

Bring the Ruckus

Ruckus Collective

2001

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Over the last few years there has been a growing discussion among revolutionaries of the need for a national or continental anti-authoritarian revolutionary organization. This discussion has emerged from several contexts, including the death of the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, the anti-globalization protests that began in Seattle in 1999, and by criticisms of the whiteness of the American left made primarily by revolutionaries of color. World and national events also seem to justify such discussion: globalization, the persistence of the American racial order, and the bankruptcy of reformist movements from the left, right, and center. Yet if talk about the need for a new organization is abundant, steps toward building it have been awkward. Much talk is simply recycled debate over violence and organizational structure, while other debates, such as over strategy, have been largely overlooked.

It is with the intention of furthering debate about a new revolutionary organization that this document was written. The Ruckus collective (no relation to the Ruckus Society) formed in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1997 to discuss revolutionary politics at a local and national level and to develop a revolutionary praxis. Our main contribution locally has been the creation of Phoenix Copwatch, which has been patrolling the streets since early 1999. Several months ago we began talking about the need for a national or continental revolutionary organization. This led us to embark on a program of study with the goal of creating a proposal for a membership-based national or continental revolutionary federation. During this time we studied a number of past revolutionary groups, focusing particularly on their politics, program, structure, and strategy.

The principles outlined below express the conclusions we have reached so far in our study. This is by no means a complete manifesto or political statement. It is simply an outline of principles we believe should be embraced by a new revolutionary organization. It is our hope that this document will not only add to the debate on the structure and politics of a new organization but help to push the development of such a group to the next level.

Neither the Vanguard nor the Network

A revolutionary organization for the 21st century needs to forge a path between the Leninist vanguard party favored by traditional Marxist parties and the loose “network” model of organizing favored by many anarchists and activists today. The purpose of a revolutionary organization is to act as a cadre group that develops politics and strategies that contribute to mass movements toward a free society.

It is not a vanguard group. It does not seek to control any organization or movement, nor does it pretend that it is the most advanced section of a struggle and thus has the right to act in the interests of the masses. Instead, it assumes that the masses are typically the most advanced section of a struggle and that the cadre perpetually strives to learn from and identify with the masses. At the same time, a cadre organization does not pretend it doesn’t provide leadership for larger movements, nor does it pretend that leadership is inherently authoritarian. A cadre organization does not seek to control any organization or movement, it aims to help lead it by providing it with a radical perspective and committed members dedicated to developing its autonomous revolutionary potential. A cadre group should debate those politics and strategies that best imagine and lead to a free society and then fight to enact them in mass-oriented organizations and movements.

A cadre is not an umbrella organization. It does not participate in any and all kinds of progressive social activism. Instead, a cadre group seeks out, helps develop, and supports those forms of agitation that undermine the rule of official society and that in some way prefigure the new society. In other words, the organization would not actively support any kind of activism but only those struggles that hold the potential of building a dual power. We imagine that such a revolutionary organization would be to contemporary movements what the FAI was to the CNT in Spain or the First International was to the European working class movements: a membership organization of like-minded persons committed to developing and encouraging the autonomous revolutionary tendencies in our present society.

A Democratic Structure

In the proposed organization, all power and authority should be transparent, accountable, distributed democratically, and effective. We believe the structure for a new organization should be based on the following principles:

1. Direct democracy. All members should have an equal say in those affairs that affect the organization. Unlike democratic centralism, this would include the right to freely express disagreements with decisions made by the majority. This type of democracy doesn't mean that a minority faction can disrupt the decisions of the majority, which tends to occur in loose network structures (i.e. consensus processes).
2. Membership. The organization should be a membership organization. Only members ought to make decisions about and act on the behalf of the organization. The organization should be controlled only by those who commit themselves to it. Criteria for membership should be clearly established, along with criteria for suspending or expelling members who violate the organization's principles. Membership criteria should include both political and financial commitments to the organization.
3. Local branches. The group should be organized into local branches. One criteria of membership would be to join a local branch or to form one if one doesn't exist.
4. Effectiveness and accountability. A democratic means of making decisions and carrying them out should be established. Members who do not meet their responsibilities should be held accountable for failing to do so.

Against the White Race

The proposed organization's priority should be to destroy white supremacy. White supremacy is a system that grants those defined as "white" special privileges in American society, such as preferred access to the best schools, neighborhoods, jobs, and health care; greater advantages in accumulating wealth; a lesser likelihood of imprisonment; and better treatment by the police and the criminal justice system. In exchange for these privileges, whites agree to police the rest of the population through such means as slavery and segregation in the past and through formally "colorblind" policies and practices today that still serve to maintain white advantage.

White supremacy, then, unites one section of the working class with the ruling class against the rest of the working class. This cross-class alliance represents the principle obstacle, strategically speaking, to revolution in the United States. Given the United States' imperial power, this alliance has global implications.

The central task of a new organization should be to break up this unholy alliance between the ruling class and the white working class by attacking the system of white privilege and the subordination of people of color. This is not to say that white supremacy is the "worst" form of oppression in this country, nor is it to imply that if white supremacy disappears then all other forms of oppression will magically melt away. Instead, it is a strategic argument, based on an analysis of U.S. history, designed to attack the American death star at its weakest point. The glue that has kept the American state together has been white supremacy; melting that glue creates revolutionary possibilities.

Against the State

The proposed organization should be anti-statist. The function of the state is to 1) perpetuate the rule of the oppressing class and 2) maintain its own power. It therefore has nothing to do with a free society and should be abolished. A revolutionary strategy seeks to undermine the state by developing a dual power strategy. A dual power strategy is one that directly challenges institutions of power and at the same time, in some way, prefigures the new institutions we envision. A dual power strategy not only opposes the state, it also prepares us for the difficult questions that will arise in a revolutionary situation.

The organization should also support the principle of self-determination, or the right for people to control their own life and destiny. Movements for self-determination have often assumed the politics of nationalism. Anarchists have traditionally rejected nationalism as a tool of oppression. We recognize that anti-statism and nationalism are often contradictory tendencies, since nationalism often supports the creation of nation-states. However, nationalism has also been a liberating force in world history, particularly in the struggle against colonialism. Thus, despite its contradictions nationalist struggles cannot be rejected out of hand by anti-authoritarian revolutionaries. The task is to develop anti-statist tendencies within nationalist movements, not to denounce the struggles of oppressed peoples because they assume a nationalist form.

A Feminist Organization

Any new organization should be explicitly feminist, in several ways. First, a revolutionary organization should have a radical feminist analysis of our society that challenges male dominance, compulsory heterosexuality, and the bipolar gender system that forces humans into "male" and "female" and "masculine" and "feminine" categories. Second, its internal operations (organizing structure, allocation of positions of leadership, meeting procedures, debating habits, etc.) should ensure women's participation and be strongly aware of practices that tend to favor men's voices over women's. Third, it should be committed to feminist political work, particularly those kinds of agitation that connect struggles against sexism with struggles against white supremacy. Finally, a revolutionary organization needs a feminist vision. It should imagine a world not only without sexism or homophobia but one in which gender relations are completely transformed.

Toward this end, it should encourage resistance to masculine/feminine gender borders and encourage people to critique and explore their desires rather than repress them.

Strategy

The proposed federation should recognize that political theory, no matter how strong, can accomplish little if it is not combined with effective strategy. The actions taken by the organization, its involvement in mass movements, and its public statements should all be determined on a strategic basis. The focus of our work should be involving ourselves in movements and activism where there is the potential to work toward the building of a dual power. Social reforms won by progressive movements may be important, but if they do not work toward a dual power they are not the concerns of a revolutionary organization. For example, animal liberation is a worthy cause. However, it is difficult to imagine how a campaign for animal liberation could threaten state power and foreshadow a new society. Thus, while a revolutionary organization may applaud animal liberation activities, it would not devote energy toward animal rights. On the other hand, a program to develop local Copwatch chapters could represent a dual power strategy, since monitoring the police undermines state power by disrupting the cops' ability to enforce class and color lines and also foreshadows a new society in which ordinary people take responsibility for ensuring the safety of their communities.

Thus, campaigns developed by the organization that do not contribute toward the building of a dual power should be abandoned. If a popular protest movement has little hope of building a dual power, it is not one we should be collectively involved in. We may morally and politically approve of such movements but as a small group with limited resources, we must reject the liberalism of reform activism and concern ourselves with revolutionary strategy.

Vision

One of the great failings of modern radical organizations has been the failure to provide a strong vision of a new society. We are able to say what we are against but rarely what we are for. One purpose of a revolutionary organization is to provide people with a vision of a world worth fighting for. Lack of vision is one of the reasons why radicals have historically failed to win the working class to their politics. Unfortunately, the fascist right has not failed in this task; they offer a clear vision of the world they want to create. If we continue to fail to offer a vision of our own, we cannot expect to win people over to revolutionary politics.

Bring the Ruckus

This proposal is the product of our readings and discussion on various radical organizations and movements over the past year, ranging from works produced by the Black liberation struggle, women's liberation, the abolitionists, and both classical and contemporary revolutionary anarchism. The praxis addressed within is also based on our experience with grassroots political work, particularly in Phoenix Copwatch.

If you are interested in the politics of this proposal and would like to discuss it further, we encourage you to contact us.

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