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Shifting Priorities

Legal work and its relevancy to the direction of
anarchist thought and action

Lee Chen

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It was the day of the Direction Action against the War. While staffing the legal hotline, I got the call to take down the information for Cindy Sheehan and others who are attempting to get arrested.

As I took down their well-organized information, I thought of the time my friends and I were pulled over by the Watsonville police for being a car full of people of color. It's not planned or voluntary. We didn't have the watchful eyes of legal observers to protect us, nor resources to minimize our exposure to the criminal legal system.

It was a very odd moment for me to hear someone tell me that they are 'trying' to get arrested.

I have participated in my share of street protests and rallies, where I witness the insanity of the police. Armed to the teeth, they never hesitate to unleash massive amounts of violence on anyone who dared to cross their path.

I also saw the aftermath, the legal ramifications, how it drained people and community resources.

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Engaging in legal work, I wanted to defend and preserve the people's right to protest, to help foster the growth of a mass movement.

Legal, just as other work, should not be about holding the line, limited to 'know your rights' trainings, or making sure the police doesn't get crazy at a protest.

It is a tool for us to push back.

But if our efforts go only toward symbolic protests and sporadic actions, the end product will not be a mass movement against capitalism.

Back in 1966, the Black Panther party decided to confront the ruthlessness of the police in West Oakland. They used the law as a tool to support their organizing. The Panthers found a California statute that would permit an individual to carry a loaded gun in public as long as it was not concealed and did not have a bullet in the chamber. This enabled them to start their patrol on the Oakland police with an organized and intimidating presence.

However, the narrow scope presented by the current legal work seeks to observe but not to participate. The main focus is to ensure the safety of activists and accountability of the police at rallies and demonstrations, but does not span further to build a mass movement. Without such a movement, how will we see an end to capitalism and enable us to build a new world based on mutual aid and self-determination?

The contrast was sharper at 'Know your Rights' trainings. It is ironic that the training was provided by those who only interact with the police when they 'choose' to. These trainings were given to people that are targeted by the police because of their skin color, the neighborhood they live in, how they dress.

By the virtue of these interactions, they are familiar with how the police operate. Who should be teaching whom? We need to switch our focus of activism to movement building. The main goal of the BPP was not just about confronting the police, but to build a movement for the liberation of all oppressed people.

The patrol on the police was a part of their overall program. This strategy aided them to show others that people power will win over state power. Once they built a bond of trust with the community, they were able to organize successfully, building further their survival program.

As more people joined the BPP, the movement grew like wild fire across the county. Though it met its demise through many reasons, the impact they made is undeniable.

Building a mass movement will be many years of work. It will mean patience, genuine struggles against the state and institutions that uphold the current oppressive conditions.

Building relationship with others, principled organizing, supporting others in their struggles, continue to learn with each other through study and interaction. This means we do it all the time, not just sometimes, for the rest of our lives.

Legal work should be focused on building the power of the people in challenging the systems that exploit us. If our efforts go only toward symbolic protests and sporadic actions, the end product will not be a mass movement against capitalism.