

Building Working-Class Defense Organizations

An Interview with the Twin Cities General Defense Committee

First of May Anarchist Alliance

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First of May Anarchist Alliance spoke to Erik D. secretary of the Twin Cities GDC Local 14 about the history and work of the General Defense Committee there. Erik is a father, husband, education worker, and wobbly,¹ who's also been involved in the youth-focused intergenerational group, the Junior Wobblies.

Fellow Worker Erik – can you tell us about the origins and history of the General Defense Committee, its relationship to the IWW and how the militants who founded the current Local conceived of it?

As I understand it, the General Defense Committee (GDC) was first founded by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1917, in response to the repression of wobblies and anti-WWI draft protests. I haven't learned enough about the historic GDC to really speak much about it. I joined the IWW in 2006, and we didn't formally charter the current local as a GDC until 2011. In 2011, the committee was 13 wobblies. But we had actually started organizing ourselves prior to 2011, calling ourselves the Local Defense Committee.

Are there historical or modern examples or inspirations that influence the way GDC sees itself, its activity and organization?

One of the things I've appreciated about the Twin Cities GDC is the very practical intention to learn, with a specific focus on learning in order to act. From the very beginning we engaged in mutual education. Since one of our early orientations was to anti-fascist and anti-racist work, we did a fair bit of reading on the topic of fascism and anti-fascism (Sunday mornings with coffee).

I mention this period of mutual education because we have a lot of inspirations, but none of them have been role models, per se. We have looked to previous movements largely in order to inform our own work and to learn from our elders and the experience of previous generations, but not as Role Models To Be Emulated. That's been important.

With that caveat, we have a lot of inspiration. I get new inspiration every time I read a book, it seems. Some of the inspiration is local: here, I'd specifically highlight Anti-Racist Action and Teamsters Local 544. Anti-Racist Action (ARA) came out of a Minneapolis-based group of anti-racist skinheads who decided they needed to find a way to kick racist skins and organized fascists out of the Twin Cities. Teamsters Local 544 was the local that organized the 1934 strike that made Minneapolis a union town, innovated new forms of the picket (specifically, the 'flying picket'), and engaged for a short time in open physical confrontation on the streets.

Beyond the Twin Cities, I think our members have a lot of very different inspirations. One of mine has always been John Brown, but I grew up partly in Kansas. I guess the Black Panther Party would be the most common source of inspiration among early members; our advocacy of Community Self Defense certainly owes a lot to the Panthers, including their Survival Programs. The most recent addition to my 'Hall of Inspiration' is Rudy Shields, whom I learned about from

¹ A nickname for members of the Industrial Workers of the World union (I.W.W.)

Akinyele Omowale Umoja's We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement.

One of the first projects of the Twin Cities GDC was organizing a “Picket Training”, which seems like a kind of simple project, but you all attached some importance to it. How come?

I think the history of the Picket Training is actually the beginning of the history of the local GDC, so forgive me for a longer answer. The IWW was always heavily involved in local May Day events, naturally. In both 2007 and 2008 we had dispiriting and potentially dangerous experiences in marches that were organized by other groups. These happened when we were ‘out-marshaled’ and ‘peace-policed.’ Folks might remember the 2006 “Day Without An Immigrant.” In 2007 immigrant protection and rights continued to be major issues, and the march was partly centered around pro-immigrant demands.

So it was worrying when wobblies who had been active in local anti-fascist actions saw someone they thought they knew from a fascist rally elsewhere in the state videotaping the crowd (we were never able to confirm the identity because of what happened next). Fascists videotaping an immigrants rights march is extremely concerning; they were likely videotaping either to research immigrants rights’ groups (including antifa groups), or to identify potentially undocumented people.

A few wobblies went to talk to the videotaper and get in the way of the camera. Shouting commenced, and the self-appointed organizers of the march successfully pushed the wobblies back into the crowd, allowing the videotaping to continue.

The May Day parade the next year found wobblies promoting militant chants shut down by the same sort of marshals.

At roughly the same time, the local IWW was doing a lot of organizing. While some of us had prior experience in organizing pickets and direct actions, the Starbucks Workers campaign, the Jimmy John’s campaign, the Sisters Camelot Canvas Union, and the Chicago-Lake Liquors campaigns all provided early experience and training in planning and executing pickets and direct actions, in a context where we were already committed to IWW ideas and practices. Some of these were particularly challenging, such as doing intelligence and the occasional flying picket of scab canvassers in the Sisters Camelot campaign. Since they never stayed put, it felt like a throwback to the 1934 strikes and the flying pickets. It was cold both Winters.

There was one particular occasion at the University of Minnesota AFSCME strike in 2007 where the IWW promoted, and executed, a hard picket line in the early morning hours at a delivery dock. This was going extremely well until a UMN delivery truck driver rammed the picket line. I was in the wrong place at the moment, and ended up on his hood. I found out later I’d crushed three neck vertebrae; it took two surgeries and a lot of physical therapy to get past it. It also gave me a serious motivation for doing pickets and direct actions better. Just a week after a truck hit me, a delivery truck hit another picketer at an IWW picket of D’Amico’s restaurant, thankfully without serious consequences.

Finally, 2008 was the end of an intense two-year process organized at disrupting the Republican National Convention. Most of us already had a critique of ‘summit hopping’ styles of disruption, few of which have been effective since before the FTAA in Miami 2003. But a number of wobblies

were serious and on occasion influential participants in (at least the early period of) the two years of planning that ended up calling itself the “Welcoming Committee.” The Welcoming Committee meetings (which were held in the same community space as the early IWW at the time, the Jack Pine Community Center) hammered out some early agreements and principles, including, along with other interested groups, the well-known Saint Paul Principles. This process also gave local wobblies experience in critically thinking through on-the-street tactics and what it would take to actually win goals and actions on those streets, whether in labor pickets or direct actions².

All these motivations and experiences were in the forefront of our minds when we thought up the picket training. We knew we had to get better at this, and though we all had some experience, that’s not the same thing as having teachable knowledge. So we researched, wrote, debated, and practiced. We adopted a principle of teaching the tactics quickly rather than perfecting the training first, and encouraged people to think about themselves as the next trainers. In order to keep track of our curriculum and to make it portable, we created a trainer’s manual, a trainee manual, and a setup manual, which we update frequently.

We offer the trainings to non-wobblies, and while we avoid being an on-call security group, we are trusted locally as providing quality security and planning successful actions. With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and on-the-streets protest since Ferguson, I think the GDC has earned a bit of respect from other local organizations as a result.

Anti-fascism seems to have been a key concern for the Twin Cities GDC from the start. Can you explain a bit about why this was the case and how the GDC intended to “do” anti-fascism a bit differently than other antifa groups?

Partly that was organic, because of the people involved. One of our members was a member of the Baldies, and later Anti-Racist Action, and brought a lot of experience on that front to the table³. Others also had anti-fascist experience. Given that density of experience and expertise, it was fairly natural that we were interested in anti-fascism from the beginning.

Our first major action was the disruption of a David Irving event⁴. Like most of his events in recent years, promotion and entrance to these is secretive and even paranoid. We created fake identities and profiles, acquired tickets and location information, and mobilized over 80 locals who hated the idea of fascists meeting in our city. This put our early group’s planning abilities to the test, since the meeting was on an upper floor of a downtown hotel with a front desk by which everyone would have to walk.

As we went along, and based in part on discussions and debates both internal to the GDC and to the local IWW, we formulated a clearer understanding of the relationship we think should

² For a discussion of the “St. Paul Principles”: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/2/16/1065414/-A-Principled-Stand-on-Diversity-of-Tactic-Avoiding-Uniformity-of-Failure>; For more on IWW activity during the 2008 RNC: <http://www.iww.org/nl/node/4384>

³ The Baldies were among the first anti-racist skinhead crews in the U.S. Anti-Racist Action, is a radical direct action anti-fascist network that was a key to fighting KKK and neo-nazi organizing from the late 80’s until recent times.

⁴ David Irving is probably the most famous Holocaust-denier “historian” in the world. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Irving

exist between anti-fascist work (I think these days, I'd say "Community Self Defense," which would include antifa work) and unionism⁵.

Part of the clearer rationale was to establish faith and credit with groups that may have had impressions of unions, or prioritize other forms of work, and to bring a more diverse group of fellow workers into the IWW. Another part was the understanding that if the IWW ever gets close to its goal of genuinely challenging the foundations of capitalism, we will have to have a group and an orientation capable of defending the union and its workers. We didn't feel that we should wait until the attack came to organize to fight it.

I think the most significant difference of our anti-fascism from other anti-fascist groups is our relatively public, or mass, orientation. Many anti-fascist groups operate largely as affinity groups, stressing secrecy and small numbers, for good reasons. But the types of pressure we can place on the fascists with these sorts of organizations is limited, and the risks to members enormous. Our anti-fascism has taken a mass orientation: we aim for the largest, most public, and most militant forms of engagement possible, consistently pushing for more radical analysis and actions. While some groups consider mass organizations fundamentally reactive and apolitical, the GDC has made its own anti-capitalist and revolutionary politics clear, in order to avoid being captured by liberals.

It seems apparent that the GDC really “took off” during the recent upsurge against police killings in the Twin Cities (Jamar Clark, Philando Castile, Phil Quinn, Michael Kirvelay & others) – could you say a little bit about why this was the case, how the GDC oriented itself and what allowed it to be a place for militants to come and to grow?

Right. The GDC began to grow very rapidly with the engagement at the Fourth Precinct. I want to talk for a minute about the types of engagement that we practiced there, but first I would like to point out the time difference: we'd been meeting irregularly since 2009, were chartered in 2011, and began to 'take off' in 2015. We didn't develop in a rush, despite our feeling of urgency. In retrospect, we should have done more, earlier, and more seriously. You can only prepare to be ready for crisis and then wait to respond in an organized fashion. By the time the police murdered Jamar Clark, after Ferguson and other places had already seen massive protests, we were ready to respond in public, I think.

About two months previously, we'd tested our ability to organize a disciplined mass march and directly confront racists. A group of racists organized a Confederate Flag display on the state capitol grounds. The state sold them a permit. We weren't going to tolerate that. We had meetings ahead of time to organize a counter-protest. We had decided to explicitly make clear that this was a GDC action, and to use our own marshaling teams, and worked with a large variety of other groups. One especially important person in that entire process person is the aunt of Marcus Golden, who murdered by the Saint Paul Police Department in January 2015.

⁵ "Unionism and Anti-Fascism" (2013) <https://twincitiesgdc.org/antifascism/>

She joined the IWW and the GDC shortly afterwards, and seems to be everywhere at all times, moving the work along.

The march began where Marcus was murdered, and ended at the Christopher Columbus statue on the capitol grounds, after ensuring that the Confederate Flag wavers were no-shows. The sheer numbers of people and organizations pledging to come, along with our clearly demonstrated militance, scared them off.

When Jamar was killed, GDC members mobilized quickly. Young Black activists began an occupation of the Police Fourth Precinct. The Fourth Precinct is in North Minneapolis, which is a heavily policed Black neighborhood. In the 1960s, the building of the Fourth Precinct was constructed as a community center called “The Way,” in response to two Summers’ of uprisings demanding racial justice in the USA. As a metaphor of how unfulfilled the promises made to the civil rights movement have been, I can’t think of a starker local one than the transformation of a Black-oriented Community Center into a fortress of blue terror.

Once the occupation was established, which took a matter of minutes to hours, activists began setting up the infrastructure for a long haul. It was already cold, but it got arctic during the eighteen days of the occupation. GDC members were heavily involved in the direct confrontations with police, to be sure, but far more importantly, we created direct relationships with local militants and young people from the neighborhood, whose politics and responses were often directly at odds with the activists who had started the occupation.

Local youth tended to a far greater degree of militancy, and simply understood more clearly what was necessary to protect the encampment, regardless of whether the self-appointed official protest leaders thought. We often provided security at night, when cars would drive at us menacingly, or shots would be fired in nearby alleyways. We were not present in an organized fashion at the moment when White Supremacists showed up and shot people at the occupation, and so I can’t say how well we would have responded that night.

An important point about the rise in our local appeal during the struggle for the Fourth Precinct was that we were a largely disciplined group that could reliably be counted on to do what we promised. Equally important is that while we showed up consistently and stayed in solidarity with the protest, we never relaxed our principled criticism of other groups’ tactics. Critiques weren’t made on social media or publicly, but we were consistent in pushing in person for more radical and militant approaches.

At one point, the self-appointed protest leaders had had enough of being challenged by local youth and militants like ourselves. Pissed that they were losing the obedience of the crowd, which was largely demanding increased militance, one of them grabbed a mic during a tense moment during the encampment and id’d one of our white members as an undercover cop. Frankly, we were fortunate that the person she accused has been active in anti-racist circles for decades and is locally well-known as a result. If the accusation had been made against one of our younger members, the outcome might have been less peaceful.

As a consequence of that event, and a lot of others similar to it, the GDC wrote and released a public statement explaining ‘badjacketing’ and demanding that no one involved in seeking justice should engage in it⁶. We pushed that line hard for what felt like months, but was really just about a week during the occupation. Then the tide started turning and a large number of

⁶ “No To Badjacketing: the State Wants To Kill Us; Let’s Not Cooperate” (2015) [https:// twincitiesgdc.org/badjacketing/](https://twincitiesgdc.org/badjacketing/)

groups and individuals began to consider the downsides of that sort of action, and condemn it. I think the outcome of our stance against badjacketing actually was greater over time and after the occupation.

For those that aren't so familiar with the last year of activity in the Twin Cities, what have been some high points and challenges of this struggle against the police- and how has the GDC concretely participated in and contributed to this struggle?

With specific reference to our anti-police work, a few things have come together. Those of us who'd been involved in previous actions had some knowledge of police personnel and leadership already; like most municipalities, our local cop leadership would be laughably incompetent if they weren't so oppressive and largely untouchable. A few particular people had started to catch our attention over the years, among them especially Bob Kroll, who was elected President of the local cop union in 2015.

Kroll has a long and documented history of brutality on the job and off, and has been accused of wearing a "White Power" badge on a jacket, and being involved in a process where the then-chief presided over the demotion, retirement, or firing of every single Black officer in the MPD. He also called the first Muslim to serve in the US Congress a "terrorist."

We had already written up a report on Bob Kroll, summarizing his history with documentation, but hadn't really distributed it⁷. When Kroll started lying in public about the details of Jamar Clark's murder by two MPD officers, we released the report along with a demand that local reports stop allowing him to comment on subjects related to race and policing, without mentioning his background. We had a big effect in publicizing Kroll's history, to the point that he's been complaining about how frequently people refer to his background, calling him a White Supremacist, etc. We've had little to no effect on local reporters, unfortunately.

While the Fourth Precinct occupation was ongoing, we caught wind of a fundraiser being held by Sheriff Stanek (heavily involved in the crackdown on the protesters at the RNC Convention in 2008) for his reelection at a bar and bowling alley in Northeast Minneapolis. The site was about ten blocks from the Minneapolis cop union's headquarters. We planned and announced a march to the cop union headquarters at night from a local park.

The very same day, however, the police forced the Fourth Precinct occupation out. There was a great deal of anger and disappointment over the course of the day, and people weren't ready to give up just yet. We went ahead with our planned protest, starting with about 20 protesters at our rally site.

We began to march not to the cop union headquarters, but to the bar and bowling alley where the fundraiser was being held. The vast majority of Black Lives Matter protesters were across the river in downtown Minneapolis, inside City Hall. When they left City Hall, a large contingent came and joined us outside the bar. By the time they arrived, many of the fundraiser guests had fled, and the rest had locked themselves inside. We held an impromptu rally outside the bar, and then marched to the cop union headquarters. It was an energetic, militant march. We'd made

⁷ "Robert Kroll: Not Credible on Race or Policing" (2015) <https://twincitiesgdc.org/2015/11/29/kroll-report/>

the cops so nervous that they'd installed security fencing around the property, and had placed snipers in the upper floors of the building across the street.

A few GDC members continued to help hold down the Justice4Jamar movement locally after the eviction from the precinct. They joined a new coalition called the Twin Cities Coalition for Justice 4 Jamar, and showed up outside the Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman's office every Friday for "Freeman Fridays," keeping Jamar's name in the news and the demand fresh. I was out of the country at the time, but on one of the coldest days of the year, the GDC played a large part in a mass march. The cold caused some innovations: entering local Cub Foods for a while looked like fun!

Of course, the local police haven't stopped murdering people since Marcus Golden and Jamar Clark. This year we had a number of people murdered by the police: Michael Kirvelay, whose sisters called the police for help while he was in a mental crisis, and who was murdered by them; Phil Quinn, a Native man also experiencing a mental health crisis, was murdered in 2015. Map Kong, a Cambodian-American murdered in his car while having a bad reaction to drugs, Geno Smith, and Philando Castile. The last is a bit closer to me than the others, since Philando worked at the school where my son went for 7 years, and my daughter had been there for 6 years already. They both knew and loved Philando ("Mr. Phil," they called him), like all the students did. Personally, I'm grateful I started fighting against police murder when I did; I think if I hadn't had some actual experience I would have been far more shaken when it came that close to home.

We're still fighting for justice for Philando and all those murdered by the cops. After Philando was murdered, a group of mostly younger activists marched to Minnesota Governor's Mansion, not far from the school where Philando worked. That occupation remained in place for some time, but never reached the militancy or organization that we saw at the Fourth Precinct, for a bunch of different reasons. After the occupation was cleared out, the GDC organized and called for a rally and march to shutdown the two municipally owned liquor stores, which help to directly fund the police department whose officer, Jeronimo Yanez, murdered Philando.

We organized this as a GDC-led action, and as such we organized it in our fashion. We did a lot of turnout work, education about the connection between the stores and the police department, and publicly promised that we would picket the stores with the intention of denying them important Saturday evening business.

This action drew the attention of more racists who tried to troll us. This was average and expected. We also drew explicit threats from Wisconsin National Guard veterans who claimed they would show up armed, and posted images of personally owned military weaponry on our pages to scare us off. We took these very seriously and began research and documentation. Shortly after, we released our security report on the situation, along with a public statement that we were unafraid, provide for our own security and don't rely on police, and we were going ahead. We did create a few new security tactics appropriate to the situation, which were useful in keeping us all safe.

Despite the threats, the protest was large and well-attended. We rallied at a point midway between the two stores, not letting on which store we were heading to. Before we even began marching, the both stores closed, which represented significantly more economic damage than we'd even hoped to inflict by picketing one of the stores.

What kind of folks began to join and participate in the GDC? How was its composition similar or different from the IWW or the anti-police movement in general? So far, the GDC seems to have “succeeded” as a multi-racial organization – how is this?

Most significantly were newer Black members and other members of color. Some had joined prior to the precinct, but it's my impression that anti-confederate flag action, and the precinct occupation, were important moments in attracting Black members. The African People's Caucus of the IWW was active prior to both of these events, and I think that their work, which was often behind the scenes, was often the most important work done, communicating revolutionary and antifascist politics to people who may not have encountered them in this way previously.

Probably the best way to describe the membership of the GDC in general is that members often have direct experience with forms of oppression that are not based solely in the workplace, and a desire to confront those challenges from a revolutionary and consistent place. All of our working groups arose either from skills members already had or had developed and were willing to share, or from needs we had. In addition to Anti-racism and anti-fascism, and training people to do more effective pickets and direct actions, we struck working groups like cop watch, harm reduction, and survivor support.

New working groups seem to have a period of incubation after being struck, during which the people involved start to think out, collectively and carefully, what a GDC and community self defense oriented approach would look like, and then get started. Once disciplined action is taken, especially if it's successful, we seem to have an influx of new members who are also affected by or concerned with those forms of oppression. I'm happy with the way that this approach has found knowledgeable and skilled members and connected them with others.

The Twin Cities IWW has been a fairly sizable and active Branch for years – this no doubt provided a good basis to build from, but there has also been some informal controversy and debate within the Branch over some Wobblies' orientation towards the GDC. What were the concerns and how has that played out?

Yes. The local GDC wouldn't exist without the local IWW, and I strongly feel that GDC locals should encourage all eligible members to join the IWW and begin workplace organizing. In terms of controversy, it's my impression that there were criticisms; I was definitely aware from the beginning that a few members opposed the formation of a GDC, but there wasn't ever a clear debate or discussion. GDC members solicited critique and engagement from wobblies, but nothing much really came of it, unfortunately.

Some concern was definitely based in the notion that organizing against fascists would put IWW members as a whole at risk of fascist attack. A few other objections seem possibly to have been that this was macho adventurism, and a distraction from the work of organizing at the workplace. All of these deserve a serious response. In some ways, however, the GDC's more controversial ideas have become common sense. The idea that anti-fascism is optional for unionists,

for instance, seems to be moot at the moment. This isn't as much because of our work, necessarily, as because of recent history: it's hard to retain any illusion about the role of the police, or the threat of fascism to workers, after Ferguson, or after Trump's election.

How has the GDC maintained a democratic culture in the context of constant action and growth? What are the main ways for Defenders to communicate, raise ideas, and debate issues? How does political development work within the GDC – what would you like to see in terms of political and educational culture within the GDC?

The people involved at the beginning were all wobblers with a fair bit of experience in the organization and a dedication to democratic practice. So in that sense there was already a basic common culture and attitude. I'm not certain we've always done this as well as we could, though we usually self-correct fairly quickly. I think over the last year the most important nuts-and-bolts contribution to a democratic practice and culture has been found in improving our paperwork and bureaucracy, actually. With regular minutes and agendas, asking people to write motions ahead of time, and being as organized as possible, our organization has grown in transparency.

I'm not certain that we currently have the practices and culture in place to maintain this without serious new effort. The rapid growth in membership proposes a challenge to this: it means that the serious and lengthy process of mutual education, which was the basis of our common understandings and analysis, and made our planning and actions easier and more coherent, will now have to be sped up and transformed into a process that can handle large numbers of new members.

There is a very serious need for lots of educational initiatives, as well as finding ways to encourage people to take part in them. We need lots of writing, lots of one-on-ones, lots of explanations, and lots of patience. If you've been around for awhile, get used to hearing the same explanations of ideas, acronyms, etc. That's a sign that we're growing. If it's irritating, please get involved in making the explanations better. Along with speedily connecting new members to working groups, I think continuing the practice of mutual education is our greatest current challenge.

What initiatives of the GDC are you excited about and what do you see as the biggest challenges and weaknesses to overcome as we move into the Trump era?

The GDC has experienced solid growth as an institution for the last few years. Here in the Twin Cities, we helped folks in St Cloud organize and apply for charters for a new IWW and a new GDC local, both of which I believe were just approved.

The projects we take on in the GDC are organized by working groups. As we've grown in numbers and capacity, the number of working groups has grown. Every new working group makes me excited.

The Survivor Support working group is our newest working group, and has already taken numerous successful direct actions. I'm really excited about this project. It remains the case that many more people of color are murdered by police than fascists, and many more women experience rape and violence at the hands of partners, friends, and acquaintances than they do from the faces of the Men's Rights groups. We must address everyday violence and oppression in our attempt to build Community Self Defense.

The post-election moment feels very new, at least at the moment. In the days immediately following, a very large swell of interest in both the GDC and the IWW happened, and a lot of my personal energy recently has gone into helping other groups charter by giving as much practical advice and history as possible. Because I am convinced that the GDC and the IWW have immense potential for the next few years, this growth is thrilling and exhausting at once.

It's thrilling partly because of the new energy, and the sudden appearance of people who are, perhaps for the first time, to fight. It's exhausting because the task ahead of us is immense, and will require a nearly constant process of mutual education.

Thankfully, creating trainings is something we've been doing well in the Twin Cities, and with the new energy, I'm hopeful we can continue to both grow and consolidate our growing power. We've started thinking about what the process of doing mass, mutual education would look like, and thinking of how to implement it. The point of all of our trainings, beyond the specific skills taught, is to spread the skills and analysis we have as widely as possible among the working class, in order to increase our confidence, competence, and militancy. The next year is going to lit, if we do it right.

Finally, we've been debating and developing a long-term strategy for GDC growth in the Twin Cities. Without going into details, I'll just say that the long term strategic and nut-and-bolts planning of our group is inspiring, and gives me hope.

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