

Fighting For Education

Two Organizers Share Their Experiences About the Student Movement, the Building Occupations and March 4th, 2010

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Esteban Garcia is currently a graduate student at UCLA and a member of Amanecer. Originally from Northern California, Esteban has previously been involved in student as well as community organizing and community media.

What are some of the challenges that radicals face in trying to build a more widespread movement in your area?

The first challenge is the relationship between formal and informal organizations on campus. There are student organizations that are very concerned with keeping a certain relationship with student government and the administration and see direct action as a threat.

Formal student organizations face a lot of restrictions due to their funding, which is allocated by the administration. Student groups who attempt to represent those most affected by the budget cuts feel they must walk a line not to risk their funding.

It is similar to how many non-profits function to not upset their funders. Their decisions about tactics and strategies are dictated by this fear.

It is not surprising that many are creating a more affinity group style structure so people can come in and discuss these tactics and not feel the need to represent their organizations.

A second challenge is creating a radicalizing experience on a popular level given the political climate on campus. The liberation of Carter-Huggins Hall at UCLA was an attempt to create such a space, by putting the building under student-worker control as long as possible.

Unfortunately, the communication with those inside and outside, logistical difficulties and really, a lack of experience, didn't allow the action to reach its fruition. Nevertheless, this was not a failure. It forced the discussion of tactics and strategies to the forefront for groups organizing around the budget cuts, which is a very important step at UCLA.

Let's talk about the contradictions of the direct actions in the student movement, such as the building occupations, and how these have also shifted the political terrain. What are the parts that are amazing and inspiring to you and what aspects are not?

While it's important to discuss and critique the dynamics regarding tactics and organizing, it is also important to acknowledge the militancy of the occupations that have taken place.

These occupations are a symbolic re-appropriation of institutions connected to capitalism and a de-legitimizing of so-called "representative authorities."

The tactic has pushed the envelope in the struggle as well as engaged all of us on how to popularize these tactics among a broad base of students in California and nationally.

We know that this struggle is not only a struggle for public education but also a fight against a system that affects all sectors of our society. The question at this point is how to leave the campuses and connect with our communities.

Some critiques of the occupations have labeled them as ‘a privileged white anarchist thing,’ which can ‘lead vulnerable populations’ such as people of color, immigrants and youth into danger. While this is not a new critique, it is very problematic. The idea that ‘vulnerable populations’ can’t make their own decisions and are being led into danger is very condescending.

It’s important to make the distinction between critiquing a tactic and critiquing the dynamics involved in the action. At UCLA, where most of the direct action organizing has been among students of color, these actions have been de-legitimized by both the administration as well as potential allies as off campus “privileged white anarchist” agitators.

It is even more imperative that we begin to dialogue as anarchist and radical students in hopes of building a popular decentralized movement that uses a diversity of strategies and tactics. Yet, this will be difficult if we do not have solidarity with each other. The controversy of the March 4th I-980 freeway action in Oakland and in Hunter College in New York, reflects the lack of solidarity among ourselves as anarchist and organizers. It is as if we lack any accountability to anything larger than our own affinity groups, regardless of which position you take on the issue.

I see this as a sign of the reality we exist in. We are repressed and have intentionally or unintentionally been marginalized as anarchists, and lost any accountability to each other and to a broader community. How has it become easier to stand in solidarity with in Mexico, Greece and Austria but hard to stand with each other here?

There is a lack of dialogue. It’s important to reflect on the process of how these actions are organized because if there are legitimate issues with the dynamics of that process, it needs to be addressed. When there is no separation between tactics and dynamics, it becomes easy to demonize these tactics as “irresponsible” and “reckless,” with broad implications. For example, the Carter-Huggins Hall action at UCLA was completely disregarded as just a bunch of “off-campus agitators” having fun at UCLA.

In Los Angeles, we find it important to popularize direct action politics as much as possible. This is very challenging at UCLA. There’s definite division within the students here, because the struggle has been predominantly decentralized. Of course the administration doesn’t like that because there’s no one to target, even though they try. The leftist political groups don’t like it because they want centralization to gain more control. Then you have liberal student groups who want a structured politic. The spontaneity and the potential for repression scares established formal student organizations on campus. Because of this it’s hard to organize students.

But having a diversity of tactics and creating spaces where more people can participate is fundamental. We also have to realize that the structure of a movement that is decentralized, non-hierarchical and based on mutual aid, direct action and egalitarianism really challenges those who you would think to be natural allies on one hand, and scares the hell out of the administration on the other.

There’s debate between those that sense that the general assemblies represent bottom up democracy and a critique of the general assemblies that question whether they can be tools to organize when they are dominated by liberal groups or leftist political groups. What’s your idea of how anarchists can navigate that?

Hell if I know! Just kidding, but in my experience of Southern California, general assemblies haven't really been used as an organizing tactic like it up north. But they are important in building a popular and mass student movement. General assemblies may be one way to organize thousands of students who are sick and tired of the system and are sympathetic to fighting for free and radical education.

The question is, how do you make the general assemblies as organic as possible? How do you keep that space from becoming a struggle over power, goals, messaging? What do you do when groups come in and use the general assembly as a platform for their own organizing or their own agendas? It would be ideal if people could agree that goals of the movement should be decided upon through conversation, not steering committees. This really calls home the point of being committed to a process.

A powerful strategy understands that we are engaged in a process of building something that we may not even know what it will look like but we know it's not the current system. However, there is a very traditional and formulaic methodology of what organizing looks like in this country; you come up with a campaign, you organize a message, and you build people up around that.

When you are doing something that doesn't fit that, something more dynamic, more radical, people have trouble putting their faith into it. Using general assemblies is an attempt to move away from that.

The powers that be within this country have been able to neutralize radical student sentiments. The politics playing out in this struggle begin to challenge that by creating and reformulating a radical student consciousness.

Tenaya Lafore is currently a masters student at UC Berkeley in education and a close comrade of Amanecer. In the past she has worked as a staff organizer for labor unions and more recently has spent several years involved in workplace organizing campaigns while working in the restaurant and hotel industries.

Let's talk about what you've witnessed as far the challenges of having a mass movement that is also democratic?

With the building occupation I think the second attempt at Wheeler Hall shows that it's possible to learn something from the problems of the previous attempt [where an immediate occupation was decided during a General Assembly by a small group of people without the consent of the rest of the people in the building].

The Wheeler Hall occupation on Nov 20 was discussed and decided in a general assembly and done in conjunction with multi day worker and students strike. The students had a General Assembly on the last day and there was a vote of 150 or more people to do an occupation and a smaller group was chosen to act as a reconnaissance team, going out to scope out potential buildings to begin an occupation.

It wasn't done in this vanguardist manner of acting on behalf of people because they're not ready. It was an open discussion and debate. And I think the fact that it had been done in a collective manner is why so many people wound up going on November 20th [to support the occupiers]. When I first got to the occupation at seven a.m. there were only 20 of us, but by noon

there were hundreds and by the afternoon over a thousand and they were very adamant about defending the people inside.

At the statewide conference hundreds of students, as well as workers, from all levels of education gathered to discuss the direction of the movement. It was inspiring, but also had its frustrating moments. What are your thoughts on the actual process and how that went?

At some points during the meeting, when the facilitators called for a vote on an issue, people would yell from the audience “You need to have discussion before you vote on something.” Then the facilitator would say

“Well, let’s have discussion first and then we’ll vote.”

In many ways I think it reflects that this is a learning experience for everybody there, and for some of the facilitators in particular on how to run democratic meetings.

We’re in a time in history where we don’t really don’t know how to engage in democracy. We don’t know what democracy means, in that people don’t have much experience getting to make decisions collectively in small or even large groups. People always say it takes too long, but we don’t have any practice.

So I don’t totally blame the facilitators. I think there were issues of power, but they were also trying to deal with both on one side the super reformists who just wanted to go to Sacramento and they were also trying to stop the vote for a general strike on March 4th.

That was their biggest mistake—they were trying to control it instead of allow a real, open dialogue and vote that really was the will of the participants there.

I also saw groups of the audience yelling ‘general strike’ because they were frustrated with the process, which is legitimate. They also wanted what they wanted and they had this kind of arrogant attitude.

It was mostly men and mostly yelling and not trying to move other people by saying ‘Hey you guys, this isn’t democratic’ but just trying to shut it down by being loud.

As far as the demand I understand the desperation for radical change, but I think that’s equating actual organizing and building power with just calling for it. You can’t just call for a strike, you have to build it.

With respect to the process I understand where they were coming from as well, but people came in with this attitude of this supposedly far left, which I don’t really think is left, but very top down controlling approach—which is saying ‘either you’re militant the way we say, or you’re reformist.’

It totally shuts down conversation and the actual possibility of coming up with something that is possible for people to decide to take action on.

Getting more into the role of radical and their roles, what do you feel are the tensions present?

I was speaking with a long time organizer about the stuff on campus and she said ‘you have to take actions that correspond to the power you’ve built and those actions hopefully get you to a new step of power.

Radical students have helped bring direct action to this movement as opposed to people being stuck on going to Sacramento, writing your legislator and all that bullshit, and so its great that there are people who say ‘no, we have to shut business down and we’re not going to stick to using the means and boundaries of change that those in power want us to use.’

Not being able to assess what kind of actions correspond to the power of the movement at a particular time and the experience of being able to mobilize the power you have is one problem.

The other is the arrogance of the vanguardist sense of lacking trust in the people and that through dialogue and discussion people can come to the conclusion of wanting to take radical action, and that instead decisions and actions have to be taken for people. When this approach is taken people become passive, and objects of the movements instead of the subjects of the movement.

What's crazy is the connection of the vanguardist actions and anarchists because anarchism is not about this authoritarian lack of trust in people and needing to take action for them, though there are the insurrectionary ideas within anarchism that carry some of these ideas.

But to me anarchism is about direct action, but in a way that is connected to where people are at and helping support them taking actions for themselves, not taking action for people. If you actually have conversations with people, and find others who are on the same page, and perhaps take action not on behalf others but in dialogue with and in conjunction with other organizing to show people what's possible that can build a movement.

Instead there's this idea that if a small group of people go take an action it will wake up the masses, but I think it's not only condescending but misguided and lazy. It turns people off and it becomes like they know better than everyone else, which doesn't get people involved.

What roles do you think radicals should be playing in the student movement right now?

Radicals should work together, meet together and talk with each other to build their analysis and also be going back to their own natural communities which is their [school] departments, their friend groups, their clubs, whatever they're part of at their schools and engage with other students and build groups that may not be as radical as they would like them to be but they can be a voice of 'Hey, I don't think we should go to Sacramento.'

I'm involved in a group in my department where some people have different ideas than I do, some for example want to have K-12 administrators come to speak, which is not my focus, but that's where they're at. But I engage with them, make the case for my ideas.

For instance, there's a lot of people who feel we just need to fight the budget cuts, but I feel that just gets us to where we started—we fight this same fight every ten years. So it's a question of that's where people start out, but what do with that?

For example I was with a classmate and I asked them, if all the workers in the café we were sitting in had their breaks taken away from them and they knew it was the law that they should have a break.

You could say that the demand was reformist because all they want to do is get their breaks back, but if you organized in a way that you build the power of the group of workers, the radicals among the workers can be asking 'Why is the boss able to take away our breaks in the first place and why is the boss trying to retaliate against us for demanding this?'

Posing those questions is a dialectical process of not just accepting people are at where they're at, but thinking that they have the capability of having a more systemic critique and also not having this idealistic view that they'll all of a sudden come to their senses and rise up. Instead you engage with the issue that people are grappling with and try to get to the root of the problem which is both respecting where people are at and not accepting where they are at, that's what radicals should be doing.

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