

From ‘Anarchist Affinity’ to ‘Collective Action’

A brief history and future directions.

Collective Action

August 2, 2017

Over the past year, the members of Anarchist Affinity have discussed changing our name so that we can adopt a label that better reflects our understanding of anarchist communist politics and vision for social change. To this end, we’ve decided to call ourselves ‘Collective Action.’

Anarchist Affinity emerged, in a very basic form, from a reading group in 2012. Early members of the group came together out of a sense of shared frustration with the limitations of anarchist politics in Melbourne. Anarchists can be inward looking – it’s easy to get caught up in the internal issues and culture of the anarchist scene, and miss out on engaging with broader social movements. We often lack the organisation and political confidence needed to make anarchist ideas relevant to contemporary political and social struggles.

Anarchist politics have a lot to offer. Our ideas about direct action, the dangers of reformism and electoralism, and the importance of bottom-up decision making in mass movements have the potential to help us build stronger, more resilient social movements. But for anarchist ideas to have any impact, we must put them into practice.

And to do this, we need political structures and methods of organising which will allow us to think and act collectively. As it is, too often we end up reinventing the wheel. Our political memory is very short, there is little sense of the history of previous struggles, and few opportunities to learn from past mistakes. We lack a clear vision of what winning would look like. The skills we need to do necessary long-term organising often aren’t present or need to be shared more thoroughly. In Melbourne, most people get involved in anarchist politics through friendship networks and use these networks as the basis for their organising. But we need to be able to reach those who are already within the ‘left’ and work together with people who might not be our friends otherwise.

These are some of the challenges we face as anarchists in Melbourne in 2017. The name Anarchist Affinity is an odd one given our politics and the common associations attached to the word ‘affinity’ among anarchists. The term ‘affinity group’ is most commonly associated with a more temporary grouping, brought together for a specific goal or action, and usually characterised by a closed membership, consensus decision making, and decidedly less formal structures. Our aim has long been to build something other than an ‘affinity group’ as it is commonly understood. We

aim to build a political organisation with shared politics and strategy, organised in local groups in various workplaces, universities, neighbourhoods, and wider campaigns. We want to be part of an outward facing group that can clearly communicate and articulate its politics to anyone who is interested, whether we meet them at work, in the community or at a rally.

We need to develop anarchist and other left-wing political collectives to help us engage in political struggles, reflect, learn and grow as activists. The particular organisational form that a group adopts is a lot less important than a commitment to organise and act collectively. Our ideas about anarchist organisation have been influenced by the political tendencies known as platformism and specifism. Platformists and specifists argue for the importance of specifically anarchist organisations as a means of linking together broad social movements. For our purposes, platformism is not an all-encompassing political theory which ought to be embraced uncritically. It is a set of principles about how we, as anarchists, can play a useful role in increasing the capacity of ordinary people to struggle for the issues which matter to them (and us!).

To us, the platformist idea of ‘collective responsibility’ means being accountable to each other, ‘theoretical unity’ means working to arrive at a shared political understanding, ‘tactical unity’ is a commitment to plan and act together, with the aim of testing and refining our political ideas in practice, and anarchist ‘federalism’ offers a method by which we can implement a shared strategy without resorting to the hierarchies inherent in so-called ‘democratic centralism.’ The idea of collective responsibility is particularly important to us. We live in a society where the isolated, ‘independent,’ individual is held up as the centre of everything.

Many of us have little experience of working with others in a context not structured by oppression and exploitation. Our workplaces, families, and friendship groupings don’t provide us with a good model for political organisation and action. Part of the task that faces us as anarchists is to create forms of organisation which allow us to relate to one another in new ways. This requires work – we can’t expect to unlearn the limited and oppressive habits of thought we have accumulated through a life time of social conditioning in an instant or by ourselves. Part of collective responsibility means committing to learning about forms of oppression, like sexism, racism and prejudice against LGBTIQ+ people, and challenging our role in maintaining them. This involves understanding how different forms of oppression support one another and how they reinforce, but are not reducible to, capitalism and the state. Collective responsibility also means that we take responsibility for the political development of the people we work with. This means being prepared to be critical of the actions of others and to help each other respond to any criticisms constructively. We are all works-in-progress, and we need each other’s support to become better anarchists.

Being part of an organisation is one important way we can help build a culture of solidarity on the left. We want to create political spaces where we help each other out as much as we can, and we get help if we need it. Our actions should be oriented around improving our everyday lives, working in the here-and-now with an eye to the future.

We want to be unified not just by an abstract set of ideals, but a day to day commitment to increasing our capacity to live and fight back against the blows of capitalism and other oppressive systems. To that end we wish to take part in and build projects that substantively address peoples’ real needs, showing the efficacy of anarchist politics in the process. We need a clear vision so that we aren’t just stuck trying to survive, but are able change the world so that we can live in it.

Collective Action is a new name, not a new grouping. The politics, aims, positions, and membership of the grouping remain the same. We hope this name better reflects our understanding

of anarchist politics, our position on the question of organisation, and what we see as the task confronting revolutionary anarchists and others who dream of the overthrow of all systems of oppression and exploitation.

Anarchists must develop the capacity to advance our ideas whilst simultaneously engaging with and advancing wider struggles. Political forces which do not organise will inevitably remain marginal. We want to work with people who share our ideas and outlook, and we want you to join us. The collective capacity of an organised group is greater than the sum of the individual efforts of disconnected activists. At the same time, there are a range of different views on how to do politics amongst Australian anarchists.

It is more important that anarchists organise in general, than that anarchists join this or that grouping in particular. For this reason, we encourage all anarchists to organise however they see fit. Whether you join our group or seek to build something different, let's communicate, collaborate and cooperate wherever possible.

The struggle before us is ultimately one of the political status quo or survival. Will we let the hierarchies of our present social, economic and political order continue until the planet is destroyed, or is another world possible? If we are committed anarchists, and if we believe that our ideas offer some possibility for real change in the face of these challenges, then let's work together to learn from the lessons of past struggles and fight for a better future.

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Retrieved on March 11, 2021 from web.archive.org

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