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NW APOC Reportback

Brooke Stepp

October 2008

The weekend of Friday August 15th through August 17th marked the renewal of a specifically anarchist presence among people of color in the Northwest. The gathering took place in Portland, Oregon over a three-day period. Around twenty people of color from all over the region attended the gathering coming from as far away as Eugene and Bellingham. Olympia, Seattle and Portland were also represented at the event.

The focus of the weekend was to define what an APOC (Anarchist People of Color) organization looks like, specifically in the context of the Northwest, and also to define what it means to be part of an APOC identity. Friday night was focused on a social event at a fellow APOCer's house where folks could hang out with one another, eat food, and get to know everyone who would be part of the gathering. This was in sharp contrast to many other activist events that take place. The focus here instead was on building community and feeling comfortable around one another rather than insisting on immediately "getting down to business." Despite the amazing community-building that happened that weekend, there was much business that had to be addressed.

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Saturday began with a report-back from the NE APOC gathering that happened just before the one in the Northwest, followed by lively discussions about the APOC of the past. APOC, as an idea, began over the Internet on a listserv in 2001 by Ernesto Aguilar and was inspired by anarchists of color throughout history, such as Lucy Parsons, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, and Ricardo Flores Magon. In 2003, the first formal gathering of Anarchist People of Color at the national level occurred in Detroit, Michigan at Wayne State University. Although some factionalism occurred at the conference (see illvox.org), a sense of purpose emerged from the conference in general. After hurricane Katrina in 2005, plans fell through for another national conference that was to be held in Houston, Texas. Resources could not be gathered to change the conference's venue in time. Thus, 2009 will mark the renewal of APOC at a national level. The gatherings that are taking place now in the Northeast, Northwest, and soon in the Southwest are precursors to this renewal.

In the past, APOC has not been associated with any sort of centralized group, but instead is a network made up of individuals and collectives. There are many different ideas concerning what APOC is, what it should be, and what it means to claim an APOC identity. In fact, the diversity of opinions present throughout APOC is one of the reasons why it is an important presence in left revolutionary movements today. At the recent Northwest gathering, participants articulated many of these points that make APOC essential and relevant. One of these ideas, and one that is particularly salient, was the fact that an APOC organization gives people of color working for social change a chance to come together and take back our communities. It gives us the impetus to create revolution in the here and now. In other words, coming together with other people of color who have similar experiences is incredibly empowering and gives us insight that we didn't have before that we can then use in our own communities.

Furthermore, an APOC presence allows people of color to reclaim our anti-authoritarian past and ideas from what has become a movement with a majority-white face. This reminds us, and the world, that people of color all over the place were living in anti-authoritarian societies long before Proudhon or Bakunin ever wrote it down and called it anarchism. Therefore, APOC is extremely important because it allows people of color to look back and take pride in our history that has been erased through colonialism, imperialism, and domination. It shows the world that anarchism is not just for and by white people. It is for all people. Lastly, an APOC presence allows a place for people of color to find support outside of our mass movement work.

The left in the United States is composed primarily of white folks. Because of this, people of color involved in these movements face a lot of difficulties from flat-out racism to being marginalized and not understood by their comrades who have completely different experiences. APOC serves as a place for people with similar experiences in relation to race to come together and find much-needed support and guidance.

One issue that came up at the gathering that will need to be discussed and analyzed further both in the Northwest and at a national level is the term APOC itself. What does it mean? What does the “A” mean? How does this label make people of color feel? Some people prefer the terms “autonomous” or “anti-authoritarian” to “anarchist.” The reasons for this are plenty and include issues of inclusivity and appearances. Many people of color in the U.S. today do not wish to be associated with what has become the stereotypical white North American anarchist movement that is less about community and more about creating a lifestyle out of anarchism. Because of these common notions of what anarchism is, many people of color feel that the term alienates us from the communities we come from. Furthermore, it was pointed out at the gathering that we shouldn’t feel obligated to define ourselves by our relationships to racism, colonialism, and imperialism, because all people of color

have different relationships to these histories. In other words, all people of color are not the same and we all have our own complex pasts and stories. However, what all people of color do have in common is the fact that we are not white in a society that elevates whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, money, etc. above all else and defines everything in relation to these “norms.” Because of this, there is common ground for us to work together around issues that affect people of color in particular such as immigration, access to healthcare, gentrification, sexual violence, gang presence, war in our communities, and the prison industrial complex.

The weekend ended with brainstorming about how our current work on issues as diverse as working with youth, poetry and spoken word, hip hop, Industrial Workers of the World, infoshops, homeless outreach, prison work, education, and student movements fits into an APOC identity in the Northwest. We brainstormed particular groups that are already working around issues that affect us as people of color in the region. We identified groups such as OLIN in Portland who do Zapatista solidarity work, Communities Against Rape and Abuse in Seattle who are an affiliate of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Seattle Solidarity Network who are doing a lot of positive work against gentrification, and Olympia Industrial Workers of the World who are doing support work for day laborers in the area. At the conclusion of the weekend, we had developed a small community among APOCers in the Northwest, a plan to publish a periodical, some concrete ideas to be thinking about, and a date for the next gathering in December of 2008 in Olympia, WA.