

Notes on “Unity” and “Left Unity”

Without shared intentions to move forward and cultivate transparent, caring relationships together, “unity” is merely an illusion.

Comrade Closet

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Notes on “Unity”

“Unity” cannot meaningfully exist where power imbalances aren’t recognized, where harm is unaddressed, and where building and healing are not mutual investments.

How many conversations have you had where you’ve tried to discuss institutional or interpersonal harm with someone and their ultimate response was that “We should just love each other” or “We need to stick together”? We’ve heard it too many times — from family, from politicians, from co-workers, from almost anybody who doesn’t recognize the role power plays in creating and sustaining systems of violence in our lives.

At an interpersonal level, we can see that demands for “unity” are often used to silence people who are critical of and speaking out against harm: Whether it might be family members who want us to “just get along” instead of interrogating how their behaviors and ideology are complicit with systems of oppression; white people who accuse people of color of “playing the race card”; non-Black people of color who refuse to acknowledge the ways in which our communities engage in anti-Blackness; or political centrists who prefer to maintain their idea of “peace” rather than actively confronting systems of oppression, and so on.

At a systemic and institutional level, business owners will exploit their workers while lecturing them about how the workplace is like a “family.” Politicians often make appeals to unity as a way of villainizing resistance movements for not “keeping the peace”, or not abiding by “law and order”, or as an attempt to coerce people into voting for the “lesser evil” — as if the status quo itself isn’t maintained through legalized state violence and control.

Unity in the Midst of Crisis

We must be critical of calls for unity even in the midst of crisis. Crisis in itself doesn’t spontaneously create unity out of difference — if anything, it’s more likely to highlight disparities in resources, needs, and circumstances because it will magnify systematic violence and inequity wherever it exists.

We are not “all one”.

Without shared intentions to move forward and cultivate transparent, caring relationships together, “unity” in crisis is merely an illusion. It will evaporate as soon those in positions of power no longer need us.

This does not mean new camaraderie cannot emerge during crisis, but trust is something that is mutually built and earned. We can cultivate meaningful and impactful relationships only if we have a real, reciprocal investment in each others’ survival. If we have chosen to grow, learn, and fight for life together. It is important to find and tend to that resonance where it exists, and not to force that affinity where it isn’t (re)generative.

Unity Requires Care. Care Requires Anti-Oppression.

Calls for unity in the absence of collective investment towards healing are just deflections from addressing harm. Unity can’t exist where we aren’t allowed to be our full selves — or to be honest about our needs — because we fear that living authentically means risking retaliation from people who claim to care about us.

Ultimately, for us to care for each other requires us to be deeply committed to each others' struggles, which also must mean confronting our problems together — all the way through structural oppression. We must be willing and committed to challenging and dismantling the violent hierarchies, borders, and institutions that exist to preserve fractures and enforce the status quo itself.

We have to reject the idea that we can be in real community with people who remain invested in oppression in any form — as abusive parents or partners, landlords, bosses, cops, capitalists, and statist.

We must divest from the top-down systems that protect and benefit those higher up on the pedestal while making sure that there is always a lower class to be exploited.

Notes on “Left Unity”

“Left unity” cannot meaningfully exist where there is a lack of transparency, accountability, and fundamental differences in values, priorities, and objectives. Anti-authoritarianism requires confronting violent hierarchies of oppression and domination wherever they show up.

Autonomy has been practiced and can be practiced by anyone, anywhere, as interconnected and diffuse acts of defiance against institutions and hierarchies of violence. Many people have turned to anarchism because of alienation from groups that demand submission to leadership — in spite of the harm caused by the leadership's positions or behavior.

Speaking specifically about “left unity”, an accusation that's often wielded against leftists is that we're expected to align ourselves with anyone left of center in a fight against a common right-wing opponent. A more specific experience amongst autonomists is that we are accused of being divisive, “counterrevolutionary”, and detrimental to “left unity” when we are critical of harmful behavior that we see within leftist organizations.

As autonomists we actively strive to practice horizontalism — as a verb, not a noun. Horizontalism cannot be a statement but is a constant negotiation of positionality and difference. When spaces refuse to even consider the possibility of horizontal organizing, they immediately resign themselves to the assumption that the work isn't possible unless levels of leadership are created and enforced.

Many autonomists have repeatedly tried to organize in a multi-tendency way. However, the leftist tendencies that prioritize leadership and hierarchy eventually move to assert their demands: to appoint themselves and their acquaintances to positions of power. They demand that everyone abide by their party line, even as autonomists push back and voice our concerns and needs — for accessibility and sustainability, for capacity, against patriarchy, against ableism, against other forms of oppressive violence. When these concerns are raised, autonomists are often gaslit, attacked, and tossed out — while the core elements of our work are repackaged and implemented without us.

We need to be clear about the levels of hegemony and hierarchy that exist within what's broadly referred to as the left. We need to be transparent about how distinct our objectives are. Anti-authoritarians and anti-statists should not be expected to uncritically engage and build with groups that are fundamentally defined by hierarchy, or groups that are willing to collude with — and ultimately become — the state apparatus. We need to recognize that practicing autonomy

means actively contesting and challenging the milieus that refuse to be critical of the harm caused by their structure, practices, and leaders.

Autonomy means not acting like fascists to gain power over each other.

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