

Organizing 101

Based on Materials from the Atlanta and Ottawa GDC

Atlanta and Ottawa General Defense Committees

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This training is intended to cover the very basics of getting organizing campaigns started. We're hoping that it's useful for those with no experience at all in organizing and those who've been involved in organizing before.

We'll be discussing what we mean when we say "organizing," basic techniques for organizing with other people and building them up as organizers, and how to set goals and decide on strategies and tactics collectively.

This training won't teach you how to beg politicians for permission or forgiveness. We're putting forward a revolutionary politics — which means addressing white supremacy, capitalism, cis heteronormativity, patriarchy, all that requires a fundamental transformation of society that our current political and economic structures can't provide.

This means building power from below — organizing each other to build a society in which we collectively decide how we feed, treat and live with each other. For us, this means empowering regular people to have more control over the things that affect them in life, and not delegating it to someone else claiming represents you desires.

What is Organizing?

"Organizing is getting everyday people together to work towards a shared goal for liberation." Or, building social relationships in order to achieve a particular goal that wouldn't be achievable by acting alone.

Real organizing requires action, and confrontation with those who oppose change.

For example unions talk a lot about "organizing" but don't ever actually confront employers, and agree to bad decisions like minimum wage contracts. Organizing is important because it enables us to take action together.

So what exactly is organizing? It happens all the time:

List some everyday organizing

What is Organizing Not?

"The important consideration is people's needs and their lives. The organizer simply makes the tools available to them."

Organizing is not mobilizing people to pursue your particular agenda.

It is fundamentally a social activity.

By understanding a particular problem in your life that others experience, and that link to larger oppressions like white supremacy or patriarchy, we understand more about each other and the structures of power that shape and dominate our lives.

By organizing with others, we collectively build a vision and strategy for a different kind of world.

What are Examples of Organizing Today?

Let's start by thinking of some contemporary examples of this kind of organizing. What are some recent organizing examples that y'all can think of?

What are some recent organizing examples?

How to Assess Potential for Struggle

You'll need to decide what kind of time and resources it might take to motivate people to act for a particular goal. There's some basic criteria that you can use to evaluate how much work it might take to have an impact.

HISTORY/CONTEXT:

- Have there been previous fights there?
- Are people involved in current or previous struggles elsewhere? Experience and confidence are infectious. (Example: Many of the people who started the Ferguson uprising were fast food workers organizing at work.)
- Are people paying attention to other external struggles? (Eg Tim Hortons workers fighting to keep benefits)
- You'll get a lot of this information by talking to people.

LISTEN TO OTHERS:

- The most basic skill of organizing is your ability to listen to other's grievances and understandings of a place and issue. The point is to motivate others to action and you can't do that without understanding their worldviews, familiarity with a place and issue and their motivations and desires for a particular struggle.
- If you're **new** to the place you want to help organize, you'll especially want to connect with others who probably understand the history and context of a place better than you.
- If you're **familiar** with the workplace, it'll be especially important to listen to how others understand and connect to a particular place or issue.
 - Do people know about how a business has changed over the years?
 - Do folks know how employees prior were treated?

- Do people have a sense of a company's change in policy towards policing over the year?
- All of this information can give you a better idea of what information you as an organizer will need to become familiar with, as well as the kinds of education you'll need to help others through. It's a good idea to make note of recurring grievances and events, especially ones you are unfamiliar with.

What are your Potential Struggles and Grievances?

Listing your current struggle and grievances can help you begin to formulate a short and easy understand way of talking about your grievances and struggles with coworkers, neighbors, organizers, etc.

What are some grievances you have? Who do you share them with?

What do you struggle with? Who do you share that struggle with?

YOUR ABILITIES/POSITION:

- You might just be passing through. You might be in a position where people are likely not to trust you. Or you might be someone that people respect because you've been a social leader in that neighborhood/workplace for a long time.
- Your social position relative to others (race/gender/class background/etc) is also important. Are you considered an outsider in this community? Are you a cis-dude, or a white person? Considerations like these might determine whether it could be more useful for you to take on strong leadership, or to know when to step back and invest more time in building other people up as organizers.
- Especially important here is distinguishing between organizing on the basis of shared principles or shared desires and material interests.
- Your resources, time and energy.
- Coding skills, speaking skills etc etc.

WHAT IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF A WIN:

Confidence from winning is infectious. But sometimes the goal isn't that specific win — that's a strategic discussion. Sometimes we don't even know what "winning" would be like, because struggle opens up new possibilities.

Regardless, we should try to think about the chances of winning ahead of time. This also involves aligning our "demands" with who we are targeting. If a large apartment company is raising rents, the office manager probably doesn't have authority to stop it. But if the office manager is continually calling the cops, then they have the authority to stop doing this, and we can force them to.

What is your position like? Think of time worked, time lived in the area, your social web, etc...

What are some ways you can think about the likelihood of a win?

AEIOU

Ok so let's say you have a general idea of what kind of win you're looking for and what's possible, and now is the time to get others involved in the work so you can further develop your goals and strategies together.

The AEIOU model that takes you through how to talk with others 1-on-1 about politics, get a sense of where they're at, work together through understanding your collective interest and motivating them to action.

Caveat 2: Some people can imagine liberation, some people have to see it and experience it. AEIOU does not always happen as a verbal conversation. Sometimes we impact others by allowing them to see collective power or experience it themselves.

Caveat 3: Organizing is 20% questions, 70% listening, and 10% talking. If you think you're not talking enough, you're talking the right amount. If you think you're talking the right amount, you're talking too much.

A — Agitate

Agitation is stirring people up by digging for the issues that make them angry. To get through life at work, many of us pave over the things that piss us off. It is the job of the organizer to

reverse this phenomenon, to bring all the issues to the forefront of a person's consciousness. The point is to help them feel justified in their anger, and to help understand that it has roots in systems much larger than us, that the injustice we confront is by no accident and won't just go away.

Agitation has two parts:

1. By asking questions, you find someone's issues.
2. By asking more questions, you get the person to tell you stories about their issues, stories

an emotional content. You get their desires, their motivations, their stake in a particular issue.

It's useful to lead with a particular thing: "Hey, some of us haven't received our overtime pay for that busy week, have you noticed that?" Or, "The boss/owner is saying some really sexist stuff and is just being creepy in general, has this happened to you?"

Leading questions are your friends here. From observing your environment before and gathering history from folks, you already have some idea of what people are paying attention to and care about.

You're going to ask questions that you think will provoke people and provide an opportunity to express how they feel about a thing. It's important here too to validate people's concerns and feelings — showing solidarity will make them feel more comfortable and build trust.

Here you'll also have to think on your feet and use your knowledge of history and current events.

Someone mentions that living on minimum wage makes it near impossible to support children or save? You know that wages overall haven't increased for decades, while the .01% hoards the vast majority of wealth in the world. Someone mentions that they're afraid to call in sick either because the manager will give them trouble or they can't afford to miss a day. You know that any doctor would tell you not to go to work when you're contagious or sick. You also know that sick days should be a basic right and just good business sense.

You're not lecturing someone here. You're making it easier for them to place their individual story within a larger story of oppression.

E — Educate

What does "Educate" mean here? In a nutshell, agitation poses a problem. Education explains how collective action is the answer to that problem.

Why do we always combine some education with agitation? Because if we just get people angry we're not doing them any favors. We might even make them feel disempowered by thinking about the enormity of the problem at hand. We all know we face big problems, and we're told every day that there's nothing we can do about them. (Climate Change is a good example here.) We have to unleash their anger and help them think through ways to apply it with others.

This is where it is important to be educated ourselves. If we know about examples of successful organizing elsewhere, we can share them.

As with agitate, prioritize open-ended questions. "What if everyone refused to get sick notes? What if we all went into the administration building right now and refused to leave? What if we stopped paying rent together? What if we refused overtime together?"

The important thing is to help others begin to expand their imagination. We are told every day that things are hopeless, and that we can't do anything about it. This is where we can help each other realize the power that we do have.

I – Inoculate

To introduce an idea or attitude into the mind'

Here we're trying to understand people's concerns for wanting to take action, and prepare people for what it could look like.

Concerns are good!

It means that people are thinking critically about taking action and already thinking through what it might look like if they did. It would be more concerning if someone was ready to take action without evaluating the risk to themselves and others. Political action comes with risks and the more prepared we are for them together, the closer we'll get to achieving our goals.

Confidence/momentum.

Bosses/Cops/Landlords/Abusers spend a lot of time thinking about how to keep us surprised and off guard, because this reduces our confidence and makes us easier to push around. Whenever we are preparing to challenge their power over our lives, we have to imagine how they will try to surprise us, to negate their power. Furthermore, when we as organizers are able to show that we know the playbook of the oppressors, we can build our legitimacy. When we can prepare others to stand up to oppressors, this builds their confidence to stand up even taller.

What are they expecting?

Begin by asking them what kind of opposition we might face. Let them go through small and big things, ranging from harassment or being mean all the way to firing/eviction/arrest etc.

What aren't they expecting?

Once you've let them think through what to expect, prepare them for things they might not expect. In a workplace, this might look like the boss "playing nice" to emotionally manipulate, or hiring expensive union-busting lawyers. In a neighborhood, it could look like a non-profit coming in and registering people to vote. At a protest, it could look like a liberal group trying to out-marshal us.

How do we deal with fear?

Return to agitation. We use fear to keep from confronting our problems, and the way to break through it is to remind each other of what it is that is motivating us to move in the first place — where our anger stems from. Anger beats fear every time.

INOCULATION IS NOT OPTIONAL This may be the most important part of organizing, and where a lot of organizing falls apart. Inoculating keeps people from making stupid decisions that expose you before you're ready. Even if you are having a very basic interaction, include at least a little bit of organizing. Example: If meeting with a co-worker, at the end, ask them "What do you think the boss would do if they knew we were talking about this stuff?"

The more you can prepare people for the worst case scenarios (or even the less bad ones), the more reliable you will seem as an organizer and the more confident people will feel in taking risks they know the consequences.

What are some dangers you might face? Firing, cops, harassment...

How can you inoculate your community against these threats?

O – Organize

By this point we've helped people get in touch with their desires for action, thought through how collective action might address their grievances, and helped people think through the risks of taking action. It's not a linear equation here, but by now you'll be about ready to ask people to take up the work of organizing through a particular situation. This means asking people to take up particular commitments and to follow through on them!

Tasks are anything that will take you from A to B – making a flyer for an event, booking a space, getting other organizations to sign on to your event, organizing food and transportation, coordinating the route of a march.

This is the most direct work of organizing, and can often be the most revealing. Asking someone to take on a task demonstrates their level of commitment to the work, which is important information for an organizer to know. You'll need to be able to know who you can rely upon to get a thing done, especially when your organizing work heats up.

It also can serve as an open invitation for someone to get involved with the work who might initially be reluctant. This can look like a lot of things. For example, a task can be tailored to that person's interest or skills (flyer design if they're crafty, or tabling if they're chatty). It can also be more or less complex, depending on the person's involvement. Asking someone to make a flyer is an easy way for someone to start to be involved and feel included in work.

Ultimately the idea is to build up other people's confidence in taking up, carrying out and eventually devising tasks of their own that further your organizing work. Remember, the goal is to make yourself replaceable and everyone is better off by having more confident and capable people who can operate autonomously.

Assessing People's Stake and Commitment

1. **A leader:** Usually empathetic, inspiring, charismatic, solid belief system, committed. Often has organic relationships in community already, and people look to them for opinions.
2. **A supporter:** Someone who generally agrees with our project, and is willing to take on small tasks. This is where we'll spend most of our time- lifting up supporters to become leaders.

3. **Undecided:** Agrees, but not willing to act now. Maybe no time, maybe want to learn more. They may become 2's or 4's in the future.
4. **Pass:** Someone who fundamentally disagrees, but isn't going to actively organize against you. Essentially a "supporter" for the other sides.
5. **Opponent:** Someone who is actively organizing against you, and have all of the characteristics of a leader. They are essentially a "leader" for the other side.

Note: "Leaders" (including ourselves) can have good and bad qualities. It's outside of the scope of this training, but sometimes "leaders" need to be challenged. This is also why we need to always be building up new leaders.

The goal here is to move people up the numbers. Not everyone is going to be a supporter, much less a leader, but we should at the very least know how to neutralize opposition.

For example, for opponents our goal would be to change them to a pass. You can't necessarily change their ideology (you may not win at this), but you can mess with their base of support — for example by out-organizing their ability to influence other people.

Where do people in your organization fit? What is their stake?

U – Unity/Union

At this point you're ideally acting as a unit that can make strategic decisions together, reflect together and developing concrete plans of action.

For this section we're going to go into developing these plans. We'll always be going back through AEIOU, and hopefully the new organizers that we've built up will be giving us the same.

Everything in AEIO is about building the basis to take collective action with other people. Unity is about deepening that basis, so that we can take stronger and stronger actions together.

There's three different spheres through which action can be developed: goals, strategies and tactics.

Goals, Strategy, Tactics

Goals, Benchmarks, Strategies, Tactics, and Alignment

The single most important thing that goes into the planning of any direct action, is to formulate a specific goal, and to establish benchmarks for declaring

victory. Unfortunately, most of the time we don't do this. Instead, we frequently identify a target, set a time and a place, and try to do as much turnout as possible. Then, no matter how impressive or unimpressive the action, it is hard to know whether we won or lost. Uncertainty about

hard-won victories is a morale-killer. Knowing how we achieved our goals builds confidence, and enables us to identify the weaknesses we need to build on.

A **goal** is a situation that you want to realize through your action. Getting out your message, recruiting people, keeping far right trolls from taking your spaces: these are all possible goals for an action.

Benchmarks are precise and measurable specifications we attach to goals.

If recruitment is a goal for a rally action, perhaps the benchmark is to get contact information for 100 people on clipboards from people who pass by.

Some goals are difficult to set measurable benchmarks for, but as much as possible benchmarks should be set that facilitate good planning before the action, coordination during the action, and critical reflection after the action.

Confidently declaring a victory increases group morale, increases tactical clarity and discipline, and improves the overall confidence and ambition of the group.

Strategy and tactics

Strategies are the more general and larger scale and tactics being more specific and smaller scale. Tactics are woven together to fit within larger strategies, which are themselves sewn together to achieve goals. Thinking in strategy and tactics encourages us to think about our actions on multiple levels, which provides direction and organization and without which we become less than the sum of our parts.

When goals, strategies, and tactics work together, they are aligned. The most common way that our actions become unaligned is when we use a tactic for a reason other than its appropriateness to particular strategies and goals. In choosing tactics sometimes we mistakenly rely on habit instead of an honest assessment of changing political terrain, or we implicitly believe that either militancy or peacefulness are goals or strategies in themselves, or we prioritize our own individual and personal needs over the democratically determined goals of the group. Proper alignment requires deliberation and planning and should not be assumed.

Going Public (or not!)

One of the key parts of strategy and tactics involves whether or not to go public as a union/organization/committee/group of concerned folks. This decision can lead to a lot of goodwill, as we saw with neighbors and friends surrounding our Burgerville and Stardust campaigns, but it can also lead to a lot of angry energy and union busting techniques.

One of the reasons to go public is to show your unity and strength together — that none of their cheap intimidation is working. This is a step in which inoculation and reorganization becomes extremely important.

U is for Union

Why get a red or gray card? There are many reasons, but some include better bargaining power when using the NLRB if your goal is a contract, solidarity with a worldwide group of fellow workers and defenders, and the absolute concrete commitment you are showing to your cause. You can also know that your dues are going towards your projects locally, and keeping

the greater organization running nationally (and internationally!) Joining the IWW and GDC is affordable and dual-carding is available, so sometimes the answer is simply: why not?

Commitment in the break room is one thing — commitment on paper is an even greater signal you're in it to win it.

For more information on the history of the IWW and GDC, check out iww.org and iww.org/projects/gdc.

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