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Ecology Action: Recycling, Education, and Cooperation

Brent Perdue and scott crow

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Ecology Action is an anarchist worker run recycling center in Austin Texas. It's not so much what we do, but how we do it. We believe we are creating cultures, models, stories of better futures.

Our History Texas' oldest and only non-profit environmental resource center was founded on Earth Day in 1970 by an all volunteer collective in Austin. For nearly forty years, EA's work has stayed very much the same—recycling and education. However, over time the structure evolved from all volunteer run to traditional non-profit, to what we now have—a staff collective.

In 2001, workers at Ecology Action wanted to return to their roots as a collective. They went on strike in defiance of poor management, low wages, and meddling from a previously absentee Board of Directors. As a result of the strike, staff began to create a workplace where everyone involved could have a say in their work environment and the business.

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We've since added 'cooperation' to our recycling and education missions. We all come from different backgrounds. But, we share similar inspirations—drawn from peoples' movements all over the world. As Ecology Action makes our factory by working, we strive to have a participatory and democratic workplace and to make business decisions ethically.

Ecology Action Ecology Action operates a downtown flagship drop-off location, four satellite locations, and offers event recycling and business pick-up service with an annual budget of \$400,000. We collect post-consumer and industrial recyclables that are processed and shipped to different facilities to be "recycled." With our small staff, Ecology Action processes 10% of Austin's recycling. Nearly 300 tons of "waste" flows through our facility each month—that's 300 Hondas. And we do it without—gasp—a boss.

We don't do it alone. Everyday we come in contact with folks from all parts of society. Our downtown location is in close proximity to where much of the homeless population lives and seeks work and services. EA coordinates over 15,000 hours of court-appointed community restitution service. Consumer and commercial clients drop-off recyclables 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We treat everyone with dignity and respect no matter their 'status' and in return we have garnered goodwill across society.

When we interact with all those folks, we talk about the realities of recycling and about rethinking recycling. Much of the domestic recycling market is shipped overseas. Often times, recycling is sorted by underpaid and mistreated workers or reprocessed in environmentally hazardous ways—whether here or abroad. Some so-called "recycling" of plastics like those stamped #3 through #7 are most likely burned internationally and are advertised as "waste to energy" solutions. Corn plastics—touted as a 'natural alternative'—are produced by Cargill, a giant chemical manufacturer, and must undergo another industrial process to actually breakdown.

Alone, recycling is not a comprehensive solution. It is most often a resource-intensive detour in the life of products on the way to a landfill. Effective work towards environmental sustainability has to include an honest and critical analysis of the limitations of capitalism and consumerism.

Our Organization "Who's in charge here?" is a constant refrain from recyclers. "No one" or "Everyone" is the response, depending on the staff's mood.

EA is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization operated by a staff collective. Our bylaws and personal policies reflect the culture of work we are developing. They are used as guidelines instead of as rules. We want to be accountable to ourselves and the group, by choice rather than coercion.

Our organizational culture is strongly influenced by anarchist ideas and principles, such as direct democracy, mutual aid and direct action. Although, you don't have to be an anarchist to work here. We are not dogmatic, but use the ideas as foundations to create a just, healthy and sustainable workplace and, hopefully, models for other businesses.

EA strives to value labor fairly and justly—through wages, benefits, and workplace policies, through dignified, sustainable employment, and through solidarity with other movements. As we've developed as a collective, we've gone through a wage livability and equalization process. All members of the collective make the same, livable wage.

We are all responsible for our day to day actions and the long-term decisions that directly affect us. That's because we, as workers, have a serious seat at the decision-making table. We use a modified consensus process. We always strive to reach agreement and our decisions rarely come to a vote, allowing all of our voices to be heard, and participate as each topic affects each individual. We strive to make all our voices heard within the organization. We sit down every morning to plan the day, and every week to meet in committees. All of us do the dirty and heavy work, the administrative work, and public relations.

Also, EA moved away from traditional non-profit fundraising models—usually heavily reliant on grants from foundations and membership donations. Instead, we sell products and services that we believe have economic and social value. We run a nonprofit by running a business that is self-reliant. We’ve steadily, and intentionally, increased our materials sales as the majority of our revenue. If all the goodwill of foundations, the government, or individuals dried up tomorrow, we’d still be in business because we meet a need. Our autonomy from outside money allows us to make principled and ethical decisions on how, why and where we conduct our business. We can craft our workplace and programs as we see fit. We are creating functioning economic engines that are autonomous and operate ethically under a capitalist system and beyond.

Conclusion We will make mistakes along the way. But, that is part of the beauty of our work. We don’t have to have all the answers. We can ask questions of ourselves, our communities and others to adapt and build healthier systems. We want to exemplify with ‘propaganda by the deed’ that our work can be a part of our lives and communities and not separate. We don’t go to work and then have the rest of our lives. Nor, do we give our lives away to meaningless work. We run the business as ethically possible, which benefits many families, communities, and other grassroots organizations.

We want to show that we can have just, sustainable, and meaningful economic models where we don’t have to give up our ideals. We still dream while working for better worlds tomorrow and today. As a friend of ours once said, “If you want people to leave the capitalist system, create something better.”

Dreaming from the concrete jungle, Ecology Action Collective

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