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We Need More Honest Reflections About How We Organise

Nerd Teacher

23/01/2022

There has been a world full of problems that has created a number of people who, new to organising, have wanted to find ways to make a difference. This is fantastic, but it's also so *incredibly* daunting. A lot of people want to know what it is that they can do, where they can start, how they can do *something* (especially when they already have little material resources to give). They're seeking *concrete answers* that *will* demonstrably and provably work, which many of us are uncomfortable providing (particularly if we're aligned with many anarchic and anti-State values).

Unfortunately, it's also created a world full of grifters, but I'm going to pay them little attention this time around. This isn't about them; this isn't *for* them. They can find attention elsewhere as they continue pretending they provide anything of value. I'm going to continue ignoring their outrage farming as much as I can.

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So, about those people who want to *do* something. They're searching out people who they think might *know* what to do because they *seem* like experts. This is usually based on who that person communicates with or how that person speaks about organising. They reach out to or follow a range of people, some of whom are often big names on social media "known" for *at least* having lefty politics. But it's awkwardly common for them to receive slogans eerily close to something out of a Nike advertisement ("just go do something") or the perpetual meaningless suggestion to "go join a union."

This piece isn't going to be anti-unions, by the way. I think unions have a place in the strategies we need to utilise to help break free of this hellish world entrapping us all to varying degrees. I will, however, be critical of many of their current structures and their frequent inability to see how their narrow focus actually creates a disconnect between how *they* perceive themselves and how *others* perceive them.

This is because everything we're doing in many of our organising spaces is *backwards*. It's incomplete and often incompatible with the needs of people around us. We're frequently missing the point of organising, and we're still repeating the same structures that got us where we are in the first place while missing key lessons from both history and today.

"Just go do something" really is *such* an obnoxious statement. It's probably worse than "just join a union," which I'll be getting to in a bit, because it presumes that someone knows *how* to do things in their community and to do them as safely as possible. It presumes that people, many of whom have been going about their lives, feel *comfortable* just getting out there and joining or starting projects with next to no support.

That shit's hard, y'know? Starting projects takes a lot of work, a lot of energy, and being able to learn and unlearn quickly. So many people start projects without taking any time to consider their own communities, the people around them, or the environment at large. They start things with a burst of energy only to run out later, burning out completely because their expectations are set so high. The few pop-up activist things that most people see, they seem so immediately stable because of what little information about them gets shared.

Of course, that isn't how it works.

That seems so obvious to say, but I guarantee that it isn't for so many people. Most of those groups fall apart completely, others will splinter, and some will continue. None of those are inherently bad, but we don't discuss those outcomes enough. We don't talk about why organisations fall apart, and we're rarely honest with how traditional hierarchies (along with the aforementioned grifters) play into the dissolution of so many groups.

We talk of the successful and long-term developments, and that's fine. But we need to outline successful short-term groups and the absolute failures. We need to know their purpose, we need to recognise that they met a goal and moved on, and we need to know what their problems were.

Our groups? They don't *have* to be long-term. Sometimes it's great for a long-term collective to sprout out of something because they *can* and because they have the will to do it. We need them. They have an important place in acting as network hubs, both in terms of local collaboration and building connections to other hubs. They can take a range of shapes, but their purpose is usually to increase communication and the distribution of information.

They should also be participating in sharing resources to help other network hubs along the way, not just concentrating their organising in small urban areas (while complaining that the people in rural areas "just don't care").

But short-term is fine, too. Some groups have a limited purpose and need to change scope. Sometimes the project is related to a one-off event, sometimes it's related to current activities happening, and sometimes it's just something that was built to have a short lifespan so everyone could move on to another area of organising. These are good, they help. Maybe it's in bringing needed resources to people after a storm, maybe it's providing skills as a field medic, whatever.

Not every organisation *needs* longevity.

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Another thing that grates my nerves is how often I hear a lot of the same complaints around a bunch of different organising spaces. In local spaces, I hear people complaining about the “lack of drive” that migrants have to get involved in anything and that they “just don't understand” how to organise. In pieces that supposedly reflect upon building collectives and networks, I hear people make roundabout connections to historical parallels to discuss why groups fall apart, but they always stop short before getting to the part where they acknowledge that they're still organising under hegemonic principles and with certain members leaving entire areas of work for *everyone else*.

In working with young adults who are childfree, I hear them complain about the “lack of parents” in their collectives. The common refrain is that they don't understand why “parents just don't care” and that, if they did, they'd “get involved for the sake of their kids.” Meanwhile, I also watch the same people bristle any time children and teenagers make an effort to get involved. It seems they haven't taken the time to recognise that the two sets of beliefs and behaviours can't coexist, that they need to come to terms with their own adultism that prohibits so many people from engaging.

The weirder part to me – though, it is by no means surprising – is that, when I hear these statements, there is no hint of irony in their voices. These “leftists” wander around in some bizarre holier-than-thou state, tossing around slogans as easily as they deride

ture plays a major role in people's experiences or how lots of people “silently leaving” is indicative of a wider and unaddressed issue, including the fact that it's *not silent* most of the time. They failed to recognise that a split that takes place during perceived “downtime” is often the result of many people being *forced* to “just deal” with something because of some bullshit behaviour that retains hegemonic structures during heightened calls for action (like faux calls for “left unity” or being gaslit into working with an abuser “for the sake of the cause”).

And much of it was part of listening to people who organise tenant unions being asked how they deal with bigotry *inside* their unions, dancing around the question by saying that they “have a conversation.” No concrete options of dealing with members who perpetuate bigotry because the aim is a “big tent” organisation, no real discussion about *how* that conversation happens and what steps are taken *after* that to protect marginalised and vulnerable people.

Even more is just my constant frustration for our refusal to look back at *what worked* and *why* it did, our refusal to look at certain organisations because of *who* was part of them.

I appreciate learning where people are and figuring out what they know, but I'm tired of seeing people just ignore how many problems *still exist* and *need to be dealt with*. I'm tired of feeling like we're organising in reverse, and I'm sick of feeling like every organisation wants to become its very own non-profit organisation instead of something built *for* and *by* the very people it serves.

Most of all, I just want people to *learn* and *unlearn* so that we can actually start the work of liberating ourselves. Not by obfuscating or dancing around questions, not by throwing around slogans to incite meaningless action and build numbers without support.

But by actually putting a lot more emphasis on learning, unlearning, and building healthy and honest relationships.

There are problems that need to be addressed, and we can't address them if we continue to be terrified that every criticism is or can become a right-wing talking point. If that's the case, then we shouldn't be talking about *anything*.

Join a union, but know that there are *miles* to go after that simple action. Join and know that there are branches who will prefer passive support to action, sometimes forcing you to assert yourself or leave to do something else. Join and know that it will not solve *everything* immediately. Join and know that you *still* need to set up a branch either for your workplace *or* your region.

Join and know that there is *a lot* to change *inside* the union because they *need* to be more inclusive and *way* more willing to learn some hard lessons that many keep neglecting.

That's been a lot of my experiences in organising, and writing this out has largely been inspired by this new boom in "leftist" content creators telling people how they can go about creating a new world. Overlooking their proclaimed *intent*, I keep seeing a lot of *negative* impacts because people go out and do the few things their favourite streamers say will work without having *any* context, including what's already available in their community and how to find out. I keep seeing people come back frustrated, annoyed, uncertain, confused. They hear the mantras that become easy to repeat slogans, but they're left without templates of what to do and are rarely shown honest examples of what they might expect.

Some of it was inspired by a three-hour long podcast episode that had two anarchist organisers "reflecting" upon sustainable organising, even though they conveniently ignored everything *they* couldn't see. Listening to them flippantly discuss why people "just left" groups infuriated me, someone who has "just left" a lot of groups in a range of ways because of exclusionary behaviours. They refused to recognise how the (lack of) available infrastruc-

whole groups of people for "being lazy" or "unwilling to make a change."

At no point in their "reflections" on how to build sustainable collectives and networks have they stopped to think about how *they* are responsible for how things fall apart, for how *they* push people away, for how people *leave*.

Instead, they continue in many of their negative behaviours, building a "collective" as if they were building a corporate non-profit but with extra steps: They create an opaque hierarchy that claims to be horizontal but is in reality vertical and confusing. They write a charter without any actionable responses to the bigotry they claim to be against. They locate themselves in inaccessible spaces that exclude many others, even as they purport to be inclusive to everyone.

For too many, the only people who seem to matter are the boards or the central organising committees. Everyone else is easy to overlook and ignore.

If there's something we all need to do, it's permanently unlearn the overwhelming majority of lessons we've acquired from the non-profit industrial complex. They will not help us get where we *need* to be because they were never designed for that purpose. They are not the models we seek to replicate, and they will more often than not be overwhelmingly exclusive.

In all those aforementioned instances of complaints, I've provided a range of possible solutions. I've done this multiple times, both as ways to highlight how my own skills and abilities could be used to benefit a lot of people and build community. I also tend to do this because, as a migrant, I'm tired of locals thinking we don't do anything because we "just don't get it" when we're being directly excluded to our detriment.

We could offer informal language exchanges to help migrants integrate (*not* assimilate) into the community, sharing their culture as well as learning the local language. We could translate documents and texts into a range of target languages, helping to improve communication and knowledge. We could offer translation services for people who need their documents translated for bureaucratic nonsense but can't afford to do it on their own. We could hold sessions to help people who feel like they've been abused or exploited, trying to find ways to improve their situations. We could do all of that without requiring that they pay dues first or be a member for a certain length of time, building more trust with people who may be skeptical.

We could offer childcare at meetings so that parents could participate. Better yet, we could create meetings that actively encourage children and teenagers to participate and learn about our collectives and unions. We could host irrelevant but fun gatherings that build community and act as entry points for people to meet each other, like art festivals or picnics; these could also support people's talents and passions. We could host skill shares where everyone, including the kids, could share what they know. This could help everyone who is struggling with remote schooling to have *more options*, allowing more people to see how schooling *hurts* our communities.

We could create a group of people to go shopping during COVID, delivering groceries and other necessities to people who need to quarantine but may not have local support networks. We could do the same thing for disabled people who may need help, making sure that no one's left behind.

Every time I do this, I make it clear that I'm giving potential options and not answers because I'm not sure how they'll work in our context or what we'll need to do to adapt them, but I think it's worth trying to figure out because I've seen them work elsewhere. They're not rocket surgery; they're all common strategies of building community networks, and we can adapt them as needed.

Federation *in the capital city of a third country* just to learn about their existence?

This whole situation has been truly absurdist, but it's par for the course in my experience. It's so baffling to me that these organisations can exist for *decades* but do so little to actually *prepare* for anything. It confuses me how they fail to build cohesive relationships with anyone (individual and organisation alike), how they fail to truly network, how they fail to even adhere to the singular principle of *being internationalists* (beyond having connections to some international organisation slapped on their name, which honestly feels more like branding).

But I can't claim to know the full situation. I can just say that all of it is atrocious and prone to creating a loss of trust and encouraging members to become frustrated and want to leave. Not only is it infuriating to see how little communication even happens between organisations that *should* be talking, but it's downright exhausting to have to play these games just to *research* and *figure out* what even exists in the first place.

Why should we have to hunt down these organisations that every "leftist" streamer touts as being of the utmost importance? Do they not see how making themselves so incredibly inaccessible *causes* burn out and frustration? And when we *do* communicate with them, so many of them can't even be bothered to help point us in more useful directions.

I mean, if my experiences in trying to meaningfully communicate with anyone have left me wondering *why I even bothered*, how many other people have felt similarly and just decided not to?

This isn't to say "unions are bad, don't join them." They're fine. But I'm *tired* of people with a platform telling people to "join a union" as if it's a solution to everything, as if that's the first step, as if there aren't issues within them that still need to be addressed because they keep getting swept under rugs by those who claim any criticism of their structures and behaviours is "anti-union."

They're building the branch, much as many others are, as if it's a non-profit organisation. They haven't realised that the point of the union, particularly an anarcho-syndicalist union, is to actually build the networks and structures that enable the kinds of actions they claim they want to see. They will never be able to support a general strike, for example, because they *will not* make their union accessible in any way possible for the vast majority of their members; they will never be able to build the kinds of actions we need so we can push for any real change because they won't create the kinds of relationships those actions require.

While both unions I've communicated with are part of a larger organisation that claims it's "of the world," their branches remain isolated. And they continue to do it to themselves, even as people give them options.

For me, it's even more frustrating. Despite apparently having connections to an anarcho-syndicalist union *in my city*, my IWW branch led me to believe they "didn't know anything about similar unions" where I lived. It took me *a year and a half* to finally find my local anarcho-syndicalist union (thanks to language barriers and a lack of radical infrastructure). When I talked to them, they told me that they'd been *directly working with* my branch of the IWW for *more than three years* to help bridge gaps between languages.

My IWW branch had repeatedly told me that they had "no idea" they even existed.

This is a *huge* issue. How is it that the IWW "didn't know" about the other union if they'd been working with them on other issues? Are they really so disorganised that they can't even maintain relationships between the unions? Have they even made an attempt to build the international connections that we need in order to adequately support others?

But the IWW isn't the only problem here. Why is it that my local anarcho-syndicalist union is *so quiet*? Why aren't they trying to do anything to build support around them? To make themselves known and more visible? Why did I have to contact the Anarchist

Maybe we could ask around to see who needs what or what would be most useful.

But they often refuse to implement activities that are *new* to them because they "could fail." After all, we "don't have enough resources" to do something that could fail. How can we get them back?

This is another lesson we need to unlearn, and it's of the utmost urgency that we do so now. We need to recognise that there are no real answers to the problems we seek to fix; the best responses are contextual, fitting the people we're around and geography we exist within.

We can't have *the* answer; we can only have solutions. And even if our response works now, it can stop working. We need to learn to be *flexible*; we need to be *adaptable*. We need to understand that things *change*.

But we need to be okay with failure, even if it means we "lose resources." Sometimes things don't work, but people appreciate that you *tried*. Does that mean it's a failed project? Or does it mean that we learned *something* that could help us later on?

Yet we're still thinking about the work from a hyper-capitalist structure. How can we build the change we so desperately need if we're too afraid to "lose" too much in a "failed" project? We can't "invest too much" into something that's "too resource intensive."

And what if people misunderstand what we're about? We also don't want to "distract from" the focus of our collectives, of our unions, of our networks, whatever.

The excuses are plentiful. They complain about a lack of resources, yet they don't want to do the simple community-building activities that would build support, that would build a range of resources to benefit everyone. It's "too time-consuming," they say. "What would happen if someone ran off with your money?"

Apparently, along with our lack of resources, they don't want to address the lack of trust and the refusal to build it. They don't want to create spaces that would develop a sense of camaraderie.

Doing that might shake the foundations it's based on, requiring a significant shift in structure.

I can't count the number of times I've provided these basic solutions to basic issues. I don't know how many more times I'll have to do this, either. But this is what I hear every single time someone has told me to "just go do something." I always end up finding "leftist" collectives where I can do something small, but I always leave because I feel restricted by people who refuse to try to help anyone because they're too busy making excuses for why we can't.

They want the numbers, but they don't want to do the work to *actually* support anyone.

But honestly, stop telling people to "just go do something," especially if you're not pairing it with other ideas that people need to know.

Try pairing it with this: It's fine to leave. If something feels off, if something feels sketchy, if someone feels a bit too creepy? Get out. That's fine. Don't feel obligated to stay just because you feel like it's the *only* way to "push for change." You can do something else, you can work with someone else. You don't have to do work in an environment that feels harmful or with people who may as well be walking red flags.

I wasn't told that enough earlier in my life. I was told to persevere, to keep pushing through even when I thought *something* was off. I was told to try to change things from the inside. Sometimes you can, but sometimes it's best to let them crumble when others are willing to support abusive environments and toxic people.

But I learned, and I want more people to learn this too: The moment something feels uncomfortable because something just feels *wrong*, get out. I will stick around if the discomfort is challenging my views or ideas (something I see as useful to growth and learning), but I will not voluntarily stick around an organisation that

interactions between members and inconsistent access because it's so randomly broken.

For me, it's a branch that has already repeatedly refused any of the suggestions I've put forward, rarely seeing if there were other people who'd be interested in working with me on them (or letting me do that myself). Are there people who'd like to build spaces for language learning? Are there people who want to work on consistent translations of important documents and texts to ensure people can access them? Is there someone who wants to help create other accessible alternatives for members to participate? I don't know. My suggestions often seem to find those who are most unwilling to hear me out, and I feel as if I'm not being *allowed* to participate fully in any meaningful way.

Not that it helps, either, when I also don't know *who* to contact anymore because of how sporadic any real communication is. Ironically, this also applies to the local anarcho-syndicalist labour union. Despite their repeated desires to "stay in touch," they have effectively ghosted me (much as they have done to a lot of other queer folk).

The constant refrain that I hear when I suggest things that would address common criticisms other members have (like how migrants "don't really want to participate" because they "don't understand") is that we "don't have the resources for them." It doesn't seem to matter *which* union I've participated in; this excuse remains the same.

Strange. I wonder how it is that we could *have* more resources for everyone and do more community building. Could it be that, if we made it possible for people to *feel welcome* and *feel like they understand* what's happening, they might want to stay and participate? Could it be that, if we encouraged people to do things they were *good at* or *interested in*, they might be able to improve outreach and communication?

Honestly, if they refuse to *create a community*, they will never have the resources for anything. They are building backwards.

Is it because, in order to gain resources from certain States, many of our groups will allow themselves to become non-profits to access them? Probably. I've seen a number of people reorganise their groups into non-profits in order to access tax-based donations. Has this been useful? Doubtful. Far too many organisations that had radical roots are now upholding the legal requirements to maintain their status, and that far too often leaves a lot of people behind.

This is an area we need to spend a lot more time reflecting on, especially as non-profits are intricately tied to the State. Formed out of a radical movement but willingly working with the State, they will *always* become defanged.

I already mentioned it before, but I need to say it now: I *hate* the refrain of “join a union.” I'm saying this as a member of a nearby IWW branch, one to whom I pay monthly dues of €3 and receive very little beyond sporadic newsletters that I half understand because of a language barrier they refuse to address and so many incomprehensible requests to vote for people I don't know for positions I don't entirely understand.

It's a branch that's *two hours* away from where I live; it's a branch that exists in an entirely different country from where I reside and is rarely capable of helping me even find people *here* who I could organise with. If I need help, I have little access to any form of assistance; if they need me to do something in person, I can't simply cross the border (especially with COVID being a thing).

Despite my monthly contribution, meager as it is, I have never had a consistent space within that branch to build even a semblance of a connection with other people. Even if I lived in the same area, most of their meetings take place in *pubs*, places I don't entirely feel comfortable in (so I wouldn't be likely to go anyway). Mostly, I feel like I'm paying for access to a RocketChat that has minimal

sees themselves as the arbiter of truth. I will not stick around a place that speaks over the very people they claim to support. I will not stick around somewhere that leaves people to fend for themselves, even as they outline all the ways they need help.

I have left *a lot* of groups – some silently and others vocally – because of how frequently they enabled people to perpetuate bigotries they claimed to “stand against.” This is also why I think we need to look beyond the narrative of how “sometimes groups just fall apart.” More often than not, people give up and go because of something that other members *refused* to engage with, regardless of how many complaints they heard.

I also refuse to join collectives that refuse to listen to my needs from the very beginning, that refuse to accommodate very simple *requests* that are asked of them. If a group refuses to make basic accommodations, they have already shown me how little respect they have for others.

This is something that I've encountered frequently with a range of groups, especially DIY spaces that I'd like to get into because those are skills I have and want to improve or they're skills I'm genuinely interested in and want to learn. A lot of DIY groups have a policy of “just show up,” which isn't helpful for a person who has to deal with both social anxiety and a language barrier.

If I cannot get a collective to have *just one person* meet me at a specified time and location, to act as a point of entry and someone to give a quick ‘tour’ of the space or help introduce me to other people who are there, I will not participate. Even if I manage to go, I will stand outside and try to figure out what my next move should be; it's usually to leave.

Seriously, just *thinking* about doing any of that makes me physically ill, and it is genuinely difficult for me.

But if I have that *one* point of contact, I can feel comfortable joining in after that entirely on my own. I can show up alone, and I don't need anything more beyond that *one* action, that *one* hour

of assistance. It helps me to feel welcome, to feel calm, to feel like I could possibly belong somewhere, to be *safe*.

Yet, exactly *zero* of the local DIY groups I've contacted have responded to my very simple request for a single and incredibly simple accommodation. They have all responded with how "needy" it is, pushing me away instead of offering to build a connection by reaching out in the ways I've *told* them I need. Yet the *same* people involved in coordinating the groups constantly complain in other shared channels about how few people want to participate, how people keep disappearing, how it seems like people are "disinterested."

Precisely *none* of them are willing to see how a tiny act of ableism is keeping at least *one* person from showing up. Which leaves me asking: How many other people have felt excluded because they won't make the simplest accommodations to improve accessibility of any kind? If they won't accommodate the tiniest request to alleviate someone's mental health, what things are they doing to exclude physically disabled people from those spaces?

And why aren't they making any real efforts to change *that*?

But what about places where that radical infrastructure is lacking? What about places where a tendency toward caution runs so high that people perceived as outsiders are rarely, if ever, allowed in? What about the places where "established" groups perceive new collectives that are developed in direct response to exclusion as "antagonists?"

One of the reflections I hear the most about organising is to "organise with people you know," but that already cuts off a lot of people immediately. What kind of entry points are there for new folks? If the only people who can really do anything are "people you know," how do migrants of any sort even get to be involved

at all? (And how does anyone even have the audacity to complain that *migrants won't participate* when they make it so they *can't*?)

How does one "just go do something" then? I ask this a lot as someone who has minimal safe infrastructure now, who struggles to find other people to work with locally, and who grew up *completely without it* in a rural location.

It's hard to "just go do something" when the templates you have for doing anything are so incredibly narrow and don't feel like they apply to your context or environment. Hell, it's so much harder when you don't even have a useful template of where to start because people like you get written out of *everything* (or urban "leftists" deride you as being "naturally conservative" and not worth helping when *they* actively refuse to even extend the most minimal amount of support and outreach).

It's not to say it's impossible, but we do need to recognise it as difficult and (for a lot of people) prohibitive, and I don't think we deal with these realities nearly enough.

Sometimes I wonder how much of this is due to people tying their identity up with what they *do*. Similar to the ways that teachers and academics can't seem to recognise that our job is not who we are, a lot of activists cannot separate themselves from their work. This makes sense because what we do feels so personal; it feels intricately connected to who we are. We tightly constrict people in words full of connotation but devoid of any real meaning when you start asking the right questions.

I never want to be labelled an 'activist', regardless of the amount of activism I engage in.

Perhaps this is another area where we can look at how the ways that we model many of our groups and networks on similar structures found in non-profits actually harms our understanding of the work we do in the service of liberation. Is it because we actually *want* to mimic non-profits because there's something useful there? I don't think so.