

Community Organising in Glasgow

A discussion with Praxis

Workers Solidarity Movement

12 December 2007

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A running theme of this issue of Red & Black Revolution has been the question of how we as anarchists should orientate ourselves towards the non-revolutionary elements of our class and towards non-revolutionary social struggles. We have suggested that we cannot remain peripheral to our class defending the purity of our ideals, rather we, as anarchists, need to be at the centre of working class social struggles. It is only thus that we can create a movement capable of abolishing class society.

The recently launched Scottish platformist group 'Praxis' offers an example of this type of anarchist activism. They have been deeply involved in trying to develop working class community organisations in Glasgow. Here we ask one of their members a few questions about what they are up to.

What are you doing in Glasgow?

Last year a number of us were working on a social centre focussed on local community organisation. This centre and the group organised around it started up three residents associations and supported the continued organising efforts of another. The group also tried to kick start a campaign for a local youth club to address youth crime and tensions around local youth gangs. We launched a community newspaper, which is still running now and gets distributed in local chip shops, newsagents and public libraries. The centre however became difficult to sustain due to a lack of volunteers and it was becoming ancillary to much of our organising efforts.

At the moment we're trying to develop a community tendency in Maryhill to resist gentrification and to develop tenants associations and other local bodies to start to fight back for the community's interests. We're in for a big fight though because the authorities plan to whack most of the housing in this area to make way for yuppie flats in the next ten to fifteen years. The tendency it's hoped will unite local socialists of all descriptions and community campaigners in pursuing a strategy of taking over local committees of the Glasgow Housing Association and Community Councils in addition to developing residents associations. This should give these local citizen bodies more leverage in their campaigns for housing and facilities investment.

Citywide a number of us are working on developing a federation of residents associations to unite pre-existing groups so that we can start to build collective representation and power for our communities across the city. We are at a very early stage in these efforts and it is unlikely that a new body will be particularly powerful initially, but over time it's hoped that a citywide mass organisation could start to fight for and develop our public transport, our green spaces and allotments, our city's housing and much of our amenities. In praxis we hope such a body could be utilised to put pressure on the authorities to cede new Community Land Trusts, while at the same time linking up with some aspects of our economic strategy.

Why are you doing this?

Local government in Scotland, particularly in large cities like Glasgow, has a great deal of power. There are lots of ways mass organisation in communities can put pressure on local authority structures to improve things for working people. We need to develop the kind of mass organisation that can act in that way, and put pressure on local government to gain real class victories.

To take a specific example of how such future mass organisation could work, in a ideal sense, Glasgow transport, for example, is partly ran by the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, which is a council commission essentially. It runs the subway and some of the trains. First and Arriva run the buses and First runs the intercity trains but survive entirely through government subsidies.. There are regular industrial struggles against both the council/SPT and the private companies. These are rarely connected to community struggles (which tend to be over service provision and service quality). It's a big problem when strikes and industrial disputes (which — in their own way — are also often about the quality of service being provided) cause resentment amongst the wider working class, and it's a structural failure of the labour movement, and to-tally unnecessary. There is no reason that strikes over pay and conditions cannot be intricately linked with passenger fare strikes over the quality of service being provided. Tied into a municipalist strategy of developing a counter-power in our communities those kind of struggles could be unstoppable.

We are a very long way away from struggles which are so synergistic and powerful but the potential is there, and is obvious. The ruling class certainly recognise this. Community organisation in Glasgow was comprehensively crushed by the authorities over a period of decades. The ruling class aren't daft. They can see that it's easier to reconstruct 'their city' as and how they see fit, if there is no organised resistance to such changes. It's our job as revolutionaries not just to gadfly about telling the class they have to fight harder, better, faster, leaner with endless campaigns that go nowhere and build no power but to actually get involved in our own communities and workplaces and try and build that class power. Building class power in communities means trying to build residents associations and campaigns for specific improvements and concessions, then coalitions and networks, then formal federations of those forms of citizen bodies. Coherent organisations like large federations of residents associations can exercise real power because of their moral authority and organisational capacity and they can push local authorities into granting concessions and improvements, but they can also go further and start to become a counter power. The left understands this intrinsically when it comes to building power in the workplace, but it's rarely so hot when it comes to building power in the community, let alone building the vital bridges required for a serious proletarian movement between the community and the workplace. It's time we raised our game and really started to build dual power.

A federation of residents associations can push for tenant management co-ops. It can take over local housing committees. It can push for stock transfer to community land trusts. It can do all that and at the same time push for start up grants for subsidised worker controlled 'social enterprises' which serve those locally controlled housing bodies. It can push for youth training schemes and apprenticeships in these worker controlled 'social enterprises'. In short local community organisation can push for an extension of the social wage while at the same time demanding ever more of a say in how that is administered, and providing an interlocation with strikes and a revolutionary economic strategy. The possibilities for community mass organisation are endless.

Who else is involved in community organising in this way?

In Glasgow the SSP have occasionally been involved in organising residents associations. Certainly it is aimed that the SSP in Maryhill will be involved in developing a community tendency.

It is however not an official policy of that party to be active in consistent class building efforts. Their practice is more usually electoral. Amongst the rest of the left there is often little awareness of community organisation. Stalinists on the whole (peculiarly) tend to be better. The CPB in Govan controls a tenants association and a community council, and the CPB supports the Scottish Tenants Organisation which is a national tenants body. As far as it is possible to say that anarchists can be seen to be supportive of this kind of work in Glasgow at least a number have been involved. Anarchists are quite a marginal force in Scotland though in terms of numbers. By far and away the majority of activists for residents associations and community representative organisations are not politicians of any kind, although historically the Labour party developed a good deal of its power base from community organisation.

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