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The Really Really Free Market

Instituting the Gift Economy

CrimethInc.

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October 27, 2007

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- piñatas full of vegan candy
- games from chess to ultimate frisbee
- an official from the free public transit system came to give out bus schedules and coin pouches with the transit system logo on them
- the local Peace & Justice coalition brought sheets and paint to make banners for an upcoming protest

After being fired from her job at a corporate banner making factory (no joke!), one enthusiastic participant hand quilted a banner proclaiming “REALLY REALLY FREE MARKET,” which now hangs at every one.

- toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and homemade soap
- hot soup, tostadas, salad, popcorn, cornbread, sweet tea, coffee, and other lunch items
- banana bread, a myriad of cakes and pies, and vegan chocolate chip cookies by the thousand
- massive quantities of groceries
- thousands upon thousands of pamphlets, 'zines, and papers
- books and magazines
- tarot card reading and fortune telling
- acupuncture, reiki, and massage
- haircuts
- bicycles
- a bicycle repair station operated by skilled bicycle mechanics
- automobile repair advice from a professional automechanic
- screenprinted shirts and patches, including some celebrating our 'Free Market
- screenprinting, poi spinning, and self
- defense workshops
- cello, theremin, and mouth harp lessons
- performances from drummers, folk singers, classical musicians, a marching band, a drum corps, and dozens of puppet troupes

There's no such thing as a free lunch under capitalism—for anarchists, there's no other kind

Disambiguation: *According to the capitalist lexicon, the "Free Market" is the economic system in which prices are determined by unrestricted competition between privately owned businesses. Any sensible person can recognize immediately that neither human beings nor resources are free in such a system; hence, a "Really Really Free Market" is a market that operates according to gift economics, in which nothing is for sale and the only rule is share and share alike. In the interest of not taxing the reader's patience, a single apostrophe stands in for the two "Really"s throughout this text.*

Once a month two hundred or more people from all walks of life gather at the commons in the center of our town. They bring everything from jewelry to firewood to give away, and take whatever they want. There are booths offering bicycle repair, hairstyling, even tarot readings. People leave with full-size bed frames and old computers; if they don't have a vehicle to transport them, volunteer drivers are available. No money changes hands, no one haggles over the comparative worth of items or services, nobody is ashamed about being in need. Contrary to government ordinances, no fee is paid for the use of this public space, nor is anyone "in charge." Sometimes a marching band appears; sometimes a puppetry troupe performs, or people line up to take a swing at a piñata. Games and conversations take place around the periphery, and everyone has a plate of warm food and a bag of free groceries. Banners hang from branches and rafters proclaiming "FOR THE COMMONS, NOT LANDLORDS OR BUREAUCRACY" and "NI JEFES, NI FRONTERAS" and a king-size blanket is spread with radical reading material, but these aren't essential to the event—this is a social institution, not a demonstration.

Thanks to our monthly 'Free Markets, everyone in our town has a working reference point for anarchist economics. Life is

a little easier for those of us with low or no income, and relationships develop in a space in which social class and financial means are at least temporarily irrelevant.

Why the 'Free Market Works

The 'Free Market model has several virtues to recommend it for anarchists hoping to build local infrastructures and momentum. First, like Critical Mass or Food Not Bombs, it lends itself to a decentralized approach: so long as the idea is well-distributed, neither hierarchy nor central coordination is necessary to organize a 'Free Market. This makes the 'Free Market model helpful for those hoping to cultivate personal responsibility and autonomous initiative in their communities; it also means that, should the 'Free Market in your town run into trouble with the authorities, they won't be able to shut it down by simply targeting the leaders.

As a means of bringing people together, Food Not Bombs seems to have built-in limits: in much of North America, the stigma around eating free food is strong enough that often only dropouts, radicals, and desperately poor people are comfortable doing so in public. The 'Free Market model, conversely, can be comfortable for almost anyone. In a consumer society in which shopping is the common denominator of all social activity, everyone feels entitled to pick through items at a yard sale—and the fact that they're free just sweetens the deal. Middle class people, of course, need more than anything else to get rid of things: their houses are all so overfilled with unused commodities that the opportunity to do something with them is a godsend. This works out nicely for the rest of us! And thanks to wasteful mass-production, even the poorest of the poor usually have access to a surplus of some kind. Being able to give something to someone who needs it is even more fulfilling than getting things for free: centuries of capitalist conditioning have

Overheard in conversations at our 'Free Markets:

[One elderly African-American woman to another:] “Oh, you live there? That's right down the street from me! Why don't you come by tomorrow, and I'll give you the flower pots you need.”

[High school student, to friends:] “See? A marching band! This is the best thing ever!”

[Ostensibly bourgeois woman holding a 'zine, to her partner:] “Look, honey, this was printed by our friendly neighborhood anarchists!”

[someone in a denim jacket, to companion:] “OK, now how can we get rid of money?”

Just a few of the things shared at our 'Free Markets:

- televisions, stereos, and computers
- furniture, futons, beds, and exercise machines
- CDs, DVDs, videotapes, and cassettes
- clothing from lingerie to ski boots
- suitcases, bookshelves, and ironing boards
- homemade bird houses
- firewood
- seeds and vegetable starts
- shampoo, conditioner, moisturizer, and other toiletries
- children's toys, baby clothes, and diapers

We also showed that direct action gets the goods. Even from a reformist perspective, our approach was more effective in producing concrete results than any other strategy could have been. Had we simply petitioned government officials or attempted to get a sympathetic politician into office, we would never have gotten anywhere. By presenting our regular use of the town commons as a done deal, we made the authorities an offer they couldn't refuse. Every low-income family that leaves each 'Free Market with a bag of groceries benefits from this.

Our efforts have borne fruit in other ways, too. Last May-day, when there were massive marches in support of immigrants' rights around the country, many of the ones in our state were organized in conjunction with liberal or communist front groups and bore a correspondingly authoritarian character. Here, thanks to the work we had done on the 'Free Markets, we were fortunate enough to be involved in the organizing along with immigrants and immigrants' rights advocates. Consequently, the march that occurred here was distinctly more radical in form and content: it took place without any permits, occupying the town's main thoroughfare for several hours and culminating in a free dinner, dancing, and movie at the town commons. The connections that developed at this event later enabled people to coordinate solidarity actions during the assault on Oaxaca.

We shouldn't underestimate the importance of small, concrete victories such as this one. In an era when radicals are used to losing every struggle they enter, it is important to set realistic goals and achieve them, and thus get used to doing what it takes to win. Perhaps the lessons we've learned here can't be applied in every town across the United States, but there must be countless other towns like our own. It's up to you to discover whether our successes can be repeated where you live.

not succeeded in grinding out our instinctive propensity for mutual aid.

Bottom-feeding dropouts such as comprise part of this magazine's readership are well-equipped to organize 'Free Markets. Dumpstering and scavenging frequently yield more than any one household can make use of; regular 'Free Markets give urban foragers the chance to put all that bounty at the disposal of other communities. Creative access to photocopying and spare time are both valuable for advertising 'Free Markets. Travelers can bring in fresh energy and take on temporary roles to decrease the pressure on locals who risk accruing too much attention for their efforts. Starting from the minimal resources available to the excluded, impoverished fringe groups can build up counter-structures that eventually provide tremendous abundance, visibility, and social leverage.

The 'Free Market is not just a means of getting stuff without paying. Long-term participation in 'Free Markets dispels the materialist programming that makes people covet useless items by denying access to them, and demonstrates just how possible and fulfilling the anarchist alternative is. It also presents a point of departure for further struggles: if this is what we can do with the scanty resources we're able to get our hands on now, what could we do with the entire wealth of this society?

Pitfalls

As with any tactic, the 'Free Market model can fail when applied incorrectly. The most common mistake is to organize a 'Market the way you would organize a demonstration: issue a press release heavy with rhetoric, put up fliers featuring circle-As or words like "social justice," tie the event to some ideology or coalition. This is senselessly limiting. The 'Free Market model works because its content is inherently radical; empha-

sizing form over content can only distract and alienate. You don't have to hide your personal commitments or affiliations—just make sure the center of gravity is that everyone is invited to come share things, pure and simple.

Another reason some 'Free Markets fail is that they come across as the territory of one particular demographic or sub-culture. If almost all the attendees come from a certain background, those who don't will feel like outsiders; there need to be enough people involved from various walks of life that anyone who happens by feels comfortable. When organizing a town's first 'Free Market, be careful to invite as broad a range of people as possible. Likewise, visitors can be a liability rather than an asset if their numbers approach those of local participants. The past two CrimethInc. convergences have both included 'Free Markets, each of which was the first such event to take place in the host town. Both were failures: an event that depends on local involvement to succeed cannot be initiated by outsiders.

Finally, don't expect to draw thousands if your 'Markets happen randomly every year or so. Consistency is one of the most important elements of a successful 'Free Market. A sporadic schedule inevitably means that attendance will be limited to those immediately connected to the networks through which promotion takes place; a regular event can eventually attract quite a lot of people, as word spreads outside the circles from which the idea originated. On the other hand, your 'Markets should not occur more frequently than you can replenish energy and resources. Each one should be a unique event, with enough effort invested in it to make it something unprecedented. That way people will always show up to see what happens, and will take them seriously enough to contribute energy themselves.

lines. At a later 'Free Market, the same official who had given the heads-up about the meeting expressed approval of this sign, implying that town employees had their hands bound by red tape.

The 'Free Markets continue here to this day, each one a resounding success. Rumor has it that the town government may change the reservation system so a fee is not required for non-profit events in public spaces; in this way, our project has contributed to the general struggle for free access to space in our community. As of this writing, several other cities in this state have regular 'Free Markets following the model we've developed. We have long-term plans to continue building an anarchist infrastructure in our town, running parallel with the hierarchical structures imposed by the government and corporations, with the goal of eventually supplanting them. In the meantime, our 'Free Markets are an excellent way to support the needy and nourish our culture of resistance.

In the end, the conflict with the town government gave us opportunities we would never otherwise have had. We were able to bring up questions about the distribution of wealth and power that otherwise go unasked in this society; likewise, we were able to differentiate our approach to social support programs from those of liberals and religious groups. Had the town not raised such a fuss, people might have mistaken the 'Free Markets as another state-sponsored charity event.

Our experience demonstrates the tremendous advantage amorphous, informal networks have when they enter into conflict with formal, hierarchical groups. All of the power the government had to bring to bear against us depended on there being specific representatives for them to target, and to a lesser extent on public disinterest. In maintaining horizontal structures and public anonymity while mobilizing massive grassroots support, we were able to outmaneuver them in every instance.

was intended to solve the problems posed by unpermitted use of the town commons.

A couple people spoke in favor of the 'Free Markets; everyone else remained silent but expectant, an unknown quantity for town officials to figure into their calculations. The politicians assured everyone that the 'Free Markets were not under attack, that there would be no arrests made in relation to them, then took advantage of the opportunity to hold forth at length about how there have to be rules and regulations and so on or else everything will just be "anarchy." A reporter subtly poked fun at one town official in corporate newspaper coverage of the meeting, noting that he delivered this threat obliviously to a room full of anarchists. In the end, the mayor announced that an "anonymous donor" had offered to pay the reservation fee for the 'Free Market, so long as someone signed up for it. This struck some as a fabrication designed to preserve appearances—a tacit admission that the 'Free Markets could not be stopped.

Hours before the next 'Free Market, someone whose name had been on a reservation form years earlier received an email from a town official again demanding hundreds of dollars of insurance if food was to be shared. The phone trees were activated again, and several dozen people showed up with cookies, cakes, pies, soups, and other delicious foodstuffs to give away in defiance. This time the government did not send anyone to harass participants; they simply posted signs reading "The town has no control over and does not warrant the quality of any food distributed at this event." 'Free Market organizers brought their own signs, one of which was a full yard high and proclaimed "The town government does not sanction the distribution of food at this event; do not sue them or expect them to share food with you. Eat at your own risk—BE GOVERNED AT YOUR OWN RISK." The wording of the town policy regarding insurance at events appeared at the base of the sign, to show how their demand for insurance contradicted their own guide-

Throw Your Own 'Free Market!

It's easy to organize a Really Really Free Market. Every town should have one; big cities should have one for every district. It is the authors' opinion that successful, consistent 'Free Markets should be established around the United States, following in the footsteps of the proliferation of Food Not Bombs groups over a decade ago, and that this would significantly increase the visibility and scope of anarchist activity in North America.

Once you get a regular 'Free Market off the ground, it should basically run itself. The challenge is to start things off with enough energy that everyone can see the project's potential, while making sure everyone who gets involved feels an equal sense of ownership and investment.

The first essential element of a good 'Free Market is location. Your 'Free Market should take place on neutral ground—that is, in an area everyone feels an equal claim to or ownership of—so no one will feel more or less comfortable than anyone else. For similar reasons, your location should be a central, visible area. If you can use a space where major public events happen or where a wide range of people are already accustomed to gathering, it will dramatically increase your chances of success.

Many of the best spaces must be rented. It doesn't make sense to pay to hold a free event, but it probably won't do to hold your 'Free Market in somebody's back yard, either. If you do have to pay a permit fee, be clever about raising the funds for it. It compromises the integrity of the event to have to put out a donation jar to cover expenses, and those donations will inevitably fall short; it's better to find a location that is free or cheap enough to cover privately, or else raise funds through independent benefit events. Reservation procedures are also problematic in that they position one person as responsible for the entire event, the exact opposite of the horizontal structure you're trying to promote. The militant solution we've tested is to start out paying permits for a space, then stop once the event

has gained enough support to weather a conflict with the powers that be. This will be much more difficult in some contexts than others, of course; shoot for the stars, but appraise your situation realistically.

The next step is to advertise. Sure, you should post fliers and send out emails to every listserv you can possibly think of, but that's only the beginning. You can take handbills around and give them out at bus stops, public events, in neighborhoods and apartment complexes; you should also see if local radio stations will run Public Service Announcements for you, or if local papers can run a listing or even a story on your event. If you come into conflict with city officials or anyone else, treat it as another opportunity to solicit media coverage. In our town people have taken the yard signs produced by politicians and real estate agencies and painted over them, then redistributed them throughout town; we also hang banners by major intersections a week in advance. We used to do the latter on town property, until we got in a spat with a petty official over it; now we put the same banners a few feet away, on private property owned by sympathetic locals or in places town employees are too lazy to reach.

Don't stop at approaching the official representatives of a group—talk to the rank and file so your outreach efforts don't depend on authority figures but extend directly to the people you want to invite. Forget about government officials—they're too tied up in red tape to think about your event as anything but a headache—but do contact the workers at homeless shelters, interfaith councils, and other social support institutions: they're probably so overwhelmed and under-equipped that they'll be thrilled to direct people to your 'Free Market for additional resources.

Make all your fliers, signs, and announcements bilingual, or else produce them in different languages for different contexts. At every 'Free Market, put out a sign-up list so people who

she was not permitted to serve food; she responded that she didn't intend to serve it, and placed it on the table with the rest of the food. He had to content himself with taking photographs of the food to present later on as evidence against the 'Free Market. Meanwhile, another town employee, a hulking fellow in intimidating dress, went around asking for suspected 'Free Market organizers by name; no one answered his queries, of course.

Despite these efforts, the event was a smashing success. Dozens of puppetry troupes came and performed, and hundreds of local families showed up with children in tow. The intersection of the puppetry convergence and the 'Free Market offered the former a marvelous public venue and cemented the reputation of the latter as a valuable community resource.

At this event, a town official who supported the 'Free Markets mentioned that at the meeting of the town government a couple days later there would be a resolution on the table proposing harsher penalties for those who promoted unpermitted events on public property. In retrospect, this was an important turn of events. Had he not passed on this advance warning, everything that followed might have played out differently. Phone trees were activated and a call went out for people to gather at the meeting in opposition to the measure. This was to be the first time 'Free Market supporters had acknowledged the town government in over half a year, and it had to be a show of force.

The night of the meeting, almost thirty 'Free Market supporters arrived at the town hall. They ranged from leather-jacketed teenagers to grey-haired women with long histories of local volunteer work. On his way into the building, the mayor stopped to ask what brought them there; he disingenuously claimed the proposed penalties were not directed at 'Free Market organizers, though he admitted they might affect them. The town lawyer publicly corrected him when he repeated this in the meeting, bluntly stating that the proposal

As the date of the festival approached, a struggle over public space issues broke out elsewhere in town when the co-mentioned earlier for its affluent customers attempted to ban public expression on its front lawn. Protests were held, posters appeared wheatpasted across public walls, newspapers printed debating viewpoints on the issue, and town officials were drawn into the matter. Venomous columnists even accused politicians who took positions in favor of public use of space of being closet anarchists—thanks in part to the 'Free Markets, anarchism was becoming a point of reference for everyone. In the end, the landlord backed down, ceding victory to those who championed freedom and community over private property.

The week before the festival, in this edgy atmosphere, a town official contacted the puppeteer who had signed up for the space and informed him that if people were going to share food at the event, he would have to pay several hundred dollars for insurance. In two years of 'Free Markets, each of which had featured a tremendous smorgasbord of free food, there had never been any talk of insurance; in fact, a later examination of the wording of town policy revealed that it did not require insurance for events at which food was given away. At the time, however, this phone call provoked some consternation.

The day of the 'Free Market, food was delivered to the site by visiting supporters from out of town;¹ this was part of the policy of rotating high-visibility tasks, so town officials would not have an easy target for repressive measures. A town official stopped one person bearing a pot of beans, informing her that

¹ Although some of us have expressed frustration with the transient lifestyle common among younger anarchists, holding that it prevents people from building up the long-term bonds and commitments necessary for major social transformation, we've also relied on visitors to bolster energy right before each 'Free Market, bring in scarce resources from out of town, take one-time-only high-profile roles, and convey stories about our 'Free Markets to other communities as an inspiration and challenge.

want to receive news of the next one or coordinate with other organizers can leave their contact information.

Next, brainstorm all the possible sources of things to give away. The more you bring to the 'Free Market yourself, the more excited others will be about the event, and the more they will expect from themselves as participants. Go through your closets, and encourage everyone you know to do the same. Of course you can dumpster bread and vegetables—but is it possible employees might slip you a little on the side, too? Visit colleges at the end of each semester, corporations that are going out of business, and wealthy neighborhoods where they leave perfectly good items sitting out on the curb. Get all your friends together the night before to cook a nutritious meal and a few hundred delicious cookies.

Make sure it's not easy to tell who is contributing what, both to avoid any implications of charity and to forestall speculation as to whence certain items came. If a team wants to raid the basement of a racist, sexist fraternity and redistribute their unused VCRs to the people, that's their own business, right?

Don't stop at gathering objects—a good 'Free Market is about people interacting with each other, not just taking and leaving things. Organize games, musical improvisations, and other participatory activities that can incorporate chance passers-by. Set up displays and dioramas for the shy but inquisitive.

Solicit participants person by person. As a rule of thumb, one personal invitation is worth a hundred fliers. Invite an accomplished storyteller, a hairstylist, a popular folk musician, a collective of spoken word artists, a specialist in therapeutic massage, a portrait painter, a bicycle mechanic, an automobile mechanic, and everyone else can you think of or run into. Offer to help provide whatever resources they need.

Consider what services others at the 'Market may need, as well. You could have someone with a truck available to make deliveries, or someone organizing children's activities in case

a lot of overburdened parents show up. In some situations, you should have a team designated in advance to deal with police, media, or other troublemakers.

Coordinate with other groups to broaden the scope of your 'Free Market. A dance troupe is coming to your town for the weekend; can they put in an appearance? How about a barber-shop quartet, a team of champion skateboarders, a wholistic health care provider, a symphony orchestra? You're not just keeping old clothes and stale bagels in circulation, you're introducing an entirely different economic system that can provide as much diversity as capitalism, if not more! Make sure that comes across at every 'Free Market.

Finally, make sure you have a plan for what to do with the leftovers! The local thrift shop or goodwill may be thrilled to get a big shipment in from you, or it may not be what they want at all, in which case you'll have to either have a place to store it all for the next 'Free Market or a means of disposing of it. Clean up the site of your 'Free Market meticulously; you'll benefit from having a reputation for being responsible in this regard.

Once your 'Free Markets have taken off, you can move on to other Really Really Free programs: free movie showings and other entertainment events, free education projects, free housing occupations! The sky's the limit once people have a taste of real freedom.

The Fight for the 'Free Market: An Epic Tale Culminating in Triumphant Victory

Our story takes place in a small town like many others in the US. This town is known for its pedestrian-friendly layout and liberal population. There's no college, but a state university is located in the larger town a bicycle ride away, and three medium-size cities are within an hour's drive. Some people

from then on it was generally agreed that a person should only fill a given role once—whether that be speaking to the media, publicly defending the 'Free Markets, or coordinating advertising and preparation—before passing it along to another. At the same time, all 'Free Market organizing remained on an informal basis; the idea was that you could do anything you wanted to support the 'Free Markets, as long as in doing so you weren't making decisions for others. This meant that no one could negotiate with the government on behalf of the 'Free Markets, and the 'Markets had no decision-making body other than the entire number of people who participated in them. Throughout this process, organizers benefited from the small size of the town and the lines of communication extending through different social circles.

Second, the 'Free Markets would take place once a month, on a regular day. This solved the problem of someone having to call for each one to take place, and with it some of the remaining problems with power distribution. If the date of each 'Free Market was common knowledge according to a monthly system, there would be no organizers to blame for calling them. Fliers went out listing the next eight months of upcoming 'Free Markets.

Finally, 'Free Market supporters reached out to their friends in a local puppetry troupe to plan a 'Free Market that would surpass all that had come before. These puppeteers had maintained a popular series of local shows for over half a decade, and were considering hosting a puppetry convergence that would draw troupes from around the country. Someone suggested that the convergence be timed to intersect with a 'Free Market, and it was agreed. The puppeteers, not wishing to take the same risks, reserved the town commons, and a joint 'Market-cum-puppetry-festival was announced across the state. In a town known for support of the arts, this was a real coup.

Still fearing that the authorities might try out intimidation tactics at one of the 'Free Markets to discourage unpermitted use of public space, we invited comrades from other towns who were experienced in "public order" situations to attend. Had we been thinking more clearly, we would have realized in advance that town officials would not act publicly, but rather target individuals underhandedly. That summer, a person who had signed up for an earlier 'Free Market received a letter from a local law firm acting on behalf of the Parks and Recreation Department, threatening civil penalties for the unpermitted use of public space.

This intimidation had the effect of making people even more hesitant to have their legal names associated with 'Free Market organizing, but it did not dampen the momentum of the 'Markets. A handbill circulated at the next one listing the phone numbers of prominent town officials, inviting people to call and express their displeasure at the targeting of individuals associated with the 'Markets; it subsequently appeared posted all around town. Officials later complained of having received numerous calls, and the individual who had received the threatening letter never heard from the law firm or the government again.

Despite this, it seemed clear that some sort of showdown with the town bureaucracy was brewing. Heated discussions took place behind the scenes about the best way to handle this. Public support had to be mobilized—but how could this occur without centralizing control or representation of the 'Markets? Should public meetings be held, or would that simply offer a clear target for government repression and reformist infiltration? There were still some who felt that a confrontation with the government was neither feasible nor desirable.

Three decisions were made that greatly influenced the ensuing course of events. First, an even more conscious effort was made to rotate roles: the individuals who had received a lot of attention up to that point were put on the bench, as it were, and

have lived here their whole lives, but many others have moved here over the past decade or two; property costs have increased accordingly, increasing the pressure on poorer residents. Class conflict appears to be at a low level, however; at first glance, a visitor might assume everyone is as affluent as the customers at the expensive co-op downtown. In fact, there is a disenfranchised class—consisting of the remainder of the area's longtime black population, the Latino laborers who have followed employment opportunities here more recently, poor white workers, and *déclassés*—but it is invisible, as most of the town's facilities cater to the young and hip or the wealthy and bourgeois.

And there are anarchists. Alongside the scene of people involved in cooperative housing and organic farming, a small but vigorous anarchist community has developed over the past decade. Unlike many towns where anarchists have established a presence, there's virtually no punk scene: no bands, no shows, no music-oriented subculture. There's also very little drinking. In place of these things, anarchists mingle with the rest of the population and hold excellent dinner parties—and organize social programs.

As of this writing, this town of less than 20,000 hosts a community bicycle repair and distribution program, a radical literature distribution, a free breakfast program for day laborers, a free grocery distribution program for low-income neighborhoods, and a books to prisoners program, among other projects. Most of these are explicitly anarchist, yet serve hundreds of people of widely varying political identification.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. Several of those projects grew up in the momentum generated by the local Really Really Free Markets, which are the subject of this story.

Late in 2003, several people from this area attended a Really Really Free Market at the protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas ministerial in Miami. The following summer, activists organized the state's first Really Really Free Market in a nearby city; it was a one-time event, coinciding with summit

protests elsewhere in the region. The next fall, a few friends paid the permit fee to reserve the town commons for the first local 'Free Market. It, too, was conceived as a one-time event; but it was such a success that in early 2005 others joined them in organizing a sequel.

Even at these first couple 'Free Markets, the crowds were fairly diverse, owing to fliers having been distributed in multiple languages and neighborhoods. There were also hints of the controversies that were to come: rumors circulated that town officials worried the 'Market would take business away from local corporations, and it turned out that town regulations forbid a group from reserving the town commons for the same event more than twice a year. Despite this prohibition, it was decided that additional 'Free Markets should take place, and a new face went to reserve the space in hopes that this would suffice to circumvent the two-use rule.

Regulations or no, it was fortuitous that we started rotating organizational roles early on. This proved invaluable both for resisting concentrations of power within our own circles and weathering our later struggles with the town bureaucracy. We had our first real scandal the following autumn, a year after our initial 'Free Market. By this time, the organization core had drifted to a social circle characterized by more confrontational politics. It was election time, and every major intersection in town was decorated with yard signs proclaiming the virtues of various candidates for office. Many of these yard signs reappeared painted over and stenciled with advertisements of the upcoming 'Market. The local political milieu erupted in a huff; this took some time to pass and was draining for those who took it upon themselves to smooth things over. The scandal drew more media coverage to the 'Free Markets, albeit negative, and contributed to their contentious reputation.

Meanwhile, the 'Markets themselves were doing just fine. The hundreds of people who attended them, who came increas-

ingly from low-income backgrounds, apparently weren't concerned about the private property of local bigwigs.

The watershed juncture arrived spring of 2006. Over the preceding year and a half, organizers had paid hundreds of dollars to reserve the space for the 'Markets, often out of their own pockets. There had long been debates as to what would happen if we stopped paying the reservation fees. Would the government dare set the police on a multigenerational, multiethnic crowd in the center of town? Some felt that they would not, and that it was absurd to pay town officials for the right to provide a public service to the people they purported to serve. Others felt that, while the fees were undesirable, the 'Free Markets just didn't have the support necessary to win a conflict with the town government.

In the end, the former camp carried the day out of necessity: there was a great deal of interest in the next 'Free Market, but no one had money to put up for it. The town Parks and Recreation Department was informed of the planned date, but no one ever showed up to pay the permit fee. Contrary to all fears, the 'Free Market went off without a hitch—it was the most successful one to date.

Another 'Free Market was called for the following month. This time, however, another group had already reserved the space for that day. A town official contacted the person who had most recently signed up to reserve the town commons for a 'Free Market and informed him of this, but refused to facilitate communication with the group. 'Free Market supporters tracked down members of this group themselves, and worked everything out with them; in the end, both events took place, and participants in the 'Free Market assisted the other group in setting up. Town officials later disingenuously referred to this double-booking as one of the problems caused by the refusal to pay the reservation fee, but in fact it was a non-issue at the time.