

The Salish Sea Anarcha Network

Jeff Shantz, Anarcho-Syndicalist Review

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Over the past year there has been something of a revival of anarcho-syndicalist theory and practice in so-called Canada. This is reflected in organizing and publishing projects coming out of Montreal (Liberté Ouvrière and the Anarchist Union Journal) that have already made significant contributions to innovative anarcho-syndicalist thinking on issues such as land back movements, anti-imperialism and class-wide solidarity. Closer to home, for me, has been the formation of the Salish Sea Anarcha Network (SSAN), which has brought together syndicalists across unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh (which make up the city of Vancouver); Katzie, Kwantlen and Semiahma (Surrey); and the Kwikwetlem Nations (Coquitlam) — which together make up so-called Metro Vancouver — with connections on Vancouver Island.

I have participated in the SSAN from the start and have been involved in organizing the network and its various public events over the course of the last year. In what follows I offer an overview of some early work and interviews with SSAN participants. We go over a range of issues such as the relevance and need of anarcho-syndicalism today, goals and challenges, shortcomings in local anarchist organizing, and aims for ongoing organizing work. Along the way they provide analysis of important contemporary issues like relationships with the land, centering Indigenous solidarity, and developing green syndicalist practice — all in a context where active anarcho-syndicalist organizing has largely been absent for a long time.

« Get to Know Us »: Initial Events

The first event was a general introduction to anarcho-syndicalism which was perhaps surprisingly well attended with several dozen people filling the local infoshop Spartacus Books. Discussion ranged over issues including green syndicalism, working class solidarity with Indigenous resistance, class struggle strategies and tactics, dock workers' struggles and Palestine solidarity. There was particular interest in syndicalist squads and organizing we can do here and now to support and advance working class struggles locally, including solidarity with unemployed and unhoused working-class people.

The second event, similarly well attended, was a film screening and discussion of the documentary « Defenders of the Land. » The documentary focused on the Gustafsen Lake struggle of 1995 in Secwepemc people practicing their Sun Dance were to a mass police raid by the RCMP acting on behalf of an American cattle rancher. The police assault saw the RCMP lay incendiary devices on a road, blowing up a pickup truck driven by Indigenous people trying to get supplies. Over 70,000 rounds were fired by the RCMP into the Sun Dance camp. The film was unique in having been granted access for direct interviews with the land defenders.

Discussion focused on ongoing and contemporary state violence against Indigenous land defenders, extractive capital on unceded Indigenous territories in so-called British Columbia, and practices of solidarity. Connections were made between the Gustafsen Lake struggle and current land struggles on Wet'suwet'en territory against the Coastal Gas link fracked gas pipeline and on Secwepemc territory against the Trans-Mountain tar sands pipeline.

In addition to venues for necessary discussions on a range of important matters, the events were organized as friendly opportunities for folks to get to know members of the network. The discussions were held in a conversational style with short introductions rather than full, formal, panel presentations.

Why This, Why Now?

I had a chat with some SSAN participants to get their thoughts on organizing a contemporary anarcho-syndicalist network, and key challenges, aims and aspirations. SSAN members come from different working-class backgrounds. Some are members of unions. A couple are members of the Industrial Workers of the World. Some work in larger workplaces, at least one does personal care work. Ages range over decades apart. Some are longtime anarchists while others are more recent to anarchist politics. Those in the conversation included Skyler, a younger anarchist, PJ, a longtime anarchist organizer and IWW member, and Chris, an electrical worker and member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

The first question was, straightforwardly, « Why is the network necessary? Especially in this area? »

For Skyler: « It's necessary to have this network as no other group is really like it around here. Closest is the IWW, however it's not anarchist even it has a bunch of them in it, and currently I feel is on the path to bureaucratic reformism due to it not having any political leaning making it vulnerable to such things.

PJ is more optimistic about the IWW. In her view, « The IWW has lots of good ideas, and 100 years of fairly decent organizing efforts around Turtle Island, attempted internationally. Their OT101 (Organizer Training 101) is exceptionally useful to anyone wanting to end their isolation and get organizing in their workplace, but these tried-and-true methods can also handily be applied in tenant organizing too. »

Skyler added: « If we are to build a mass anarcho-syndicalist movement it's important to kickstart something like this at some point. »

On the matter of local context, PJ commented: « There's huge and unaddressed problems here in (smug) Vancouver area environmental and so-called 'social justice' seeking movements. A real disconnect from both working-class struggle and grassroots Indigenous resistance movements from that of the traditional 'earth protection' movements. Several of us have been influenced by social ecology and yearn for a plurality of more green syndicalist futures. »

In that regard I wanted to know how they saw the network in relation to other local movements.

For Skyler: « I would like this group to connect to other unions, Indigenous decolonization, anarchist groups. Only through shared struggles can we overcome all hierarchies. »

PJ was more expansive: « So, basically, there's been a disconnect from the land, and although in the 1910s there may have been a strong relationship between IWW and Tsleil-Waututh dockers, today there's little such remnants of organization between workers (unionized or not) and local grassroots Indigenous family/clan structures. There is a Watch House still in existence near TMX (formerly Kinder Morgan, now state-owned pipeline) and we've helped to bring forward a few instances of the (Vancouver revolutionary) FreeSkool, which have included Indigenous land defenders, Black and BIPOC activists, and anti-surveillance movements, but more forums are

needed, and organizer capacity has been stretched in other directions recently, particularly in local demonstrations in solidarity with Palestinian resistance to the last nine months of brutal escalation in the ongoing colonial occupation. There's been encouraging recent connections between the Wet'suwet'en solidarity movements in Vancouver and the Palestinian solidarity movement, but yet many hurdles to unity, and there's still great dependence on social media corporations for our news, information and organizing platforms. »

I wanted to know what they see as the network's most important activities/aims/contributions going forward.

In Skyler's view: « Right now the most important activity is education. We need to educate the working class in order for them to properly fight back against state capitalism. Also, we are trying to get more anarchists on board to grow big enough to get closer to becoming a proper union and do more things. »

PJ explained: « So, with the Salish Sea Anarchist Network, we wanted to get something going that moves people away from shitty dead-end politics and shakes up the usual suspects — something different than the status quo marching around in circles chanting meaningless slogans and going nowhere, interrupting mostly only workers heading home from work in the afternoon. »

PJ also noted the importance of drawing on hard-gained lessons of organizing over years. In her view: « After many different collectives, events, anarchist bookfairs, free skools, conferences, workshops and choir performances, SSAN seems just one more way to reach forward, bring past lessons and activities into the historical memory of present youth and keep on connecting them with mentors, teachers, organizers, working class leadership that can drive movements forward in a positive way. Obviously, we strive to be ever-innovating, changing and dynamic, but it helps to draw on some history. »

Finally, I wanted to get a sense of how they would like to see things develop.

Skyler reiterated: « Like I said before I want to form this group into a proper union with federations, delegates, constitutions, etc., with proper union functions. And have it be large enough to create a mass ansyn (anarcho-syndicalist) movement. »

For PJ, there should be no illusions about the work involved: « However, we understand that a lot of organizing, building and education must be done in order to get from here to there, or to even open up small autonomous pockets of freedom, where people can get together, take and share notes, keep historical archives and share real, unfiltered news with one another. Means and ends consistency is important. We want to avoid charity models, and instead build self-sufficiency and working-class revolutionary consciousness that doesn't spin its wheels internally, but is forward moving and engaging in active struggles. »

Hopes and Challenges

There are a number of key challenges facing the network. Because we are not workers in the same workplace and have diverse work schedules, it has hampered regular organizing meetings. This is exacerbated by the fact that members are spread out across Metro Vancouver and Vancouver Island. Participants also have widely different experiences with organizing and with anarchism.

As PJ put it: « We're still very young/new as a group, and not yet really a « network, » still in the process of formation and solidifying some of our goals, so I can't say for sure if we can overcome some of the hurdles we have and get it together, but I do have high hopes that we can at least pull together some consistent presence in the area with regular meet-ups, film and discussion nights, talks and presentations or workshops, events which can bring together generations, bring suppressed histories and perspectives of people in resistance back into awareness within current struggles, and build unity, capacity and basically people power. »

More intermediate goals include formation of a flying squad to do picket and direct action support. There is also interest in starting a tool library, and one member, Chris, who is also a member of IBEW, is committed to getting this up and running and sees it as an active, and useful, way to grow the network. He would like to see a network of working-class libraries. In his words, this would be « one that actively creates material libraries, direct action libraries, bike libraries, clothing libraries, and in general anything that can help unemployed and unhoused people be part of anarchist unions. » For Chris, « incorporating libraries as a praxis also opens doors to » showing « Old unions » what « an actual union, a syndicalist union, looks like. »

These are early stages. Network participants recognize that there is a lot of work to be done and are not interested in taking shortcuts. They are trying to do some groundwork and set a more durable foundation to build on properly. We will be hearing more about the activities of the SSAN and some of the lessons they are learning along the way.

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