

Less Mobilising, More Organising

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A few years ago I was involved in protesting outside a café in Sydney alongside a backpacker who'd previously worked there. The backpacker had been paid below the minimum wage the entire time they'd been employed, and all attempts at dialogue with the boss had proven futile. Having gotten nowhere with negotiations, we set out to protest at the cafe until the owner paid up all of the money that was owed.

The whole thing took a lot of effort. Three weekends in a row, 20 to 30 people travelled from right across Sydney to stand out the front of the café for several hours at a time. We chanted, held signs, and handed out leaflets to passers-by. The owner and other staff yelled abuse at us, threw buckets of water over us, and got their friends to show up and harass us, while police got called to the scene on most occasions. A huge amount of my and others' free time was taken up doing this over and over again, and for a month it seemed to completely dominate my life. Eventually, the owner capitulated and paid out the full \$1,150.

A couple of years after that, I was a union delegate and was organising in my workplace. We were negotiating for a collective agreement to increase all of our wages and conditions, and little progress was getting made. Attempting to intimidate us, our employer gave us a 'best and final offer'. We held a mass meeting of several dozen staff, voted unanimously to reject the offer and to prepare to take strike action, and conveyed this to the bosses. Taken aback, they immediately revised their final offer and added higher pay rises, costing the employer in total an extra \$42,000 per year, every single year, forever.

These two stories fairly neatly illustrate the differences between a mobilising and an organising approach to activism, and the relative power of each of them. In one instance, we expended a huge amount of effort and time to win a fairly modest sum of money by mobilising already-sympathetic people on a self-selecting basis from scattered parts all across the city. And in another, we won a vastly greater amount of money with relatively little effort, through the power of taking a particular defined constituency of people and organising almost everyone in it, regardless of whether they were particularly inclined towards left-wing politics or not.

There seems to be an obvious lesson that can be drawn from this – organising is far more effective. But within left-wing political organisations in Australia, a shallow mobilising- and protest-based approach to activism is dominant. Large and small demonstrations occur with great frequency, yet with a few exceptions most of these campaigns win practically nothing. On the other hand, the amount of long-term organising work that's being undertaken has virtually collapsed.

I think it's therefore worth critically analysing the overwhelming focus on mobilisation in Australia today, and making the case for an emphasis instead on deep, long-term mass organising.

At this point though, it's worth clarifying what I mean by mobilising and organising. At its most basic, a mobilising approach involves selecting a particular cause, then attempting to get as many people as possible who already agree with that cause to gather together in one place. It doesn't especially matter whether these people work together, attend class together, live near each other, or have any kind of connection at all – the point is just to get as many individuals from anywhere to come together to protest, demonstrate, or otherwise show their support for some kind of already-determined cause. In this way, those in power will see the level of support this cause has and the level of disruption that supporters of the cause can create, and then capitulate to the supporters' demands. Protests are classic examples: people from all across the city attend as individuals or small groups, walk around and chant for a while, and then separately go home and revert back to being isolated individuals.

Organising, on the other hand, works very differently. An organising approach aims to take a particular constituency with clearly defined boundaries and then organise literally every single person in it to come together, act collectively, and take power into their own hands. A few of the obvious examples of this would be organising all of the workers in a particular workplace or industry, all of the tenants under a particular real estate agency or landlord, all of the unemployed at a particular job agency, or all of the residents in a working-class suburb affected by some kind of common grievance. Wherever it takes place, the point is to organise everybody on the basis of their shared location and their shared experience of exploitation and injustice, regardless of their pre-existing commitment to left-wing causes.

For anarchist communists, organising is by far the most powerful form of activity we can undertake, and it should be the focus of our efforts. At the most basic level, we aspire towards a society in which workplaces are run democratically by those who work in them, neighbourhoods are run democratically by those who live in them, and every single person has a right to all of the necessities of life. Only organising can build the structures in workplaces and communities through which ordinary working-class people can take power into their own hands to achieve this. Every workplace mass meeting, for example, contains the seeds of an organisation that could take control of the workplace, manage it democratically, and get rid of the bosses. Thus, every time we organise, we're concretely bringing ourselves closer to a socialist society. Even the most enormous rallies and mobilisations of hundreds of thousands of people can't do this.

Even at a more day-to-day level, organising is far more effective at fighting for and winning immediate gains. A strike by every single person in a workplace – or even just a majority of workers – exerts a crushing level of power and can rapidly force an employer to capitulate to workers' demands. This is even more pronounced at a larger scale: a strike by 100,000 workers in a few strategic industries can force all kinds of concessions from governments and employers that simple mobilisations of 100,000 unconnected individuals from scattered parts across a city can. The same goes for a similar organising approach in the other non-workplace settings.

Organising also has much greater potential to politicise and radicalise new layers of people. In my own experience as workplace union delegate, almost none of the more than 80 people who joined up to the union would have identified themselves as leftists, and the overwhelming majority had never even been to a rally or taken part in any kind of political activity before. Unlike a mobilising approach, however, it wasn't possible to just ignore these people and only focus on already-radical coworkers – every single worker needed to be drawn into activity, regardless

of what ideas they happened to hold. This entailed an endless amount of talking to, persuading and listening to people who were completely different to me, both in politics and in their life circumstances more generally. The long-term results of this were quite spectacular though, as scores and scores of workers struck, rallied and took action for the first time in their lives, and changed themselves through their own self-activity. Had our industrial campaign never taken place, I very much doubt that any of these people would have responded to an isolated poster they happened to see in the street or a post they saw on social media promoting some kind of mobilising-style campaign or rally. Only organising has this kind of potential to draw into activity and engage mass numbers of people who aren't already pre-committed to a cause.

Moreover, the kind of politicisation that occurred as a result of my workplace organising was far deeper. Rather than the usual attendance at a rally followed by return to isolated and atomised daily life, which often inspires a sense of post-event powerlessness, coworkers took action and built power alongside people they spent every day with. Many coworkers told me that involvement in the union completely altered the way they saw their fellow workers, and it wasn't hard to start to feel quite powerful. In this context, and especially after we'd been on strike together, I think that ideas of socialism and workers' control would have been relatively easy and normal to propagate, and I imagine that had we organised union meetings on topics like 'Workers' control: what is it and could we do it?' they would have proven fairly popular, since our daily circumstances were already starting to point in that direction. As it was, people expressed embryonically anti-capitalist sentiments on their own, and a significant number of coworkers – often totally ordinary suburban parents in their 50s and 60s – made unprompted comments to me about not needing bosses.

None of this is to suggest that mobilising isn't important, useful, and necessary – it is. Rallies, petitions, counterprotests, blockades and other mobilisation-based forms of activity all have value and can win gains. It's just that compared to the sheer power of effective, long-term mass organising work, mobilisation alone is fairly ineffective and powerless. Mobilising simply cannot win the immediate gains, politicise large numbers of not-already-committed people, and build the organs of working-class power that can take power across society, in anything like the way that patient, committed, deep and long-term organising can.

Organising is hard. It's difficult, slow, unspectacular, often boring, and you have to work alongside people who're completely different to you. But it's ultimately a vastly superior and vastly more powerful approach. Moreover, from my own personal experience it's incredibly satisfying, meaningful, and fulfilling. It also has none of the weird, subcultural and generally unpleasant sectarian dynamics of protest- and mobilisation-based campaigns.

As anarchist communists we should be focused overwhelmingly on organising. It should be the top priority for all of the groups that we're part of, and when in the coming year or two we're able to create a national organisation, we should prioritise it across the country, with internal trainings, bulletins reflecting on the organising that members have been involved with, and one-on-one support for members undertaking new organising work. Rallies and mobilisations aren't in and of themselves bad things, but patient mass organising at the level of the workplace, the industry, the job centre and the neighbourhood is where we should be focused.

Again, if my experience is any lesson, it's easily possible for a single militant to go into a particular, defined constituency, solidly focus on organising, and have a disproportionately large and influential impact within a short space of time, culminating in several days of strike action.

All that we need is the ability to replicate this on a larger scale. Above all else, in other words, we need an organisation of organisers.

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*Chris Oliver argues that left-wing activists should focus less on shallow mobilisation and protest,
and more on deep, long-term organising.*

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