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Encouraging Self-Organization in Communities

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In Boston, as in cities all over the northeast, the housing crisis has intensified. Rents have as much as doubled in the past five years and affordable housing is disappearing at an unprecedented rate as developers buy up investment properties and gentrification encroaches on formerly livable neighborhoods. Evictions have increased by nearly forty percent as well and in a most disgusting turn of events a bill is being discussed in the Massachusetts legislature to allow towns to count prison cells as low-income housing units. But people are fighting back and tenant organizing and solidarity are on the rise.

As an anarchist I decided to become involved with a community group doing work on housing issues and tenant organizing. As a renter, I am dealing with the housing crisis and was interested in connecting the work that I do in my collective with work I would like to do in the larger community, hoping to see how the

two would intersect. I thought it would be an opportunity to learn from people who have been organizing for years and have been effective at activating people to improve their own lives. I wanted to see how community-based organizing was working in Boston, knowing that I would probably be the only explicitly anarchist person in the group and also knowing that there are people in the revolutionary anarchist movement who would view the work I was involving myself in as reformist. In this article I will explore both of these themes.

Community organizing, which Tom Knoche describes as “social change efforts which are based in local geographically defined areas where people live,” has a long history of struggle and success in Boston. City Life/Vida Urbana (CL/VU) is a 30-year-old organization based in Boston’s Latino and African-American community of Jamaica Plain. It emerged out of various social struggles in the 1970s and is now working to preserve and build affordable housing and to fight gentrification. A Tenant Organizing Committee formed last winter out of CL/VU in response to the overwhelming number of people facing eviction and rent increases throughout the city. The idea behind the committee was to bring together people involved in tenant unions in their own buildings and to support individuals in struggle.

We discuss how to support and show solidarity with one another and how to spread the word that organizing to fight landlord greed is an option. Additionally we hope to initiate a discussion in the community about fundamental issues of capitalism as they relate to rent and housing. Rent control, the immorality of market-rate rents, gentrification, and citywide solidarity have been some of the topics focussed on in the past few months. The base for the committee is tenant organizers from around the city and it is these people who guide the work of the group. Therefore an important part of each meeting is a brain-storming session on possible strategies for current struggles.

form the groups we work with, realizing that in neighborhoods that have been organizing themselves for years we are the people who have much to learn. In participating in the conversations at the Tenant Organizing Committee, I have been excited by the possibility of building solidarity and linking struggles. People who are involved in self-motivated, self-organized struggles carry this potential on into other parts of their lives. They are more apt to unite to reclaim power from bosses, landlords and other oppressors. Only by engaging in concrete acts of local solidarity and by putting our actions where our revolutionary rhetoric is will we begin to transform society on a large scale.

Futher reading suggestions

- (Knoche, Tom) Organizing Communities: Building Anarchist Grassroots Movements
Essay first published in the journal Social Anarchism; reprinted as a pamphlet
- (Fisher, Robert) Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984

Nearly twenty tenant organizations have formed in Boston in the past year with the aid of CL/VU. In parts of the city artists are organizing to protect warehouses and studio spaces from being consumed by speculators and turned into Internet start-up companies. People are organizing against landlords' attempt to finagle out of guarantees to provide a certain number of low income units and against rent increases buoyed by an out of control housing market. Still other people are putting pressure on landlords to sell buildings to non-profit organizations and tenant unions in order to take units out of the market and put them in the hands of the people who live in them. Tactics have ranged from negotiation with landlords to marches through downtown to lobbying for the return of rent control to noisy demonstrations outside of landlord's offices.

An example of this type of organizing occurred at a 31-unit building in which the owner began eviction proceedings because the tenants refused to pay \$6-800 rent increases. The tenants came together to form a union and began negotiating with the landlord through letters and legal representation. They elicited the aid of a local city counselor and the city housing authority. The landlord's lawyer responded with a letter that fueled the flames, stating that, "We live in a capitalistic society and it is not wrong under our system for [the owner] to seek to make a profit. In fact profit is at the very core of our society." The union began to build ties with other tenant unions in the area, rallies were held, and eviction notices were burned in protest. The landlord began to soften with increased pressure from the media. Eventually the landlord relented to the union's demands for smaller increases and rent stability. This agreement softened the tone of the final rally that was held outside of his office on a busy weekday morning. When people begin to look at the issue of landlords making money off of their vulnerability, the real crime of rent is laid bare. A critique of capitalism emerges and as people work through their struggles,

escalating the intensity of their tactics as need be, their militancy grows organically out of necessity.

Mass building take-overs and squats have not occurred yet in Boston, but the discussion of housing is being opened and radicalized. So the question arises: should we, as revolutionary anarchists, work with organizations whose final analysis is not anarchist and whose tactics we may consider reformist, and if so, how? Robert Fisher dissected neighborhood organizing in this way: "While neighborhood organizing is a political act, it is neither inherently reactionary, conservative, liberal or radical, nor is it inherently democratic and inclusive or authoritarian and parochial. It is above all a political method, an approach used by various segments of the population to achieve specific goals, serve certain interests, and advance clear or ill-defined political perspectives."

There are no doubt problems of hierarchy and straight-up liberalism in some community organizations. The battles fought are sometimes ones that will make no real change for those who need it most. But I think we must examine exactly what "reformist" means within local struggles. There is a great difference between people, even radicals, working for others and people working for control of their own lives and becoming empowered by this struggle. Perhaps what we can infuse into such struggles is a revolutionary vision including a structural and over-arching critique. At the same time we can learn lessons in effective strategizing and escalation of tactics that community organizers have been developing for years.

People organizing for their own survival generally don't have to be told they are getting screwed. They can feel it. We should look at the radicalizing potential of such struggles before we pronounce them to be not sufficiently revolutionary. Attacking the work of communities that are uniting in real struggle because they are viewed as reformist smacks of privilege; too often those unable to take on the risk of arrest or physical harm are dismissed and the direction of revolutionary work is held hostage by machismo.

I see value in working in solidarity with others around the world during global days of action; these are ego boosting and fun, as well as useful for opening space for dialogue. But it takes an entirely different kind of energy and commitment to look around in our own communities and examine the relationships there, work to change them or to challenge capitalism on a local scale alongside those who have not adopted a particular ideology. It is easier to support the Zapatistas, for example, than it is to confront our own attitudes which may be paternalistic and racist by becoming involved in grassroots struggles in our own cities.

For the revolutionary struggle to grow it has become necessary to expand beyond the relative comfort of our autonomous zones. Excitingly, the idea of a free society is a topic to be that is being discussed by many rather than dismissed as fantastical and the reception for anarchists within this conversation is warmer than it has been in a long time. At the same time I feel that we must be wary of intervening in community and class struggles in a patronizing way, touting our ideological development and purity. Our goal must be always to encourage self-organization and self-education as a way for people to gain control over their lives. I also think that it is important for anarchists to participate and help in the growth of the communities around them and to admit that they may learn something in the process.

Tom Knoche wrote that, "anarchist community organizing must be dedicated to changing what we can today and undoing the socialization process that has depoliticized so many of us." Our ways of interacting and creating must be innovative and revolutionary. That is what autonomous struggle and anarchism is about, letting each person find his or her full potential and sharing our strengths and experiences to build a society that none of us could have imagined alone. We will have to argue and compromise and grow.

Our future society will not be won solely with revolutionary rhetoric. In working with groups that aren't specifically anarchist we will be transformed by the experience at the same time we trans-