individuals have obligations to the other members of an organisation. And the majority have the right to ensure that the responsibilities of membership are observed. But expulsion is a last resort, and should not be used lightly. Expulsion is something that the membership should decide on directly, in a general membership meeting or convention. And it should always be required that accused individuals be given advance notice and have the right to defend themselves before the general membership prior to a vote to expel.

Talking Until Agreement is Reached

The partisans of informality also tend to be averse to voting as a way of making decisions. They prefer the process of talking until agreement is reached (or not reached). In my experience, this process tends to encourage informal hierarchy. That’s because this process tends to heighten the influence of the more articulate and self-confident individuals, and tends to disenfranchise the shy newcomer, and the less articulate. Voting has the advantage that it is an equalizer. The shy and the aggressive, the articulate and the not-so-articulate, all can raise their hands, and each has only one vote.

Advocates of consensus sometimes say that hierarchical organisation is the only alternative to consensus. But there is also the alternative of direct democracy where decisions are made by majority vote. Direct voting by the members puts the majority of members in control, and control by the majority of members is the opposite of hierarchy. In a hierarchical organisation, it is not the majority of members who are in charge but a few leaders at the top — that is what “hierarchy” means.

The libertarian idea of direct, democratic voting is quite different than the official concept of “democracy” in this society. “Democratic voting” typically means electing officials who then have all the power of making decisions. But that is really elective autocracy, not genuine democracy, which requires direct decision-making by the rank and file.

Formal Consensus

Though “talking until agreement is reached” is the natural method of decision-making for “small, informal groups,” not all advocates of consensus decision-making are averse to formal organisation. However, making the organisation formal — a written constitution, definition of membership and so on — does not eliminate the basic problems of the consensus process.

The requirement of unanimity means that disagreements have to be talked out until verbal consensus emerges. This means that even a formal consensus system tends to heighten the influence of the more talkative, self-confident participants. Also, the requirement of consensus often leads to prolonged, marathon sessions, or meetings where nothing is decided.

This aspect of consensus tends to make the movement less conducive to participation by working people, and tends to reduce participation to the hard-core activists. When people have other demands on their time (job, children, spouse), they will tend to be frustrated by meetings that are unnecessarily long, indecisive, or chaotic. Most people will want to have some sense that something will be accomplished, a clear decision made, and in a reasonable amount of time.

In his pamphlet *Blocking Progress*, Howard Ryan describes a nightmarish example of what can happen with consensus.¹ Many people in the Livermore Action Group — an anti-nuclear action group here in the Bay Area — were uncomfortable with the first point of LAG’s action guidelines which stated: “Our attitude will be one of openness, friendliness and respect toward all people we encounter.” “A common sentiment”, Ryan points out, “was that oppressed people often do not feel these things towards police or authorities and should not be required to feel them in order to join the [Lawrence-Livermore Laboratory] blockade.” In 1982 there was a month-long discussion of this issue, followed by two full days of informal open debate. At the second of these assemblies it was proposed to replace the “friendly and respectful” language with “non-violent.”

Coming towards the end of this long process of discussion, there was a suggestion by one of the participants in the second meeting that a straw poll be taken to determine the general opinion in the room. This was itself considered so controversial that two hours were consumed in debating whether it was even okay to take a straw poll. Finally a poll was taken and the vote was 74 to 2 in favour of changing the non-violence code to remove the “respectful and friendly” language. One of the participants has described what then took place:

“One of the two people [a doctrinaire pacifist] blocked it. He was asked repeatedly to stand aside, to leave, to die. People were just so upset. He wouldn’t budge and it was blocked.”

This is a good example of the elitist coercion that consensus permits.

Consensus is Anti-democratic

The requirement of unanimity is anti-democratic. A small minority does not have the right to prevent the majority of members from doing what they want to do. Organisations are not of value in themselves but only as a vehicle for co-operation and collective activity. Insofar as consensus

¹ Howard Ryan, *Blocking Progress: Consensus Decision Making in the Anti-Nuclear Movement*, 1983, published by the Overthrow Cluster of the Livermore Action Group. Ryan’s pamphlet makes a number of the same arguments against consensus that I am making here.

thwarts the majority from doing what it wants, it makes the organisation an ineffective vehicle for them. This can lead to splits and fragmentation – exactly the result that the advocates of consensus say they want to avoid.

The rules of an organisation can – and must – protect the rights of individuals and minorities. If one studies the situation in the AFL-CIO-type unions, and major political organisations, it is true that the rights of individuals and political minorities are often in a sorry state. But these are hierarchical organisations. It is the hierarchy, not “majority voting,” that is the problem.

Anarchists of the more individualistic persuasion argue that consensus is necessary to avoid “tyranny of the majority.” But where in the real world does the majority have real power? The real tyrannies that people are fighting around the world are tyrannies of entrenched minorities, of governments and bosses. I don’t want to claim that “majorities are always right” but I do believe that people have the right to make their own mistakes. The issue here is whether people have the right to control their own movements and organisations. To give a single individual or small minority the right of veto on decisions is to have a system of minority rule.

Even when individuals or minorities do not actually threaten or use a block to keep the majority from doing what it wants, everyone is aware that they could, if the organisation is run by consensus. The structural requirement of unanimity puts pressure on the majority to placate small minorities in order to accomplish something. Often this leads to decisions that paper over disagreements and leave everyone dissatisfied.

Rudy Perkins has described this problem, based on his experience in the Clamshell Alliance in New England in the late ‘70s:

“Majority rule is disliked because amongst the two, three or many courses of action proposed, only one is chosen; the rest are “defeated.” Consensus theoretically accommodates everyone’s ideas. In practice this often led to:

- a watered down, least-common-denominator solution, or
- the victory of one proposal through intimidation or acquiescence, or
- the creation of a vague proposal to placate everyone, while the plan of one side or another was actually implemented through committees or office staff.
- In other words, within the anti-nuclear movement ideas are in competition and some do win, but under consensus the act of choosing between alternatives is usually disguised. Because the process is often one of mystification and subterfuge, it takes power of conscious decision away from the organisation’s membership.”²

Consensus puts pressure on minorities not to express misgivings or disagreements because their dissent would prevent the organisation from making a decision. Thus it actually becomes harder for minorities to state dissenting opinions because dissent is always a disruptive act. When decisions are made by majority vote, on the other hand, there is not this heavy “cost” to dissent and minorities can freely state their disagreement without thereby disrupting or blocking the organisation from reaching a decision.

² Rudy Perkins, “Breaking with Libertarian Dogma: Lessons from the Anti-Nuclear Struggle,” Black Rose, Fall 1979, p. 15.

Consensus also means that it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to change an organisation's orientation even when it is clear to most members that the current direction is failing. That's because there will almost always be a minority who will be against change, because the current direction of the organisation may have been what attracted them to it, or because they may simply prefer what they are used to.

Simple Majority

"Simple majority" is the requirement of one vote more than half the votes cast in order to make a decision. A simple majority is the smallest number of votes needed to guarantee that a decision is made.³

Advocates of simple majority sometimes hear the retort: "But do we want to have a major decision made with 51% for 49% against?" Decisions that organisations make in the course of conducting their affairs vary a lot in their relative importance to the participants. For some decisions, a narrow majority won't matter because those who voted "no" may not have really strong feelings one way or the other. If it is an important issue, though, it is clearly a problem if an organisation is closely split.

Sometimes, in organisations that are based on membership participation and democratic voting, close votes will lead the group to stop and reconsider the issue in order to find a proposal that accommodates objections.

More often, this process happens before it reaches a vote. When it becomes clear in the course of the discussion on a proposal that the membership are closely divided and have strong feelings on the issue, there is likely to be an effort to find a proposal that mitigates objections. For one thing, it is to the advantage of the proposal's partisans to have as much support as possible within the organisation. The work of the organisation is bound to suffer if it is badly split — dissatisfied members may drag their feet or drop out.

When a union conducts a strike vote, for example, the partisans of a strike will want to get the largest possible majority for a strike. If the vote for a strike isn't overwhelming, if there is only a narrow majority for striking, the union will be less likely to actually go out because the division among the workforce undermines the chances of winning a strike.

Such considerations have at times led people to propose decision-making based on larger majorities, such as two-thirds or three-fourths. But the problem with this is that most of the decisions that organisations make are not so crucial that large majorities are needed.

Moreover, stipulating a majority larger than 50% plus one means that decisions can be blocked by minorities. Though the minorities required to "block" a majority are larger than under consensus, this still permits minority control. A cohesive minority could exercise undue influence on a group due to its potential for blocking what the majority wants. Thus the arguments against consensus also apply to some extent against a formal requirement of two-thirds or three-fourths majority. The advantage to "simple majority" as a decision-making method is that it is the only way to formally preclude minority rule.

³ If we were to allow a decision to be made when half vote for a proposal, then it might happen that half vote for proposal A and half vote for proposal B. And what if A and B are conflicting proposals? Requiring one vote more than half guarantees that a single solution is decided upon.

There may be circumstances when it would be desirable to have a larger majority than 50% plus one — as in those cases where the organisation is closely split on important issues. But instead of trying to make a formal rule for this, I think this should be dealt with by the membership using good sense in such situations. Not everything that is desirable for an organisation can be created by formal rules.

The conditions required for the healthy and democratic functioning of an organisation go beyond the formal rules. Whether the rights of members are respected also depends on the climate in the organisation. How people treat each other is an informal factor but it is just as important as clauses in constitutions.

There is usually some sort of underlying, informal consensus in almost any organisation. To take an obvious example, there needs to be a consensus that disagreements are not settled by punching someone out. So, there does need to be a consensus on some things, on certain basic assumptions that underlie the unity of the organisation. The advocates of “consensus decision-making” are correct in perceiving this, but where they go wrong is in trying to elevate this into a general principle of decision-making so that everything requires a consensus. The consensus system puts day-to-day decisions, on the one hand, and the most important decisions, fundamental purposes and ways of treating each other, on the other hand, all on the same level.

Small Groups, No Power

However, consensus does often work reasonably well in small groups, especially where the participants have a common background and shared assumptions. Some people might maintain that small, independent groups are all that is needed.

Indeed, some partisans of the small group have argued that “bigness” inevitably brings bureaucracy in movements and that only small, independent groups can be genuinely controlled by their members. This ignores the methods that libertarians have developed for avoiding top-down control in mass organisations (such as the guidelines I mentioned earlier), and the examples of libertarian mass unions that functioned through assemblies, without an entrenched bureaucracy; organisations like the Industrial Workers of the World back in the ‘10s or the Spanish National Confederation of Labour (CNT) in the ‘30s.

If the “bigness means bureaucracy” dogma were true, a libertarian society would be impossible. To have a society organised along anarchist lines means that there must be a means by which the whole populace can participate in making crucial decisions affecting society as a whole. For this to happen it must be possible to have large organisations, organisations spanning vast areas, such as the North American continent, that are able to function in a non-hierarchical way, directly controlled by their rank and file participants.

If the whole society could be organised to make decisions through direct democracy and mass participation, as anarchists advocate, then surely it must be possible for people to build mass organisations that are run this way today. If not, then how could a libertarian society be brought into existence? Only a mass movement that is itself organised non-hierarchically could create a society free of top-down, bureaucratic, exploitative social relations.

This brings us to the clearest problem with the “small groups” doctrine: Small groups have no power. The power to change society requires a mass movement, and the development of solidarity among working people on a large scale. To unite people from a variety of backgrounds and

cultures, to coalesce the various groups into a real movement, to pool resources, mass organisations are needed. In the absence of a larger movement, small groups can be discouraged by their own lack of resources and sense of isolation.

Unless working people can organise their solidarity into mass organisations, they will not be able to develop the power to challenge our very powerful adversaries – the corporations and their government. Without a mass movement, most people will not develop a sense that they have the power to change society. Our ideal of social change in the direction of democratic participation and workers control will appear to most people as merely a “nice idea, but impractical.” Only the strength of a mass movement can convince the majority that our vision of a society run by working people is feasible.

Building the Federation: a Primer for Forming Local Anarcho-Communist Collectives [from NEFAC Membership Handbook; first edition, September 2000]

As we see it, the anarcho-communist vision of society is fundamentally based on federalism and collective organisation. In keeping consistent with this vision, we feel that it is important for this federation to establish a membership that consists mainly of active anarcho-communist collectives.

Each collective should consist of at least three federation members (see NEFAC Constitution for membership requirements) from a given area. These collectives would be free to organise themselves internally as they see fit, so long as they remain egalitarian, directly democratic, and do not violate the organisational and political framework of NEFAC.

Once in the federation, collectives would be responsible for carrying out any tasks on the federation's behalf which they accept voluntarily. Collectives are expected to keep each of their individual members informed of the federation's activities, and maintain regular contact with the federation including regular reports of collective activity. Each individual collective should function as a semi-autonomous unit, consulting and co-operating with other federated collectives, but acting on their own initiative (i.e. voluntarily accepting federal mandates).

Why Organise Local Collectives?

For those NEFAC members who already participate in local anarchist and activist groups, a specifically anarcho-communist collective might seem useless to your ongoing politics. However, because NEFAC has a broader membership than an isolated local group, a federated collective would provide a good opportunity to create strategic dialogue among anarchists doing work in different groups in your area, and offer a means to co-ordinate this work with other collectives in the region.

In addition to acting as a resource for local activism and anarchist agitation and propaganda, collectives are also able to participate more fully within federation activities. Instead of isolated individuals being involved with the federation primarily on the regional level, members who have local collectives can shape the federation to suit their local situations and needs.

How Do We Organise a Local Collective, and What Do These Collectives Do Once They Are Formed?

NEFAC collectives should organise themselves as self-managed, semi-autonomous groups of revolutionaries who work together in order to propagate anarchist ideas and co-ordinate their activities within communities, workplaces, and social movements. They should meet regularly and designate people to be in charge of calling people and reminding them of meeting locations and times, keeping meeting notes, and collecting dues. Obviously these should be rotating tasks.

Once a local anarcho-communist collective is formed, federation members can utilize these groups as a means for:

- Serving as a forum for discussion on how to better participate in broad coalitions as revolutionary anarcho-communists. In this way anarchists don't feel isolated in coalitions with sectarian-left groups or liberal organisations.
- Supporting the work of members within local groups in the form of sharing tasks, such as postering, media contacts, fundraising, etc. Creating a participatory forum for theoretical development and the discussion of anarcho-communist politics, revolutionary history, etc.
- Supporting the work and development of anarcho-communist strategy within larger social movements, as well as a structure where this strategy can be critically discussed and evaluated.
- Ensuring full collective participation within federation politics (for example, local groups can discuss and debate proposals between conferences). Distributing agitational and propaganda materials produced by the federation.
- Providing a structure for bringing new members into the federation.
- Organising fundraising events on behalf of the federation (which would go towards funding federal projects, supporting the warchest, etc.)
- Mobilizing people for local demonstrations or campaigns.
- Hosting NEFAC congresses or strategy meetings.

Communication: Getting the Word Out

As important as being organised, getting your information out, spreading information about events and important issues, communicating your ideas to an audience, reporting news about actions, demonstrations, and organising going on in the movement that are not reported in the capitalist media, are among the core responsibilities of any activist.

This text covers wheat pasting and tabling

A good activist would do well to learn these skills.

Posting, Tabling, and Propaganda Distribution

- Supplies needed:
- Wheat flour
- Water
- Paint brushes or inexpensive sponge brushes
- Fliers and/or posters
- Container with lid
- Gloves (Optional)
- Plastic bag (Optional)

Whether you're pasting artwork, political posters or fliers for a show, wheat paste is a good medium to glue them up with. Unlike wallpaper paste, wheat flour is cheap and easy to get a hold of. If you're going to be doing a lot of pasting, a bucket with a lid, a handle, and a paint roller work well. Otherwise a plastic container with a lid will hold enough.

Pour dry wheat flour into the container about 1/3 of the way full. Slowly mix it with water, stirring as you do so. You want the wheat paste to be thin enough to paint onto walls but thick enough to stick.

To put something up, paint the wall with a thick layer of paste and smooth your poster over it. Make sure you glue the edges down. Don't paste over the poster or you won't be able to see it. Wheat paste is not clear. If you're worried that the poster might get damaged in the weather, or if you want to make it harder to take down, spray [or paint] a clear coating of clear lacquer over it. The wheat paste sticks best to surfaces like cement. If you put the poster up well enough the only way anyone is going to be able to take it down is by sanding it off.

If you're worried about being linked to the crime, wear gloves and carry a plastic bag with you. If you see a security guard or a police officer, put all your wheat pasting supplies in the bag.

To make it even less suspicious wear some nice light-colored clothing (so that the wheat paste doesn't show up on it) and carry a Gap shopping bag. Play it off. Remember, it's best to wheat paste with a purpose. It's a great way to make apolitical (or anti-political) statement or put up your artwork for others to enjoy. Good luck and have fun!

[From Wheat Pasting Made Fun and Simple By Lauren Liberty
http://freepacifica.savegrassrootsradio.org/aia/comm_postering.html]

Tabling

Why Table

Setting up a literature table at events is a lot of work; why should you put so much energy into this?

Answers:

- Tabling makes money
- Tabling provides outreach for your group
- Tabling provides activity for members looking for something to do.

All of these benefits are essential for building your group, and making it strong. It is important, especially when you are not involved in a local organising drive, to generate activity and be seen. And, if your group is not active, and you do not plan any events, your members will drift away.

Where to set up a table

All of the following events and locations are useful and beneficial to some degree. They are listed in decreasing order of likely success (based on observations made by experienced East Bay IWW members):

- Big political events, demonstrations, and marches;
- Events of your own;
- Small events;
- Specific locations in your community.

It is best to start with no more than one event or tabling effort per month and build up your momentum.

The least likely to succeed (in terms of raising money or general outreach) is establishing a table in front of a supermarket or a transportation center. Tabling at big political events, on the other hand, while not especially conducive to organising, is nevertheless much more conducive to raising money for the group and letting active folks know of your group's existence.

Supplies you will need

In order to successfully table and accommodate your volunteers, you should obtain the following (lightweight, yet durable materials are the best)

- Portable Tables (if none are available, a tarp laid out on flat ground will work)
- Folding Chairs
- Milk Crates (for transport; can double as chairs)
- Rubber Bands (wind is always a nuisance)
- A Cash Box and ?20 (R, \$, £, ¥, €, whatever) in small bills for change (round your prices off to the nearest 100 — it's much easier)
- Clip Boards (for petitions and sign-up sheets)
- Literature Racks (not essential, but highly useful, especially if space is limited)
- Tarps and Rope (in wet climates)
- And, a durable hand truck with straps for transport is essential. These can usually be found for very little money second hand. But get one that is durable and will last. Airport luggage carts are flimsy and will fall apart due to wear and tear.

Free Literature

If your table is full of neat stuff for sale, you will be able to distribute a great deal of organising literature for free, because folks who come to the table, whether to browse, buy, or ask questions, will inevitably accept any free information you provide. So, it is not a bad idea to produce some basic literature explaining what your group is working on and/or has accomplished. Petitions and Pledges of Solidarity are also useful to have. This is yet another benefit of setting up a table.

[From Steve Ongerth, East Bay IWW with modifications by the editor.]

Guidelines for Tabling (free literature and merchandise)

Be sure that the name of your group appears on a sign or banner prominently displayed and visible from a distance. People want to know who you are.

If you are selling merchandise: Have an appropriate amount of change in a cashbox or other suitable container. The cash box should also contain pens, pencils, tape, scratch paper, etc. As the day goes on, if you are accumulating a considerable amount of money in the cash box, take out all cash except what you need to make change and put it in a safe place. Do not neglect to do this, so that the risk of theft can be kept to a minimum. Keep careful records of financial transactions while tabling — it might be a good idea to keep a record of donations, memberships, sales, and sales tax, separately.

Make the table display as attractive as possible. A tablecloth perhaps, a variety of colorful books, shirts, eye-catching signs, posters, etc., will draw people over. Hang up shirts if you can instead of just putting them flat on a table.

Put free literature front and centre to make it as easy as possible for people to pick up something and take it with them.

As people approach the table, stand up and engage them in friendly conversation.

Always provide a sign-up sheet that offers further contact. Usually that contact would be a promise to receive the next issue of your newsletter or to notify people of an upcoming event you're planning. Forward a copy of these sign-up sheets to the person in your group who keeps track of your group's mailing list. This is more important for small groups for whom adding a few new members would be a big boost than for large groups, which will probably find it too much work and cost for minimal response.

The person in charge of the booth should know prices of all merchandise for sale. Take an up-to-date price list of all merchandise. All items should be marked with the price, whenever possible.

As the day goes on, straighten literature periodically to maintain a neat appearance of the table. For outdoor events, have with you a plastic sheet of some kind for a quick cover if it rains, and a bunch of clean rocks (or rubber bands) you can use to keep pamphlets from blowing away if it's windy. Protect the free literature as carefully from moisture and excessive dust as you would the merchandise for sale.

If someone asks you a question about the material you are tabling that you don't know the answer to, try to get their name and phone number. Offer to find out the answer and call them back — then do it. This is much preferable to giving incorrect information, or none.

For groups that have merchandise brochures and can fulfill mail orders: If someone shows an interest in an item you can't supply right then, give them a merchandise brochure and invite them to place an order for it.

[Excerpted from “Guidelines for Tabling” by the International Vegetarian Union with modifications by the editor.]

Other Ways to Distribute Free Literature

Coffeehouses

There are often vegetarian or eclectic cafés, coffeehouses or stores which are not corporate and cater to casual patrons who aren't rich people or trendy. Basically, they are places YOU would feel comfortable hanging out at with your friends. Some may be meeting places for activists. These are a good bet for leaving literature but, you should clear it with the people who run the place before leaving any literature. If they won't go for it, don't try to convince them. Just find another place where they will let you leave literature.

CARE Packages

Send CARE packages of literature to people who write for more info about your group or its politics or who express an interest in Anarchism in letters and e-mails pertaining to work your group is doing for Anarchist-related projects. It is a good idea to be networked with other Anarchists in your area so if people get information request letters, they can refer them to you so you can send the person a CARE package.

Other Collectives

Give your literature to other collectives and to friends whom you know will put your literature out. Some of them will also have THEIR OWN tabling projects. In this way, you can get more literature out than if your group were doing all the work themselves.

[Excerpted from "How To Do A Red and Black Book Project" by Scott, Insurgency Culture Collective with modifications by the editor.]

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Andrew Flood
A Practical Guide to Anarchist Organisation
12th October 2004

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