

Small Town Organizing For Anarchists



We first came across "Small Town Organizing for Anarchists" back in 2009 and it immediately struck a cord. While we aren't necessarily from a "small town"—the town we live in has over 100,000 people—it's a town with little anarchist, radical, or even "leftist" infrastructure. When we read about things that anarchists are doing in other areas, all too often the actions, models, and discussions just aren't relevant for a town like ours. We can certainly understand the appeal of living in areas with large concentrations of anarchists, but that just isn't our experience.

We think this guide offers a lot of helpful advice for anarchists in small towns and those of us in areas where there are relatively few—if any—anarchists.

This article first appeared in *Rolling Thunder* #7. It was accompanied by a piece that looked at the work anarchists in the small town of Winona, Minnesota have done over the past several years. We'd highly encourage folks to seek that out.

With love from some no-coast anarchists,
Sprout Anarchist Collective

If you live, or have lived, in a small town in the U.S. and have spent any of that time trying to get a project off the ground, you're already familiar with the obstacles small town radicals face. If, in addition, you've ever turned to radicals in much larger cities with much larger projects under their belts, hoping for guidance and inspiration, you will know how demoralizing it can be. Most contemporary anarchist organizing has been defined by radical projects coming out of larger metropolitan areas: Food Not Bombs projects to feed the homeless and hungry, anarchist bookstores and collective spaces with dozens of members and volunteers, theoretical debates about dusty European anarchists. These projects are unthinkable or irrelevant in the small towns where many of us live.

Personnel Diagnostic

The most important step is always first. If you're hoping to move forward quickly, you'll need to establish a working group of committed comrades. This is a delicate matter – make sure your friends understand that you're ready to commit to sticking around and working through the hard stuff when things get difficult, but don't twist anyone's arm. If you're all on the same page, you'll all benefit from having companions equally willing to invest time and energy; by the same token, you can't count on a group of people you've managed to talk into your wild ideas if they don't really share your drive and desire. It's better to work closely with those with whom you have the greatest affinity than to be always making plans for others who may not come through! Likewise, though there will be plenty of situations in which it will be beneficial if someone "bottomlines" a task, take the time to maintain a horizontal social structure for the big picture plans. Be careful to work with friends who are equally committed to this.

If you don't have anyone – if there is no one you can collaborate with to create anarchist space and sentiment where you live – you can still make amazing things happen. Be outgoing and adventurous, stay committed, and keep your eyes open: an active anarchist is only lonely for a short time!

Once you have a sturdy working group, ask yourselves some core questions. Who is stuck in your town? Who lives there by choice? Who feels relatively alone? Which of you belongs to a larger, supportive social circle? The answers to these and other questions – questions about privilege and family relationships, for example – are vital to healthy communication and relationship dynamics, and can aid in properly diagnosing breakdowns in communication and dynamics when they occur.

This guide was written with a certain definition of small town; about 30,000 people inhabit our small town, but it could be easily relevant for smaller communities and cities of up to 150,000. None of this has been tested in suburban developments, but we predict that it might be relevant there as well. If you can count the active anarchists in your areas on your fingers, this guide is for you.

For a Healthy Working Group:

Don't project responsibilities onto your friends.

Do remind your companions that their company is important and wonderful.

Don't take on projects that require more hands than your group has; don't count on volunteers miraculously appearing.

Do bear in mind what other groups can offer to your projects.

Do let your friends know what you need to stay in the game.

Do check in frequently to see what you need to stay in the game.

Don't let your friends down! A thousand times no!

The most important thing for your group of friends to do is *be friends*. Know each other well so you can anticipate each other's needs and trust each other to communicate them.

Welcome others into your group when it makes sense. Don't be so eager to get helping hand that you jeopardize your safety or the success of your plans, but don't exclude others for lack of experience alone. Without a doubt, your small town circle will be connected to at least a few other groups and social circles. Perhaps the local Catholic Workers share some of your goals and interests? Maybe there is a college in your town and you know members of student groups with connections to resources or potential volunteers? Are there burnt out activists, or *anyone* for that matter, who might be sympathetic? Make note of all these groups and decide whether or not to invest energy in any connections you might have with them.

Establish a Rough Timeline

Sketch out some short-, medium-, and long-term goals. If everything went smoothly, where would you like to be in a year? How about in five? Let your fantasies run wild – just keep in mind that you'll have to commit to all the incremental steps that can enable you to realize them. A good timeline should consist of projects that are rewarding in themselves while establishing the conditions in which more will be possible.

Start at the end of the timeline. What is the furthest thing out on the horizon – where are you headed? What will it take to get there? Maybe you'd like to be able to organize unpermitted Reclaim the Streets parties in your town. That would require a fair bit of momentum for most small communities – not to mention an analysis of how public space is used and what the role of the authorities is in such situations, at least among the few dozen people it would take to pull it off. If these are among your long-term goals, you could plan to author and distribute literature that calls

Pose as a student group at campus club fairs and distribute relevant radical literature. Share wildcrafting recipes and anti-civilization tracts with local wilderness enthusiasts. Plan games like capture the flag for high school students and other explorers. Host themed parties in your home; challenge all attendees to do something unfamiliar and absurd. Bond with non-heteronormative neighbors through conversations challenging patriarchy. Outreach is all about imagination: how will you meet people and share exciting experiences

attention to issues around public space. You'd also need the logistical skills and resources to make a Reclaim the Streets party happen; that might mean planning safer block parties, parades, or Really Really Free Markets first. In order to get those preliminary projects off the ground, you might need a reputation for throwing great parties, which you could acquire by hosting exciting events in your home. The trick is to understand how connected one activity is to all the others. This is the case in all kinds of organizing, but especially in smaller towns. Lay plans strategically; each one should simultaneously *feel* feasible and outshine all previous activity.

All this said, all the planning in the world can't guarantee the results – it simply guarantees that *something* will happen. Reality is always different from anything you can arrange or imagine in advance, and that's a good thing. Stay flexible enough to react to new developments and seize unforeseen opportunities.

Example of a timeline from feasible feat to wildest dream:

Learn the schedules of all bountiful dumpsters in the region.
Connect with local small-scale food producers and farmers for access to excess.
Distribute literature calling for an end to food scarcity through anti-capitalist gift economics.
Maintain free food servings once a week and earn a reputation for distributing healthy, unspoiled foods.
Convert two trucks to run on veggie oil.
Start a "canning club" to preserve perishable food items.
Hold bake sales and other fundraisers to prepare finances to support a space.
Establish a Free grocery store open every other day.

Outreach

In building a community, the most important aspect of outreach is maintaining points of entry; without accessible activities, your group will have to proceed with all its plans alone. Don't be demoralized if people aren't coming forward in throngs, though – outreach is a slow process full of unpredictable chain reactions and coincidences.

Work out the practical matters. How will you connect with eager participants? Who are they, anyway? Make sure you show up with literature and enthusiasm at all-ages events, and keep the projects you work on accessible to young ones. Sober spaces are almost always a good idea, even if they are controversial. If you yourself are a radical youth, don't underestimate your own capabilities – you

Give away free food and zines at every opportunity.

If there's a liberal event that needs more fire, bring

can do anything in this recipe an older person can.

No outreach strategy should rely too much on turning liberal activists into radicals. You'll waste too much energy trying to convert their firmly established way of looking at the world. An eager young person, a disillusioned service worker, a friendly neighbor – these people and more will likely be excited to delve into radical politics for themselves, if given the opportunity to participate in inspiring situations; leftists, on the other hand, will lock you in endless grueling debates that can isolate you from everyone else.

Distributing Anarchist Literature

Distributing literature isn't what it used to be; thanks to blogs, *Facebook*, internet forums, and *infoshop.org*, information travels quickly through the anarchist community. Lots of material can be read online – which drains the magic and intimacy from such readings. But you can't depend on the internet to accomplish all of your outreach tasks, so start a *distro*.

Offering tangible and relevant literature at strategic times and public events is an invaluable practice for building radical community. Find a connection for free or cheap printing: investigate campuses, explore your options at copy shops, or look for a used photocopier. Stock up for different occasions and crowds, and read everything you plan to distribute so you'll be prepared to discuss any of it.



All qualms about online social networking aside, you can find a plethora of print-ready PDF versions of essential reading materials on the internet. Utilize these resources whenever you can, but be strategic – how many copies of Alfredo Bonnano's *Armed Joy* does a town of 15,000 really need? Don't circulate texts because they are available rather than because they are useful; find, or else author, literature that supplements the projects you are working on. Remember, also, that if need be you can scan homemade zines and create PDF files of them to print on college, home, or workplace communities.

Give away the essential zines. Hopefully you can sustain this on donations alone**: if it doesn't bring in enough, consider selling books and other wares to balance your budget. Gathering some basic raw materials will enable you to produce on a larger scale: get cardstock for covers, CDRs for bootlegs, postage money to order bulk zines from other groups, a long-arm stapler***.

Setting up a distro in a small town is an art; it's important to learn how to anticipate

where you'll be controversial or invisible and where you'll be a welcome presence. Be ready to explain who you are and what you're doing confidently in a single sentence. If there is little awareness of contemporary radical politics in your locale, your presence at an event will itself be an expression of your intentions. If you find yourself tabling at events you detest to highlight an alternative, be prepared to make a compelling case and frame your literature as an elaboration of your point.

*** You may actually find that giving away zines a way for donations moves more zines and brings in more money than*

Presentation is everything! Save space by adding another dimension to your table: build shelves and displays for your books and merchandise instead of laying them flat. If you or your friends are skilled in web design, create a website advertising your catalog. Take your distro to events outside your town, or supply nearby communities with literature for their projects; you could even put together a bookmobile and tour the region.

**** Staple your damn zines! Nothing says "please recycle this instead of reading it!" like loose leaves of folded paper.*

Public Relations and Crime

When a small group of anarchists is engaged in aboveground organizing, they might be singled out as the culprits of any underground trouble; bear this in mind and don't put yourselves needlessly at risk by leaving dots that are too easy to connect. At the same time, your public presence shouldn't deter others from taking action; just as you shouldn't do things to jeopardize others, try not to police others who share your values. In some cases, local anarchist organizers can maintain a clandestine alter ego group that acts anonymously when a riskier or more militant approach is called for.

Diplomacy

Be intentional about your relationships with others. Be clear about who you are openly opposing: for example, some local government, all law enforcement, the owners of certain businesses, known unrepentant abusers. Likewise, give thought to which allies you are seeking. You might make gestures of goodwill to certain people simply for strategic purposes: the city inspector, for example. This can be demoralizing, but in small towns, it's often better to maintain an unmediated relationship with these people than to rely on second-hand gossip to present you in the best light. It is up to your working group to decide where to draw the line. At the same time, you will likely find other groups you genuinely respect and wish to support.

Punks and Other Anti-Authoritarians

Being diplomatic with other anti-authoritarians should be easy...if you are *strangers!* Realistically, your personal lives will probably be intertwined, and it can be very difficult to keep private matters separate from your work as organizers. This is not to say your lives should be utterly disconnected – just know that to the degree they are entangled, you are opening yourself up to potential drama. If punks and anti-authoritarians are familiar with your projects, they'll probably participate if they're interested; resist the temptation to “recruit” them if they aren't, while staying open to criticism and endeavoring to keep your projects accessible. Likewise, support others' efforts, but don't co-opt their projects with overbearing contributions or suggestions.

In a worst-case scenario, you may be plagued by nihilists from your own subculture who represent your plans and act against them in a spirit of inertia, self-destruction, and entitlement. Don't hesitate to call them out if need be – but do so in such a way that fosters conflict resolution, rather than resentment and territorialism.

Ultimately, it is up to you to prevent your organizing from negatively affecting your friendships and other aspects of your own lives. Take the initiative to resolve conflicts early – most small towns are too small for you to be divisive with other anti-authoritarians.

Liberal or Conservative Activists and Community Organizers

Resolve any disputes within your group about who you all consent to work with. There is no sense in one of you being friendly with the neighborhood church group, for example, while others harass them – not unless you have some crazy scheme that demands this, anyway. Make sure you are aware of each other's opinions about such groups so you can work out a course of action everyone supports.



Make your decisions based on what is ultimately good for the work you're trying to do. Don't maintain a working relationship with a group that has a conflicting agenda simply because of a friendship – you can be friends without being working partners. At the same time, it always pays to be friendly with people, at least at first.

Friendships with people who hold leverage – or simply inside roles – in hierarchal organizations can open doors. Maybe you can get radical materials into the teacher's lounge or a waiting room? Maybe you can gain access to grocery store donations from the food bank? Perhaps a librarian will setup a zine shelf or order special books?

If you genuinely respect a group, but hold significant differences in opinion,

remember to affirm your alliances with them: “It’s been nice to know others feel strongly about this.” “Y’all have really come through for us – how can we return the favor?” If, for example, you are unabashed militant insurrectionists working with a group of committed non-violent activists on a shared campaign, bear in mind that they might be especially sensitive about your contrasting perspectives. You don’t have to compromise your ethics or tactics to work well with others, but don’t be insensitive.

Putting Your Town on the Map

Your small group can’t singlehandedly take advantage of every opportunity in your town. The larger your radical community is, the more diverse ideas and initiatives you can expect it to produce.

One way to expand your community is to draw from other communities. Like it or not, not every anarchist will be committed to his or her hometown. The social tides are constantly pushing and pulling traveling radicals into and out of geographic places. As you establish projects in your community, you’ll undoubtedly benefit from more helping hands – so you might as well extend deliberate invitations to regional and traveling anarchists.

If the regional anarchist community doesn’t already know your group is active in your town, inform them. You can do this by attending regional and national gatherings as a group: share stories about your town and contribute to networks and projects that involve other communities. This alone may not suffice; you can always host events of your own and invite people from the region to come participate.

Travelers may pass through your town, especially if it is near major transportation corridors. Unless they’re insufferable, house and feed them. Maybe you’ll get some help with your daily work and they’ll pass on stories of adventure and mischief in your town. Be responsible about hosting traveling groups as well, be they touring bands, films, workshops, or adventurers; it’s good to become a point of interest for such groups, and you may help them get excited about visiting small communities.*

Whenever there is an influx of out-of-town radicals visiting a small anarchist community, it’s important that they not dominate your allies’ space or overstay their welcome. Don’t insult your visitors’ intelligence, but inform them about boundaries they should respect.

Transmission

After you have established the presence and tone of your group, communicate your analysis and projects to the local community at large. To accomplish this, you could start out with clandestine art projects like wheatpasting or banner drops – presuming you’re already disseminating zines or audio recordings. Better, you could publish a journal or newspaper at regular intervals, or organize major public events. No matter the medium, make your intentions and desires clear and set the stage for new possibilities.

Small Town Festivals

Perhaps more desperately than big cities, small towns need *action*. They need fun and excitement, adventure and magic. Commit to creating these things; if you do, others will appear who welcome the opportunity to bond and play. Plan festivals that revive the spirits of everyone who participates, and structure them to foster inclusion and excitement about radical projects. Such events can connect social circles that rarely overlap, galvanize enthusiasm for your and others' projects, and reward all participants with fun.

You could organize block parties, dance parties, parades, film or music festivals, masquerade balls, massive picnics, variety shows, town hall meetings, puppet shows, carnival games, free bazaars – your imagination is the limit. Be realistic about who will attend and what resources you can access. You'll find that planning festivals tests and hones skills you can use for larger, more ambitious projects; likewise, organizing festivals is a great way to improve your group's reputation for planning exciting events.

Acquiring Permanent Space

The success of your progress towards long-term goals may well depend on the establishment of permanent anarchist spaces and institutions. Think this over in advance. What is a realistic space for your group to manage? A garden? A bike basement? A collective house? An infoshop? A squat? A woodland compound?

Though opening such a space might seem feasible, what would you need to have to make it happen? Money you don't have? Skills you've yet to hone? Respect you've yet to earn? Chutzpah you haven't found? Every step of this recipe should bring you closer to possessing those things.

How will you use the space to provide for your community? You might offer some kind of infrastructure: a reliable large-serving kitchen, a point of distribution for radical literature, a free department store. Or maybe the first priority is to create a space that will be inspiring to *you*, and help you stay active for years to come. Whatever your goal is, let those intentions inform the decision you make in the planning stages.

Like many other activities mentioned in this field guide, it would take another entire recipe to discuss all the details of managing a collective space. But if you're in it for the long haul, all this work will be worth it! Think of the momentum you could sustain with a

Exciting moments can be demonstrations of anarchism rather than iterations of it. Inspiring situations are the best form of outreach; people will associate your intentions with their experiences.

permanent greenhouse in which you could incubate projects and relationships. You'll likely inspire others to take risks to acquire more spaces themselves, if they can count on your space to be there for years to come.

Finally, make sure whatever space you're establishing is important enough to your group that you can commit yourselves to defending it – that means protecting it with good security culture when applicable, maintaining healthy public relations, taking calculated risks when necessary, and above all coming through on your commitments month after month and year after year. Don't go through the trouble to establish a space that feels like an unrewarding burden – if you don't enjoy your volunteer shift enough to look forward to it, it's probably not going to last!

Final Thoughts

It's easy to overlook the most important priority for any small town organizer: doing what it takes to *stay in the game*. Small radical communities are especially vulnerable to burnout, and if your working group is all you have, make every effort to keep the band together. Recognize that emotional maintenance means taking breaks: from each other, from your projects, from your whole town. Don't stretch yourself or your friends to the breaking point. No long-term organizing effort is sustainable if it depends on unsustainable activities. Though it may be intimidating to take lengthy breaks from fragile newborn projects, you may have to do so to maintain your emotional health.

Be aware of when your cohorts are struggling, and do your best to support them. Don't press on with failing methods; take the time to regroup and devise new plans that accommodate everyone's needs. If you're managing a project single-handedly, meditate on your own needs and watch for warning signs of loneliness and defeatism. These tough times can be eased by relationships with nearby anarchist communities. Let regional radicals build your morale – they stand to lose from your absence no less than the locals around you. Hopefully they'll seek your support when they need it as well.

Keep your head up and move forward. Hold hands through the celebrations, link arms for the confrontations – stand your ground!

We can measure our strength by the presence and scope of permanent anarchist spaces: how frequently are they established, how consistently, consensually, and joyfully they are maintained, and how fiercely they are defended.



from the occupied territory currently known as grand rapids, mi // <http://sproutac.org>