

Neighborhood Associations

A Personal Experience

Larry Gambone

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The neighborhood association is an important area for anarchist involvement. Of the popular organizations, such as trade unions or cooperatives, these associations are the easiest ones to implant oneself in. The reason is the lack of bureaucracy or controlling bureaucratic caste with which one must struggle in the other institutions. The neighborhood association is a natural place of involvement for militants who are retired, students, self-employed, or on social assistance.

I have been involved in our association for three years. In that time, I have helped in neighborhood clean up, fund raisers, meetings of up to 400 residents, public art and the location of colourfully painted garbage bins. We had a successful campaign to stop noise pollution from a local industry. Our Miner's Heritage Picnic saw a thousand people participating last year. We are presently engaged in creating a neighborhood plan which is an attempt to preserve the working class nature of the neighborhood and rebuild much of the community that has been lost through businesses moving to shopping malls in the city periphery. Much of what we do takes the form of direct action. We don't ask for permission, we just do it.

Two years ago I was elected to the executive of the association. Where I speak out or take some sort of a leadership role, is where I have the applicable skills. I work to maintain a common ground approach within the organization. I helped develop a very successful neighborhood blog/newsletter. With my knowledge of labour history, I was able to put together the Miner's Heritage Photo Exhibit and to re-print the BC Federation of Labour's 1913 pamphlet on the Great Coal Strike of 1912. My next goal is to set up a "literature department" to research and publish information of interest to the neighborhood.

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The association gives a concerted voice to a neighborhood, creates dialogue and in doing so, helps re-build community. Where these associations do not exist, fear or prejudice-driven elements can stir up the populace, encourage hostility toward minorities or prevent positive developments within the community. Where a neighborhood association is already on the ground, it can preempt such hostility and steer the neighborhood in a constructive direction.

I have experience with such a situation. The neighborhood adjoining us has no association. An attempt to create a soup kitchen for the poor was crushed by a minority who whipped up fears about drug addicts and homeless people. In our neighborhood an old hotel has been converted into a controlled living space for people with drug and mental health issues. Some people tried to stop this chiefly due to fear, but our association was able to have a calming or moderating effect on the neighborhood.

My reason for joining our neighborhood association is no different from anyone else. I want to preserve the community that still exists in my neighborhood and to re-build what has been lost. I am a member for a real reason, a reason that relates to my personal existence. I am not there for any ideological purpose, much less to convert people to an ideology. And if you do have an ulterior motive for being there, eventually people will know it. Ultimately, there is no difference between what I am seeking, what our association seeks, and my personal beliefs. Community is also one of the foundation stones of libertarian socialism.

My approach to working in the association could be applied to any popular or grass roots organization. First and foremost, I listen to what people have to say, probably the most important thing you can do. When you listen, you will find what a truly amazing amount of talent and experience exists in the group. In most cases, it will be far more than you possess, and you will learn more from them, than they will learn from you. Those few occasions where I do stand out are those areas where I possess abilities needed by the group.

Flexibility is important. Perhaps not everything done or said by the group is to your liking – though I cannot think of an instance when this has been so. (I must point out that not all neighborhood associations are as advanced as ours.) It is important to keep your mind on the main issues such as community building, inclusiveness, direct action and democratic process, rather than getting hung up on secondary issues.

Doing is a necessity. No one likes a person who talks but does not act. Within the confines of your time limits and capability, get involved and do things. Not just the “cool” stuff either. I put up the tables and chairs, take tickets, and try to be there when I am needed.

Speaking to the essence. You can refer to the core elements of anarchism, such as direct democracy, direct action, self-management, and encourage such tendencies, without ever bringing up the “A -word.” The overtly ideological will only divide people, but actual anarchist practice will unite them. Furthermore, since you are not the only one in the group possessing many of the ideas you espouse, pull these ideas out of people, rather than trying to put them in when they are already there. (Nothing loses people quicker than appearing arrogant or a know-it-all.) People will, in time, figure out where you are coming from. But since you are respected, you will not be reduced to a media caricature.

One thing you will discover when belonging to a functioning neighborhood association, is that all progressives have far more in common with each other than xenophobic or reactive elements. Whether social democrat, socialist, Green or anarchist, at the neighborhood level, it does not seem to matter a great deal. All want people to have more control over their lives, to build community and to be inclusive.

With neighborhood associations that are dominated by fearful or NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) people, the role of the anarchist is obvious – countering this negativity and encouraging an inclusive community-building approach. However, if the association usually acts in an anarchistic way already, what point is there in belonging to it as an anarchist? What then is the point of having your theories and ideologies?

Everyone's insight and experiences are valuable – including your own. An experienced, well-read anarchist brings with her the knowledge of the sociology of power, a rich background in mutual aid, direct action and a general history of social movements. You will, of course, not be alone in possessing such knowledge, but the difference is, that as an anarchist, you have specialized in these areas. You have the tools to strengthen the libertarian tendencies that already exist within the group.

Furthermore, you have a vision beyond the progress of the neighborhood association, the city, or even community restoration as a whole. Once again, you will not be unique in this, but anarchism envisages a form of organization completely different from that which exists at present. As the corporate state breaks down, socially, economically and environmentally, the old, centralized, top-down form of organization will become increasingly untenable. Neighborhood associations, as direct democratic, decentralized institutions, could form the nuclei of a new form of governance – one of federated neighborhood councils. When the breakdown commences, anarchists ought to be there to promote this new organizational concept.

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