

Organizing A Mass-Based Community Constituency

Anarchy Carpet

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Let's face it — revolution and serious social change can only occur with massive popular participation. We can spend our time organizing the organized, individuals who already have a political mindset, or we can widen our scope. According to the mainstream media, anarchists are just a bunch of violence-loving hooligans who roll into town for the big protest and vanish afterwards, making no lasting social change. And we all know “activists” who are just that — going to protests like they were concerts.

So where do we go from here? In the meantime, more and more fall into poverty both here and abroad, and corporations continue to grab power with the willing accomplice of governments who are moving further from the people. But in order to shift focus and begin to invest in community or labor based organizing, we have to recognize the obstacles.

I've been organizing with ACORN, a low-income people's organization, for almost a year now. Working with a mass-based constituency is vastly different from organizing students or other activists. But if you want to organize a union at the local grocery store or get people together to fight some abusive bank or gas company, the people must be involved. Otherwise, we're just speaking on behalf of the oppressed as advocates — and that can lack legitimacy. In terms of actually winning changes, twenty-five community residents who are actually being screwed by a mortgage company walking the picket line is a hell of a lot more effective than twice as many young anarchists. Many activists join the movement out of a sense of justice and righteousness. Community members will fight because they're fighting for their own livelihoods, or homes, or jobs, or children. It's a powerful concept.

Which is not to say that there aren't more than enough obstacles in the practical world of organizing. Many times, we're entering a culture that isn't our own. In my case, I work primarily in low-income African-American neighborhoods. I happen to be a young, college-educated white male. Clearly, there are going to be some social and cultural differences between myself and those that I organize. From dress, to speech, to personal politics, there are constant challenges. For example, in the neighborhoods where I organize, adults are generally polite. They don't curse, and therefore neither do I. Many of my members are deeply religious, and often want to start meetings with prayer. I am an atheist — but I keep my mouth shut about it. Nor do I discuss homosexuality, feminism, drugs or a host of other issues where my beliefs differ greatly from that of our members. As a membership-based organization centered on economic justice, we limit our issues largely to those issues that our constituency is directly effected by and agrees on by consensus. I can't “force” the members to turn out for a pro-choice rally, and it is not my place to set the agenda. For instance, we have organizers who are gay — but they will likely never disclose this to an ACORN member, nor will the organization take a stand on the issue. Personal appearance is another matter. Suddenly, certain things which I have come to accept as natural (facial piercings, multiple earrings on guys, dreadlocks, punk clothing) can suddenly be a barrier to getting in someone's door and having that person take you seriously.

Am I uncomfortable when someone suggests that it was God who enabled us to fight? Sure. Do I get angry when someone says something derogatory about their wife, gay men and lesbians, or Korean shop owners? Yes. Can I jump into a political tirade every time something offends me, like I might do when I'm at home? No. But at the same time, I have enough influence as an organizer to ensure that my members won't adopt an official position that would be racist or sexist, and I would fight against any “patriotic” or pro-war statement.

However, once someone has signed up and gotten involved in the struggle, the relationship takes on an entirely different dynamic, particularly with the neighborhood chairpeople and hard-

core members that I see often. Then, we're just two people working on the same fight, and it's up to me about much to disclose and what to say. We have members that I've discussed issues like the war, drug legalization, police oppression, and yes, even anarchism.

Most people assume that there must be a sense of distrust as I knock on doors in the inner city, but don't let intimidation prevent your work. More potential organizers than I can count have expressed interest until we actually hit some pavement and knocked on doors for five hours. Too many people fear doorknocking, but you never know who is waiting to meet you before you get out there. It's one thing to get someone who is politically-minded to show up for something, but another thing completely when someone who has never thought about politics gets active because of your work.

Cultural differences are one thing, but political differences present a far more relevant challenge. Anarchism, communism and socialism are not words that non-activists will respond to positively—they've been effectively vilified by popular culture and the media. So I can't go around waving my black flag in people's faces and expect them to line up for a march. Not only would I be pushing away people who could potentially join your campaign, but I would open myself and the organization up to discrediting by our opponents. You can't wear a mask in community organizing. It's the same reason my name isn't on this article.

When it comes to personal politics it helps to remember one thing: Stick to the issues. Think of the issues and ideals that drew you into the movement—that's what people will respond to. Community control, fair wages, police brutality and corporate accountability can all be understood and used to organize — without a treatise on Marxism or anarchist theory.

Organizing in the real world also means knowing your shit in local politics. You might hate all politicians on principle, but you better damn well know the difference between the pro-community woman on the City Council and the anti-poor, pro-corporate Mayor. Know the laws and the local governance. They are the systems you must manipulate to get things done, even if you find the whole mess repellant. I find that most organizations try to be too pure, and by doing so, discount themselves out of relevance.

There is a great personal fear of community organizing. In my experience, most activists don't like to doorknock, particularly if they've never done it before. It means leaving the comfortable social circles we're used to. You are no longer organizing your peers and friends. You will interact with people of vastly different ages, religions, education, races, cultures and opinions as you. Flyering for a rally in the community is completely different than getting out there and talking to people. Be prepared for rejection and ridicule. More than a few days I've finished a day or doorknocking with no new contacts or members to show for it. I've had quite a few meetings when less than five people showed up. And just think of trying to have a protest that small. You will develop an acute fear of failure, because failure is a very real possibility.

Aside from the fear of being outside someone's comfortable social situation and fear of failure, there is one other big obstacle —community organizing is hard fucking work. You can do it part time or volunteer in your spare time, but it's most effective when at least some of the organizers are full time. I have worked 50 or 60 hours more weeks than I care to remember. This, of course, brings into play yet another dreaded factor—money. A truly serious, long-lasting organization must have resources and be able to pay for things like employees, phones, buses and offices. Therefore, fund raising is absolutely necessary. It may mean canvassing rich neighborhoods and applying for grants — both relatively odious tasks. However, most community organizations also ask for dues from potential members. It sounds harsh, and is sometimes uncomfortable to

ask for money from low-income people, particularly when you know that it could be going for your own salary. But just as Cesar Chavez did, you take the money, even if it hurts that person today-because you know you're fighting for a better tomorrow.

If you're building an organization of people that are committed to social change, be prepared to deal with the fact that some people will take on different levels of responsibility. Some tasks, like training staff or participating in the hiring process, are necessary. As organizations grow, so do their bureaucracy and imperfections. It's our job to work within those pre-existing structures, we should do our best to change those organizations for the better and keep our ideals present in our organizing. Just work hard at it — include everyone in decisions and build equitable, unifying environments. And though I may not be able to organize around my favorite causes all the time (globalization isn't a big topic in the neighborhood, yet), this doesn't stop me from participating in marches and rallies and direct actions outside of "work." For me, this has included being arrested at an anti-war protest. And I have introduced elements of anti-authoritarian or anarchist practices into my first neighborhood drive-like consensus building, deprivatization of property (seizing vacant lots, squatting homes), and bottom-up decentralized structures.

Despite all of these challenges, organizing in the community is a necessary and rewarding form of activism. Working on a local level makes building power a very real possibility and brings victories that, though they aren't toppling capitalism, they are making people's lives better. There are moments that are just as moving as mass convergences because they are so personal. I've seen dozens of tenants confront slumlords in their rich neighborhoods — class war in its most basic form. I've helped bring a busload of children and parents about to lose their library to the gated community where the library trustees lived. Members that I recruited have taken over vacant lots and blocked traffic for campaigns. It all pays off when the neighborhood leader you recruited shouts down the Director of Public Works or the retired grandmother you literally begged to come to a meeting stands up mid-discussion to say, "If that bastard won't clean up his lot, then we'll take it ourselves!" Once turned on to the idea of unity, activism and the power that lies in the hands of community, people will surprise you and can often become very radical.

If you've been organizing and want to take the struggle to the people that are often most oppressed by the system and feel the blunt force of capitalism in their communities every day, do it. Don't let the fear stop you-let it move you instead.

A Recipe for Disaster

Greetings,

When I first read "Organizing a Mass-Based Community Constituency" [NEA #4], I got really angry. Then, as it was signed "Anarchy Carpet", I assumed it was maybe a joke I didn't get. As it seem's it is not a joke, here's what I found objectionable in the article.

To start with, the article in question is in direct contradiction with the article that precedes it and the one following it. How the hell are people supposed to figure out our position if we print such contradictory pieces? Furthermore, the piece is in direct contradiction to my own experience as a community organizer, and NEFAC member, and I hope it is also in contradiction with what the federation is trying to accomplish.

Contempt for the Working Class

Starting with a good intention –that is respecting other people’s culture and not imposing the organizer’s views– the author ends up showing a great contempt for the working class and forgets about basic principles of community organizing, namely popular education and consciousness raising. How come? Well, the author stresses many times that he doesn’t talk about his views on subjects such as religion, queer sexuality and sexism, and doesn’t “jump into a political tirade everytime something offends [him or her]”. He or she furthermore adds that the organization will not take a stand on the issue as it is “a membership-based organization centered on economic justice”. But at the same time, Anarchy Carpet adds that he or she “has enough influence as an organizer to ensure that my [sic] members won’t adopt an official position that would be racist or sexist”. In other words, people are too stupid to change their views and adopt more progressive ones and instead of trying to convince them to change said views, as we don’t want to argue with them, we have to fool them by not expressing them officialy. In Quebec, even in the most reformist community groups, such a practice, which amounts to an abdication of responsibility, would be enough for a termination of contract (i.e. you would get fired).

The author advocates hiding one’s political views as he or she thinks that if people knew he or she was an anarchist it would “not only be pushing away people who could potentially join your [sic] campaign, but I would open myself and the organization up to discrediting by our opponements”. I have to strongly disagree as I think it is the contrary. If you have a successful struggle, the local elite will do everything in it’s power to discredit you and if you are an anarchist, they will find out. Now imagine, if your not open about your politics, the people you are struggling with will feel betrayed and manipulated. I can already picture the headline in the local daily “Campaign Secretly Run by Closet Anarchist”. If, on the other hand, everyone knows your politics –which doesn’t mean they have to agree with them– then the local elite can’t play this against you (I know, it happened to me during the struggle around the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City). It is if your politics are hidden that you are open to discredit, not if you are open about them.

You Cant Fool People into Class War (or Anarchism)

If we want to build a movement for social change, then we need to advocate social change. If we believe social revolution is the ultimate medicine to the ills of capitalism, then we need to advocate revolution. People, all kinds of people, including working class people, will come to anarchism through their experience of struggle and through discussion with others (that’s us). People will not be fooled into class war or anarchism, they have to be convinced, and to convince them, we have to talk to them about anarchism. Period.

And it can be done. Consider this: thirty years ago, in the very same community Anarchy Carpet is organizing – that is a poor African-American community – there was a group of organizers who started organizing while being really open about their politics. These people were highly successful. In less than two years they built a mass base and lots of community programs. They were in fact so successful that they suffered a fullfledged assault by the combine forces of the State and Capital. And still, in the middle of the battle, with dozens of organizers killed and many more jailed, a national survey said that 25% of the black population agreed with their politics, and 75% thought that they were the group most likely to affect real social change. This

group was called The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. They didn't show contempt for the people, but a great confidence in their capacity to understand the system and change the course of history.

The strategy proposed by Anarchy Carpet is, for anarchist-communists, a recipe for disaster. It will not build a liberatory movement, but the worst kind of social movement that exist, that is a conservative, corporatist social movement. In opposition to this, anarchist-communists need to be open about their politics and tactics. After all, let's not forget that if you act like a reformist, walk like a reformist and talk like a reformist, then, no matter if you call yourself an anarchist "off-work", YOU ARE A REFORMIST.

Solidarity,
Nicolas Phebus,
La Nuit (NEFAC-Quebec City)

Why Support Union Busters?

Fellow Workers,

I was shocked to find an article praising ACORN ("Organizing a Mass-Based Community Constituency") in your last issue, especially as NEFAC members have joined us on picket lines outside ACORN functions.

ACORN is a notorious union-busting operation, having fired several employees across the country for attempting to unionize with the Industrial Workers of the World. ACORN demands that its staff put in long hours (60 hours a week and more) without overtime, subjects staff to unsafe working conditions, sometimes withholds workers' paychecks for weeks at a time, and denies its employees and members any real say in how the organization is run. The horrendous working conditions have created a situation in which most ACORN staff quit within their first two months; those who try to address the problems are harassed, "laid-off" or terminated. Information on ACORN's vicious union-busting can be found at www.iww.org.

ACORN is not only not anarchist, it is diametrically opposed to anarchism, having launched two political parties (first the Citizens and more recently the New Party), called for more aggressive policing of poor people's neighborhoods, etc. It works hand-in-glove with politicians, banks, privatizers, and their ilk. Despite its name, it is not even a community-based organization. ACORN chapters are tightly controlled by the national (self-appointed) staff in New Orleans, who receive all funds, cut all checks, decide which campaigns local groups will work on, create and dissolve chapters and campaigns with the stroke of a pen, and fire any employee who dares challenge their autocratic and often senseless decisions.

Certainly, anarchists should be actively engaged in our communities and in talking to ordinary people. The article on the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) offers a much more principled (and effective) model for this, as did the organizing in Quebec City, where NEFAC members and others did intensive community organizing in advance of the summit protests. These examples demonstrate, also, that it is not necessary to adopt reformist politics (or to ignore homophobia, racism and sexism, as the anonymous ACORNite suggests) in order to connect with ordinary people.

In Solidarity,
Jon Bekken,
Anarcho-Syndicalist Review,
Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), IU680

Anarchy Carpet Responds

Dear NEA,

Since my article seems to have caused quite a stir in the last issue (which I fully expected), I'd like to take this chance to contextualize and expand on a few of the points which I believe were misunderstood.

First off, I am not a NEFAC member, so you'll have to excuse me if my article contradicts the official NEFAC position. I was solicited to write this to give my impressions of the challenges inherent in organizing, from a radical perspective. I took the opportunity to address those challenges and talk about my responses to them. It's not a recipe for anything, nor was it to be taken as a methodology for organizing. A better title would have been "Get Off your Ass and Organize: Why Radicals Shouldn't be Afraid of Working With the Working Class." Part of my job is recruiting organizers, and I guess I'm just a little sick and fucking tired of "dedicated revolutionaries" who won't organize because they're uncomfortable with working with anyone outside their activist circles.

Currently, most of the best organizers I've worked with have come from our membership or the neighborhoods we work in. In terms of "hiding my politics," perhaps it wasn't clear. Like union organizers, I spend a lot of time making first contact. For me, that's going door-to-door talking to people, looking for new members. When you do that, it's impractical to talk about your personal politics (as opposed to the issues of the organization, which mirror the concerns of the people.) And yes, people say things I don't agree with at the doors. Do I waste time arguing with them? No. There are 350,000 potential members of this organization in Baltimore. And by the way, perhaps you and your organization's politics match up perfectly, but that's extremely rare. And when I'm working, guess what? I'm representing the 2,000 members whose dues pay my salary and the elected board that I report to, not myself.

But that's why I talked about the fact that you discuss the issues, not the ideologies that go with them, at least at first contact. Because, yes, it is a fact that you will scare people off if you talk about anarchism the first time you talk to them. (By the way, Baltimore is a conservative southern town, though I don't think that matters much.) But like I said, once someone commits to the organization, all bets are off. I'm open about all sorts of issues and politics with the members, even though most of those issues won't be addressed by the organization. It's an unfortunate fact that a community group focused on economic issues probably won't take a stand on, say, abortion rights. Many of the members might believe in the abolition of personal property and still be a fundamentalist Christian, with all the social beliefs that come with that. So that's why I'm limited somewhat, not because I'm a condescending asshole. (P.S. I sometimes say "my" members in affection, because organizing is personal and I consider the members friends beyond a political sense. And yes, they call me "their" organizer.) As for the press & enemies, I'm sort

of undecided on that. But I know that campaigns should be about the membership and the issue, not the organizer.

But perhaps you'll indulge me for a moment, because I believe we may have started what could be a larger, more productive debate. What's an anarchist to do when there are no relevant organizations in their town doing real, active organizing? (Please don't say create your own—when I say relevant I mean a group that counts thousands of members, can actually win things, and has the resources to pay full time organizers.) Most cities just don't have an active IWW or something like OCAP. You'll have to choose between the ACORN chapter, a union or (gasp!) a CBO or an IAF affiliate. Guess what? All these organization are inherently reformist. They're set up to deliver for their members, which by definition is going to mean compromising to less than complete revolution. Without delivering real wins and benefit to the members, you're going to have trouble keeping people involved and recruiting new members.

So what value does organizing with one of these reformist organizations perform? Besides providing real benefit to people, they are building a culture of resistance and creating institutions of dual power. Communities learn the tactics and value of direct action and people power as well as how to be skeptical of authority, government and the bosses. Unions by their very existence suggest an inherent inequality in the capitalist relationship between worker and boss. And because these organizations never really “win”, the continuing struggle keeps up an antagonistic relationship between people and power. And, without mass numbers involved in organizations like this, any form of radical social change simply isn't possible. And even though they may be “reformist”, at a moment of crisis, a well-prepared and radical membership can exceed both the purposes of the group and its elected and staff “leadership” to truly become revolutionary. Our participation in this process as radicals and anarchists in organizations like this is essential, in order to further radicalize the membership, staff and direction of any organization.

Anarchy Carpet

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