

But We Don't Have Leaders: Leadership Development and Anti-Authoritarian Organizing

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Leadership and leadership development and leadership can play important roles in moving forward with our commitment to equality in organizations, movements and society. Leadership development, as defined by organizer Dara Silverman, is working with others to build skills, analysis and confidence. Anti-authoritarian organizing, as it relates to this essay, is building the capacity of people and their organizations to challenge illegitimate authority – which includes capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism and the state. Anti-authoritarian organizing, like other forms of radical organizing, uses principles of solidarity, cooperation and participatory democracy to build movements for social change. Anti-authoritarian organizing over the past century has helped to advance a politics that challenges the idea that the ends justify the means. The emphasis on empowerment, democratic participation and transparent decision making are based in the strategy that our organizing prefigures the society we’re working to build. Anti-authoritarians generally argue that revolution is a process made through day-to-day struggle rather than one historic moment.

The concept of leadership is complicated and the struggle for a more complex understanding of leadership is on-going. Movement veteran Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martinez says, “As organizers, we need to reject the definition of leadership as domination, but without denying the existence and need for leadership. Denial can lead to a failure to demand accountability from our leaders. That demand must be embraced, along with anti-authoritarian methods, in leadership development. Accountability takes the measure of a person’s responsibility; it means being accountable to one’s fellow organizers, to the goals of one’s collectivity and ultimately to the people one claims to serve.”

In thinking about leadership development several questions have guided me: How can leadership development help us build mass-based, multiracial, anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist movements with visible leadership from women, queers, transgendered people and working class people of all colors? How can we talk about leadership without creating the image of two or three people leading us, but the millions of people, in their communities, who are right now leading progressive social change around the world? And, as a white male from a middle class background, what does an anti-racist, feminist, class conscious leadership development process look like for people of a similar background working for collective liberation? In writing this essay I look to those who have mentored me in thinking about leadership development and the models of respectful leadership they’ve provided: people like Sharon Martinas, Dara Silverman, Clare Bayard, David Rojas, Betita Martinez and Laura Close.

In arguing against the commonly held opinion that revolution was both spontaneous and right around the corner, 19th century Italian revolutionary Errico Malatesta said, “It must be admitted that we anarchists, in outlining what we would like the future society to be, have, in general, made everything look a bit too easy.” We have a critique of existing society and a vision for the future, but no plan to move forward, he said. He went on to say that we must meet people where they’re at, win concrete improvements in people’s lives through collective action and, together, expand both our desire and capacity for liberation. Leadership development is about expanding that capacity and recognizing that social change doesn’t just happen, it is made. It’s about the long, slow, patient process of building power with people rather than power over people.

Food Not Bombs and the Struggle over Leadership

It was in the winter of '94 and the protest was at the Hall of Justice. Food Not Bombs activists were being arrested repeatedly for sharing free food at the Civic Center across from city hall. Keith McHenry, a longtime FNB organizer was going to court, facing felonies, and over 100 people protested to drop all charges and end police harassment of low/no-income people. I had just moved to San Francisco and wanted to get involved. I'd been doing FNB in Whittier, a suburb of Los Angeles, but I didn't know any of the SF people. The long line of police in riot gear was intimidating. I tried to introduce myself to some folks, but people were caught up in the moment. I stood by myself trying to figure out what was going on, wearing my FNB button, hoping someone would talk to me.

Someone did talk to me — Keith McHenry. He was thanking people for coming out and introducing himself to people. When I said I had been doing FNB for the past two years, he immediately started introducing me to other FNBers and invited me back to his house for dinner. He asked me question after question about how I got involved and what we did in Whittier. He gave me literature, told me about the meetings and asked me what I was interested in doing. He told great stories and had a healthy laugh. Over the next year he would call me and ask if I could help him with all kinds of projects.

McHenry did an excellent job of bringing me in. I wanted to join, but he opened the door and welcomed me into the group. He didn't just tell me what needed to be done, he asked me questions and wanted to know what I was all about. He asked me what I was interested in and followed up with me. He mentored me in direct action organizing, and I was heavily involved in FNB for the next six years.

Keith is a good organizer but there was also dynamics around privilege in effect. Keith is a white man from a middle class background who connected with a younger white man from a middle class background. This is more than demographics; it's about the way we were both socialized to behave and interact. Our connecting and working together wasn't problematic in and of itself. The problem was the ways that white men of class privilege dominated the leadership positions in Food Not Bombs and how our ostensible rejection of even having leaders prevented meaningful discussion about sharing power, challenging privilege and supporting leadership development of a broader base of people. For example, it was not uncommon between 1995–98 to have organizing committees of five men and one woman, all white and of mixed class backgrounds. And while the general meetings were also majority men, women made up half of those who did the work.

In FNB, the concept of leadership was fiercely debated. For years, many of us said, "there are no leaders." Often times people like myself who were playing obvious leadership roles were the ones most vehement about the group "not having leaders." Our refusal of leadership was, in many ways, an attempt to share power, but it also made it extremely difficult to talk about the real power dynamics in our work and how they related to institutional forms of privilege and oppression. If we have no leaders, it was argued, then anyone can participate just as much as anyone else. If we believe in power sharing and collective organizing, then work in the group is generated by personal initiative driven by a neutral "do it yourself" ethic. Power dynamics in the group were frequently discussed as personality conflicts and attributed to the shortcomings of individuals. As Malatesta warned, we had a critique of inequality and a vision of equality, but no plan to get from here to there.

When we talked about why the same people did all the work there was rarely concrete steps put forward about how to change the situation. But there was often anger from all sides about the situation. Those doing lots of the work would say they needed help and asked why people weren't participating. Those making lots of decisions would often say they wanted more people to be involved that they didn't want to have all this power. They often felt guilty and defensive about the situation. Those who were marginalized in the group talked about how others were monopolizing power and that things needed to change. Inequalities and their negative consequences continued to hurt individuals and undermine the group's efforts.

For 23-years, FNB groups have been an important point of entry for thousands of people coming into movements for liberation around the world. FNB — like other groups that are gateways into social change work such as MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan), gay straight alliances, anti-corporate student groups, Earth First! and others — create opportunities for people to learn, practice and develop skills, analysis and confidence. While working for justice in society, these groups can also help people understand the connection between personal and social transformation.

Leadership development is primarily about doing day to day work — door knocking, political education, recruitment, cooking for 100 people at a rally — and having a space to reflect and learn from the experience. Making leadership development a more formal and intentional process, for me, has been about taking responsibility for my actions and trying to be accountable to the people I work with. In rejecting leadership, I was in many ways rejecting responsibility and accountability to others and continuing the tradition of capitalist individualism. In learning to respect the leadership of others and in myself, I have struggled to reclaim trust in and respect for myself, both of which I was taught to achieve only through dominating others. In working to heal myself and fight back, I have needed the leadership of others who have nurtured and developed communities of resistance and cultures of liberation.

Developing Leadership and Building Organization

In Food Not Bombs, the most successful ways I saw change happen was when we began to identify positions of leadership in the group and had open discussions of power and strategized ways to share it. This was an ideological shift from “no leaders” to “working to all be leaders.” We already had rotating facilitators at our weekly meetings and someone who served as the treasurer. People began to identify other responsibilities in the group: writing up literature, developing and sending press releases, representing the group in coalitions and so on. But the same people generally stayed doing the work. We had begun to identify leadership, but we didn't have a leadership development process.

An important piece of leadership development is recognizing the skills and analysis people already have and providing each other encouragement and opportunities to develop further. It's helpful to look at the many ways that leadership manifests — strategic, tactical, theoretical, programmatic or operational, to name a few — and then break those down into tasks and concrete steps people can take. Through practice and accomplishing concrete projects we become more confident in our abilities.

One step to take is identifying the many things that need to get done in an organization and having coordinators delegate work. There should be things new people as well as people who

have been around can take on. This doesn't mean just announcing tasks at a meeting, but asking people to do certain things. If it's something like facilitating a meeting for the first time, speaking to the media, performing before a large number of people, or confronting the mayor, this requires giving the person extra encouragement and being there to offer support. Asking people how the experience was for them and opening up space for evaluation of experience is a big part of leadership development.

In my experience, directly asking someone if they would do something is far more effective than asking in a meeting — effective not only in getting more people doing more work to build the collective power of the organization to fight for justice, but also in terms of promoting the leadership of a broader base of people. I volunteered to do so many things in FNB meetings, wishing other people would, resenting other people and knowing people resented me for the position I was in. Anti-authoritarian leadership development is about looking at our organizations, looking at how power operates and taking small but concrete steps to share power. Another rule of organizing is that when people take on work, they should be given props. Recognizing the work people put in, not just the highly visible roles or the people who speak and write, is crucial for movement building.

Leadership development is about seeing different levels of responsibility as stepping stones to help people get concrete things done, to build their involvement, to increase their sense of what they are capable of and to develop the skills necessary for the job. Leadership development is far more than just rotating work. It is based on the belief that analysis, strategic planning and critical consciousness develop through action and reflection. Without space for reflection — “What did you learn from that experience?” “What was good and what could have been better about that protest?” “What could you have done differently?” — our abilities to plan and organize can remain stagnant. In FNB we were generally more reactive than proactive, and long-term planning meant thinking two months down the line. In rejecting leadership we also undermined our ability to plan and be strategic.

Leadership development is also about encouragement, recognizing that people frequently carry enormous insecurities about being good enough, having enough experience, having anything worth while to say and doubting that anyone thinks they're capable enough. Simply saying, “Hey you should go to the next organizing meeting” can be a form of leadership development. It's a reminder that the meeting is happening and indicates that you want that person's involvement. Asking someone face-to-face is the best way to get them to go somewhere or do something because you can provide encouragement if they say, “no, I don't have enough experience” or “but, I haven't been in the group long enough.” Working through our own and others' insecurities and fears is a huge part of organizing.

SF FNB largest event, our 20th anniversary free festival Soupstock that turned out over 15,000 people, was a majority women organizing crew that coordinated over 300 volunteers. The first majority-women meetings were the result of women and men asking people to attend, then answering questions about involvement and trying to get folks excited about the project. But it wasn't just that suddenly more women were asked to participate and there was feminist transformation. Rather it was the result of a decade of work by women like Johnna Bossuot, Alice Nuccio, Julia Golden, Tai Miller, Lynn Harrington, Catherine Marsh, Rahula Janowski, loretta carbone, Lauren Rosa and Clare Bayard who organized Women's Autonomous Cookhouses, distributed feminist literature, put on anti-sexism workshops and initiated a women's discussion group to support each other's leadership. In SF FNB, becoming more conscious of whose leadership was

supported and how it was supported, and how race, class and gender privileges operate, helped lay the foundation for change.

A consciously radical leadership development process needs to have a strong anti-oppression analysis of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and age. Who already feels entitled to volunteer for responsibilities? Who already has certain skills and resources? Whose participation goes unrecognized? I've been in countless FNB meetings where men, mostly white, would come for the first time and talk like they knew it all and volunteer for high levels of responsibility that many other people who had been in the group for years had never taken on. I've also talked with dozens of people who were in groups for long periods of time and said they didn't take on responsibility because "other people would be able to do a better job" or "I didn't think other people would think I was capable enough."

An anti-oppression analysis is key to leadership development. The majority of leadership in liberation struggles comes from people of color, working class and low-income people, Jewish people, transgendered people, queers and women. Leadership development for me has been working to challenge the ways that race, class and gender privilege have been obstacles to seeing and learning from this leadership in oppressed communities. A leadership development process for people with race, class and/or gender privilege that has a focus on learning from leadership in oppressed communities is critical to successful movement building.

Looking to leadership in oppressed communities is recognizing that those most negatively impacted by oppression hold keys to dismantling those systems. It has meant looking for that leadership and listening harder, knowing my socialization trains me to ignore those voices. It's not about agreeing uncritically with everything but engaging respectfully because leadership from oppressed communities has been the heart of liberation struggle and is key to my own liberation. It's also about being complex, knowing there's a vast diversity of voices in oppressed communities and knowing that looking to leadership is about liberation struggle not guilt and that I must make political choices and be accountable for those choices. What it comes down to for me is believing that systemic inequality and injustice is built on the backs of oppressed communities and that radical leadership from those communities is core to radical struggle to free us all. My training as a white, middle class, mostly heterosexual male was to only see people who looked like me as leaders. In rejecting leadership I was revolting against that training. Later, it became clear that leadership from oppressed peoples was key to my own struggle against internalized white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism and capitalism. In universalizing my understanding of leadership as loyalty to oppression, I was marginalizing leadership for liberation both in oppressed communities and in myself. Anti-authoritarian leadership development grounded in anti-oppression politics is about critically looking at how power, privilege and oppression operate and taking concrete steps to build our movements and move us towards collective liberation.

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