

An Anarchist Organising Manual

Zabalaza

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Contents

Preface	3
Organising Basics	3
Organising a Local Group	3
How to Start A Local Group	4
Recruitment	4
The First Meeting	4
Keeping the Local Alive	5
Troubleshooting Common Local Group Problems	6
Setting up an anarchist group	6
People	7
Politics	7
Money	7
Commitment	8
Contributing to an anarchist group	8
Internal meetings in an anarchist group	9
Frequency and location	9
Decision making	9
Conduct of discussion	9
Agenda	10
Minutes	11
Further comments	11
Mass Organising Tactics	11

Preface

This pamphlet is a collection of essays taken from various sources. The first is taken from the *War Resisters League* and is available on the *Struggle* (struggle.ws) website. The following three are taken from the organising section of the *Workers Solidarity Movements* website. And lastly, the fifth is taken from a book called *Rules for Radicals* by *Saul Alinsky*, pp. 126-140. The person who posted the essay to the web had the following to say about it

“I’m somewhat ambivalent [unsure] about Alinsky, and if you read his books, you’ll see why I say that; but I can’t deny that he was a successful organiser, and thus think that anarchists can benefit from some of his ideas.”

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Organising Basics

Organising a Local Group

When organising, local group members should ask themselves: “Are we reaching out to various groups in the community – minority groups, the elderly, trade unions, churches, the campus? Are we seen by other parts of the community as a resource and support group at moments of community crisis?”

Here are some guidelines to consider in preparing to work for a just and peaceful world:

- Educate yourself while keeping your mind on possible actions.
- Gather a core group incorporating as many key skills as possible.
- Take local action with a specific focus, within the context of your broader concerns. A “scattershot” approach to organising will likely end in frustration.
- Identify all avenues of access you might have into the political processes of your community.
- Identify and approach all possible allies.
- Target your information to the public. They are more likely to be persuaded than the establishment.
- Take yourself, your group, and your issues seriously. If you lack confidence in your cause it will soon show.
- Present viable alternatives.
- Continuity, persistence, and focus are prime ingredients for success.

How to Start A Local Group

There are a couple of strategies for forming a local group. The first is to start a group around *broad* political or social concerns; and then develop specific campaigns and actions that reflect the concerns of your group. A second strategy is to form a group around a *specific* campaign, target, or injustice... thereby attracting people who are concerned with that issue. They may not have broad political agreement with one another, but many who get involved for the first time may wish to continue working in the same vein with a broader group...

[Note: for anarchists, the first option is the way to go, as single-issue politics scuttles the broader movement]

Recruitment

The most effective method to convince people to attend a meeting is one-to-one contact. If people are asked directly to come to a meeting, then they are more likely to attend than if they simply hear or read about it without being put on the spot for a commitment. The next best method is to mail a letter or postcard about a meeting, followed by a phone call reminder.

The common "mass methods" of outreach are through leafleting or setting up literature tables at speaking engagements, concerts, meetings, film showings, shopping centres, demonstrations, and so forth. Registration week on college campuses is often the best time for reaching people. Having a petition or sign-up sheet is valuable for follow-up calls and mailings. Placing an ad or announcement for a meeting in a newspaper, on the radio or community billboard, or simply posterizing key locations can be useful to draw people, but don't rely on these methods to act as more than a reminder.

The key is to be creative and continue to reach out. No group, no matter how stable at one time, will remain that way for long without continually trying to gain new members. This is especially true in communities that are in constant flux, e.g., high schools and colleges.

It is crucial that new people are made to feel welcome. When a stranger comes to a meeting, introduce her or him around and involve the person in regular meeting discussions and post-meeting activities. Also, give the new person a real task to perform, such as making posters, handing out some leaflets, reading a book for a study group, helping to organise a demonstration, or putting to use any skills (s)he may have. You have to gauge what a person can take, however, so that a new person does not feel overburdened or get frightened off.

The key is to attract five to ten reliable workers, who are likely to stay past the first few meetings. This is your core group, which will be expected to know what is going on with the group at all levels.

The First Meeting

The first meeting of a group can be crucial to the initial success of that group, so plan carefully. Set a time and place before contacting people. The place should be convenient, the time should be far enough ahead so there are no conflicts and soon enough so people won't forget (that means about a week or two ahead).

Before the meeting, make an agenda — what you want to do, why you want to do it, how you'll go about it, and who will join in. Select a room a bit too small and arrive at least a half-hour in

advance. Try to have a beverage and some sort of snack available. Also, display any appropriate literature you might have. Make sure someone will take notes that can be sent to all those who expressed interest but couldn't attend, as well as those who did attend.

Start the meeting with introductions to each other, giving a little more than one's name. Go over the agenda to see if there are any changes or additions, then set a reasonable time limit for the meeting to end (e.g., 2 hours) and stick to it. After there's been group acceptance of the what, why and how, get firm commitments to do something like giving money on a regular basis, giving time, attending a study group session, leafleting, or just about anything. Without a commitment to do something, people have no reason to relate to the local group. Before the meeting breaks up be sure to set a time and place for another meeting. Ask people to bring others who are interested to the next meeting. You may want to set up task forces to meet between meetings.

Meetings are a drag if you don't get anything done. Every time you have a meeting, decide beforehand what you want to accomplish...

First Meeting. Get friends and people politically close to you. Discuss the need for a local group to act on specific issues. Work for common agreement in identifying the issues, and get commitments to work on them through the group.

Second Meeting. Get new people. Summarise previous decisions and determine how the organisation will function.

Third Meeting. Plan an action (picket line, leafleting, etc.) and/or set up a study series.
Fourth Meeting. Discuss the action and plan further activities. Plan the involvement of more people.

If your meetings regularly exceed 20 to 30 people, you may want to split into two or more groups. It has been found that the ideal sized group for decision-making is on the order of a dozen or so.

Keeping the Local Alive

The easy part is getting started. The hard part is keeping things going. **The single most important way to sustain a local group is to be active.** If you don't develop regular projects and actions that people can involve themselves in, they will sense a purposelessness to the group and drop out.

There are any number of actions that can be organised on a regular basis. Leafleting... once a week [is one] example. This ongoing program involves people in a leafleting schedule, and doing the leafleting itself. Study programs are regular activities that will involve people if you have a goal. Create study programs around issues, around politics, around prospective actions.

A newsletter that comes out regularly fills several needs. It's an ongoing activity that involves people. It disseminates information on local activities and is an outlet for political education. It serves as a forum for opinion. It helps tie the membership together.

Second to having a program and doing something, what keeps a group together and helps it grow is a communitarian spirit. A sense of togetherness is really important in this alienating society. If your group is a place where people can feel wanted and part of something, they'll stay and work.

Make your meetings enjoyable rather than dreary. For instance you can have them at the same time as a potluck dinner and at a regular time and place, so that going to them becomes a habit for members. Do some things that are done just for fun. Have parties and picnics or retreats.

Make decisions co-operatively. That means really talk things out at your regular potluck dinner meeting. People need to feel involved, and be involved, at all levels of the group. There's a tendency to let one person write the leaflets, one person to do the thinking, and another to do the shit work. While it's true that some people are better at a given task than others, an attempt should be made to rotate the tasks.

Troubleshooting Common Local Group Problems

Endless meetings with little action. Do anything together, no matter how small (e.g., taking some time during a regular meeting to write a government official or setting up a leafleting event) can give an important feeling of accomplishment while beginning the groundwork for a more substantial project.

Failure to attract, integrate, and hold new members. Brainstorm ideas for outreach and implement these ideas. Make every new person feel welcome and immediately involved.

Leader or key organiser leaves. Though it is often more efficient (in the short run) to have the "best" person do a particular task... it is much better to encourage others to take initiative, responsibility, and leadership in certain areas.

Responsibilities not adequately shared. A process of rotating responsibility or leadership can be regularised to promote a decentralisation of skills, thus strengthening the movement. Set a time limit (e.g., every 3 months) to rotate convening and facilitating meetings, etc. Schedule special workshops for certain skills (e.g., writing and designing leaflets, speaking, fund raising).

Lack of funding. Establish a pledge system for regular members (R2 a week or R10 a month) just to meet basic operating expenses. Plan a raffle, garage sale, film showing. Brainstorm other ways to get funding.

Group too large. Split the group up, either by geography, interests, or meeting time. This will keep meetings from getting too cumbersome.

Division of interest/lack of unity. If your group is doing too much at once, you may wish to split the group along the lines of the areas of interest, instead of doing many things poorly.

Group changes from founding basis. Often, as new people join a group, it begins to change from its original purpose or its politics may be altered or diluted. Sometimes this is a good process, but sometimes this happens by design (e.g., infiltration and take-over).

To avoid the latter, the group should be founded on an explicit basis. Coalitions are more susceptible to manipulation than groups with clearly identified politics.

Government infiltrators. The best way to deal with informers is to keep everything you do "aboveboard" and honest; that way no exposure would disrupt your activities. Often groups are more disrupted by suspicion of "who's the agent," than by what an agent could do.

Setting up an anarchist group

There are four simple requirements for an effective organisation:

- people
- politics
- money

- commitment.

People

People is pretty self-explanatory. To have a group you need more than one person and really at least five before it becomes sustainable. In most places anarchists are not very hard to come across, in most countries at least 1 in a 1,000 to 1 in 10,000 people might consider themselves an anarchist. So even in fairly small towns there are likely to be at least a dozen or so 'anarchists'.

Unfortunately the next step most groups take is to try and set up a group that includes just about everyone that adopts the label. This may seem like the logical thing but problems arise when we look at the next two requirements.

Politics

For a group to be effective it has to have a clear idea of what it is fighting for, not simply what it is fighting against. And it must agree what the best tactics are to use and that everyone in the group will use follow the agreed tactics. This will be discussed at length later

Money

In order to function an organisation needs a paper, leaflets, rooms to meet in, money for mailouts and a dozen other items that require lots of the green stuff. Ways of tackling this requirement include

Ignoring it. Which means things only take place if someone is willing to fund them out of their own pocket. This is pretty common but if course results in things not getting done. It also gives the funder undue influence.

Use 'criminal' means to raise money. This sometimes happens but is generally not a good move as sooner or later people get caught and end up in prison or worse. What's more if you come under any sort of police investigation it will rapidly become apparent that your getting funds from some dodgy source that will in itself attract further investigation. It also gives the state a good excuse for a 'non-political' clamp down.

Organise fundraisers. Although I think this can work well for special purchases, like say a printing press if its used for regular bills (printing, rent etc.) it soon turns into a massive drag and waste of resources. You can spend half of the time was discussing jumble sales and disco's which is off-putting.

Membership levy/subs. This is what the WSM uses; members contribute 5% of their gross income on a weekly or monthly basis. A percentage system is fairer then a flat rate as an un-employed member (on 100 dollars a week, the state welfare) pays 5 dollars where as someone working and earning 500 **Con** dollars a week pays at least 25 dollars. This gives us an income to pay for our paper, magazine, leaflets, and rooms and even to subsidise travel to demos for unemployed members. Of course it also has a negative effect on the first requirement, people, as some people may be unwilling to loose the equivalent of a couple of beers a week. Which brings me to the fourth requirement, commitment.

Commitment

The amount of work you do and the amount of money you're willing to put in depends on you feeling good about the organisation. It is adversely affected if you feel you are being used, or that other people are not willing to contribute their share. That much is obvious. However it's also true that your commitment will be dependant on how much you agree with what the group is doing/saying and whether the groups seems to be going somewhere or just treading water. It's easy to keep people around when lots of stuff is happening; the difficult thing is the periods in between bursts of activity.

I favour a high commitment oriented group over a 'as many people as possible' one. With time I think the high commitment one can come to involve a lot of people where as I don't think the reverse can be true. Enough background, here's some concrete ideas.

Find another four or five people that are willing to do something serious. You may know this many already if not get an address you can put on leaflets and start leafleting demo's etc. with anarchist stuff. Get a flag or a banner together. Maybe call a public meeting on anarchism and see who turns up.

Once you get your four or five people be prepared to spend a couple of years getting your act together before you start to expand. Agree on a membership levy and conditions of membership. Write down agreed perspectives and strategy for promoting anarchism and getting involved in activity. Start publishing a regular paper arguing these ideas. Sell it through bookshops, campaign meetings and demos. Get involved around struggles and develop respect for your group as good activists and people with good ideas. Don't concentrate on talking to anarchists, concentrate on talking to activists. Find out about the national groups and travel to nearby demos/conferences. Make a banner you can bring on marches. I know all of this is possible with as few as five people because I spent the period from 1989-91 doing just that here.

Above all you need to be patient. A big problem is the 'revolution next year' syndrome where you hype yourself up to expecting a lot and then get disappointed when it does not materialise. Work out where you are going but be prepared to go there slowly, as I said above its likely to be two years before you get any serious return on your work.

Contributing to an anarchist group

Now that you're a member of an anarchist group it's time to start thinking about what sort of contribution you can make to the group. Don't allow yourself to sit back and blindly follow what others suggest, respect the experience of other activists but recognise that you have a contribution to make in all aspects of the group and also a unique perspective on its functioning.

Is there a theoretical area the group is weak on? If this is the case then perhaps you could research this and explain it to the others through internal educational talks or articles. It's generally impossible for everyone to know everything so its a good idea for people to specialise a little providing they also explain what they discover to everyone.

Is there a practical skill (e.g. Desk Top Publishing) the group is lacking that you could learn or already know? Can you teach this to others?

Is there a struggle you can get involved in that no one else is currently involved in? Perhaps help is needed in particular struggles the group is already involved in. Perhaps you should get

involved in a particular area of struggle to confront your own prejudices or just to find out how things function.

You should start slowly, volunteer for simple stuff first and as you understand how things work (and how much you can sustain) take more things on.

These are practical contributions you can make to build the group and really you should be looking for ways to do one of each. A lot of them are things you can do right from the start.

Internal meetings in an anarchist group

One thing central to any functional anarchist group is regular internal meetings. In a healthy organisation almost all decisions will be made at these meetings and there will be a sufficient level of discussion to ensure all those attending have a good idea of the activity and arguments in the different struggles the organisation is involved in. Internal meetings should also have some time given over to education.

Frequency and location

A new group or one engaged in a lot of activity should meet at least once a week, at the same time and day. As soon as possible you should try and find a regular venue for meeting that is not someone's home. You'll want a space that's private enough for you to have strong disagreements in and where only the members of the group will be while you are using it. In Ireland this means most groups use private rooms in quiet pubs that are glad for the additional customers on quiet nights!

Decision making

Arguments about how best to reach decisions are fundamental to anarchism. What I have found works best is to allow plenty of time for discussion in the hope of being able to reach a consensus. Only when it becomes obvious that this is not possible should you move to a vote. If time permits it may make sense to postpone making a contentious decision to the next meeting to give people a chance to think things over (and calm down!).

Conduct of discussion

Even with a small group it's normally a very good idea to have someone to chair the meeting. Being able to chair a meeting well is quite difficult, in particular you need to be very careful not to abuse your position in a strong argument. But it's also important that the same person does not chair every meeting. Perhaps the best way is to have a list of everyone willing to chair and each week take the next person on the list.

Basically a chair should

- try and arrange the room so that everyone sits in a circle and make sure you are seated where you can see everyone
- if there are new people there start off by going around the circle and getting everyone to say their name

- at the start of the meeting ask people for items for an agenda and then stick to that agenda. If people start speaking on topics rather than the one under discussion interrupt them politely and tell them you are adding that item to the agenda
- ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to speak
 - i. generally it's a good idea to ask people to put up their hand when they want to speak and then to take a list of people waiting. In most situations it's a very good idea to put people who have not yet spoken to the top of this queue.
 - ii. if the discussion is just taking place between a few people and in particular if it is just between two it is often a good idea to suggest going around the circle and giving everyone a chance to speak
 - iii. pay attention - people who are less confident about speaking will often indicate that they want to speak in a minor way (eg briefly half put up their hand). A good chair will spot this and encourage them to speak
 - iv. control yourself - while the chair can speak in debates you should try and speak the least and **always** put yourself at the end of the queue. There is nothing worse than a chair who feels they are entitled to comment after every single speaker. Be very strict with yourself
 - v. don't allow people speaking to insult other people in the room. If they do interrupt and make it clear that this is not acceptable
- if the discussion is going around in circles with the same people making the same points again and again you should point this out and ask if people want to continue the discussion or
 1. Move to a vote
 2. Postpone the discussion to later in the meeting or the next meeting if there is any disagreement on what to do you should call an immediate hand vote on whether or not to continue the discussion and then on what to do with the discussion.
- if it appears a decision has been reached (i.e. everyone is agreeing) then write down what you think the decision is then read this back to the meeting.
- if it appears a vote is necessary then make sure the exact question to be voted on is written down and then read this question back to the meeting before taking the vote. This is very important in case there is later disagreement over what exactly was decided.

Agenda

If it's known who is chairing the meeting in advance it may be a good idea for that person to start the meeting with a suggested agenda. In any case the agenda should almost always include

- minutes of last meeting

- correspondence to be dealt with
- decisions that have to be made
- other issues people want discussed
- AOB at the end for minor things people want to mention or things they have 'just remembered'

If there is any disagreement over the order of the agenda then this should be quickly discussed and voted on at the start of the meeting. If the chair thinks there is a lot to get through it may make sense to set a maximum amount of time that can be spent discussing particular topics right at the start of the meeting.

Minutes

Someone should be responsible every week for keeping minutes of the meeting and preparing these to be read at or distributed before the next meeting. Minutes need not be very detailed (you don't need to write down what everyone says). They should include

- a list of who attended the meeting
- a list of topics discussed
- a list of decisions reached for each topic, this should be a copy of what the chair reads out
- a list of who has volunteered to do what
- a list of items to be discussed at the next meeting

Further comments

It is important that meetings start on time and end before or at the time they are advertised to end at. Certainly they should end once they have reached the advertised time and somebody needs to leave.

Mass Organising Tactics

Tactics mean doing what you can with what you have. Tactics are those conscious deliberate acts by which human beings live with each other and deal with the world around them. In the world of give and take, tactics is the art of how to take and how to give. Here our concern is with the tactic of taking; how the Have-Nots can take power away from the Haves.

For an elementary illustration of tactics, take parts of your face as the point of reference; your eyes, your ears, and your nose. First the eyes; if you have organised a vast, mass-based people's organisation, you can parade it visibly before the enemy and openly show your power. Second the ears; if your organisation is small in numbers, then... conceal the members in the dark but raise a din and clamour that will make the listener believe that your organisation numbers many

more than it does. Third, the nose; if your organisation is too tiny even for noise, stink up the place.

Always remember the first rule of power tactics: *Power is not only what you have but also what the enemy thinks you have.*

The second rule is: *Never go outside the experience of your people.* When an action is outside the experience of the people, the result is confusion, fear, and retreat.

The third rule is: *Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy.* Here you want to cause confusion, fear, and retreat.

The fourth rule is: *Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.* You can kill them with this, for they can no more obey their own rules than the Christian church can live up to Christianity.

The fourth rule carries within it the fifth rule: *Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.* It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage.

The sixth rule is: *A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.* If your people are not having a ball doing it, there is something very wrong with the tactic.

The seventh rule is: *A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.* man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time, after which it becomes a ritualistic commitment...

The eighth rule: *Keep the pressure on,* with different tactics and actions, and utilize all events of the period for your purpose.

The ninth rule: *The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.*

The tenth rule: *The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition.*

The eleventh rule is: *If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counter side;* this is based on the principle that every positive has its negative...

The twelfth rule: *The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.* You cannot risk being trapped by the enemy in his sudden agreement with your demand and saying "You're right—we don't know what to do about this issue. Now you tell us."

The thirteenth rule: *Pick the target, freeze it, personalise it, and polarise it.*

In conflict tactics there are certain rules that the organiser should always regard as universalities. One is that the opposition must be singled out as the target and "frozen." By this I mean that in a complex, interrelated, urban society, it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil. There is a constant, and somewhat legitimate, passing of the buck...

It should be borne in mind that the target is always trying to shift responsibility to get out of being the target...

One of the criteria in picking your target is the target's vulnerability - where do you have the power to start? Furthermore, the target can always say, "Why do you centre on me when there are others to blame as well?" When you "freeze the target," you disregard these arguments and, for the moment, all others to blame.

Then, as you zero in and freeze your target and carry out your attack, all of the "others" come out of the woodwork very soon. They become visible by their support of the target.

The other important point in the choosing of a target is that it must be a personification, not something general and abstract such as a community's segregated practices or a major corporation or City Hall. It is not possible to develop the necessary hostility against, say, City Hall,

which after all is a concrete, physical, inanimate structure, or against a corporation, which has no soul or identity, or a public school administration, which again is an inanimate system.

[He says your target should be a *person* in the organisation you are opposing; a face within the opposition for you to focus on; it must be someone with power within the organisation, like the CEO, school superintendent, governor, or something like that.]

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