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On the Passing of Joel Olson

James Stephens

May 16, 2012

After the disbanding of Bring the Ruckus, we promised a document that would say more about our organizational decision to disband. That decision was a difficult one, fraught with emotion. It was nothing, however, compared to the news of the death of our comrade and Ruckus founding member Joel Olson near the end of March. In the wake of this, an organizational reflection hardly seems to matter at all. What follows is a short tribute to our beloved comrade. It does not seek to be an obituary, or an accounting of his interests or accomplishments. We offer it here because this space still exists, at least for the time being. We offer it as a way to deal with the loss of a beloved comrade, which, despite the difficulty some of us had in the wake of our collective decision to disband, is 10,000 times harder — or more — to come to grips with.

Joel played an important role in the disbanding of an earlier organization, Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, as he and others argued strongly for the centrality of white supremacy as a primary obstacle to building a revolutionary anti-capitalist movement in the United States. After the split of Love and Rage, he helped found Phoenix Ruckus, a study group, but also one that put theory into practice, with the founding of Phoenix Copwatch.

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Phoenix Ruckus is ultimately what led to the founding of Bring the Ruckus in 2002 as a national revolutionary cadre organization, with a founding meeting in January 2004.

Joel's founding status and relative experience compared to some of the BtR membership sometimes led folks to get the wrong idea. We joked at times that he was our "charismatic leader," but other people, disposed to believing we were "Leninists," "vanguardists" or who knows what, at times took this farther. Nothing could be less true about how Joel related to the organization as a whole and his comrades individually. He learned from everyone, and he was always open to listening to other viewpoints and changing his view on a situation. He always came prepared and ready to debate, yes, but ready to learn also. As a Repeal Coalition member said at Joel's memorial service in April, he struggled alongside, never in front of. That was true of him in the streets and in meetings.

We formerly of Bring the Ruckus were all awaiting Joel's return from Spain, to talk, debate, and perhaps build new structures or organizations more suited to the times we are in. It must be said here that one of the last things Joel did to have an effect on revolutionary organizing in the United States was to call in February for the disbanding of Bring the Ruckus. Although he loved its members and had done as much as anyone to build the organization and in so doing try to contribute to building a strong, revolutionary left pole, he believed Bring the Ruckus had ceased functioning in the way it needed to in order to have an effect on the revolutionary tendency and mass struggle in the United States. He believed that some relationships within the organization were so strained that they would pass a dangerous threshold if the organization stayed together. He and his longtime comrade and great friend Luis called for disbanding BtR in order to preserve these relationships. It must be said that they made the proposal along with their comrades from Flagstaff. It must also be said that they were not the only ones, or even the first ones, to believe that Ruckus had ceased functioning. After an emotional meeting in which we voted to disband despite many

members' opposition or reservations, Joel commented to many of us about how principled we all were in coming to this decision, and how truly proud he was to be our comrades.

Thus, Joel's last act as an American Revolutionary—and he truly was that—was to disband the organization he and others had begun. His legacy and contributions to North American anarchist and revolutionary politics cannot be questioned (to the point that, for instance, many young punks and anarchists are deeply influenced by him without even knowing it or of him). He furthered the cause of freedom both in theory and practice.

But we would all do well to remember how he acted, that for Joel it was never about his legacy or "his" organization. In true dialectical fashion, he proposed and then voted to dissolve what he had built, in order to build anew. He didn't know what that would be, and he wasn't absolutely certain that we made the right decision, but he was ready to see where it would go.

Joel Olson—Presente!!
We'll miss you, comrade, and are all proud to have struggled alongside you.