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Anarchism's Least Wanted

Organizing In Conservative Regions

Sonja Lavelle

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This essay is dedicated to all those who say to us “Why bother? It’s hopeless. Just move away to a more progressive state.”

“How shall we begin our action? Just look at an opportunity, and it will soon appear. Everywhere that rebellion can be sensed and the sound of battle can be heard, that is where we must be.” Carlo Cafiero

Back in February of 2021, Texas had a freak blizzard which knocked out all power across the entire state for over a week. Without the necessary infrastructure or food or water or any preparation for such extremely uncommon freezing temperatures, hundreds of Texans died. We were finding dead bodies in closets for weeks after, bodies of people who had shut themselves in to try and insulate from the deadly cold.

Meanwhile, our neighbors in more progressive states mocked us dying in car accidents on the ice, not having enough blankets on hand or firewood (fireplaces are uncommon in the hot southern states). “Those redneck hillbillies voted for Republicans who don’t

care about them. They get what they deserve. Let them die.” It was disheartening to see some who had at one time called me “friend” be so callously dismissive of our suffering.

While our homes flooded from burst pipes or burned down from people trying to build fires for survival, our cowardly government officials hopped on planes and flew to tropical destinations to escape the disaster. Emergency services did not respond to calls for rescue. In that moment, people realized the government was not coming to save us, that the cops were not coming to “protect and serve” us, that fire and ambulances were not coming to our aid. But then something extraordinary happened.

What was extraordinary is that, after a few days of waiting in vain for rescue, many people suddenly realized that *we had to become the heroes we were waiting for*, that only our neighbors could save each other, and they began to spontaneously organize with incredible cooperative efforts and ingenuity. Despite the knee-deep snow atop a thick layer of ice covering every road, people began to slowly make their way to the very few places that had their own power source and could provide heat.

But they weren’t only there to enjoy the warmth. They came bearing supplies such as food, water, batteries, warm clothing, medicine, and skills to offer assistance. I myself, being a seasoned medic, trekked an hour through the ice and snow, bringing all the gear I had and spent my time cleaning and bandaging wounds, screening people for communicable disease (it was the height of the pandemic), tending to early stage frostbite injuries and hypothermia, checking vital signs and blood sugar levels, providing whatever care I was able to, and connecting people to needed resources. We did this every day, 16 hours a day, for over a week, until power came back.

As extraordinary as this was, it was not an isolated event nor was the response of the people unprecedented. I saw equally heroic solidarity after devastating flooding, massive wildfires, hurricanes, the covid pandemic, tornadoes, etc. Each time these crises came,

archy and domination, free from the learned helplessness and conditioned dependence on oppressive entities.

“We are convinced that the masses of the people carry in themselves, in their instincts (more or less developed by history) in their daily necessities, and in their conscious or unconscious aspirations, all the elements of the future social organization. We seek this ideal in the people themselves.” ~ Mikhail Bakunin

the government would flee, and the people would rise up and come to the aid of neighbors across all class and race and religious spectrums, whether they knew them or not. The people who came together in these times included some who had been radicalized and were knowledgeable of theory and the concepts of anarchism, but most of them were regular working class people who simply knew that expecting government help would be foolish, and it was the job of neighbors to save neighbors. They behaved as if they were already ungoverned.

“Let us take the people as they are and let’s move forward with them. Casting them aside simply because they have no abstract grasp of our formulas and our rationale would be both idiocy and treason.” ~ Errico Malatesta

It should come as no surprise to know that in the rural areas of conservative regions, people are often even more inclined to direct action and mutual aid without any radicalization needed because their lives depend on it. Not to disparage urbanites, but by nature of the urban infrastructure, which is rarely seen during its development and therefore taken for granted, people in bustling cities tend to be the receivers of others’ labor, even by the laborers themselves. This leads to the bystander effect because with all these people around, surely someone else will respond to this person in need of aid, and surely with all these city services paid for by our taxes, there must be someone else in charge of fixing anything in need of repair.

In rural areas, where there isn’t an endless parade of people, residents know that if you see someone with a flat tire, it will be a long time before anyone else comes by and it’s up to you to pull over and help. And without any city services to come fix the washed out roads or downed trees, the residents know that it is up to them to handle the problem themselves and not expect some nameless, faceless entity to do it. “It’s not gonna do itself,” you’ll often hear

them sigh. Needless to say, after all you've read to this point, these rural areas also have a staggering number of disenfranchised apolitical (non-voting) people as well.

These examples of solidarity, big and small, undeniably illustrate the potential that lies even in conservative places such as Texas and Oklahoma, states known (somewhat accurately) for ignorance, gun fetishists, cattle, bigots, evangelicalism, coal and oil worshipers, etc. AND YET, again and again, we see these spontaneous mutual aid efforts spring forth every time. This is the universal solidaric spirit, nestled so deeply in the most base nature of the human species, which always arises in crisis. Wherever there are people, so too exists this spirit. No place is unsalvageable.

“The mutual-aid tendency in man has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time [...] when even the greatest calamities befell men — when whole countries were laid waste by wars, and whole populations were decimated by misery, or groaned under the yoke of tyranny — the same tendency continued to live in the villages and among the poorer classes in the towns[...] And whenever mankind had to work out a new social organization [...] all have originated from [...] a gradual extension of the mutual-aid principles from the tribe to always larger and larger agglomerations, so as to finally embrace one day the whole of mankind, without respect to its diverse creeds, languages, and races.” ~ Pyotr Kropotkin

You may be wondering at this point how one is even able to attempt formal organizing in conservative places that have such a heavy hand of the law against anyone even slightly left of center. Isn't it risky? Aren't we concerned about our safety? Yes. It's true that we exist under terrifying draconian laws which deny us

the yet-unradicalized are drawn to our cheerful social ecology tendency, we use this opportunity to educate them and make more anarchists, one by one. We use our popular education group to bring people over to our way of thought, to teach them how hierarchy, domination, and authoritarianism are the cause of so many problems around the globe. We use our organizer education groups to develop them into better organizers who can radicalize others. We also have many other projects under our belt, such as free stores, libraries for books and tools, food and clothing pantries.

And we're not the only ones! Many other orgs like ours exist in other conservative regions. Cooperation Tulsa got its own inspiration from Cooperation Jackson located in Mississippi. There is Cooperation Milwaukee in Wisconsin, Cooperation Denton in Texas, and even some sibling Cooperation orgs in other countries as well. All these are not only thriving, but flourishing despite being in conservative regions.

We do not see it as “going down with the ship,” because the ship is not yet sinking or unsalvageable. While overnight liberation may not be possible, we are successfully making slow, incremental growth and change, bit by bit, like the Ship of Theseus, until we have built a whole new society free from hierarchy and domination. We know the people will not let go of their current system until they see another one in action, working better than the first. We work building the new in the shell of the old, so that we may have a cooperative society, rather than competitive, so the people will let go of the rotting corpse of capitalism they are currently dragging around. We, as much as anyone, perhaps more so, need the solidarity of anarchists everywhere.

I hope it provides some ember of hope to know that there are many of us in these conservative regions who are doggedly building for the future, prefiguring dual power, radicalizing people, building community-lead coalitions, and trudging through the daily tedium required to create a new world free from hier-

tunately, we are often driven only by passionate reactive emotions, and rarely by proactive necessity.

Just as I have seen the effectiveness of horizontal organizing, I have also seen the ineffectiveness of disorganized attempts. Informal affinity groups burn out almost immediately or implode from discord and disagreement on how things should be done. This is due to a lack of formal structural foundation, a mission, points of unity, conflict resolution guidelines, collectively agreed upon standard operating procedures, and even in anarchist affinity groups, a lack of theoretical unity which causes inevitable fractures.

But we can also look at examples of formal horizontal organizations that have sustained themselves long term. Cooperation Tulsa, the communalist org I work with, was founded in the wake of the 2020 BLM uprising by just two people who wanted to take advantage of the rebellious spirit momentum. Its first project was to build a community food garden in the historic Greenwood district, the site of the Tulsa Race Massacre. And then a second. Cooperation Tulsa now collectively owns a 2.5 acre plot of land that we took from a literal dump site and have made clean and healthy and began growing food crops of native corn, beans, and squash, eventually turning it into a food forest which will provide food sovereignty for the community, and ultimately a path to self determination.

“...let us above all avoid falling into the error common to many comrades, who refuse to associate with working men who are not already perfect Anarchists, whilst it is absolutely necessary to associate with them in order to make them become Anarchists.” — Errico Malatesta

But we do not consider this a short term hobby project. The seeds we sow and nurture are not only growing food for nourishment of the body, but growing community, spirits, and minds. As

control of our very bodily functions, laws which protect capital interest and private property while offering no accountability for the exploitation of consumers, workers, and tenants, and a lack of the social safety net of government programs to educate and feed and house those on the losing end of our drastic wealth inequality. Yes, we are incredibly oppressed. And that is precisely the reason why we must organize here.

Here in Oklahoma, the heavily armed buckle of the bible belt of America, where a trans child can be beaten to death in their school bathroom while a teacher stands watch and the cops cover it up for the school (just a 20 minute drive from where I sit now), we are simultaneously aware of the risks of organizing here *and of the risks of not organizing here*.

We must not run from this, as so many suggest, because fascism and domination anywhere is a threat to people everywhere. The power hungry are not satiated by power, but rather their appetite becomes more voracious with each act of consumption. Once the beast feasts on us, it will turn its blood lusty eyes to you as its next course. Morally, we should not run. We have an ethical obligation to not abandon the Nex Benedicts, those who can not run, those whose indigenous roots here date back centuries before the arrival of the colonizers, and leave them to be slaughtered either by the hand of the state and their modern day Brown Shirts or through social murder. You, who would like to imagine yourself being the brave hero who runs into the burning building to save a kitten, now conversely tell us we should simply throw up our hands and leave behind our most vulnerable community members. They deserve acts of great heroism as well. And thus, we must stay and fight.

“Don’t wait to take part in a movement which appears with the label of official socialism on it. Every popular movement already carries with it the seeds of the revolutionary socialism: we must take part in it to ensure its growth.” ~ Carlo Cafiero

Returning now to the examples of my own past solidaric activities, I must admit some level of disappointment and failure. If we failed at anything in these extraordinary acts of heroism, it was that so many of us squandered precious opportunities to build something out of the ash and rubble of these crises. Mutual aid, *when radicalized*, is the foundation for building dual power. But when the crises passed, too many of us simply dusted off our hands, considered our work done, and failed to use the momentum which would have been ripe to give birth to more formal, lasting collectives and organizations, and to radicalize those we worked alongside. This failure to organize made it needlessly more difficult to coordinate again for the next crisis.

While some of my fellow anarchists reject the necessity of formal organizing, I have seen how effective formal horizontal orgs can be. While it takes a huge effort to spontaneously coordinate reactive action to crises, resulting in delays and inefficiency, organizing formally allows for preparedness and also the building of liberatory structures to construct the revolution. Admittedly, formal horizontal organizing is notorious for taking up a lot of time due to the model of reaching full consensus on all issues via direct democracy. The question often posed is one of what would be done in those urgent times if everything is to be deliberated on. (Ironically, this is the criticism heard from anti-organizationalist anarchists and authoritarians alike.) However, that is not so much a roadblock as it can be a boon when plans of action are previously agreed upon.

“Although anarchists sometimes claimed that the social revolution should be ‘spontaneous,’ the majority of anarchists did not expect it to appear suddenly without any planning and preparation. Nor did anarchists think that the social revolution would occur independently of anarchists influencing other workers through words and deeds. They instead meant that the social revolution

should not be imposed on society by a revolutionary elite acting in the name of the people. For a revolution to be ‘spontaneous’ in this sense of the term was for it to be voluntarily launched and self-determined by workers themselves. ~ Zoe Baker

When a tent camp that I and many other radicals had helped build to provide stability and safety for our homeless neighbors was descended upon by city authorities aiming to clear out and destroy everything we had built and arrest the camp residents, the local radical left gun club swiftly came in numbers, armored and armed with long guns to hold off the cops and other city officials. This face-off lasted for over a week, allowing time for the residents of the camp to pack up their belongings and find a new location. It also let the cops know that the people will not be so easily pushed around. But this swift action was only possible because there existed a formal radical organization tasked with community defense, which had trained and prepared for such events, with previously agreed upon plans of action, each member knowing their specific roles and positions (comms, intel, lookout, etc.), allowing for their rapid deployment when the time came and ensuring their relative success. They had faced the tedious deliberations in advance rather than in response.

That is not to say that organizing isn't difficult. It requires a great amount of will and perseverance. Just as we humans are exceptional at acute empathy, we seem by contrast to be woefully inept at chronic compassion. Driven by fear and urgency in times of crisis, most of us don't hesitate to commit grand acts of heroism. We would run into a hundred burning buildings to save kittens. But once the adrenaline and emotion of it all wears off, we lose our drive and commitment to act. We so often fail to make the effort to analyze why these hypothetical buildings full of kittens keep catching fire, to make changes to prevent these fires, to prepare for the next potential fire so that great heroics are not needed. Unfor-