

Anarchism And Neighborhood Associations

**Experiences with my neighborhood association and the anarchist potential for
these organizations**

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October 25, 2008

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Background

My neighborhood has a working class tradition, dating back to the coal miners who settled here 120 years ago. The mines are long gone, and the work has changed from blue collar to white collar, yet the area is still inhabited by working people and proud to be so. Most people live in small to moderate size single family dwellings that were built before the First World War.

Problems

We face three major inter-linked problems. There has been an influx of drug addicts from the down town core. The development of shopping malls on the outskirts killed the old city, which was then taken over by the destitute and troubled. Real estate speculation and the refusal to build affordable housing, drove up the cost of rent, which created homelessness. After wrecking the city, the business interests decided to revitalize the down town as a tourist attraction. The drug addicts and homeless were then driven out, ending up in our neighborhood, the one nearest the old city centre. Conflict arose between the addicts and families with small children who feared an increasingly seedy, petty crime and needle-laden environment.

The second problem is the potential for greedy developers to take advantage of our lower priced real estate, move in and turn our neighborhood into yuppie heaven. The third problem is a noisy, invasive glass recycling plant which threatens to drive out the people unfortunate enough to live near it. The city does nothing about this problem, yet they are quick as thieves to react to other situations. Ultimately, the three problems stem from being a working class neighborhood, if this was upper class area, none of these problems would be allowed to exist, but as workers, both at work and in our homes, we are expendable.

Our Neighborhood Association

Attempting to deal with these problems is our neighborhood association, a group that has been around for close to thirty years and had its ups and downs in terms of support and influence. We are not the only group in the neighborhood, but are the best organized and most respected. A vocal minority demand a vindictive, confrontational approach to the addiction problem. We do not, favoring a positive approach, one that emphasizes an active, clean neighborhood with public art and public activities. We have gotten absentee landlords to clean out their crack houses, favor support for the addicts and public housing for the homeless.

As to real estate development, we have made it clear the kind of multi-family dwellings we want – affordable ones – and with one exception, potential construction has been kept within our guidelines. We will also be working on a Neighborhood (development) Plan which will specify exactly the direction we wish our neighborhood to take. We keep up the pressure on the city about the glass plant, but so far not much progress.

This is not all we do. Part of the neighborhood is a river delta. The Association worked and encouraged the development of an Estuary Park to preserve this area for the wildlife. Each June we put on Miners Heritage Day, to remember and celebrate the coal miners who built this town. About 600 people usually attend and enjoy a large number of activities such as live music, barbeque, pancake breakfast, speeches, photo displays, rides for the children and a neighborhood

heritage walk. We also do tree planting and annual neighborhood clean-ups. Several of our members are artists, so we have public art displayed on the chain link fence surrounding our neighborhood park. Since the city refuses to install street trash bins, we have provided our own, and painted them in bright colors and designs, under the guidance of our artist members.

Our association has about 25 core members, but many other people help at events. From 100- 450 people, depending on the issue at hand, attend our public meetings. The association newsletter goes out to at least 200 families. Most core members are supporters/members of the social democratic New Democratic Party or the Green Party, but there are also Liberals and Communist Party people. Among those 25 people is a wealth of trade union, community and environmental activism, not to mention local history and culture. I am the only anarchist in the “core group”, though several other anarchists are there to help out. Here is something interesting and important. Regardless of ideology, when dealing with neighborhood, or even city issues, we all tend to see eye-to-eye. The real division is between the Association and the reactionary/developer crowd. This is something I have also seen in trade union work, practical, local issues unite people. No matter what our other beliefs, we all desire more control of the neighborhood by the people living there. We all want a humane and democratic process. We all want the protection/restoration of the environment. We all oppose NIMBYism and welcome social housing and social services in our neighborhood.

The Potential of Neighborhood Associations

City government, like all levels of government is centralized, hierarchical and in the hands of capitalists and their friends. At best, it poorly expresses the wishes of the working class majority. Neighborhood associations in working class areas are, on the other hand, grass roots expressions of that class. Furthermore, such associations attract the most advanced militants – the natural leadership of the neighborhood. We are not the only association in the city and a Neighborhood Association Network exists, but to date, not much is happening with it. We do, however, work very closely with the association of the neighborhood next to ours. The idea of a network (or federation) is a good one and has great potential. But here is where the real future lies: Should dissatisfaction continue to grow against authoritarian forms of governance, the possibility exists that these associations form the nucleus of Neighborhood Assemblies which could then supplant city council.

Anarchists ought to consider joining their neighborhood association, and if one does not exist, forming one. These associations are an excellent way of getting involved in the community, meeting other militants and laying the groundwork for genuine self-government through a federation of neighborhood assemblies.

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Retrieved on 14th October 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

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