The Intersections of Anarchism and Community Organising

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Historically, revolutionary movements have been guided by revolutionary strategy and tactics. A successful dual power movement does not spontaneously arise; it needs consistent organising within an anarchist-communist framework. If we want to be actively involved in pushing society towards a revolutionary consciousness, we need to move outside our usual circles; we need to stop the cycle of activists only talking to activists. To step away from this paradigm is a change in tactics; a change which is sorely needed. After being an activist for years I decided to become a community organiser and with that experience I gained new insights in revolutionary strategy: Anarchists can learn a lot from community organising models in radicalising neighbourhoods and families.

During my experience of organising I successfully facilitated a tenant-buy out of a 48 unit Section 8 property and the creation of a worker-owned landscaping company. This experience has changed my perceptions of the direction of the anarchist movement, its tactics and goals.

Organising in primarily non-white and poor neighbourhoods around issues of affordable housing and living wage jobs gave me new insights in strategy, which differed from my previous activist experience. One of the lessons I learned was how to begin changing relations of power and radicalising people, through pro-active campaigns around community identified issues. Through the process I felt that both community organising projects and the anarchist movement could learn from each other so that we can begin to build a dual power movement strong enough to topple capitalism and rooted deep enough in actual communities to begin creating a new society.

I learned many hands-on skills of organising, such as building an organisation, running campaigns, running meetings, doing turn-out and polarizing targets. Through learning many aspects of organising, a contradiction arouse with my work and my politics; I was organising without specific radical means and ends which lead down a one way street to reformism. Simultaneously, I was able to build power in non-white and working class neighbourhoods and for the first time I also felt I had an impact on changing socio-economic conditions in people's lives. The contradiction has lead me to both critique the absence of explicitly anarchist politics within community organising, as well as the lack of a solid organising strategy by anarchists to effectively radicalise the working class and change socio-economic conditions created by capitalism, patriarchy and whiteness.

Before analysing the connections and differences between my organising work and the anarchist movement, a background of the organisation I worked for is needed. Its mission statement is to organise and empower low-income families in order to build political and economic power, achieve resident control of affordable housing, and to create a permanent regional organisation working for change. It is left-leaning and has a very strong direct action culture. Unlike many other community organising projects, it blends institutional based organising, traditionally seen amongst already established and mostly middle class institutions such as churches, and neighbourhood organising, traditionally based in a specific neighbourhood as opposed to an institution. It strives to create new institutions controlled by low-income families who are directly affected by such an institution. For instance, it originally focused on tenant buy-outs of at risk Section 8 housing complexes, which it successfully converted to co-operative ownership of over 1,100 units, to a worker owned landscaping company servicing those properties. Each new institution pays dues in order to continue organising the already established institutions and to develop, create and organise new institutions.

The organisation is the leadership; it is not the paid staff. The

board of directors is made up of low-income people who participate and make the decisions in the organising campaigns. These board members decide everything from the organisation's direction to the organising staff's income. Any day-to-day decisions about campaigns are made by the leadership and are carried out collectively by the organiser of the campaign and the leadership. Within that structure the director acts as a mentor to the organising staff and guide to the campaigns as well.

The organisation's major success is that it built a strong direct action-oriented organising structure that builds new economic institutions controlled by white and non-white poor families. The organisation is successful at building a cross-race working class organisation because of how it develops its campaigns, what issues it organises around, the social class it focuses on, the solutions to the issues it organises, the institutional structure it has produced and its focus on leadership development, participation and ownership of the organisation.

Campaigns around issues such as maintaining affordable housing, tenant ownership, and living wage jobs, directly affect poor families. These campaigns are not based on advocacy, raising awareness, or morality, rather they are based on changing the relations of power, building non-capitalist economic institutions controlled by poor people and making real changes in the socio-economic conditions of those who participate. By focusing the goals of campaigns in a realistic and winnable framework, the organisation is able to consistently bring people out to actions and meetings. The tangible results for the participants, the ownership over the process and the active role they play in meetings, negotiations, and direct actions keeps people active.

Since the campaigns are not based in one locality and are not strictly lead by one social group, the organisation has developed into a working class lead organising project, which is immigrant, Latino, African-American and white. The membership's decision-making power over the direction of specific campaigns and the organisation as a whole are conscious acts by the organising staff;

this produces a bottom-up structure empowering working class families as opposed to the organisers themselves.

As an organiser, it was clear that I had to both find people who would add something positive to a campaign and push those interested to get involved. I focused on those who would benefit the campaign and, therefore, the organisation. I looked for people who had influence in their communities, are articulate, are politically developed, are angry and want to see change, and countless other skills and traits that help with an organising campaign. Organising is about building political relationships and trust. I focused my energy on building trust and political relationships with individuals I identified as being beneficial to a campaign and the organisation. To keep people involved I had to not only push them to be active, but also create an environment where their issues were the campaign's focus.

Similar to any successful community organisation, it did not build itself by the organising staff telling families what to do. Rather, it was built by the members actively changing the conditions around them, while the organising staff helped tp provide a framework, specialized knowledge, and time to facilitate the process.

One question that everyone asks me when I tell them about my experience as an organiser in poor and primarily non-white neighbourhoods is did I live there, and, "how can you (as a privileged white male) go into a poor non-white community and tell them what to do; doesn't that make you uncomfortable and aren't you asserting your privilege in non-privileged spaces?"

Organising is not about telling people what to do, nor should organisers go into a community with solutions to problems one identifies as an outsider. Community organising is a bottom-up process that focuses on solutions to issues established by people who live in the community. One does not have to live in the same place as one organises, nor does one have to fill the exact same social categories as those you are organising with (though it definitely would help). The strength of any organising drive is the

potency of the political relationships its participants have with each other and how those relationships move the participants toward challenging relations of power.

Being privileged by whiteness and class, affects my consciousness, my social relationships, and my effectiveness in working with non-white poor families, but it does not prevent me from actively building powerful revolutionary relationships with oppressed groups, especially relationships that are defined by the oppressed and based on changing the conditions of their oppression. My organising work not only focused on the issues the members wanted, but it also built institutions to combat those issues, therefore, guaranteeing a strong working class lead organisation for the future.

To build a strong organisation with low-income and non-white members one must organise around winnable issues relating to class. It seems simple; but all too often, radical and anarchist organisations fail miserably in this regard. How many political groups have white people been involved in which do not take a conscious step outside of our own white activist communities to build actual relationships with individuals and organisations of oppressed groups?

When talking about class, organise around class issues. This does not mean having teach-ins, passing out flyers, and waiting for the proletariat to show up with a blank slate, and consume every radical word and use it as fuel to end the economic domination of the working class. What it does mean is listening to the working class, as opposed to simply reading about them, by going door to door and talking with working class people. Be specific, research locations in your local city or town, and go to areas, which are being gentrified, housing is being lost, or jobs are leaving. Find out what the community needs and wants and organise around it. Don't tell the community what is best; instead, use your energy and political experience to actually create class resistance.

Even though the organisation I worked for is successful at build-

ing strong non-capitalist economic institutions and developing winnable campaigns based around issues of class, it still remains a reformist organisation because it lacks a coherent and institutionalised body of radical politics, such as anarchist-communism. Just like the majority of community organisations, the goals of the organisation are not outright anarchistic nor revolutionary. Most community organisations do not explicitly organise their members in a revolutionary framework or discourse. The lack of a coherent and institutionalised critique of capitalism and the intersections of race and gender within class prevents them from moving toward creating long-lasting revolutionary social change, which ultimately negates the effect it could have on power dynamics in society. The absence of such a critique and strategy also prevents the leadership from developing more radical politics, thereby creating a dependence on the organiser for political insight. Without an explicit radical or more specifically, an anarchist-communist praxis, the purpose of the organisation, the campaigns as well as the solutions to the issues in the campaigns remain limited to reformist ends.

Anarchist-communism provides a theoretical body of politics and historical tradition to guide such organisations to revolutionary goals and projects. Anarchism is much more suited for today's community organisations because they both emphasise decentralised political action, direct democracy, rank-and-file decision-making power and community input in situations that affect the community. In addition, the anarchist-communist body of politics would help enrich any political understanding of class-based organising; it would open up a revolutionary perspective and infuse revolutionary goals and aims by its members, thereby, transforming any reformist campaign into a small step for a new society and economy.

The focus on reformist goals ensures that any actions and successes act as merely a band-aid covering the wounds caused by capitalism. Though the building blocks for a vibrant dual power struggle are in place, the lack of revolutionary thought cripples

the organisation and its possible impact in creating long-term, permanent socio-economic change. Just like many other community organisations it does not have a revolutionary political platform, nor a specific body of politics. This creates flexibility to the organisation in getting state and federal funding and grants; it also allowed the organisation to gain from electoral politics.

At the same time, by not having an anarchistic theoretical framework, the organisation became and still is a breeding ground for reformist practices, which virtually decapitates any revolutionary potential the organisation has. Instead, a campaign victory reaffirms the status quo by allowing those participating to think that they can succeed under capitalism and state, rather than infusing the idea that both determine the conditions of existence for oppression, poverty, hunger, homelessness and class exploitation.

Any strong community organisation or union has its own culture; and any radical one, has built into its culture, radical politics. This can be done in a variety of ways; one way is to build critiques of capitalism into one's campaign for affordable housing even if the goals of the campaign are currently reformist. The institutionalisation of radical politics into the organising work will produce radical members. As an organiser I was the only connection to political action for many families. This action brought class to the forefront of their political activity, but as the organiser I did not bring it in an open and explicit way, pushing those I was organising into a more radical position. Looking back I realized how simple it is to infuse such a body politic within a campaign without pushing potential members away.

Though the anarchist movement (especially the communist strains) in the United States has a revolutionary tradition based around working class organising in local communities, it remains today stagnant and unfortunately far removed from a strong working class movement or even working class identity. Through my experiences in organising and developing relationships with poor families, both white and non-white, it is clear to me that in

order to move the anarchist movement to a fundamentally working class nature, we need to step outside our usual tactics, communities and goals. We need to stop acting in a reactionary format. Anarchists need to think of themselves more as organisers than as activists. Organiser's work with specific individuals and groups based in specific locations around issues important to those one is organising; it is a radicalising process based on changing the relations of power by building a movement. An activist tends to work on a number of issues without any community interaction, no dual power framework, more focused on agitation and demonstrations often leading to reactionary actions which exist outside of a strategic campaign for social change.

Anarchists can learn lessons in organising from community organising projects. The most basic lesson is to stop ignoring these "reformist" organisations and to take the time to learn from them anything we possibly can. As anarchists we do not want to build an organisation without working class members. We ultimately want to build a revolutionary class movement powerful enough to send the bourgeoisie into extinction. A difficult step to such a problem is radicalising the working class: understanding class-consciousness and acting as a solid front against capital and class exploitation. This work must be explicitly anarchist, and those participating must also be theoretically conscious.

The organisation's focus on issues and solutions developed by poor people reinforces its commitment on being controlled and directed by the rank and file who is made up of an oppressed class. By building institutions controlled by those affected by it and by constantly fertilizing a confrontational direct action culture within campaigns creates serious dual power possibilities, yet to be seen in the current anarchist movement. It seems simple: to build a revolutionary anarchist movement we should begin to build actual political relationships with the working class.

To gain working class respect we must facilitate their economic liberation through the participation of the working class. The work is not easy and it is not always flashy, but it's the only

way anarchists can bring anarchism into the living room of the working class: by door knocking and workplace organising we can help to change conditions in their neighbourhoods, their jobs and their lives.

Just as this organisation and other community organisations start small, so must we. We must start with small campaigns that we know are winnable, will radicalise the participants, are related to class struggle, will build an organisation and can lead to a revolutionary campaign further down the road. A movement starts with people; organising is not more complicated than radicalising individuals so that they work collectively to change the power relations within society. As anarchists we need to revisit our revolutionary strategy and incorporate a stronger emphasis on organising and movement building so that we can simultaneously destroy capitalism and create communal control of society.

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