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Thinking About Anarchism: Organisation

Is there a 'right' way for anarchists to organise?

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Programmatic Groups

This is where people come together around an agreed detailed programme and set of written positions. Because of the often quite detailed agreement between the members it is possible to have a long running organisation that builds up considerable resources.

It also will develop a reputation (for better or worse) amongst those who come into contact with. Internally it should build a high level of trust and mutual understanding between its members which allows a high level of solidarity and mutual aid.

The greatest advantage of such a form of organisation is its ability to weave a common thread between a number of projects and struggles through both involvement of its members in them and through a publication that details each of them to many people.

The disadvantages of this form of organisation is that it requires a level of commitment to join and quite a lot of time spent in internal discussions to reach collective agreements. Because of both of these it will seldom be able to grow very fast without losing its original purpose. The Workers Solidarity Movement is an example of this form of organisation but our members are also involved in all the other forms discussed.

However it is not the best form of organisation for involving lots, i.e. hundreds or even thousands, of people or involving new people because the existing group of people already know each other well and those who are not in the core group of friends will tend to be excluded (accidentally or otherwise) from a lot of the decision making because of the informality. This form of organisation is sometimes called an affinity group.

The Network

This is useful where a large group of people are interested in a common project and want to be able to rapidly involve as many people as possible. It might be composed of a collection of affinity groups and programmatic groups or it might simply be composed of individuals. It's a good form of organisation for one off protests or events. Typically there will be one or more assemblies that define and redefine a set of goals/mandates and alongside this lots of sub-groups and individuals who will implement these mandates or do what is required to fulfill the goals.

However its open nature makes it easy for hostile opponents and others to 'infiltrate' it. Its lack of anything but basic agreement on core principles mean that over time disagreements within the network may grow to paralyse it and prevent it taking action. Networks in Ireland in recent years have included Dissent, Dublin Grassroots Network and Grassroots Network Against the War.

Project Groups

These are useful when you want to achieve some single long term aim like opening a bookshop, creating an indymedia or sustaining a social centre where part of the goal is to bring new people into the project. Seomra Spraoi is one such project.

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It is an old cliché that anarchists are against organisation — the media loves to point out an imagined contradiction between anarchism and organisation. The reality is that (among other things) anarchism is a theory of organisation. The circled A often seen sprayed on walls represents the A of anarchism within the O of organisation.

The confusion arises because anarchists criticise all forms of top down organisation and all too often we are told these are the only forms that can exist. Whether it's the boss in the workplace or the politician in the Dail we are educated to believe this is the only way to get things done.

Of course in our day to day interactions with friends and relatives we never organise things this way. Can you imagine arranging a night out where one person ordered everyone else to turn up at a particular pub or to go to a particular cinema?

Forms of anarchist organisation

There is no one right form of anarchist organisation. Rather, different forms are used for different purposes. What all these forms have in common is a desire to avoid the creation of any hierarchy while at the same time making sure that whatever needs to be done gets done.

Informal organisation

The simplest form is the informal form where a small group of people want to do something, they discuss this and then they go ahead and do it.

This works pretty well for small scale individual projects — in particular if there is some reason why you don't want the project to be public knowledge. Opening up an abandoned building in order to squat in it might be an example.