Interview with Joaquin Cienfuegos of Cop Watch LA and the Revolutionary Autonomous Communities

Affinity Project

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Contents

This interview was done in the summer of 2006. Joaquin is currently working with the Revolutionary Autonomous Communities (which at the time of the interview was in the process of being created) and the Guerrilla Chapter of Cop Watch Los Angeles.

He was interviewed along with other members of Cop Watch Los Angeles for the Affinity Project.

AP: So maybe you could just tell us who you are and why we're here.

My name is Joaquin Cienfuegos; I'm here at the Youth Justice Coalition Center, or Chuco's Justice Center, in South Central, Los Angeles. I'm part of a couple different groups. One of the groups is called Cop Watch Los Angeles; another is called the Youth Justice Coalition, and the Si Se Puede Los Angeles Labor Collective. Basically these are the groups I'm working with at this point.

I guess Cop Watch is one tactic, and we're trying to form an anti-imperialist revolutionary organization with a horizontal structure and build a base for that, a revolutionary movement.

FINDING ANARCHISM

AP: What would you say your political background is, how would you self-identify politically?

Basically, I consider myself an anarcho-communist, even though I do have my criticisms of that tendency, especially in the united states at this point. I think there's definitely a lot of similarities and unity that I have with the politics. also, I think historically my background growing up–working class, Chicano in South Central Los Angeles–having to move to Fresno, California, where my parents worked in the fields, and around the time of Proposition 187, which was an anti-immigration law, that kind of forced me into politics. It basically raised my liberal consciousness and made me think about things and challenge my teachers who were actually telling me that immigrants come here and steal peoples' jobs. My reality was seeing immigrants come and work in the fields in back-breaking labour that nobody else wanted to do. The immigrant rights movement was the first cause I joined.

Also around issues of police brutality, growing up in South Central Los Angeles, I joined a couple coalitions and groups that dealt with immigrant rights and police brutality. At first I considered myself an anarchist, I was a little eclectic, but I was into revolutionary politics and felt like there needed to be a revolution in the united states to actually change the conditions that we all lived in. Around the Democratic National Convention in 2000, there were huge mobilizations in Los Angeles; there was a youth-led mobilization, there were mobilizations for immigrant rights, for Mumia Abu-Jamal, and around police brutality, and at that time– that's when I really got into the movement and started to organize.

I got arrested at a meeting in a space in Pico-Union. Pico-Union is primarily a Central American community, and has the highest concentration of Central American people than anyplace else; the only place that's more Central American is actually Central America itself. This is right here in Los Angeles. The police department there is called the Rampart Division, and a couple years back there were scandals around the Rampart district where a lot of things came to light. The police had actually murdered people, planted drugs, stole evidence, and the police of course brushed it under the rug eventually, but these things all came to light. People saw that there was oppression and repression there.

I got arrested at a planning meeting for this youth-led mobilization against police brutality for the Democratic National Convention. There were a number of cops there and as we were walking to our cars, they told us to get against the wall. They searched us and they found a knife on me and took me to jail. People from the meeting came out and started chanting 'let them go, let them go.' they let the other two people go but they already had me in handcuffs and they took me in. They questioned me about who was involved in the organizing, how I got involved, who were the leaders.

That was my first experience with political repression. I had been harassed and arrested for things around curfew or drinking in public. Fresno and Los Angeles have youth curfew laws. Then, I guess, people who had my back or supported me were members of the Revolutionary Communist Party–a Maoist organization–so I joined them for four years. The reason why, I guess, was that they had support for me and also because I felt like they were talking about revolution, something I was interested in, and they were sort of organizing for it [according to them]. I joined them for four years and was organizing in communities like Watts, and the projects, in movements and coalitions that were led by them. Two years ago I felt that–I always had questions about their politics and the structure of their organization–the centralized power, and the people who had power in the organization reflected the power structure of this society (white, male, upper-middle class). So I had huge questions and they weren't able to answer them, so I decided to leave.

I always had unity with anarchism, especially with anarcho-syndicalism. When I was younger, when I was 14 or 15, I got kicked out of school. One of the reasons I got kicked out of school was because I would challenge my teachers. for example, my teacher saying that immigrants come and take peoples' jobs, another incident being a teacher just straight-up lying to us. I was in the honors' classes, and my history teacher was telling us that the u.s. has won every war it's been in, and I challenged that and said 'you guys lost in Vietnam, right?' they got defensive and told me I was disrupting class, and all these things added up. I got kicked out of school, when I was in 9th grade I was out of school for two years, and I spent that time reading on my own. I was really angry. I would read history, especially Chicano and Mexican history.

One of the things that influenced me the most was the history of the Black Panther Party, learning about them and their politics and how the state crushed them with COINTELPRO. Also Ricardo Flores Magon and anarchist influences in the Mexican Revolution. Those were the kinds of things that brought me into anarchism, and the Zapatistas inspired me as well. Those things politicized me when I was young, and I got involved when I was 16 or 17 here in Los Angeles around the time of the DNC. Those were things where I got introduced to anarchism, participating in the black bloc at the DNC. A lot of the people in the black bloc varied in politics from social revolution anarchists, to anarchist insurrectionists, or green anarchists, or individualists right. Kind of like the North American anarchist scene, which is more on that tip.

AP: What does this term 'anarchist insurrectionist' mean? I've heard it a lot but I'm not quite sure what it means. I sort of feel like it's something people don't like that much, but I'm also wondering if I might be one. I'm not sure.

For me, anarcho-insurrectionism has things that are definitely positive that are there. But I think it also comes from a lot of youth who are just angry and think blowing things up is in-of-itself revolutionary, and they're not focused on organizing. [They think] blowing things up is going to create the change that is necessary and smash the state. To me that's what anarcho-insurrectionism means, and now it kind of comes from the middle class, crimethinc,

anti-organization scene. There's definitely a huge divide. It comes from privileged anarchists who don't really want to be accountable to a community, who don't want to build and create within a community. They just want the rush of destroying something or breaking windows. There's definitely a role for that within the movement, but when there's no foundation or base built, then you're going to get crushed and smashed by the state.

Anyways, that's how I got into anarchism. I had more unity with people or color or working class people that were in the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, a group within the RCP, that were actually mobilizing in some sense, and I got lots of experience doing that there. I think I was limited in what I was able to do; people were alienated for questioning or having doubts about the party line. The members feel like everything the party says is correct.

Their leader, Bob Avakian, is viewed as an all-knowing person. It's really religious and cultish; even other Marxists call them a cult. I feel like a lot of the politics are carried over to their methods, but I was able to grow and develop once I actually left the organization and got experience in actual organizing. I was not limited to their party line and actually got to hear people and learn from people, rather than trying to convert people to my understanding. That's why I became an anarcho-communist.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ANARCHIST FEDERATION

We worked on different projects once I left; we had the Southern California Collective Network, which is a network of different collectives, which turned into the Southern California Anarchist Federation – Los Angeles.

AP: We've been hearing a lot about it all over the west coast. A friend of mine in NEFAC was talking about it.

We had a lot of the same experiences, other anarchist groups in the u.s. and Mexico, and we fell apart. I could get into it…

AP: Yeah that would be great to hear about, how things fall apart.

Well the Southern California Anarchist Federation (SCAF) was formed in the summer of last year, or a little bit before that. There were chapters in Orange County, in the Antelope Valley and Los Angeles. When the Los Angeles chapter formed it was one of the strongest and most diverse chapters. It had people of color, women, working class people, and for most anarchist groups in the u.s. that's really rare. Especially with anarchist organizations in the u.s., they're led by white upper-middle class folks, males. That reflects their politics as well, which is why you have the animal liberation and earth liberation scene here, and that takes priority over the class struggle, the community struggles, and mass popular movements. That's lacking in the u.s., especially in the anarchist scene. So we formed the group in Los Angeles and a lot of projects came out of SCAF-LA.; one of them was Mujeres Libres, one of them was Cop Watch LA.

When we formed SCAF some of us wanted to build a foundation for a revolutionary movement within the communities. We had an idea of building community councils and dual power institutions.

AP: Like neighborhood associations?

My position was that we needed to do that. I wanted to go into communities, our communities that we already lived in, and build these councils and lay the foundation for general assemblies and organizing around the issues that affect people directly. Elect delegates, unite under common

goals and vision, and build that revolutionary movement, and create the world they want while they destroy the system that's killing us.

There were different tendencies within SCAF LA; there were individualists, green anarchists, anarcho-communists, and it was a diverse mixture. Although we didn't have a lot of queer or transgendered people in the group.

AP: Why was that?

Well that relates to why the organization fell apart, and why we disbanded. I think that the group grew, we were pretty large in Los Angeles, and we worked with the Si Se Puede, a Los Angeles labour collective which I'm still part of. It's small and more of a coalition now; it works with the Industrial Workers of the World and the different independent unions in Los Angeles, the port truckers in Long Beach who had a general strike on May 1st.

AP: They have their own association?

They do within Teamsters, I think, and the longshoreman union. The independent contractors have an independent association with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

There was also a youth collective, and a mutual aid project where one of our members was trying to work on a resource directory for his community. So I think that's basically the projects that we built and some good things came out of SCAF. It was a collective experience in actual organizing and trying to build something collectively, which I think is part of the process of unlearning. I think from the time they're born people learn to rely on other people for politics and decision-making in their lives. So it's a learning process where we have to teach ourselves to organize and lead ourselves, reorganizing our daily lives so that we have that collective power in our communities, workplaces, schools and all facets of society.

AP: Did you develop some sort of way of speaking to people to get people to want to take some responsibility?

I think in SCAF-LA, we lacked that, and disbanded before we actually started doing that. But I think that within the organization there was rotation, skills development. People had facilitation training, note-taking, consensus process training, and for a lot of youth–a lot of us were young–that was the first organization that we had ever joined. When we decided to disband, we were all still friends, but we were concentrating on our projects where the actual work would get done. In the projects is where the work happened.

There are still people who are trying to continue and take a step back to build political unity; we didn't have that process before we joined the organization, and just because someone calls themselves an anarchist doesn't mean we all agree. We figured that out. People were pulling the organization in different directions; people were trying to lead, especially people with more privilege. We had a huge encuentro with some individuals from Orange County (not the chapter as a whole) –not to talk shit, but this is the reality, and the truth needs to come to light –where because they started SCAF they felt that they had ownership over the organization and they were going to tell us what SCAF was going to be.

AP: Did they really say shit like that? That they were going to build a federation and be in charge of the federation?

Some individuals would tell us that we didn't know what a federation is. 'A federation is like a party, and we are going to decide what the bylaws are going to be and what the constitution is.' We decided that there needs to be autonomy within the federation too, and no one who isn't from LA going to tell us what we're going to do.

AP: So they were going to tell everyone what to do. How is that a federation then?

Exactly. (laughs) A lot of it came from privilege that people from that chapter had; for me, people who have resources, training and education to lead in society join the movement, that privilege reflects on the way that they do their work. They end up wanting to lead, and because they have a different position within society, their politics are going to be different. They're going to be more comfortable with their way of life and position, and have more to lose, and they're not going to want to have a movement that gives other people more power. I think that gathering that we had reflected that. I think a lot of them got challenged, and that was a good experience for them as well, because they had never had their privilege challenged before. That's why a lot of the movement in the u.s. anarchist scene, with the animal and earth liberation movement, you have mainly upper-middle class white males involved in it because they want to be involved in an organization where they don't have to challenge their privilege, or white supremacy, or sexism, or homophobia.

AP: I find it difficult to care about animals when people are not doing too well all around you. I mean it makes sense theoretically, I understand–and I'm a vegetarian…

Yeah I'm a vegetarian too…

AP: Yeah and it's not about that. It's more about health and the whole food system is fucked up. It's hard for me to put that as a major priority in the world.

And that is what happens; animals get prioritized over human beings, and its part of their position. I think a lot of people in Orange County in general came from those movements, and they actually had a lot of respect for the work we were doing in L.A., but they had never been checked. Some of them got defensive.

Anyways even people who called themselves anarcho-communists, who I felt a lot of unity with, some of them wanted to take ownership of the organization and spend all of our time talking about it. That shouldn't be done at the expense of the projects, the work, which many of us were already involved in.

AP: I want to know how you folks got together in the first place.

On the basis of anarchism I think.

AP: Was there a callout? How did it happen?

Well we already had a network in L.A., and they already had SCAF in Orange County before we built a chapter. But we would work on mobilizations and have anarchist contingents at anti-war marches or the Mayday labour march. That's how we started building ties and alliances with people in Orange County. Our positions in society and our politics were all a bit different. But because we all called ourselves anarchists I think we joined into a federation. My experience through that was I at least connected with people I see more eye-to-eye with. We might actually build another federation, not specifically anarchist, within our communities. I was able to realize that just because someone calls themselves an anarchist doesn't mean I have full unity with that person. I feel like we can work on different projects within coalitions, but I might not necessarily want to build an organization with someone who has that type of politics, who doesn't take the politics of oppression seriously–race, class, sexuality, gender–politics that we were trying to integrate into the anarchist politics.

If your role to lead oppressed people or to be an ally to oppressed people? We only work with those who see themselves as allies.

COPWATCH

Coming from that experience with different organizers, we focused on building CopWatch up. We have a different model from other CopWatch chapters in other cities.

AP: Berkeley started it?

Well actually the Black Panther Party started that and Klanwatch (Deacons for Defense and Justice).

AP: Did they call it CopWatch?

No, they called it community patrols, and klanwatch before that. I guess we call it copwatch because that's what we're going to do; we're actually going to go out there and observe police in our communities. We didn't want to have that orientation of activism, and we wanted to be pro-active and rely on people who live in the communities and are directly affected by police brutality, to challenge it and to stop it by organizing against it. The organization in L.A. provides resources, training and support to people who are doing it themselves. This is a big part of self-determination, self-organization and self-defense of our communities. Communities like Compton, and Watts, Long Beach, South Central, East L.A., Pico-Union, are part of this project right now.

We were also involved in the South Central Farm, doing study groups and training every week. We feel like study groups are a way to democratize knowledge, and in SCAF we had the imbalance of power where people who had more experience and knowledge would end up leading. I'm also criticizing myself for doing that, because I was always speaking and taking on a leadership position because I'd had that experience already. There were other people who were doing the same. Even within us, it felt like a tug-of-war all the time between building a revolutionary organization or an anarchist network. So we ended up disbanding.

In CopWatch, we want to take the politics seriously, of actually studying and taking on oppressed communities directly and not try to tell them what to do or how they should organize themselves. It's a different dynamic from SCAF; we also name the systems of oppression and talk about how they intersect. We're building a culture around it, so different organizations and collectives talk about them as well. They don't just talk about imperialism and capitalism; we're actually talking about patriarchy or transphobia or homophobia, and white supremacy. We need to take these politics seriously. if you're calling yourself a revolutionary, you should be held accountable and be criticized for not taking these politics seriously.

AP: Do you have a lot problems with getting people to take homophobia and transphobia seriously? It seems like such a huge hurdle to get over pretty much anywhere.

I think that definitely among young people, especially from poor communities, there's a lot of homophobia and fear of queer people. There's a lot of machismo and patriarchy, people being taught that men should lead society. We try to rely on queer people themselves; there's a group called Q-Team, which is all queer and trans youth of colour from communities like South Central. We work with them as well and support them, and actually take youth that we work with and integrate ourselves into some of those movements and learn from them. We actually talk about where that oppression comes from, and how it relates to our own oppressions too. How can we connect all these different struggles and built a movement around them.

AP: Like how machismo, as a static identity itself, is oppressive to men too.

Yeah, and it's different and complex. A lot of it comes from survival tactics in these communities. Being a person of colour and poor and working class and male, we get harassed by the

police, people hit us up all the time, we get jumped, so we have to build this image of ourselves up, like we're tough so nobody will mess with you. And it sucks because we try and build different relationships with people, of trust and love and respect. It's key. Changing social relationships is harder than overthrowing the state; it's the hardest thing to do. Even though overthrowing the state is hard, in the u.s., but changing social relationships that come from colonialism, that's the revolution right there. That's a process we have to begin today, building dual power and organizing to challenge those social relationships and build something that's different. That's what we want to do. Even though we want to respect people for their own tactics of survival, we also want to challenge that and integrate different people with other oppressed folks.

AP: And there are other forms of oppression that are yet to be discovered, and when they are we'll have to take them in as well.

For us, we have to challenge the entire power structure. You can't just focus on one thing and not deal with the other. You've got with the left in the u.s., what is called class reductionism. They don't see the intersections of class and race, class and sexuality, class and gender, and how these things are overlapping. It's also because they don't want to challenge their own privilege. You look at who's leading these organizations and they're white males, and the RCP was challenged for years over their homophobic position. They felt that homosexuality came from capitalism, and once we got rid of capitalism homosexuality would disappear.

AP: Yeah they say that about racism too.

Look at Cuba today. They still have racism, and white supremacy. I don't know if you've heard of Robert F. Williams, he wrote Negroes with Guns…

AP: I was in Cuba talking to people, and they were telling me that there's definitely a division. Black people were saying that there's definitely a division between us and them. Well people will point to it and say it's not as racist as america, but it never was. It's not about the revolution or Fidel, it just never was that way. Latinos and Blacks in Cuba were never in the same situation.

LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

AP: You mentioned that there was a problem with people who were more experienced, and probably older too, but they also might have an idea about what to do and other people don't know what they want to do.

Yeah it's complex because there's a need for expertise. You look at the EZLN, and even though there was a hierarchy in the Black Panther Party it was a self-organization for Black people, and part of the problem was a centralization of power and internal contradictions that existed with the Panthers that led to their destruction, but also there are good aspects that we can look at and learn from. Look at Geronimo Pratt, who had experience with dealing with the military aspects of organizing. He trained the Black Panthers and with that training they were able to not get massacred by the LAPD. There was a shootout that happened in South Central Los Angeles, and they held them off for nine hours and two people died. Without that training, all of them would have died. Look at the EZLN, the military component of the Zapatista movement. Militaries aren't democratic and there's a need for expertise. Look at the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution, there were militias that elected their own officers. But I think the role for those people who have experience or training is to democratize that knowledge, to teach others so that they get put in prison or killed other people take it on. Geronimo Pratt was responsible enough to do

that. In other places people need to allow younger people to step up as well, so the revolution doesn't die with these individuals.

AP: And it's got to be a dual relationship, one that includes some respect for experience too.

Yeah, I think it's complex. In Mexico they call it protaganismo, when individuals get romanticized and put up on a pedestal. We should love revolutionaries but I don't think anybody is perfect. There's a lot to learn from these individuals, but there's also a lot to build and to criticize. The individual has to be open to criticism when they mess up. I think what happens too is that some individuals don't try to put themselves in that position, like Subcomandante Marcos. I think that sometimes people romanticize him and look to him to solve their problems instead of relying on themselves. When I was in Mexico people criticized him and the EZLN for [protagonism]. This is criticism from within La Otra Campana, they wanted to help it. They wanted to continue to build that movement. It's the individual's responsibility to step back, and other people have the knowledge that you have, but it might take someone a little bit longer to actually figure it out. It's not to say that we shouldn't step in when we should step in, but we have to let people have their own process, and that's responsible leadership.

AP: Can you tell us more about CopWatch, and the Black and Brown racial divide?

With CopWatch, naming the systems of oppression is the political aspect, and we always try to put the question forward of why building this culture of resistance is necessary. We can't always just react to police brutality; we want to stop it before it happens. Eventually we want to build liberated communities where we have complete autonomy from the police, which is a lofty idea but it's our goal, our vision. This means that we rely on ourselves for food, for education, for culture, for everything. We're building that sort of movement in those relationships with each other.

AP: So CopWatch is a tactic?

Yeah it's an arm of a much larger revolutionary movement, we're building an organization that CopWatch is a part of. At first it was made up of male youth of colour, now it's women and men of colour from these communities, and when we recruit we try to focus on people who aren't represented in our organization, like queer and transgendered people. Other people of colour who aren't represented too. Most of us are Latino, and there are a couple Black people, but we want to organize with more of the Black community, and Asian community, and we do work with white people as allies. And White people should be organizing in their communities, not coming to our community, because they're not going to be accountable to this community or feel the consequences of the patrols. We have mixed areas here, and people should be organizing wherever they're at, and that's how we organize with CopWatch in Los Angeles.

COPWATCH AT THE SOUTH CENTRAL FARM

We've only been around for six months and we've had experience doing patrols in the South Central Farm. Most of us were involved in that struggle, in that movement, and a lot of people came out of that. The leadership had different tactics than the community, and CopWatch was involved to bring in the things that we thought were missing. Not that we wanted to impose our own ideas, but there were problems, a lot of celebrities involved, a lot of people with privilege who wanted to lead the movement with their own tactics, for example pacifism. And that came from the white environmentalists.

We tried to bring in the tactics that were missing, for example community outreach. CopWatch would go out into the community with the farmers and do community outreach. We would do CopWatch trainings and do security at the farm. We would be there all day and night, and would rotate and take shifts. We were building relationships with the farmers and putting forth our criticisms. Some of the members of CopWatch were arrested when the police went in there and evicted people, and two weeks later they bulldozed the farm. That day people did some direct action by going into the farm and shutting down the tractor by putting vegetables into the exhaust pipe. They shut it down and ten people got arrested. People were brutalized, slammed to the floor, a woman got choked, and a fifteen or sixteen year old kid got really kicked and beat up, and was charged with felonies. The next day, they finished destroying the farm, and the leadership of the farm was saying we can't take any more action, they opted to take the legal approach and they ended up losing because they didn't continue to fight.

AP: Are you trying to critique that approach?

Yeah we're trying to do it in a diplomatic way. We really support the 350 families that were on that farm, and we still want to build those relationships with them. Just because we lost that doesn't mean we can't build on that model where we're actually self-sustaining in our own communities. That's a threat to the city and the state, which destroyed the farm.

AP: What do you think of the possibilities of some of those families becoming a strong, almost like farmers' movement in LA?

That would be great. I think those types of movements in Latin America, South Africa and Mexico are light years ahead of us. The South Central Farmers can reach that level of organization. I think a lot of them were kept out of the process and the struggle, because the leadership would speak for them, and they took the back seat. It was all about the celebrities, and two people doing it for them. Of course we disagreed with that, but we didn't want to go in and not be diplomatic about it. We were still critical, and raised it to the leadership. The leadership attacked us but they still wanted us there. They always relied on the legalistic approach, but we wanted to build a relationship with the farmers and give them the ability to have an experience in self-organization and collective struggle.

My position is that if we can give them training and resources to do things themselves, and if they want to disregard the leadership it will be their choice and not ours. That way they can continue to fight and not get demoralized.

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

AP: So what other stuff are you working on?

With CopWatch we're trying to do more political education for the community, and want to turn this into a community centre and set up workshops for silk-screening and graphic design. We want to build our own leadership skills and organizing skills. CopWatch is a grassroots organization. We don't want to rely on what is called the non-profit industrial complex; CopWatch is a dues-paying organization. All the individuals pay dues, so we don't rely on the non-profits and grants and foundations. They end up setting the terms for our organizing, and we want to be autonomous. We decide what we support, what we follow and what we don't. We've been building strong relationships with organizations that are community-based, like the Black Riders Liberation Party.

AP: What's that?

The Black Riders are a black revolutionary group; they're George Jacksonist and African-Intercommunalist. They get attacked by the police. We have a different strategy, so we just find out where we agree and where we disagree. They work with a lot of Bloods and Crips, they're made up of Bloods and Crips, and they do police patrols as well, they call it PigWatch. they're a street organization, a militant group; they're building a larger base in the community…

AP: What's their organizational structure?

They're vertical, but I think that we have some unity with these organizations and those alliances need to be built for a strong movement. The politics can continue to be debated. We are a horizontal organization and promote those politics, and encourage people to organize that way. We're not explicitly anarchist, and we say that different politics need to be built out of our organization. We try to take these systems of oppression seriously, because the anarchists in the u.s. don't, even the anarcho-communists don't. They also look at Kropotkin and these people as founding fathers, and take really purist positions. We want to build a platform for our organization, too, because we need to be unified on tactics and all that, but that's something that needs to come from your experience, your struggle, and your conditions. Each region has its own conditions and we need a strategy that reflects those conditions. That's what we're trying to create, and be horizontal. A lot of us came from anarchist organizations, for example a member, was part of an anarchist organization, who left because they were white males and he didn't want to be involved in an organization that had an obscure position on solidarity.

AP: What are your thoughts about solidarity?

To them it meant tabling–I can't speak for him–and writing statements, and not really being an ally and figuring out what that meant. It meant more activist work, sending newsletters. Not trying to build a movement.

To me, solidarity means we're fighting for the same interests and try to support each other. It means giving resources, fighting alongside with people. For me, solidarity with struggles around the world means that we struggle to change things here in our communities, in this society. The u.s. government is responsible for a lot of the misery in the world, and we take responsibility to organize here, to give people resources and educate people about what's going on.

AP: Do you see any danger in looking at the government and seeing the government as white and separated from the community, and not feeling culpable or responsible for the oppression of the united states government, because I'm not a part of that? Is that an issue?

I feel like there are a lot of people who say that things are so messed up here, 'I'm going to move to Canada.'

AP: Then they find out that it's fucked up there too. Especially if you're Black or Brown.

Imperialism is a worldwide system right. Most of us, we can't leave or change the colour of our skin. We have roots in our community, and have responsibility here. To me, I don't want to leave but I want to change things in my community.

Some people don't even know that they're oppressed in this country, let alone feel responsible for american oppression elsewhere. Harriet Tubman said that she could have freed a thousand more slaves if they only knew they were slaves, right. So I think that's important to realize that and we need to be conscious about our own oppression and how our struggles are connected around the world. That way we can learn from each other and have influence over each other, and build that type of movement that's international and intercommunal, but also has autonomy and is rooted within regions. That's my vision.

AP: Do you ever work with religious organizations?

At the farm we had contact with Christian organizations, and we don't have a position where we don't want to work with people who are religious or spiritual, we don't shun that. We're not purist in that sense. Definitely a part of building popular movements is working within those communities. We've got to be realistic; the churches have a large base in these communities, and a lot of people organize through their church. So how can we build that alliance at this point? We're also not going to censor ourselves. CopWatch is diverse at this point, so there are people who are religious or spiritual, and there are people who are atheists like me. Of course, if we build a revolutionary organization, that's one of the topics, we need to discuss: religion and its role historically and today.

AP: Are there horizontal churches around?

Yeah there are different ones. There are African-based spirituality churches that are more radical and supportive. I don't think there is a church that is horizontal.

AP: Any sorts of Muslim organizations?

Well there's the Nation of Islam. There's Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, who work out of Brooklyn, and the folks in Berkeley CopWatch wanted to hook us up with them, because they do CopWatch and are more along the same politics as us.

AP: Are there a lot of Muslims here?

There are Iranian Muslims around, and in Orange County there are Arabs, Palestinians, Lebanese… in Beverley Hills there are Iranian Jewish people, who tend to be a little bit more conservative. There are a lot of Republican Muslims around.

AP: Even still?

Yeah, believe it or not. I guess everyone has their own uncle toms.

I don't think our priority is to demonized religious people. Of course there are the Christian fascists who are in power, but that's different. They're part of the power structure, the white supremacist government and imperialist state. Of course, we need to take on the whole system, but there are communist organizations that only focus on trying to demonize religion. To me, that comes from them not doing any organizing, just sitting back in their ivory tower and talking about politics and how they're the vanguard.

AP: What sort of difficulties do you run into when including people from different backgrounds in CopWatch?

On the one hand, you want to get people involved in CopWatch. People are taught that police are supposed to be the good guys. The immigrant community is dealing with that. We've been dealing with Black and Brown youth, and Black people have a different experience of dealing with the police. The police are the direct oppressor in their community. Of course they're afraid as well. Not everybody overnight is going to jump into doing patrols or being full-time organizers, but there are steps. In organizing you need to take the steps to bring people into that movement, to lead themselves. We allow them their own tactics. We want more popular political education, and build support first from the communities. For example, we need to find ways for people to feel like they're participating even though they're not out there doing patrols, where they can do different things at this point to support CopWatch. For example, people can have bake sales or have posters in their windows to support CopWatch. We want to essentially build CopWatch communities, where everybody feels like they're part of it. They feel empowered to step up, be combative, and say 'we're not going to allow the police to brutalize somebody today, to do whatever they want and kill us off.'

AP: If every time someone sees cops fucking someone over and came out of their houses, things would really change.

Exactly, build that culture and get people comfortable enough to go out there and observe police, have their camera or whatever they have, just get information to build that movement. Our chapter in South Central is going to be connected to Watts and Compton, because Watts is a part of South Central and is very repressive and intense. Brutality is an everyday occurrence in Watts. I don't know if you heard about the case of a young girl, she was a year and a half old, and she was shot by the SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) team. Her father had her in his arms, and it was a hostage situation, but instead of negotiating they shot both of them and they were both killed. In Beverley hills they would have negotiated for hours first. So our chapter is going to be located in Watts, and that's the largest chapter, and we're going to be doing work in South Central and Compton.

Watts has a history of rebellion. 1965 and 1992. In those communities there is a lot of tension, it's a part of the city's and the state's tactics of divide and conquer. A lot of it is perceptions over competition over jobs. Who's at fault here for limited resources? It's not Latinos, it's not the Black community it's the government. Watts has a huge unemployment rate.

Part of the reason people are fighting each other is that they don't know each other's histories. They're not taught it. In reality, they have more in common than they have differences. They have similar histories and they're living next to each other under similar conditions. They don't realize it, because of the way the state pits them against each other.

One of the things we want to do is to work with youth, and we are working with youth, and we want most of our chapters made up of youth from these communities, Black and Brown. We want more youth recruited so that they can work together and build together, to create a dialog to learn from their experiences. Also leading by example in the community. If we can show that Black and Brown youth are worried about this situation, and there are programs for resisting these things that are happening, like once-a-month breakfast programs, after-school programs, people's history, figuring out why we should be fighting together.

AP: Do you go door-to-door?

In South Central we've done that with the South Central Farm. When we did community outreach we go door-to-door. We'll talk to them about the South Central Farm and also CopWatch and what we're trying to do.

AP: Do you use conscious hip-hop to unite people?

Yeah that's a form of political education too. And we're doing punk shows here in this space; we had our first punk show, and revolutionary hip-hop. We're trying to use this space as a community center, to set up drums and guitars so people can come and practice music. Using culture as a form to educate people and work together. In South Central, Los Angeles and East L.A., a lot of the hip-hop and punk youth are into both types of music. They integrate both cultures, especially in South Central and East L.A.

AP: How do you deal with increasing number of Latino and Black cops that are in the community? It makes the binary break down; the 'white state' idea might be harder to see.

I don't think it makes it harder, because a lot of people actually see the Black and Latino cops as being worse than the white cops because they see them as trying to prove themselves to a white supremacist system, and sell themselves to their master. A lot of people see that. And we try to promote that it's not a few bad apples, it's an entire system that's at fault. This makes us different from other CopWatches. We're more focused on revolutionary work, to get at this

entire system, and we also try to educate people that even though there are people of colour in power, they're upholding white supremacist interests. We try to educate people about what that means. It means that they're not really representing Black people or Latino people; they're representing the white supremacist system. I think most people understand that and have the same feelings.

AP: Do you have neighbourhood watch here?

Yeah we have neighbourhood watch. We want to change that dynamic and change it to Cop-Watch communities. They're more about blaming each other, blaming young people, than what's really at fault. One thing we want to do in terms of that, for example people think that women calling the police about domestic violence is going to solve that. In reality, it creates more problems and they don't care about women getting beat down.

AP: They have these 'someone has to go to jail' rules, where if the cops arrive for a domestic call, someone has to go to jail. do they have that here?

I don't know about that. we should look into that. either way, when the police get called in, things escalate. and even when there's a restriction order, they try to intervene, and they're not helping the situation. They're not helping women fight domestic violence. There's this organization in Brooklyn called Sista ii Sista, which is made up of women of colour, and they try to organize around domestic violence with autonomy from the police. For example, the services that get provided like counseling, we can provide ourselves. Domestic violence is a community issue, and should be dealt with by the community. I think that this is the type of situation we're trying to create. Cops aren't trained to deal with these types of problems. Neighbours know each other and build relationships with each other, and they should be able to deal with their own problems, and women should be empowered to fight against it themselves and not rely on the police.

AP: Do you ever think it's possible to talk to people about what to do when the cops come, and how to deal with them? My experience with them anywhere I've lived is that they come, they try to find your weakness mentally, and they try to get you to lash out at them mentally so they can kick the shit out of you and take you away. I guess always in life it's been lessons on how not to get provoked.

We do have know your rights trainings. When we do CopWatch training we talk about getting harassed by police too. We have lawyers who come in and talk to people about the basic laws they need to know, and the vagueness of the law, and how they get used against us. we do try to promote that as well, and pass our resource cards where it has information on how to contact us, or lawyers, and their rights.

AP: Besides the Black Riders, are there other political street organizations that you work with?

The Black Riders is probably one of the only ones we work with at this point. The Youth Justice Coalition is made up of people that have been incarcerated and people that have dealt with police brutality–that's a lot of people–a lot of people are coming from the streets and are ex-gang members or non-active members. We work with them too. We want to work with more youth who are affected by that directly.

AP: Do they come to you or is it an outreach program?

We try to do outreach. A lot of them we already know, they're in our community and we just talk to them about police brutality and what we think about it. We encourage them to organize themselves.

AP: Do you ever have to deal with the leadership of these gangs?

Not yet, we haven't had that problem yet.

AP: Are you worried about that?

I think that we want to build the type of organization that's made up an entire community, and they're a part of the community too, and we want them to defend the community, not be self-destructive. We want to get them to start supporting the projects we're carrying out. the time to engage with people is right now, and we need to get into that.

There was a group called CAPA (the Coalition Against Police Abuse), and Michael Zinzun who was one of the organizers passed away recently. He used to do a lot of work with Bloods and Crips in organizing truces, and I think we want to continue that work as well, building those types of truces within the communities. It's a part of connecting the different communities. He had been doing it since the 70s.

After the 1992 rebellion, there was a truce with the Bloods and the Crips and the Mexican gangs, but there is evidence of the sheriffs, when the Crips were having a barbeque they were shot at, and fighting was instigated again. A lot of hip hop artists were involved in the truce.

AP: It seems like a lot of what you're talking about is like the Black Panthers but a horizontal organizing style.

Yeah we're definitely inspired by the Black Panthers and the Zapatistas, and other revolutionary movements around the world and especially in Latin America. We want to learn from that and adapt it into our communities and conditions here.

AP: With COINTELPRO and the instigation of the state provoking and systematically murdering those who were involved, have you thought about how similar community programs can be started again while avoiding that sort of shit?

I think that we definitely take that seriously. anybody who takes themselves seriously has to study that, and find ways to combat it and prepare themselves for it. Some of us have already dealt with it. One of our members, Sherman Austin, the webmaster of Raise the Fist (www.raisethefist.com), was the first person to be tried under the Patriot Act, and he's a member of Long Beach CopWatch. He was affected by the Patriot Act. I had the Secret Service and the FBI come to my mom's house, and my job, and my ex-girlfriend's house. A lot of us have dealt with intimidation, scare tactics, arrests, but it's not escalated to the point where it was for the Panthers at this point. We want to do study groups around COINTELPRO and the Patriot Act. I mean it wasn't just COINTELPRO that destroyed this movement; it was internal dynamics that existed. Fighting, drugs, gender oppression. The Black Panthers were some of the only ones who took these politics seriously, and they were working on it. Of course, part of the tactics of the state is to go after the leadership. If you have a rigidly centralized organization, and don't have horizontal relationships with people, then when the leadership is arrested or killed the organization falls apart. I think that was one of the problems that existed with the Black Panthers. They were still one of the groups that posed the biggest threat to the state, because of their community projects and what they were doing, and that's why they were taken out.

So we need to talk about how do we create that type of movement while preparing for repression, and sustaining that organization for years to come.

AP: I mean I wasn't even alive when this shit happened, but my understanding with the Panthers was that their leadership structure was like an oil slick on the top of the water, and to avoid getting taken out you have to make them dig everyone out because they're too integrated into the community.

I think we need coordinators and organizers, but I think the role for coordinators and organizers is to make more coordinators and organizers.

AP: That's like that Muslim teaching; the best leader is someone who doesn't create followers but makes more leaders or something like that.

This is why Malcolm X posed such a threat to the government and others. And when Martin Luther King was killed, he was leaving his position on non-violence and getting more radical. Anybody who's talking about these things, and seriously organizing around them, is going to be attacked by the state. I mean I agree a lot too with George Jackson's strategy, and the Zapatistas, about building dual power and counter-institutions within the community, where people can take on these projects and programs for themselves and be self-sustaining. They connect with others who are doing the same, like community councils, and at the same time we have to realize that the state is going to come down on us eventually, because we can't have autonomy under this system. So we have to prepare and organize to defend our gains in our communities and safeguard our programs. So a lot of us are trying to find ways of implementing that here, without getting smashed. We have to rely on people in the communities to defend themselves, in different ways.

Eventually it's going to come down to the state and people's self-organization. People will have to carry out a revolutionary struggle and a civil war. I think a majority of people want to eventually get rid of this system.

Affinity Project
Interview with Joaquin Cienfuegos of Cop Watch LA and the Revolutionary Autonomous Communities
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