

A Communalist Assembly Starter Kit

Usufruct Collective

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How to Start a Communalist Assembly

Communalism is the means and ends of directly democratic, non hierarchical, ecological, co-federated community assemblies that seek to meet people's needs, decentralize power, oppose hierarchies, create reconstructive and oppositional collectives, and to build the new world within the shell of the old via libertarian socialist dual power. It is a praxis—an intertwined theory and a practice— that applies universalist principles to particular contexts adapting to relevant conditions and variables accordingly. Communalist assemblies seek to intertwine reconstructive politics, oppositional politics, collective building, principled action, and consequential efficacy.

Form of Freedom

Communalism's ethics are rooted in both a form and a content. The cellular node of communalism—form of freedom put forward by communalism—is a community assembly. Communal assemblies are places for deliberation and collective decision making about political and economic affairs. Embedded councils/committees/working groups implement policy through self managed relations within overall mandate of the base level group. Community assemblies can then co-federate to have different scales of coordination and relations between various scales of communal assemblies. Delegates are sent back and forth between co-federal and communal councils where policy making power stays at the lowest level in the hands of people directly.

Points of Unity

Directly democratic forms can be instrumentalized towards anti-democratic, non-egalitarian, and otherwise unfree content. It is important that policies people make in the assembly—and the assembly form itself— are in harmony with certain principles. It is recommended that such principles for form and content at least include direct democracy, participatory relations, communal self-governance, non-hierarchy, co-federalism, and social ecology. Such principles can exist as explicit points of unity for shared practice within an organization, or alternatively they can exist within the structure of a communalist assembly by existing within the bylaws, bill of rights, and programs of a communalist assembly.

Examples of a communalist points of unity are: Direct democracy, Non-Hierarchy, Co-federalism, Communal Self Governance, and Social Ecology. Direct democracy within free association of persons, without ruling classes, and without hierarchical relations, makes it so the form and content of assemblies are not towards hierarchical forms and arbitrarily limiting freedoms of persons. Co-federalism allows for interdependent cooperation with other communal assemblies and organizations. Communal self governance is needed for self governance on every scale. Social ecological praxis is an orientation towards solving ecological problems caused by social problems.

The points of unity are general principles that can be applied to particular contexts in a large variety of ways— and can once again be framed within the structure as agreed terms of practice and as rights an assembly is designed to uphold and protect. People helping to start a commu-

nalist assembly should be well versed in the basic theory of libertarian socialism and preferably communalism and social ecology more specifically.

Strategy

The strategy of communalist assemblies is to build dual power against capitalism and the nation-state. This process is done in part through incubating institutions—such as other communal assemblies, community and worker controlled cooperatives, land trusts, solidarity networks, direct action networks, mutual aid networks, community gardens, popular education organizations, free stores, tenants’ assemblies, workers’ assemblies, ecological technology projects, and more. These building blocks then co-federate and help each other out mutualistically and create alternative and counter institutions to business as usual.

Communalism involves oppositional politics and direct action—opposing that which ought not exist and taking action without being mediated by hierarchy within one’s own organization. Another dimension of communalism is reconstructive politics and mutual aid—meeting people’s needs through networks that pool skills, tools, needs, abilities, resources on various scales and creating alternative infrastructure. Another important goal is popular education—internal and external to communal assemblies. It is important to create a form and content of communalism and that requires educating members of the assemblies and populace at large on the theory and practice of libertarian socialist and communist praxis.

Communal assemblies can coordinate with and incubate libertarian socialist organizations. Together, such building blocks can join up to become more than the sum total of their parts in mutualistic relationships. Such a strategy integrates more fragmented movements while uniting them on terms of unity of libertarian socialism and the necessity of the communal aspect of libertarian socialism. In a sense, communalism is to community as anarcho-syndicalism is to the workplace.

As such building blocks of a potential dual power start developing they can coordinate and form alliances and joint-projects. As communal assemblies start developing across different neighborhoods, cities, and regions, they can form more formal co-federal structures on various scales. Such projects aim towards decentralizing power, meeting people’s needs, while building horizontalist governance structures to replace hierarchical governance structures, before, during, and after revolutionary moments.

It is prefigurative in the sense that such self-managed institutions—connected with self-managed communal assemblies—try to model the world they want to create in their formal structures, but it is also strategic in the sense that it realizes that the new world does not exist yet and is something that we need to build from the conditions that exist. The formal aspects of communalism are necessary but utterly insufficient. Although instrumental strategic reasoning without due ethical considerations can lead to brutality, merely prefigurative approaches—especially ones that don’t realize a distance between means and ends, and not just where there should be consistency between them—can lead to toothless projects with no meaningful attempt to re-organize power and confront hierarchical conditions. Questions like given the current conditions, “how do we reach out beyond the current left and organize with the unorganized?”, “what collectives should we try to build to seize power?”, “what collectives already exist that we can work with on various levels?”, “how do we spread popular education?”, “how do we keep

our eyes on the prize while engaging in intermediate steps?”, “how do we reach out without sacrificing what should be minimal principles?”, etc. need to be at the forefront of organizing a communalist project.

ByLaws

Bylaws should be fleshed out as a communalist assembly develops. A good initial aspect of the bylaws is some kind of decision making process. This can be as simple as follows:

1. Decisions ought to be made through deliberation. Critiques, agreement, dissent, amendments, counter-proposals, etc. should be included as well as attempts to round out decisions through discussion and trying to get as close to large amount of agreement and a decision that is best for the general good.
2. Decisions ought to be made by simple majority–decentralizing decision making and veto power.
3. Proposals and Decisions ought to be filtered through the (libertarian socialist) bylaws and bills of rights and/or (libertarian socialist) points of unity.
4. Committees, delegates, working groups, etc. ought to be administrative rather than make policy over and above the assembly. They self manage within the mandate from below.
5. Committees, delegates, and decisions are subject to immediate recall through simple majority.

This can be fleshed out and adapted as needed. Focusing too much on bylaws at the beginning can turn people away. However, it is also possible that having some kind of bylaw structure from the beginning for people to agree to can ensure that the communal assembly has a structure and an ethos that people can choose to sign on to or not sign on to—and tweak, adapt, and develop later on. It is important to think about deliberation and decision making processes, restorative justice processes for grievances, various delegate positions, and ways that committees and affiliated organizations relate to the general assemblies.

A separation of policy and administration is important within the organization: The overall policy should be set by the general assembly and committees should self manage the implementation of that policy within the boundaries set by the general assembly. Individual delegates should have no policy making power and should serve a purely communicative, coordinative, and administrative role. Such roles should be rotated and there should be a fostering of general knowledge throughout the assembly project. Part of the assembly project is a process of education for those involved to find out how to self manage an organization. People bring their different propositional and practical knowledge to the table and the assembly should serve as a teaching and learning experience for all involved.

Committees

When there is a project voted on at the assembly an embedded council/committee or working group can be started to then implement the project. The implementation of the project should

be squarely within the policy made from below. The committee—formed of volunteers who agree enough with the policy made from below (a policy that is at least in line with libertarian socialist bylaws and bill of rights or points of unity)— then self manage the implementation of the policy. Committees can have broad or specific mandates—and depending on the context the mandates should be more specific or more broad. For example, a solidarity network committee might be given the broad mandate of 1. Organizing according to applicable bylaws, bill of rights, points of unity 2. Direct action against landlords and bosses 3. Towards mutual aid for tenants and workers and 4. A direct action wing that can plug into a variety of actions in line with X, Y, and Z variables. 5. Reporting back to and accountable to assembly and 6. Receives benefit of assembly members, other collectives connected to the assembly, networks, internet presence, being part of a broader movement beyond multiple single issues etc.

Sometimes committees become relatively autonomous and self managing and form into separate organizations. This can be a really positive thing for the working group and the assembly project. However, absolute autonomy and separation from the assembly and other affiliated organizations can be an inhibiting factor for both the assembly and the other collectives. Instead, it makes sense for some committees to become affiliated yet self-managing organizations rather than absolutely autonomous so the different groups can work together mutualistically in some kind of sustained way. Whether the committees should become embedded within assemblies, affiliated with assemblies, or autonomous from assemblies will vary from context to context. It will make sense to make some committees open to all members (or non members), and to make other committees closed (where only those delegated from the general assembly can join). It is possible for the people in a working group to form an autonomous organization—for personal reasons or reasons of effectiveness— while the embedded committee remains a part of the assembly with or without those members.

Under full communalism, politics and economics would be integrated into co-federated networks of horizontalist communes with embedded self managed councils for implementation of projects and economics needed to reproduce society. The embedded councils are made out of volunteers who self manage within policy made from below between the entire commune—assisted by liberatory technology. Auxiliary councils and groups—in line with libertarian socialist and communalist rights and responsibilities— also exist. However, it is important that such auxiliary groups do not privatize the means of existence and production needed for political economic reproduction.

Delegate Roles

Although communalism is against any kind of representative policy making, communalism is not against coordinative, communicative, and administrative roles. Such roles should be mandated and recallable and have no policy making power. Such roles are in many regards the equivalent of carrying a backpack full of rocks up a mountain. Such roles should be shared—so no one person has to do too much work and so everyone gets as much general knowledge as possible. Such roles can include a secretary or note taker position, a treasurer position, a digital outreach coordinator (emails, website, social media, etc), and co-federal delegates to coordinate between assemblies and then go back to the assembly base where actual decisions are made.

Initial Group of Kickstarters

Hosting some kind of interest meeting for friends, political comrades, or even the general public can be a good way to kickstart such a project. It is good to have a core group of people who understand the basic strategy of communal assemblies. It might make sense to even start as a reading group to review the basics of social ecology and to theorize what it would mean to apply such strategies to one's specific location. It can be helpful if the kickstarters have various kinds of diversity within them and diverse and differentiated social relations for both ethical reasons of inclusion and strategic outreach.

Before one brings a communalist project to the public, it makes sense to have some kind of pre-drafted idea of the overall structure and orientation of the project. This idea and project can then be provided to people who are interested in co-authoring a communalist project. Depending on the context one is in, one can adapt the bylaws, bill of rights, or points of unity for practice to be more and less fleshed out—fleshed out enough to be coherent but flexible enough to be adaptable and to include a large realm of permissibility within the ethics of certain minimal principles.

Research/Community Mapping

When starting such a project, one should look at potential comrades and people trying to stop a communal assembly project from happening. Look at the other building blocks towards a libertarian socialist ecology of movements in one's own locale. It might be an IWW branch, an anarchist federation, the libertarian socialist caucus of a local DSA chapter, a direct action network, a mutual aid network, cooperatives, environmentalists, community spaces etc. Even though communalism ought to be a secular project including freedom of and from religion, reaching out to left leaning religious congregations can be an important thing to do. Find out people and organizations that might be sympathetic so they can be invited to assemblies. Research far right organizations in your community. Be aware of who the local ruling class are. Research potential for police repression in your area and generally.

It is important to find people already very sympathetic and then reach out to de-politicized or more moderately politicized people—that is to reach inwards for the express purpose of reaching outwards. Rather than creating a “lower common denominator of the left” kind of organization, the goal should be to create a specific praxis focus and then reach out with it and see if people who are already somewhat aligned with such values agree with communalist practices—or to create a general assembly along lines of common conditions and then infuse it with libertarian socialist form and content overtime. The goal is to reach out through an assembly project without compromising on what should be minimal practices of libertarian socialism within communal assemblies.

When to launch

Before a communal assembly project launches, it is important that people who have the shared ideals do preparation work together. Having consistent meeting space ready, a proposed structure (which may or may not include skeletal versions of bylaws, bill of rights, points of unity for practice, program, strategy, etc. to propose), an outreach plan, some initial projects that can be

started, and adequate time to really think about how to launch the project is crucial. An organization can only launch once. It is almost always more sustainable and long term for a group to start out moving at a slow pace to build themselves up before they reach out. That way the organization can have its minimal form and quality glued together before reaching out. It is also possible to launch too late and miss crucial moments for organizing.

Outreach

Outreach can be done in a plurality of ways. Word of mouth and face-to-face one on one interactions and communication are very important. One on one outreach can also be done via one on one text invitations. Door-to-door approaches are underused and very effective at reaching out beyond the already existing left. Flyering is important as well—whether or not one lives in a city that has a culture of flyering for events. Bus-stops, neighborhoods, cafes, walls for poster events throughout cities, etc. should be flyered as much as possible when trying to do outreach. Make sure that the flyers include the ideals or practices of an organization, some explanation of what the event is, as well as the time and space location of the event, and where to find more information. Handbill flyers can be made to pass out to people at various political and countercultural events and while people run into people throughout their everyday travels. Announcing the event during announcement sections of other leftist organization meetings can also be fruitful—especially if meaningful relationships with other leftist groups are forged. Block parties can also be good ways to do outreach and build community. The internet is an important tool as well—but has many limits. Text message groups, social media events, and internet groups can be used to reach out to people—but they should never be relied upon at the expense of face to face organizing. Having an email list-serve is an important tool to utilize. And of course outreach through action is also a crucial way of engaging people and showing them through demonstration that your organization is not “all talk”.

Many people are not radicalized by going to meetings, but radicalized by going to direct actions. Many people are radicalized by mutual aid projects rather than direct actions. Many people are radicalized through popular education rather than through any of the above. It is often when people deepen their understandings of the processes of actions, mutual aid projects, and popular education that people often see the importance of going to meetings, making collective decisions, and doing the leg work that makes actions possible. It is important for organizers to help catalyze such connections in people’s minds. Part of being involved in an expansive process of directly taking action and organizing is co-authoring actions, events, and projects with people and learning by theory and practice. People who do not get involved in such processes are abdicating the potential of their critical thinking skills to think through actions and alternatives to actions, propose actions, to critique actions, to amend actions, and to actuate actions.

Initial projects one Can Start

Exactly what projects to begin with can be tricky, and is not identical across different contexts. One interesting way to kickstart community assemblies is to host issue focused forums and assemblies where single issues are deliberated about in depth. Other ways to start can be through mutually assisting other left projects that already exist. A direct action arm of the organization

can be important to bridge abstract problems and solutions to concrete actions that can be done as well as give the assembly a class struggle and class abolitionist ethos. If assemblies lose an oppositional character entirely, then they can easily become pejoratively utopian. Solidarity Networks are ways that people can take action against bosses and landlords within and outside of the point of production in ways that use direct action towards mutual aid. In other time space locations with different social relations, community gardens, technology projects, and cooperative development might make more sense as projects to start. Fundraisers for political events, potlucks, and block parties can be ways to build community, have fun, and spread political messages through political causes, pamphlets, relationships, and dialogue. Skillshares, lectures, reading groups, and other popular education projects can help facilitate theoretical knowledge and are easy to start.

Where to start: Block by Block or more city wide organizing?

One way to start communal assemblies is going block by block to organize specific neighborhoods into neighborhood councils. Another way to begin such a process might be to organize a broader city wide assembly project of some kind and then decentralize into neighborhood assemblies as people join and capacity allows—and as people find out which particular blocks they want to focus on. If one is doing a block by block approach to organizing, then people should find neighborhoods and regions within a city that are more fruitful for organizing—due to both economic and theoretical compositions. Working class neighborhoods are the most important neighborhoods to initially organize—as well as neighborhoods that have good class consciousness and are more left leaning in general.

There is an important urgency to change the world and therefore we must take our time with these projects and build them in a generative way. Do not expect the assembly project to be successful overnight. Although more periodic kinds of institutions that only exist for a few months or years can do a lot of good action within a city, organizations that continue onwards passed their initial jumping off point that have more of a potential to change conditions in the world—especially in unity with other building blocks.

General Principles and Particular Contexts

Communist assemblies can be started in a variety of ways. Different approaches of applying general principles make more and less sense in different contexts. The general principles of communism are necessary but insufficient for its application to particular conditions. The cutting edge aspects of communist praxis deal with applying the general principles to particular contexts and creating a strategic content. This is where things get relatively tricky and where general approaches fail to be a sufficient guiding path—as necessary and important as they are. This is where local knowledge can combine with general knowledge to create a strategic and prefigurative approach—recognizing consistency and lack thereof between means and ends.

Applying libertarian socialist communal assembly projects will look different in different places despite retaining general principles. Even though there might be surprising similarities about applying general principles to particular contexts, Applying such principles in Oakland will look different than applying such principles in New York City, which will look different

than applying such principles in Jackson, Mississippi, which will look different than applying such principles in rural Vermont, which will look different than applying such principles in Kobane or Mexico City. Such locations are also not static cities but in process, so within a few years the best ways to apply such principles to particular locations might significantly change. Furthermore, just because there are ways that work well—or even sufficiently work—in applying general principles to the particular city one is in does not mean that there are not even better ways to be doing communalist organizing. The praxis of applying general principles to particular contexts—and even the general principles themselves—are subject to change if there are sufficiently relevant variables that emerge. There are always ways to implement communalist projects in better ways— even compared to projects that are thriving.

Common conditions vs. common ideals vs Common practice

One of the goals of a communalist project is to reach out to people who do not yet share communalist theory. Putting forward programs and points of unity that groups should be rooted in and bounded by, if not done well, and adapted to the specific kind of organization one is trying to build, can unnecessarily inhibit reaching out to people who do not already agree. For example, imagine how unnecessarily alienating it might be to ordinary people to start a community assembly in the USA in 2019 that starts with a program for full communism in those exact terms. It would make more sense strategically to talk about giving everyone free necessities of life and mutual aid. We need to find ways to communicate communalist principles and practices, have them enshrined within the structure and alive in the content of popular assemblies, without unnecessarily alienating people and without making communalist ideology (a specific kind of libertarian communism) a prerequisite for joining (and without sacrificing the ethical substance of communalist practice at the same time). The specific structure, bylaws, and content within the development of a communalist organization will and should vary according to context and conditions and what people need and desire (although there also ought to be a universal ethics underpinning that variation). If one's goal is to reach out to a persons via shared conditions and organize around shared practices to meet common needs and/or arrive at a common goal (and then hopefully develop good shared principles), then convincing persons through pragmatic actions that arrive at meeting their needs (or mutually desired political ends that are consistent with good principles and organized through them), as well as reason, and dialogue further down the line might make sense. But there is no one size fits all approach to such a process of getting involved in social movements and participating with others on an equal footing to develop mutually reinforcing relations between form, content, theory, practice, persons and organizations. Common conditions can develop into shared practice, and shared practice can develop into further shared principles, and from there those new shared principles can nourish future actions, etc. And from there, new shared ideology based organizing can happen (that can be done via ideologically specific libertarian communist groups distinct from popular organizations but with members who are participants in both) to create popular organizations and/or to join popular organizations in solidarity and aim to help develop those already existing groups into groups with better form, content, and strategy to meet the goals of those already existing groups. The libertarian socialist strategy of doing so has been called “dual organizationalism”, and it aims towards

to self management of popular organizations and social movements rather than a hierarchical vanguardist approach.

Not having good form and content– including but by no means limited to a points of unity for practice (or bylaws with a bill of rights) rooted in good ideals– can create incoherence to the point where the assembly form subverts its own liberatory form and content. A way to round out an assembly or a collective without having to agree to specific common ideologies is to have common practices rooted in libertarian socialist principles embedded in the structure, bylaws, bill of rights, and (as much as possible) culture of an assembly. Not everyone has to agree to libertarian socialism or communalism to agree to the terms of practice within the form and content of an organization that are rooted in libertarian socialism or communalism. Such an approach has a lot of the benefits that a shared ideology approach has yet nonetheless serves different functions.

What might inhibit Communal Assemblies

Inhibiting factors of communal assemblies will differ from region to region over time and space. In every context, capitalism and the state will be general inhibiting factors: everything from a lack of public space to organize in, to cops enforcing unjust laws, etc. There is of course TINA– There is no Alternative– a prevailing theoretical and practical orientation that inhibits any radical critique of that which exists. Liberal cooptation is another thing to be wary of given that liberal ethos can take libertarian form and subsume it to liberal content (or form). The democratic party has a whole array of activists and movements that spread electoral reductionism that can try to take over and defang leftist organizations. Marxist-Leninist tendencies can try to restructure communal assemblies into hierarchical forms aimed towards state socialist revolution, whereas anti organizationalism will try to inhibit collective decision making processes and organizational structure altogether. Racism, sexism, Anti-Semitism, etc. are inhibiting factors that make it difficult to build relationships and trust to work together on common issues and issues that drastically affect some people more than others. Furthermore, such racist, sexist, and oppressive relations inhibit the kind of egalitarian relations needed for a project to be worth fighting for. Such issues exist both within the wider society and within left circles. Identity-reductionist attempts to deal with oppression lead to ways that are not holistic enough to build solidarity–and such approaches do not know how to deal with political economic structures that underpin structural forms of oppression.

Communal assemblies should emphasize general principles and particular contexts they are in and surrounded by–not just either or. Furthermore, communal assemblies should be both prefigurative–in the sense of building and reproducing the kinds of structure that ought to exist in the new world–and strategic in the sense of being oriented towards certain principled goals and trying to achieve them rather than mere maintenance of a good structure. The strategic aspects should be in line with good principles rather than at the expense of them. Communal assemblies should also build relationships with people and not just be a political process. Relationship and trust building are important steps to actual decision making processes and organizational resilience.

Communal assemblies can also be inhibited by decisions made by communal assemblies themselves. This can happen through inhibiting horizontalist form, lack of strategic content, lack of

relationship building, lack of prudent vision (which CAN take the form of a focus on militancy at the expense of reaching out), not reaching out to people, not educating people, not having enough structure, etc. No matter how good the form of an organization is, it does not necessarily entail good content. Even if good form and points of unity for practice are carried through within the content of an organization, the content itself might not be strategic and generative towards long term goals.

Is the Assembly the best place for you to start?

Although communal assemblies are an important—in my opinion the most important—building block for revolution (that can also catalyze other building blocks), they are also not necessarily the best form for every particular group of people to start within every particular context. It might make more sense to build other building blocks of a revolution first such as a solidarity network, a tenants' union, a houseless solidarity organization, a mutual aid organization, a cooperative federation, a popular education group etc. It is easiest to start a communalist assembly when such libertarian and socialistic organizations and culture already exists. However, communal assemblies can act as a catalyst for the very institutional and cultural infrastructure that make communal assemblies easier to start and develop.

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