Using the Organiser Model to Beat the Household Tax

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The new year brings a new tax from the Irish government and a new fight in the shape of the campaign against this household tax. Although we have beaten such taxes in the past, past victories are no guarantee of future success. In the light of the current low level of organisation and self-confidence amongst our class, we need to re-assess our methods of organisation if we aim to achieve the levels of mass participation needed for a victory. The argument of this article is that the existing traditional models of building local campaigns are not sufficient to the task and that we need to look to a new model of organising — the organiser model.

This article is not so much a practical handbook as a look at the concepts behind the organiser model, particularly as they differ from those of more traditional models that people may have come into contact with in past campaigning activity. Even if these models — principally the activist model and the mobilisation model — are usually not explicitly articulated, but spread by example and imitation, more or less consciously.

There is not the room in this article to explain the differences between the organiser model and both the activist model and the mobilisation model. Even though this is an anarchist magazine and the activist model is the one most anarchists are familiar with, here we are going to focus first on the difference between the organiser model and the mobilisation model. This is partly because the coming household tax struggle needs a mass organisation model, and the activist model is implicitly not a mass organisation model, even if this is not always explicitly admitted. But the other practical reason is that the majority of people who come along to join in with the household tax campaign will not be coming from an anarchist or environmental direct action movement background and will be more familiar with the mobilisation model, which is the current traditional organising mode of the parliamentary left or republican movement.

So, given that it is rarely explicitly theorised, what exactly do we mean by the "mobilisation" model? In outline, the mobilisation model is based on the correct perception that power is related to numbers. That is the more numbers the more power. Combined with the perception that past events of successful people power have been associated with events involving large numbers of people on the street, the mobilisation model often becomes the "politics of big crowds". The stereotypical photograph of a successful mobilisation model is a picture of a big crowd on a demonstration or rally against the issue of the day. There is also a more "antagonistic" version

of this photograph, where the large crowd is throwing bricks and molotovs at riot police, but despite the greater popularity of this version amongst some republican and insurrectionist minded activists, this should not disguise the underlying similarity of the two versions, and the common assumptions behind them.

Leaving aside the young men with the molotovs for now, the mobilisation model maps rather neatly onto the needs of electoralist politics. In elections also, the numbers that vote for your team are what matters, and the presence or absence of any ongoing relationship links between the voters is immaterial, invisible even. Only one kind of relational link matters in electoral politics, that is the vertical one between constituent and candidate. Where the candidate is aware of horizontal links between their constituents, they are only of interest to the extent they can be used instrumentally to further the reach of the candidate, to other members of the community. In fact there is an incentive, within the clientilist model of Irish electoral politics, to not only not help the creation of horizontal links between constituents, that might allow for mutually beneficial interchanges to take place, but actually to obstruct them. So that the candidate retains the position of fixer or middle- man or woman.

In the mobilisation model, there is a push towards the general tendency of modern consumer society, to prefer large crowds of relatively atomised individuals entirely dependent on an outside force, whether it be a rock band, a new brand of trainer or a political candidate, for their constitution as a collective force.

So what are the problems of the ”mobilisation” model?

On a practical level, the biggest problem of the mobilisation model is, ironically, scalability. Because one of the unspoken assumptions of the mobilisation model is retaining that inside/outside relation between the mass of relatively dis-empowered campaign members and the pre-defined “leadership”, there is a limit to how many organisers the campaign can recruit in the course of the campaign. Given that there is a practical limit to how many members each organiser can effectively organise, that limits the overall active membership of the campaign to a relatively small multiple of the original core organisers. Even if the combined forces of the left, anarchist, republican and community activist groups in a town like Dublin added up to 500 effective organisers (it doesn’t) and even if each organiser could effectively organise 100 members (in practice much lower numbers are possible) that still only leads to a total of 50,000 in a city of over a million people. So on the scalability question alone, the inescapable question becomes are you really trying to beat the tax, or just going through the motions to be seen to be “fighting the good fight”?

The organiser model is so-called because one of its central aims is to create a “chain reaction” of organisers finding, recruiting and training more organisers to go out and do the same until the necessary scale is achieved. The organiser model understands power to stem from the number of people who can effectively act together. This is a deeper understanding than the politics of big crowds.

Although the Organiser model is today most well-known from the American union SEIU, its history goes back to the community organising of Saul Alinsky in 1930s Chicago, passing through Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez, the Mexican-American labor organiser of the 60s and 70s, trained by Ross. In its development up until today it has continually inter-weaved between the spheres of both neighbourhood and community based organising, as well as workplace struggles. In fact, even though we are presenting the organiser model here as a “new” model, significant elements of its roots go back to the organising style of the early 20th century, of many of the same traditions

of the early Industrial Workers of the World where James Connolly learnt his organising skills. Organising based on agitating, educating and organising people mainly through the use of face to face conversation, rather than published texts, TV adverts or Facebook and Twitter.

The model emphasises the central role of individual face to face conversations in both creating and maintaining relations of trust and confidence among large numbers of people that give them the collective strength and commitment to act together, to take risks together and to fight together. But this does require a commitment to having a high enough ratio of organisers to members to make this possible.

In the post-war period, the introduction of Keynesian or Social market mechanisms of incorporating both unions and community activist groups into corporative setups, like social partnership, meant a gradual moving away from the labour intensive organising model in favour of a more hands-off approach, based on turning the union or tenants' groups into a more service model operation. The only remnant of face to face engagement in today's era is the door to door canvassing for votes that political party activists do around election times. But canvassing for votes, even though it involves knocking on doors and listening to people's issues on the doorstep, does not ultimately provide the skills needed for real organising. Organising is about asking people to make a commitment to give part of their life towards working to a common goal. Canvassing for a vote is just asking for someone to put a tick on a piece of paper.

Because of this emphasis on the power of the face to face conversation in "moving" people — that is, getting them to make a substantial personal commitment to work to a common goal — we are going to pick, as our sole example of the different tools in the organising model toolbox, the organising conversation. There are many other tools in the model such as Power Structure Analysis, Charting, Universe mapping, but this article cannot go through them all, or even give an overview. As we said at the start, this article is not a practical handbook. In fact the organiser model is a collection of practical skills that can no more be learned through reading articles or books than boat rowing can.

What is the organising conversation? It is basically the conversation that organisers have with potential members of the campaign in order to recruit them — or not, as the case may be — although it actually has a far wider application than that one task. The conversation is broken down in 7 sections, as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Issues
3. Vision
4. Education
5. Inoculation
6. Call the question
7. Assignment

The first part, the introduction, should be you briefly introducing yourself so that people know who you're with and that you're legit and not a snoop from the social, a cop or some other dodgy character.

The second part, the "issues" part of the conversation is the most important part of the conversation and should take 80% of the time, during which the other person should be doing most of the talking. The skill here is asking the right kind of open questions that will encourage the other person to do most of the talking and talk about what their issues, whether in the neighbourhood or the workplace, really are. Again there is not the space here to go into detail about what techniques are used, the point is to understand the function of this part of the conversation, which is crucial. Effectively, finding a person's real issues (which are often not the first issues they talk about) is the basis on which they can be "moved". By the same token, if it turns out that for whatever reason that person's issues will not be helped by achieving the objectives of the campaign, then there is little left to do except thank them for taking the time to talk to you.

The next step of the conversation is where you ask the person to consider a "What if you could…" vision of a different situation where they could address their issues.

The education part is about what the campaign is about, how it works and how working with it can make that vision reality.

The inoculation is a vital stage, it raises the common counter-arguments of sceptics or the opposition (bosses, landlords, the council or government) and deals with them. Without this step, all the work of the conversation will be undone as soon as the person involved talks to the next sceptic they meet.

Finally we get to the crux of the conversation, the "move" point. Here you put the question to the other person as to whether they want to carry on as they are, accepting that their issues are going to remain unchallenged, likely even getting worse as time progresses, or are they going to make the leap to commit to working in the campaign to improve their lot? This question is the one and only one that you should, and must, frame as an either/or, yes/no question. Having put the question, you then wait for the answer. The important thing here is complete silence, the next person to speak absolutely must be the person making the decision — because if they say yes, then that is a "contract" firmer than any amount of spitting on palms and shaking hands can produce.

The final part of the conversation is the assignment of work, the meat of participation. In a housing tax context, that can include putting a poster up in the window, coming to the next meeting, or getting the rest of the neighbours in the street to put up window posters or come to the next meeting. The important thing here is to agree work that the new member is confident they can do, and above all, agree a follow up time where the organiser will contact them to review progress and continue the participation in the campaign.

Having examined the basic function of the organising conversation, many people might find the idea of such a planned conversation difficult because it sounds much like the sort of sell you get on the doorstep from chancers selling broadband or cable TV. Is this not just another form of manipulation? It's an important question, and one worth answering properly as it allows us to see a deeper aspect of the whole model.

What is manipulation? Manipulation is the use of techniques of influencing people in such a way as to make them do things that are ultimately against their real interests. That statement has two parts, the second of which bears some examination. In order to get people to act against their own interests, generally some degree of deception is involved. Maintaining deceptions, for any length of time, gets increasingly difficult the more time passes and the more people are party to the deception. Consequently, doorstep hard sellers, con artists and other professional manipulators tend to keep the number of their targets small, focus on the most easily dominated

or manipulated targets, try and keep them as isolated as possible from the rest of the world, limit the opportunities of the target to ask awkward questions of the manipulator and finally, usually limit the length of time the deception lasts to a short duration with a sharp exit after the "payoff" point is hit.

First of all, let's look back at the structure of the organising conversation. The point that was repeated throughout the above, is that you must find the other person's real issues — you cannot try and replace their issues with the issues you think they "should" have, because, quite simply, they will not be moved on the basis of issues that aren't really theirs.

Secondly, we want to continue a lengthy campaign with as many members as possible, where members are talking to as many of their neighbours and colleagues as possible and that direct one-on-one communication and questions between all the members and organisers of the campaign is continual. More than that, when we are looking for new organisers and street reps, we are looking for the people whose judgement is most trusted by their peers — that is to say, the most independent-minded, sceptical and least easily cowed individuals. Simply put, no deception can survive for any length of time in that environment.

So that was the inoculation part of this article which also partially follows the 7 step structure above. Do you feel manipulated by being told that? Does having the structure of an argument explained necessarily make it less valid? Not necessarily. In fact it would be self-defeating if the tools and techniques of organisers needed to be kept hidden as some kind of "secret sauce" in order to be effective. Remember that one of the central aims of the organiser model is precisely to train as many people as possible in the use of these techniques. Any tool that relies on secrecy for effectiveness is useless to us for the same reasons of scalability we mentioned at the start.

So, to return to our original question above, does the organiser model involve manipulation? Well, if we accept that in the demands of an extended campaign involving mass participation, that making people do things that are against their real interests is not practicable, that leaves the question, is this the use of techniques of persuasion to get people to act in the furtherance of their real interests? Sure it is. But is that manipulative? Well, let's examine people's options in relation to the furtherance of their real interests. They can choose to do something about it, or they can choose not to act. Now if we were trying to persuade people to make the choice not to act in their own interests, then yes, that would also be manipulative. But to persuade people of the benefits of acting in their own interests, while always leaving the final choice — to act or not to act — to them alone? How can that be manipulation? Unless that term means not only to persuade people to act against their interests, or to refrain from acting in favour of them, but also, at the same time, to do the opposite. And any term that applies both to one thing and its opposite at the same time, ceases to have any meaning.

One of the reasons for slightly belabouring this point is, as we mentioned before, that most people's experience of people doing political door to door, face to face conversations these days, is of people canvassing for votes. Now we all know that politicians will happily go down the road and tell a different lie at every door in order to try and get people's votes. But that's the difference between a canvassing conversation and an organising one. The canvasser just wants a very small ask, a tick in their box rather than the other fella's. Because it's a short term ask before the "payoff" point on voting day, and there's no intention to get ongoing participative engagement, the quick and dirty solution for politicians is to use every deceptive or manipulative trick in the book. But the organising conversation is not asking the other person to give you something, but

to become something — an active participant in an ongoing campaign — and that is why the two conversations need to be so radically different.

As we said above, the organiser model is not something that can be learned theoretically by reading texts like this. Instead the only way to learn it is through engagement with a campaign, participating in organiser trainings and applying the practices in the work of the campaign. The campaign against the household and water taxes presents that opportunity. Within the campaign groups of the Independent Workers Union we have a body that is committed to providing organiser model training to the activists of the campaign. Not only with the aim of bringing the campaign to victory, but also to spread as widely as possible the skills needed to win future campaigns and build working class power in our neighbourhoods and workplaces. If you want to be part of that project, join your local campaign group and sign up for the organiser model training.

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