

Anarchism and Collective Organization

Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists

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Because of the frequent mass demonstrations that have been occurring in the past couple of years, a lot of people in the anarchist movement have formed, joined, participated in, or otherwise been involved with an affinity group. In fact, many people have been turned on to anarchist politics after experiencing first hand the efficient and empowering action that can come out of a solid affinity group. Working closely with people that share a mutual trust and respect, as well as a common strategy and vision proves the anarchist method of organizing far better than the most eloquent anarchist thinker. After all, it has its roots in what most of us consider to be the farthest reaching attempt at anarchist social revolution – the Spanish Civil War.

What is of note that relates very closely to then and now is that the anarchist affinity groups of the Spanish Civil War didn't form in the weeks prior to July 1936 – in many cases, they had been around for years. They formed as study groups for self-education; for propaganda purposes – printing and distributing newspapers and pamphlets: they formed as class conscious individuals saw a need for more organization at the grassroots level, more widespread radical education, and a more strategized method of agitation.

Today, when considering what work we are doing and have been involved with, and what type of impact we, as anarchists, will have in the future, the question of forming collectives becomes a very important one to look at. From the perspective then that working in collectives and helping others to form them is something that anarchists should be doing, I hope to discuss some of the practical considerations that might come up in the formation of a collective and its subsequent work.

Most of us have spent a lot of (generally well spent) time and energy working as individuals in coalitions, networks, and organizations that are generally synthesist with their politics – groups that form around a specific issue or campaign or that do specific, routine projects with folks from a multitude of political persuasions involved. There is often little discussion of politics and the space to discuss theory and tactics as they might relate to a strategy of struggle is generally absent. We can and need to question the overall strategy behind this type of work and the effectiveness at achieving stated goals but there are instances where this work has been and continues to be important. The Zapatista support work in the US and Canada, and the activity being undertaken to free Mumia have often happened under this structure. Recent local anti-FTAA coalitions have also shown that this work can be positive and effective.

However, the point I want to make is that as a collective (rather than an individual), anarchists can have a stronger impact contributing to such struggles as well as initiating campaigns and struggles that we can be openly radical with and assure that the work is carried out with a revolutionary perspective even though we may be fighting for a reformist victory. Not only that, but in a collective with people we know well, respect, and trust we create an environment ripe for personal and political growth. We can take a small step in the process of creating social alternatives to our alienating and competitive existence under capitalism.

Deciding to join or form an anarchist collective is more of a decision about working with a particular group of people than committing to do political work. Both are important, but since most of us are, in some capacity or another, already involved with radical politics the former needs more consideration. With that in mind, the choice of people you want to work with takes on more priority and immediacy than specific projects or campaigns you might engage in. Looking around you at work, in your neighborhood, city, town, or at school, ask yourself who it is that you respect; who's been involved with projects that you thought were solid; who, in your conversations seems to argue along similar lines as yourself; who is someone you could learn from as well as potentially teach something to? These are some of the questions that can lead to the formation of a collective. If it is probably accurate to assume that anarchists number about 1 to every 1,000–10,000 people in North America then most of us shouldn't have too difficult of a time finding other people that would be interested in forming a collective.

A common mistake to avoid is starting a collective with people simply because they call themselves anarchists. In North America today, there are "anarchists" that brutalize women, "anarchists" that vote for presidents, "anarchists" that care more about their patches than real social change, and "anarchists" who think a huge majority of the human population should die. The point here isn't to call for some abstract theoretical anarchist purity, but to be aware that a common strategy and vision is sometimes easier to find with people who do not label themselves as anarchists. What should never be overlooked in the formation of a collective is that, anarchists or not, the group must have theoretical and tactical unity.

The members of any collective should not only share the same political analysis but the strategy and tactics involved must be agreed upon as well. This is a major point that distinguishes the collective form of organizing from more broad-based coalitions or networks. In pursuing this unity, one of the more important things that a newly formed collective can do is draft out a political statement detailing not only a critique of the contemporary system but a vision as well. This collective discussion, though obviously inward functioning, can establish a solid framework for long-term involvement in social movements. Though it is fluid and changes as the collective's experiences do, writing the statement begins the process of helping those involved in the collective to become more articulate and knowledgeable in regards to understanding our exploitative and oppressive system. In addition, it offers a concise picture of your politics to other individuals or collectives that may be interested in the work you're doing and possibly want to start a relationship. It also engages our desires and imagination in thinking about a vision for a society where life could be enjoyed rather than stolen.

Oftentimes, a collective is viewed with suspicion and seen as exclusive or elitist by other activists. This is usually an issue of people not understanding the organizational idea of a group that functions with a closed membership. The point isn't to act as an all-star team of activists but to build trust and relationships while being engaged in social struggle from a common platform. It is important to explain this to people and to address those who express interest in joining.

When it doesn't make sense to open the membership to an individual who is interested in joining, the collective should encourage and help that person to form another collective. This project of encouraging others to form collectives should be a constant one for any collective. In addition to constantly advocating for others to self-organize, another way a collective can combat the perception of exclusivity is by getting involved with current struggles in your area or by initiating campaigns in your community that present the possibility for numerous people and groups to work together. This will give the group visibility and show that your collective doesn't exist for reasons of ideological purity. While there may be some work that is more effectively accomplished by the collective alone, don't let the group devolve into some kind of activist nucleus that is only concerned with perpetuating its existence.

It is definitely time for anarchists to begin to seriously consider getting more organized. Moving beyond the protest circuit and looking at ways to transform the anarchist movement, into something rooted in the community and educated from experience confronting the system where we meet it on a day-to-day basis, begins not only a revolutionary strategy, but its examination as well. And in many ways, forming collectives and engaging in social struggle at that level mirrors a vision of an anarchist society where autonomous, egalitarian, non-hierarchical groups of people work with each other and with other collectives to achieve common goals. That model opposed to leaders, inimical to authority and oppression, and at odds with reformism should give us a basis of organization that can begin to challenge the entire system.

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