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Back to the Roots
Anarchists as Revolutionary Organizers
June 28, 2010

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Ian Martin is a broke student/wage slave, a member of Students For Justice, a Wobbly and a cool Panamenian dude. Much debt is owed to James Mumm's article, *Active Revolution* , and to my comrades in Students For justice.

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is engaged in. Forming revolutionary movements is of course necessary at some point, but such a movement would highly benefit from organizers with skills and experience built up in other, more reformist movements.

Movement of Anarchists or Anarchistic Movement?

Anarchism developed out of the struggles of people for Justice, equality, freedom, and community, not as an armchair ideology. It is thus sad to see how much of what passes for anarchist theory and action today is divorced from ordinary people, their movements, and their everyday lives. For those who embrace anarchism as an intellectual game or hobby, they are quite free to pass their lives scribbling away into eternity. But for those who want to see a new society brought about, it is time to get back to the roots, back to the struggle. We cannot impose our ideas on others without violating the spirit of anarchism. But that is not the goal of organizing, nor is it to manipulate or subvert people. It is not possible or necessary to convert every person into a conscious anarchist, and then launch a movement and revolution from that point. Rather, we should be working together with others to build a movement that is anarchistic in orientation, strategy, and goals. If such a movement can be built, it matters little whether people call themselves anarchists or not.

Contents

not to say that one should not read or that skills cannot be shared, they certainly must and should be, but direct experience should not be ignored). The other reality is that most movements consisting of oppressed people will be generally reformist, especially organizations that people join w I hen first becoming conscious or deciding to take action. This is largely because anarchists and other revolutionaries have declined to participate in movements of oppressed people, as organizers or even as participants. Abdicating this role has left t the stage clear for reformists to run the show and monopolize the attention of oppressed people. Anarchists must work directly with the oppressed if we are serious about having any part in a social revolution and contributing to it. And to work directly with the oppressed, we must often work in reform movements. This is not wasted effort on our part despite what we may think of the goals of a movement, because it is vital for an organizer to understand the process of radicalization, and the best school maybe in such a movement. It is important for organizers to understand the different ways in which people are radicalized, and how this knowledge can be used to help radicalize others.

Finally, while activists, organizers, and revolutionaries often have a sense of unjustified superiority and ego due to being part of the few who have advanced ideas, working in reform movements may help bring one down to size. Organizers must always be open and receptive to learning from others. We must never assume that just because we are revolutionary and others are reformist or ordinary that they have no thing to teach us. Hopefully, an organizer will be transformed as he or she helps to transform others. In other words, revolutionary organizing is not a one-way process but rather an interchange and back and forth of knowledge, experience, ideas, and skills. Despite being useful and important, this process is also necessary to break down any barriers between an organizer and those he or she is working with, though it should be said that the best organizer is one who is already rooted in the struggle he or she

This concept is an important one for organizers to be aware of and fully understand because it should be central to organizing strategy. It is all too common for those wanting change, especially isolated activists, to develop a view of ordinary people as ignorant, reactionary masses who are the problem. This view is problematic for two reasons. One, because it establishes a false division in our minds between activists or revolutionaries and the people. The people are not some abstract mass over there, we are the people. The fact that this way of thinking has become so prevalent demonstrates the isolation that the activist approach has created and its inherent elitism. Secondly, this view ignores the fact that everyone is a potential revolutionary because, as I mentioned, we all unconsciously chafe against this system, from messing up at work to vague hatred of the police to complaints about corporate omnipresence. The process of organizing is thus the process of tapping this unconscious rebellion in people, bringing it out into the open, and helping them to fashion it into a conscious awareness. This can effectively be done using the processes I have mentioned action and reflection, asking the right questions to transform the unconscious into the conscious, etc.

Working in Reform Movements

Though it may seem distasteful and pointless to anarchists, it is often necessary and important for revolutionary organizers to work within reform movements. This serves four purposes to build skills, work directly with the oppressed, to understand radicalization, and to be transformed as one transforms others. The fact is that most people, especially anarchists unfortunately, don t have much experience in organizing. Participating in reform movements is a good way to build up solid organizing skills. Experience is the best teacher, and simply reading about organizing is often a poor substitute (which is

What's the difference between an activist and an organizer? The distinction is quite important. An activist is committed and responsible to an issue; they are what I call 'issue-centered'. The issue can be anything from war to globalization to anarchism itself. Activists then attempt to rally people around this issue based on individuals' moral commitments and beliefs. For activists, an organization is simply a means to effect change and win some victories regarding the given issue.

What needs to be done to create a successful, truly liberatory, revolutionary movement? What should an anarchist be doing to help in the creation and construction of such a movement? These are, or at least should be, central questions that anarchists need to be addressing. While they are by no means the only relevant issues, the fact that some anarchists spend so much time on intellectual masturbation instead of tackling these concrete problems of liberation is symptomatic of their distance from real grassroots struggle. For some, anarchism may be an intellectual game, a lifestyle, or simply something to do to pass the time. But for anyone who is truly interested in liberation, in building a free, equal and just society made up of vibrant communities, its time to get our hands dirty. There s no substitute or quick easy fix for organizing and movement building. Behind every spontaneous uprising or revolution, there was years of organizing work that paved the way and laid the foundations. Such work has been ignored for far too long by those calling themselves anarchists. This distance from grassroots struggle must be eliminated, and anarchists must assume their proper role as revolutionary organizers if they wish to be at all successful in seeing their dreams realized. The reason why anarchists are so cut off and isolated from the people and find themselves sharing in so many of the other flaws of the Left, is because like the Left, anarchists have mostly (in modern times) been activists.

Activists and Organizers

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An organizer, by contrast, is committed and responsible to a defined constituency. Or in other words, is responsible to a group of people (students, workers at a workplace, etc.) or a community. Organizers are what I call people-centered. Rather than rally people around some issue, an organizer believes that the important thing is to build relationships between people and transform power dynamics, letting issues be defined by the people themselves. For an organizer, building people s collective power to create change is ultimately more important than victory on an issue. Issues are important insofar as they are a means of building this collective power, radicalizing people, and constructing a movement and organizations.

Activism Isolated and Impotent

It can quickly be seen why activism leads to alienation and isolation from ordinary people, and ineffectiveness in bringing about real, revolutionary change. Activists spend their time producing analysis concerning different issues, and then expect people to come flocking to that analysis that was produced by activists in isolation. This process does not let people craft their own analysis or select their own issues. Activism is based around a deep lack of trust in people, and an unwillingness

tion is fruitless. Just as people grow from lessons learned from experience, organizations and movements become more effective and powerful only by assessing past actions and shaping future tactics and strategy based upon such reflection. It is also important that such lessons are institutionalized or made permanent in some way so that people don t have to keep reinventing the wheel. This is why solid organizations are necessary that just don t evaporate after time, because we need to be launching from a higher and higher point of experience and awareness each time we act. If lessons are lost when a movement dissipates, then the next generation has to start from the bottom of the ladder once again. This is one of the reasons why a social revolution has yet to be achieved.

Unconscious and Conscious Rebellion

Anarchists maintain that the current system we live under is irrational, unnatural, and deeply antihuman. Contrary to what many think, the tendency of humanity is actually towards cooperation, freedom, and creativity (in other words, anarchism), so that the social environment we must survive in goes against our natural instincts and inclinations. Given such a context, it is common for people to manifest unconscious feelings of rebellion towards everyday situations that go against their dignity and humanity. To put it in another way, no one feels comfortable being a slave because it is an inhuman condition. Acts of absenteeism, sabotage, or slowing down on the job are unconscious acts of rebellion against the conditions of work under capitalism. Often, people may be nationalistic or conservative on a conscious level, yet possess unconscious subversive instincts just by virtue of being human. People can only be persuaded to go against their own best interests (which is the purpose of the propaganda of those in power) to a certain point and a certain depth of consciousness.

son that the word movement is used after all, because it is based on action. it is also important to remember that the process of empowerment and radicalization is primarily driven by personal and collective experience in action (and reflection upon it afterwards).

The three steps I have outlined are not really steps at all, but rather three components of a complementary and simultaneous process. Action is made up of strategy and tactics. Strategy is in essence the overall plan of action to accomplish a larger goal. A campaign, itself with its own strategy, might be part of a larger strategy (towards revolution for example). Tactics are the individual actions which make up a strategy.

The role of an organizer is to facilitate whatever course of action or campaign people have decided upon. He or she does this by sharing whatever experiences or skills might be helpful, by asking the right questions that will get people to think in constructive and positive ways (i.e. getting people to think strategically, encouraging creativity and thoughtful choice of tactics, etc.), and making sure that tasks are coordinated and followed through with. The test of a group s structure comes through action, and its weaknesses will often only be revealed at this time. An organizer should always be assessing what is going wrong or right and bringing these observations up to the group for discussion and possible solutions. An organization s structure should always be seen as a work in progress and never beyond question. It is important to be fluid enough to adapt to changing conditions and situations as well as to compensate for unforeseen flaws.

While organizers should be a motivating force in an organization, true motivation for action can only come from within each person. Passion can definitely be a collective process, however, in that people undoubtedly inspire each other. Enthusiasm is often contagious. That being said, one of the key roles for organizers comes after action when they should be encouraging analysis and assessment, for action without reflec-

to give control to the masses, who are valuable as bodies in a march but not as participants in theory or guiding a movement. Given this fact, it then becomes a bit absurd when activists start asking, 'Where are the people of color?' or 'How come only white lefties ever participate?'. Should they be surprised when their lack of trust is returned by those they disdain? No genuine revolution can be built from a strategic model that values an issue above people, and utilizes people as simply a means to an end (shouldn't anarchism be about putting people as the end)). Anarchists have become activists by default over the years, due to a lack of clear organization and concrete goals, and this needs to change.

Organizers have a fundamental faith and trust in people and their potential, and thus allow them to take part in and guide analysis and issue-selection. Many so-called radicals (and anarchists) seem to fear that ordinary people will make mistakes if given this control. But what is anarchism if not the belief that people are fully able to govern themselves and make the decisions that affect their lives? Certainly our ability to do so is stunted by living in a hierarchal, authoritarian society, but how else will this capacity develop and how else will people learn but through mistakes? Vanguardism is not just a strategy but also a state of mind that thinks that there is a group of enlightened radicals, and everyone else isn't quite at their level yet, so the ordinary folk can't be given control. This mindset must be wiped out, especially from the brains of those who claim to be anarchists.

Letting people define their own issues is key to an organizer. People will obviously be far more committed to fighting for an issue and goal that they have selected through a collective, organic process than one that was chosen for them and they are expected to run to, shouting 'Hallelujah, I've seen the light!'. An organizer should work to build people s skills and experience in analysis, not control the analysis itself. Organizers should facilitate analysis by making sure that a process of dia-

logue, where people talk out their feelings and insights about an issue, and research takes place, with ultimately a solid position and strategy being formulated. As sure as the sun will shine, people will at times choose to work for the reforms, which sets off the vanguardist tendency in many radicals. But an organizer knows that its not the end of the world, and in fact is quite natural. The best way for someone to learn the futility of reformism is often not by being lectured, but by experiencing it for him or herself in the course of struggle. Radicalization is rarely a divine revelation; rather reform struggles can often be key elements in the process. Organizers facilitate and encourage the action people have chosen, knowing that any action is useful as long as there is reflection. Truly useful and radical theory develops from such action and reflection, not clever thoughts in an ivory tower. An organizer is ultimately concerned with transforming power dynamics, and this can often be accomplished just as well in working towards a reform as a more radical goal.

It is also important to remember that historically the people have been the most radical element in revolutionary moments. It is the activists, intellectuals, and party leaders, who are always claiming to have the monopoly on militancy and advanced ideas, who end up exerting a conservative influence when it most matters. A true anarchist and revolutionary organizer wants to develop and unleash the revolutionary potency in people, and when its day has come will let it wash away the old order without straining to put a leash on it in the name of party, ideology, or personal power.

Power Dynamics

Organizers are primarily concerned with transforming power dynamics but in what way? Currently, much of society is based on an unequal power dynamic of hierarchy and top-down rule.

you with tasks anymore, at least until you can prove otherwise. The person who is accountable does not necessarily have to perform the task alone, but can simply be the point person who makes sure that what they are assigned to do gets done in general.

2. Build Leadership and Empower People

It is important that organizations empower and develop the leadership abilities of each of their members. While anarchists are against permanent leaders with vested authority over others, it is important for us in our organizing to acknowledge the fact that leaders and leadership of a different type do exist in organizations and revolutionary movements, and that this is a natural and not necessarily negative phenomena Leadership is not harmful as long as the right structure is in place to insure that the leadership skills of everyone are developed, and that everyone is a leader at some point and in some capacity. When everyone is a leader, has power, and is an agent of change, then anarchism is realized. Part of an organizer s work in changing power dynamics is to change them within the organization, by making sure a structure place that insures power is equally distributed, and that those with privilege, be it based on gender, race, class, education, or experience do not hold an unfair advantage. Shaping theory, leadership, decision-making, and/or importance. If an organizer achieves nothing else besides empowering people, then he or she has done a lot. Power is is something that everyone has, it just needs to be tapped and drawn out.

3. Move Towards Collective Action

Ultimately an organization must act. It is no use having empowered people or a great structure if people s power is not used to make things happen and create change. There s a rea-

also level playing fields and that if people do not speak up or participate it is their own fault (personal responsibility).

Anarchists and revolutionaries should know better. The group is collectively responsible for insuring the equal participation of all its members, while personal responsibility is a concept that we should discard, as it has always been the justification for iniquity.

Organizers should help in building a non-hierarchal, democratic structure that defends against the emergence of any type of hierarchy or elite, whether formal or informal. Such a structure should accomplish the following things:

1. Create Accountability

It is vitally important that tasks are formally assigned and divided up. If they are not, tasks will end up falling to the same people over and over again, which is unhealthy because not only will those people end up monopolizing experience and skills, but the work of the organization ends up being performed by only a few, which is a recipe for elitism. Additionally, assigning tasks has the benefit of creating accountability. If no in task, one is really responsible for a certain task, then there is no way of insuring that it gets done. But if there is someone responsible, then there is a definite sense of accountability which will insure that most things do get done, and at the least that there is someone to question if he or she does not follow through on the assigned task. Accountability is not a trespass against individual freedom. Tasks should be assigned on a volunteer basis, so that one freely chooses to be accountable when taking something on. While individual freedom is a high priority for anarchists, so is the collective responsibility that goes with it. In other words, there is a responsibility to the people that you work with when participating in an organization. You are fully free to shirk a task, but your comrades are equally free to not trust

Anarchists and revolutionary organizers should be focused on changing this power dynamic wherever it occurs. Power is not necessarily a bad thing it is simply the ability to effect change and have a say in decision-making. What is bad is when power is distributed unequally, when it is given to some and not to others. But fortunately power, unlike money, does row on trees, or more precisely is present within each of us as human beings. How power is distributed in society is a social relationship, and like any social relationship, can be transformed once the people involved commit themselves to changing it.

While power is currently concentrated in the hands of a few, organizers work to change the situation into one in which power is distributed evenly. What this means in concrete terms is that right now only a minority in society get to make the decisions about how society will operate, and also monopolize the means to enforce those decisions. Instead, anarchists wish to see everyone have an equal say in the decisions that affect their communities. Decisions will be made reality by the people themselves, not imposed on them by coercive methods.

Organizers are not only concerned with developing people s power, but also their creativity and initiative. In other words, while all revolutions and movements depend on some degree of popular empowerment, oftentimes this is only so that it can be directed into the channels which leaders and would-be leaders have devised. Anarchist organizers rightly view this as manipulation and inimical to freedom. With equal and collective power for all should come the equal opportunity of all to decide how their power will be exercised.

It should be understood that there are generally two types of power positive power and negative power. Positive power is the ability to create and construct in terms of freedom, it can be described as the freedom to. Negative power is the ability to restrict someone else s actions or prevent an undesired event from taking place. In terms of freedom, this is known as freedom from. The terms positive and negative do not necessarily

connote that one type is desirable and the other is not. True power is the sum of both positive and negative power. The desirability of a form of power can be found in whether it is collectively wielded or monopolized by only a few.

Negative power is the destructive and limiting force. When wielded by the few, it manifests itself as war, prisons, police, bombs, oppression, etc. But as a collective force, which is what revolutionary organizers are concerned with, negative power is the important ability of people to stand up to injustice in the streets, destroy oppressive institutions, and defend their freedom, rights, communities and organizations against encroachment by rulers. Obviously negative power is vital in pursuing a social revolution and radically transforming society, since those in authority and blessed with privilege will not give up their ill-gotten gains without struggle. The most important elements in cultivating negative power are courage, confidence, and willpower. Once the people have resolved upon a course of action and believe in it in their hearts, the power they can wield is without equal. Governments and institutions that seem invincible and eternal have crumbled with breathtaking speed once the masses have made up their mind to destroy them. Given this fact, those in power by necessity must convince people through various means (education, the media, etc.) that they are helpless to change anything and powerless in the face of the might of the system. Thus, the most common reason that people give for not participating in political or revolutionary activity is that it is useless and they can t make a difference. In order to cultivate negative power then, this socialization must be counteracted. By participating in campaigns and actions, people can begin to get a sense of what they can achieve collectively and become habituated to using that power. People must develop the courage to use their power, confidence in its efficacy, and the willingness to use it. While negative power is often heavily or exclusively focused upon, because we are in

2. Organize Relationships into a Structured Form

Structure is vitally important for all organizations. While a good organization may be made up of people who feel a kinship to each other and even people who are all committed to lofty revolutionary principles, informal hierarchies still can and will develop without structure. It is easy to be turned off to the concept of structure when we live in a society based on authoritarian, hierarchal structures that strangle freedom and participation, and when endless, frustrating bureaucracy is everywhere. But just because structure takes on such vile forms in our current society does not mean we should throw out the baby with the bath water. If used in the right way, structure can actually be a means of insuring democracy and equal power and participation.

The absence of structure and order does not necessarily lead to freedom or equality. Certain members of our society possess privileges based on race, class, gender, or personality. Without any structure, these privileges manifest themselves and an informal, ranked hierarchy based upon them emerges. Those with privilege dominate discussion and decision-making, while those without it feel disenfranchised and intimidated. Democracy is not just about everyone having a vote, but about everyone having an equal part in the discussion leading up to a vote, the information needed to make it, and the opportunity and ability to voice their opinion on the issue. Those who argue against structure ignore the fact that the process upon which structureless groups operate is the organizational equivalent of the theory of laissez-faire capitalism everyone in capitalism has the opportunity to get rich, so if they don t then its their own fault. Of course we all know that this is complete nonsense and that success in capitalism is almost always determined by privilege (whether based on class, race, gender, etc.). Similarly, some argue that groups without structure are

organizer. One s skills, insights, and knowledge should not be jealously guarded but rather shared as widely as possible.

That being said, what are the main tasks facing an organizer when helping in the construction of an organization?

1. Build Relationships

Relationships between the people inside them are what make or break effective revolutionary organizations. Ultimately, a network of relationships or collection of people forms the initial foundation of an organization. Sometimes this group comes together organically on its own, and at other times it is the work of active outreach by organizers. Such outreach can be in the form of one-on-one conversations, group forums, or other means. Oftentimes organizations also come about as the result of a single-issue campaign when a core group of people working on such a campaign come together to create something more broad and lasting.

Whatever the case may be, it is the responsibility of organizers and everyone in an organization to make sure that all relationships are healthy and based on principles of equality and solidarity. Feelings of camaraderie and cooperation often develop naturally as a result of shared work, but it also is important to create a culture of friendship. This culture can come about if people have fun together and share in social activities that are not necessarily even related to what the organization does. When new people enter the organization, the utmost effort must be made to integrate them into the network of relationships, so that cliques of old experienced members, separate from new members do not develop. If people are not engaged and feel disconnected from everyone else, they will likely not stay around for long.

the midst of a system which we must dismantle and destroy, it is vitally important not to ignore the other type of power.

Positive power is the constructive and creative force. It can be used by the few to create complex systems of exploitation and oppression, such as the global system of neo-liberal capitalism or the million and one laws that only serve to damn us. In the hands of the people, however, positive power can be used to create new institutions to meet the needs and desires of a society based upon a new vision. Such creative work is as vital to revolution as the destructive work of negative power. Obviously the goal is not just to tear down the current society but also to build a better one in its place. Just as people need to participate in smaller expressions of negative power to build their confidence before they jump into the big leagues, so too are small steps often helpful with positive power. Limited programs of mutual aid to meet community needs, such as breakfast programs, tenant or worker cooperatives, etc., are important ways to build people s confidence in their ability to construct without direction from above, to provide practice in exercising that creativity which has atrophied in the suffocating atmosphere of capitalism and hierarchal society, and to give people a taste of a different world, a taste which will hopefully bloom into a burning thirst. Just as people have been convinced that they can t stand up to the system and make a change, they have also been convinced that this way of life is as good as humanity gets and there is no alternative. We have been bred to believe the worst about each other and humankind in general, and experiments in positive power can show people that cooperation, justice, equality, and solidarity can come as naturally and easily to us as competition, selfishness and brutality to us under the current system. Once confidence, experience, and belief/desire in a better world have been developed, people can wield positive power to move beyond limited programs to the complete collective management of social, political, and economic life.

The aim of organizers is to help develop both the positive and negative power of the people. A revolutionary anarchist organizer does not control people power; rather he or she merely tries to work for situations and structures that develop it. How that power is used is up to the people themselves.

Towards the Social Revolution

Dual power is an important concept for organizers and anarchists to understand. It refers to a state of affairs in which popular power, in both its positive and negative forms, poses a direct challenge to the State and threatens to replace it as the accepted power in society. When free, cooperative institutions are created by the people to take over the political, economic, and/or social organization of life, the new society is being created within the shell of the old. However, while this positive construction is absolutely integral to revolution, it cannot be successful without tactics based on negative power. The State will not just peacefully relinquish power to the free institutions of the people. Rather, those in power will try their best to destroy them using whatever coercion and force is necessary. This is because institutions of dual power are direct challenges to the legitimacy of the State. A situation where two social forms compete for legitimacy is inherently unstable, one or the other must prevail eventually. Negative power is thus essential to defend the people s institutions against State attacks, as well as to take the offensive and dismantle the State.

Some see social revolution as an outdated concept that is rendered impossible and unrealistic in this modern world of high-tech weaponry and a U.S. military that is the most powerful war-making machine the world has ever known. This, however, demonstrates a lack of understanding as to what social revolution really is. It is not a political revolution where leaders and factions compete for authority or a guerilla struggle with a small band fighting against Goliath. Rather, it is the people as a whole rising up to create new societal forms and to destroy the old ones. It can be seen as a zero-sum game where an increase in people power leads to a decrease in State and elite power. Once a certain point has been reached, people power is at such a high level that State and elite power is reduced to a weak semblance of its old self. This is because it must always be remembered, and it seems that some have forgot, that the economic, political, and social power of the ruling class is based on controlling and commanding people s power. When people begin to seize control of their own power and use it for their own purposes, not only does this become fuel for the fire of revolution, but it also means that this power is lost to the ruling class and means a reduction in their power. The case for social revolution in modern society is thus not as hopeless as it first seems, for the withdrawal of people s power from the system does more damage to State and capitalist power than any street fighting could ever do. There will of course be some fighting and violence, but the more organized the people are and the more people seize control of their own power, the weaker the ruling class will be without firing a single bullet.

Organizing Theory

Organizations at heart are a network of relationships between people. It is important never to forget this, and that organizations are created to serve the needs of people, not vice versa. That being said, organizations are necessary and important. They are the means by which people can wield collective power. Power must be wielded collectively, not only because it is otherwise impossible to achieve social change, but also because collective power will be the basis of the new society. One key thing must be said and I cannot stress this enough the ultimate goal of an organizer is to make everyone into an