# BUILD YOUR OWN
# SOLIDARITY NETWORK

*A guide to building a successful solidarity network along the lines of the Seattle Solidarity Network, written by two SeaSol organisers.*

**Cold B & T Barnacle**

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# INTRODUCTION

***In which we describe this article's intended purpose and audience.***

The Seattle Solidarity Network (or "SeaSol" for short) is a small but growing workers' and tenants' mutual support organization that fights for specific demands using collective direct action. Founded in late 2007 by members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), SeaSol is directly democratic, is all-volunteer, has no central authority, and has no regular source of funding except small individual donations. We have successfully defeated a wide variety of employer and landlord abuses, including wage theft, slumlord neglect, deposit theft, outrageous fees, and predatory lawsuits.

We've gotten a lot of inquiries in the past several months from folks in other cities wanting to start something like SeaSol where they live. Our mission in this article is to describe, for the benefit of those trying to build something similar, our experience of what it took to get SeaSol started and to keep it growing.

Please note: we are writing as individuals, and not in the name of the organization.

# DEFINING THE SCOPE

***In which we discuss the challenges of defining the scope of a solidarity network project in its early days.***

The first step in starting an organization is to decide what it's for. When starting SeaSol, we made a point of defining the scope of it very broadly, and this has proved to be one of its greatest strengths. Last month we were fighting a housing agency over towing fees. Today we are fighting a restaurant owner over unpaid wages. Next month we might be up against a bank, an insurance company, or a school administration.

Because people are so used to single-issue organizing, when we first started it was difficult for some to wrap their minds around the idea of an organization that was not just about job issues or just about housing issues, but would deal equally with both, and beyond. There was also an urge to restrict the scope of the project to just certain sectors of the working class, such as the poorest of the poor, workers in specific industries, or specific neighborhoods within the city.

Rather than becoming specialists, we have insisted on keeping our scope broad and flexible. Any worker or tenant in the Seattle area can join and can bring their fight to SeaSol. This helps us to bring in as many people as possible, and to keep up a constant stream of action. It means that instead of developing identities as tenant, neighborhood, or industry activists, we are building a sense of broad working class solidarity. It also means that the activists who started the project did not have to see ourselves as something separate from the group we wanted to organize. We were part of that group.

# PREREQUISITES

***In which we explain the basic things we needed in order to be able to launch SeaSol.***

People wanting to know how SeaSol got started often ask whether we had funding, whether we had an office, or whether we had extensive legal knowledge. We had none of these things, and we didn't need them. However, there were a few basic things that we absolutely did need to have in order to make it work, and they are probably just as essential for anyone else out there who wants to build a solidarity network.

***1***---*One or two solid organizers.* Of all the essential elements, this one tends to be the most difficult to come by. Without it, any new solidarity network is doomed. Other activists may come and go, but there must be least some who are extremely dedicated to the project, competent, self-organized, able to put a lot of time into the work, and planning on sticking with it for at least a couple of years. In SeaSol, it helped that some also had prior organizing experience.

***2***---*The ability to round up at least 15-20 people.* This one is obvious, but people who are new to organizing almost always overestimate how many people they can mobilize. Getting 15 people to an action usually requires getting about 25 people to tell you, "Yes, I will be there."

For the first SeaSol actions, before we had an established phone tree, we just had to try to mobilize among our friends, our friends' friends, IWW members, and people connected to other pre-existing organizations. We also sent emails to a few old lists that were left over from defunct radical projects from the early 2000's. Our first action invitation was the only exciting thing that had gone out on some of those lists for a very long time, and this probably contributed to what we then considered an excellent turnout, 23 people.

***3***---*The ability to reach out and find workers and tenants who have conflicts with their bosses and landlords.* SeaSol did this by putting up posters around bus stops. See the 'Starting Fights' section for more on this.

***4***---*Some logistical details.* Starting a solidarity network requires very little money. You will need a place to meet, but there is no need to rent an office. We held meetings at an organizer's home for the first year of SeaSol. You will need a phone number that goes to voicemail – we don't try to be 'on call' whenever the phone rings (we're not paid social workers!). We use a free voicemail service that sends the messages to our internal email list. You will also need an email address, a website, and someone with decent graphic design ability for making posters and flyers.

***5***---*A plan for getting started.* You might be tempted to launch your solidarity network by publicly inviting all interested activists to an initial meeting. This is probably a mistake. When the direction of the project hasn't yet been firmly established through action, it's very easy to get blown off course. At this early stage, if you hold a large meeting by bringing in people with a wide variety of different ideas and agendas, you're likely to get a lot of confusion and strife, and not a lot of action. In SeaSol, our tiny initial group of like-minded activists spent several months putting up posters and winning a few fights before we ever publicly announced our meetings, or held any public events other than actions.

# STARTING FIGHTS

***In which we describe how we find people with employer or landlord conflicts and bring them into SeaSol campaigns.***

***Postering.*** From the start, our main way of finding new people with job or housing conflicts has been by putting up posters on telephone poles. We mostly post them in working class neighborhoods or in industrial areas where a lot of people work. The most effective places to stick them seem to around high-traffic bus stops. Someone who's standing around waiting for a bus is more likely to take the time to read a poster than someone who's walking past.

We keep the content of our posters extremely simple and direct. Because we want to elicit fights that we can win with our current size and strength, our posters list specific problems that we think we can potentially deal with: "unpaid wages?" "stolen deposit?". If someone is currently facing one of these problems, these words are likely to catch their eye.

Postering is a 'passive' form of outreach, since we're leaving it up to the screwed-over worker or tenant to contact us and ask for our support, instead of us approaching them. We do this for a reason: people who have taken the initiative to contact us are more likely to be people who are prepared to play an active role in a campaign. Also the fact that they have approached us, and not the other way around, makes it easier for us to insist on some conditions in exchange for our support. For example, they'll have to be actively involved in their own fight, and they'll have to join the solidarity network and commit to coming out for others as well. That's our deal – take it or leave it.

Getting contacts via posters isn't easy. At the beginning of SeaSol, there were doubts about whether anyone would ever call us. We started by spending several weeks working on and arguing about text and design

for two different versions, one for boss problems and one for landlord problems. Then we probably put up around 300 posters before we got our first call. They get torn down so we had to keep going back and putting them up again.

There are definitely people getting screwed over in your town. Don't give up if they don't call you right away. If you keep postering over and over in a lot of different places and still aren't getting calls, consider redesigning your poster. In our experience, the most effective posters do not look like anarchist propaganda. Try putting them on brightly colored paper, and make sure the key phrases ("unpaid wages?", "stolen deposit?") stand out large and clear to a casual passer-by.

***Getting a call and setting up the first meeting.*** When someone calls us about a conflict with their employer or landlord, the SeaSol secretary-of-the-week listens to the voicemail and calls them back. The secretary asks questions, listens briefly to their story, explains what our group is about, and if it makes sense, sets up a first meeting with them, usually in a public place like a coffee shop. At these initial meetings we aim to have at least two, and no more than four SeaSol members present, with at least one being a committed organizer who has some experience.

***Agitate // Educate // Organize.*** In this first meeting, we go through the classic organizing steps of "agitate – educate – organize".

"***Agitate***", in this case, doesn't mean making a speech. It means listening to their story (even if they already told it on the phone) and asking questions to bring out exactly how the injustices affect their life. In talking through this they're "agitating" themselves - in other words, they're bringing to the surface the emotional forces which made them want to contact us in the first place. The emotional response to getting stepped on is often extremely powerful, but most of the time people bury these feelings in the back of their minds so they can get through day-to-day life. Now it all has to come back out. Only then will they be ready to face the possibly unfamiliar and scary idea of fighting back using direct action.

The next step, "***Educate***", means helping them understand how something could be done about their situation through collective direct action. We do this by briefly describing how our action campaigns work, using real examples. We give them a sense of what their first action (the group demand delivery) might be like. We don't bullshit them or promi-

se that we will win their fight, but we give them a sense of the strategy behind our campaigns, and why it usually succeeds. We also briefly explain the other key things they need to understand about SeaSol, especially the fact that we're all volunteers and that we're not a law firm or a social service.

Finally, "***Organize***" means getting into the specific, practical tasks that we need to ask from them. Can they help us boil their problems down to a specific demand that we could fight for (see the 'Demands' section for more on this)? If we did fight for it, would they be able and willing to come to our meetings every week to take part in the planning? Would they be willing to become members of the solidarity network, receive frequent phone calls for actions in support of other workers and tenants, and commit to coming out whenever they could?

## Deciding whether to take on the fight

We end the first meeting by making a plan to follow up with them, usually by phone, once SeaSol as a group has had a chance to decide whether we're going to take on the fight. We ordinarily vote on this (majority rules) at our weekly meeting. If it's really urgent, we use a passive consensus process called the "24 hour rule" by emailing a proposal to our higher traffic email list. If no one objects within 24 hours, then the proposal passes. But the situation is rarely urgent enough to require this process, and it's basically impossible to use it for tricky decisions (since we won't have consensus), so usually a decision to take on a fight can wait until the weekly meeting. We make sure not to invite the person (or people) requesting support to be present at this meeting -- otherwise we would never be able to say no.

We use three main criteria in deciding whether to take on a fight: Is the fight compelling enough to motivate our members and supporters? Are the affected workers/tenants ready to participate in the campaign? And, can we win it?

We think about ***winnability*** as the relationship between two factors: how hard it is for the boss/landlord to give in to our demand, versus how much we can hurt them. Consider a restaurant that owes its former dishwasher $500 in unpaid wages. The restaurant has one location only, and it's in a touristy area, where potential diners are not all that loyal to any particular restaurant. It is having cash flow problems.

*How hard is it for them to give in?* They're having money troubles, so it might be a little hard for them to scrape together the $500. On the other hand, this is always a matter of priorities, and $500 is not a ton of money for a business. If we pressure the boss enough, it seems likely that he might be able to come up with it.

*How much can we hurt them?* Our ability to hurt any boss or landlord ranges from "we can embarrass them", which is weak but still sometimes useful, to "we can put them out of business", which is usually the strongest thing we can threaten. In the case of the real-life restaurant used in this example, with a few months of aggressive weekend picketing we could probably have put them out of business. After weighing the difficulty of the demand versus how much we could hurt them, we decided this was a winnable fight. As it turned out, the restaurant owner, after going through the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), decided he didn't want to find out if we could put him out of business, and the dishwasher got paid.

When we don't think we can win a fight (or don't have the capacity, and have too many fights ongoing already), we don't take it on. Moving from victory to victory keeps the group energized and growing. Getting bogged down in unwinnable fights would do the opposite. As we grow stronger, fights which are unwinnable now will become winnable in the future.

# DEMANDS

***In which we discuss the formulating and delivering of demands.***

## Formulating the demand.

Before we can decide on whether a fight would be winnable, we need to know exactly what we'd be fighting for. This is something we have to figure out during the initial meeting. Usually when someone first meets with us, they have a problem with their boss or landlord, but they don't yet have a demand. We have to help them come up with a clear, specific, reasonable demand that can be communicated to the boss or landlord, telling them exactly what we expect them to do to address the problem. The demand should be as simple and concise as possible. Sometimes it's necessary to include multiple demands, but it can't be a huge laundry list. If the demand isn't simple, righteous and compelling enough, our own people won't understand or feel strongly enough to come out and fight for it. If it isn't specific enough, we'll end up with confusion over whether or not we've won.

Here is an example of a poorly-formulated demand to give to a landlord:

> *"Address ongoing issues concerning moisture and mold which have continued to be ignored."*

The main problem here is that it isn't specific. How will we know when "ongoing issues" have been "addressed"?

Here is a better version:

> *"Repair the leaks in the kitchen and living room ceilings, which are causing water damage and mold."*

It's clear and specific. There won't be much room for doubt over whether or not it's been done.

## Putting it in writing.

When we present our demands, we always do so by handing over a written demand letter. If we were to present our demands verbally, we

might find ourselves getting bogged down in back-and-forth arguments with the boss or landlord, which would lead to confusion and delay. Presenting the demands in writing helps us avoid this, and it also lets the group democratically decide on exactly what message we want to get across to the boss or landlord, without much risk of mix-ups or miscommunication.

Obviously the affected worker/tenant (or group of them) needs to be involved in the process of putting together the demand letter, and they need to be in agreement with the final version we end up with. However, this doesn't mean we let them write whatever they want. The demand letter is signed in the name of the solidarity network as a whole, so we have to make sure it's something that we as an organization are prepared to stand behind, and to fight a potentially long and hard campaign over.

We keep our demand letters extremely short and to the point. This is sometimes a challenge, because often the first impulse of the person we're supporting is to use this letter as a vehicle for expressing all their anger to the boss or landlord, or for presenting lengthy justifications for the demands. We have to explain that while all this stuff can be great when it comes to mobilizing our supporters, telling it to the boss or landlord isn't likely to do any good at this point. In the demand letter, there are really only three things we need to get across: (1) what the problem is, (2) what the boss or landlord needs to do about it, and (3) how much time we're going to wait before taking further action.

Here's an example:

> *October 23, 2010*
>
> *Mr. Ciro D'onofrio,*
> *It has come to our attention that a former employee, Becky Davis, has not been paid the final wages she earned working for Bella Napoli, of which you are the owner.*
>
> *A total of $478 was never paid to her after her month of employment. The various reasons given for this – missing invoices and a missing bottle of wine – seem to be spurious and untenable.*
>
> *As the owner of this company, we see it as your responsibility to ensure that this situation be resolved, and that your employee is paid in full the wages she is owed. We will expect this to be done soon, within no more than 14 days. Otherwise we will take further action.*

*Sincerely,*
*Becky Davis and The Seattle Solidarity Network*
*www.seasol.net / info@seasol.net / 206-350-8650*

## Delivering the demand.

Our fights always begin with the delivery of the demand en masse. We round up a group of people, anywhere from 10 to 30, to go with the worker or tenant affected and confront the boss or landlord in their office or at their home. It isn't a violent confrontation, but nor is it a friendly visit. The group is there to get the boss or landlord's attention, to show that there is some real support behind the demand, and to make them think twice about retaliating. We don't engage in conversation -- in fact, sometimes these actions are entirely silent. Once the whole group has assembled in front of the boss or landlord, the worker or tenant affected steps forward and hands over the demand letter, and then we leave.

Some have argued that it would be quicker and easier just to send the demand letter by mail. In some cases this might be true, in the sense that we could get our demands met more efficiently this way, but it would not serve our larger goal of building up people power. Delivering the demand in person as a group builds a sense of solidarity, in a way that mailing a letter could never do. The people who take part in it end up feeling personally connected to the fight. This means that if the target boss or landlord gets scared and gives in quickly, it's an empowering victory for everyone who participated in the demand delivery. If the target does not give in quickly, then all those who came out are now much more likely to be willing and eager to come out for the follow-up actions. If we got our demands met just by mailing a letter, the only people who would have participated in the victory would be the one or two individuals who had written the letter and dropped it in the mail. It would do nothing to build up power for the future.

When planning a demand delivery action, we don't want the boss or landlord to know we're coming. Without the element of surprise, the action would have much less impact. They might even arrange to be absent at the time of the action, or to have police there waiting for us. This actually happened to SeaSol once, when we had foolishly forwarded around an online action-announcement in which we named the company we were targeting. Since then, when announcing demand delivery actions we've always made sure to avoid broadcasting the name of the boss or landlord involved. Sometimes we assign them a code name.

Demand delivery actions can be a tense experience for some of our people, especially new folks. As we're approaching the target's office or home, the people in front seem to want to walk fast, while the ones in back lag behind. We've seen this lead to a situation where the person in front arrives almost alone in the target's office, and in their nervousness, hands over the demand letter and turns to leave before most of their backup has had a chance to file in through the door. Obviously this squanders a lot of the power of the action. To avoid this, we now make a point of asking the people in front to walk slowly, and the person carrying the demand letter stays in the back of the crowd until after we've all gathered in front of the target. Then, once the full presence of the group has been felt, we part like the Red Sea while the letter-bearer passes through and hands over the demand.

***Why not refuse to leave until the boss/landlord gives in?*** Some have asked why we don't just stay there in the target's office until they've resolved the problem. No doubt occasionally this would scare them into giving in on the spot. But what about the other times, when they decide to be stubborn and refuse to give in? To counter us, all they'd have to do would be to call the cops and wait. After a while the cops would arrive to forcibly remove us, and with our current strength we would not be able to hold out for long. Then we'd be stuck spending our time on legal defense instead of planning further action against the boss or landlord. Plus, having started off our campaign with such an intense action, we'd have little or no room to further escalate the pressure.

By choosing to leave once we've delivered our message, with a promise of more action to come, we keep the initiative. Instead of trying to defend a space that we wouldn't actually be able to defend, we stay on the attack. This makes it very hard for the boss or landlord to counter us. We're there in their face before they know what's going on, and then we're gone before they can bring in the cops. We leave them with an impression of strength, and we leave them wondering what we'll do next.

Finally, depending on the demand, it's not always even possible for the boss or landlord to grant it on the spot. What about repairs to a building, or better safety equipment at work? Here the most we could force out of them immediately would be a written promise, which they would then be likely to break as soon as we were gone.

# STRATEGY

***In which we summarize the basic principles of strategy used in SeaSol fights.***

If the boss/landlord doesn't give in before our deadline, then the pressure campaign begins. Through a sustained series of actions, we aim to create an increasingly unpleasant situation for the boss or landlord, from which their only escape is to grant our demands.

There is no sense doing a demand delivery unless we're ready to back it up with an action plan that can force the enemy to give in. Therefore we consider, what are the pressure points we can use against the enemy? How many people can we get out to an action, and what are people willing to do at those actions? All of this takes a serious and thoughtful analysis of our own strength.

Our campaign strategy is based on the basic insight that the boss or landlord doesn't cave in as a result of what we just did to them—they cave in as a result of their fear of what we're going to do next. So we have to be able to ***escalate***, or increase the pressure over time, and we have to ***pace ourselves*** so that we can sustain the fight for as long as it takes. At least once during a fight, we brainstorm possible tactics and order them from least to most pressure. Then we make a plan for how often and in which order we should carry them out.

To illustrate this, here's a list of the actions we took in our fight against Nelson Properties, in order from start to finish:

**1**---We did the mass demand delivery.

**2**---We started the ongoing posting and re-posting of "Do Not Rent Here" posters around many different Nelson buildings.

**3**---We started door-to-door tenants'-rights discussions with current Nelson tenants.

**4**---We started a series of small pickets in front of Nelson's office.

**5**---We delivered letters to Nelson's neighbors, warning them about an as-yet-unnamed slumlord in their midst, and promising to return en masse to discuss the problem with each neighbor in full detail. We made sure Nelson himself got a copy.

And then we won.

# A TAXONOMY OF TACTICS

***In which we describe our criteria for evaluating tactics and elaborate a taxonomy of tactics we have tried.***

For any potential tactic we have to ask ourselves these questions:

***Does it hurt them?*** For example, does it cost them money? Does it hurt their reputation? Does it hurt their career?

***Does it hurt us?*** Does it put too much strain on our people? Does it get us arrested, prosecuted, or sued?

***Can we mobilize for it?*** Will our people like it? Will they understand it? Will they be able to do it? It is at a time when people are available?

We want all our actions to build people's experience, confidence, knowledge, and radicalization. We want to take action in an empowering manner, avoiding the disempowerment that comes from relying on bureaucrats, social workers, politicians, lawyers, and other "experts."

We take different approaches for different targets. We try to be creative and flexible. Tactics brainstorm sessions are sometimes hilarious. Picketing was great for Pita Pit because it was a public restaurant in a high foot-traffic area. Picketing was not a great idea for the Capitola Apartments, because it was hard to know when potential renters might show up to view the place, but repeatedly putting up "Do Not Rent Here" posters worked great.

Here are some of the types of tactics SeaSol has used so far. Each one has its pros, cons, and logistical considerations.

***Handing out flyers in front of a workplace.*** Flyering at a workplace can be targeted at customers, at workers, or at random passers-by. Just handing out flyers is a little bit less aggressive than picketing with signs. The content can either be purely informational, just arousing sym-

pathy and raising awareness of the issue (ostensibly—really it's always about freaking out the boss), or it can be openly about turning away customers, as in "Don't shop here!".

***Picketing a store / restaurant / hotel.*** The timing of a picket is really important and often warrants scouting the location to determine the time of most possible impact. We have found that direct messages garner the most attention: "Don't Rent/Shop/Eat Here" grabs people's attention more than a nebulous "Justice for all workers!" or similar. When we picket we usually hand out an aggressive flyer at the same time. We have also tried out other tricks to help turn away business. For example, in the Jimmy John's fight, we handed out coupons for Subway; in the Greenlake and Nelson fights we had collected negative online reviews to show to potential customers; in the Tuff Shed fight we had a list of other shed stores to direct people to.

In some cases picketing can antagonize the current employees, especially if they are restaurant workers who are dependent on tips. Recently we have discussed the idea of always doing a week or two of less aggressive, informational picketing or flyering before we start aggressively turning away business. This would give us an opportunity to make contact with the current employees in a positive way and explain the issue to them. We have also begun taking up collections for the tip jar when picketing a coffee shop or restaurant.

***Picketing an office.*** Usually picketing a company's office does not turn away customers, but it does generate embarrassment. Again timing is key. When are their busy times? Sometimes we haven't been sure if they've noticed us, so we've stood right in front of the door until they've asked us to leave.

***Postering around a store / restaurant / hotel.*** Again, the content can be informational or else urging a boycott. Posters are usually targeted at foot traffic so we put them up accordingly (eye-level, facing sidewalks). Posters often get ripped down quickly.

***Postering around vacant rental units.*** The posters usually say "DON'T RENT AT [name of building]", and they highlight problems that will turn off potential renters, such as pests, mold, deposit theft, etc. We emphasize that if someone rents from this landlord, they too will suffer from the landlord's injustices. Here we're appealing to poten-

tial tenants' self interest, whereas in a "don't shop here" flyer, we're typically making more of a moral appeal. To make sure the landlord sees the connection between these posters and our conflict and demands, we add a little explanatory text at the bottom, like "Nelson Properties is currently persecuting former tenant Maria. You could be next."

***Visiting neighbors with flyers.*** Airing the boss or landlord's dirty laundry in front of their neighbors can often make them extremely uncomfortable. This is most effective when they live in an upscale neighborhood. You can approach the neighbors on the pretext that, as neighbors, they might be in a position to influence the boss or landlord to "do the right thing." If neighbors do actually exert pressure, it's more likely to have to do with the fact that the boss's or landlord's activities are subjecting the neighborhood to an uncomfortable situation, rather than based on moral considerations.

***Visiting the landlord's workplace (if any).*** The issues involved with visiting a workplace are very similar to visiting a neighborhood: to put the boss/landlord in an uncomfortable position. It's good to show up in a big enough group to get a lot of attention, speak to the person's boss and/or coworkers about the issue. We hope this will then generate secondary pressure on the landlord, via their boss ordering them to see to it that this doesn't happen again.

***Introductory letter to neighbors or coworkers.*** In the past we used to do neighbor or workplace visits without any warning, as a one-off tactic. This succeeded in upsetting the boss or landlord quite a lot, but it didn't seem to cause them to give in. The problem was, it didn't generate ongoing pressure. After we did it, the damage was done – they had been "outed" to the neighbors/coworkers. Before we did it, they didn't know it was coming. So it didn't add any pressure.

After running into this problem several times, we decided to try doing the action in two parts. The second part is the visit as described above. The first part, one to three weeks earlier, consists of mailing or discreetly dropping off (on doorsteps or car windshields) "introductory letters" to the boss or landlord's neighbors or coworkers, making a point to accidentally mail or leave one for the boss/landlord themselves as well.
Here is an example of one of these letters, from our fight with Nelson Properties.

*Hello,*
*We would like to reach out to you, as concerned neighborhood residents, about a tragic situation which you may be in a position to influence for the better.*

*Maria and her family, who recently moved after suffering health problems due to landlord negligence, are now suffering further abuse at the hands of an unscrupulous business called Nelson Properties, which is rooted in this neighborhood. Having collecting rent from them without doing basic maintenance, Nelson is now pursuing Maria and her family for even more money that they do not owe and do not have, and is also wrongfully pocketing their deposit - a small extra profit for Nelson, but a huge loss for a low-income worker like Maria.*

*A group of concerned activists will be roaming the neighborhood soon to distribute more information and to discuss this issue in more depth with each household on the street.*

*We look forward to meeting you!*

*Sincerely,*
*Seattle Solidarity Network*

These letters are vague and polite—we don't want to sound like thugs—but they let the boss/landlord and neighbors/coworkers know that we will soon do something that will make them uncomfortable. It contains just enough information so that the boss or landlord themselves knows it's about them, but it won't necessarily be entirely clear to the neighbors/coworkers who this is about. This leaves plenty of room for us to get more specific when we actually visit the neighborhood or workplace.

In this particular example, we had been fighting them for a month, and then they gave in within two days after we delivered this letter.

***Postering around the boss or landlord's home.*** We have found this to be an effective way of airing the target's dirty laundry in front of their neighbors and family members. This is similar to showing up in person but easier—it takes fewer people and can be repeated over and over as posters get torn down. Make sure to include the boss/landlord's name and address on the poster and if possible a photo of the boss/landlord or of their house.

**Addressing city council meetings.** Most city councils have a public comment period where anyone can speak. These are often televised. They're usually poorly attended, so a sizable organized group with a compelling message tends to get attention. This is mainly useful if the boss or landlord has business relationships with the city, or if the council has decisions to make which will impact their business in some way. Otherwise this tactic is not likely to have much impact, unless the target is exceptionally high-profile and concerned about his/her reputation.

Come prepared with a short speech, so you're not making it up as you go along. This tactic has more impact if combined with picketing at the outside entrance before the start of the meeting. We have found it works well to have all supporters stand while the speaker is speaking and cheer after they finish. This allows for the presence of the group to be felt by the council in connection with what the speaker is saying.

***Crashing events (such as open houses).*** This tactic makes the most sense in a long-running fight, where you are trying to find every possible way of making trouble for your target. When you find, usually by searching online, that a company you're fighting is holding an event that's open to the public, you can have a few people go in "plainclothes"—without picket signs—and blend in with the crowd. Then after a prearranged signal (someone yells, "yee-haw!"), they start distributing flyers to the crowd to inform everyone of the company's misdeeds. Don't forget to save some of the free snacks for your comrades outside.

***Picketing at public meetings and events.*** Any meeting, convention, or other event that your target is connected to can be a good option for picketing. Your target may have dealings with government agencies, sponsor industry meet-ups, belong to a country club, or be connected to a charity. These can provide picketing opportunities where you can tarnish their reputation in the eyes of people whose good opinion they care about.

***Calling to arrange to view an apartment.*** If a landlord has vacancies they are trying to fill, you can mess with them by calling to arrange viewings. This works best when combined with picketing or flyering outside the rental office or outside the for-rent unit. Then the person who arranged the viewing can either: (1) not show up and call later to say they've changed their mind after receiving a flyer about the conflict,

or (2) if they're a good actor, they can go through with the viewing and act very uncomfortable about the people picketing/flyering outside.

***Online reviews.*** Some businesses rely heavily on the internet for getting customers. There are several popular websites where anyone can post reviews about businesses. A sudden barrage of negative reviews can have a major impact. Plus it's a fun tactic that lots of people can do on their own time, and even supporters in other cities can help out. For this tactic to be effective, the target has to be able to see that the barrage of negative reviews is connected to your conflict and demands.

***Satirical charity events.*** If your target is known to be wealthy and is vulnerable to public shaming, holding highly-visible "charity" events on their behalf can be a clever way to ridicule them. To get the most possible mileage out of this tactic, plan it well in advance and advertise heavily with posters and/or flyers. Here's an example:

> *Impoverished landlords Harpal Supra and Tajinder Singh need your help! For months they have not been able to maintain decent health and safety conditions - such as clean drinking water and ventilation - in the house at 24260 132nd Ave SE, Kent. In protest, the family who lives there has decided to withhold rent money from them. The landlords are in such need of this money that they are now in the process of evicting the family!*
>
> *You and your family are warmly invited to a Charity Bake Sale for Harpal Supra and Tajinder Singh, from 3pm to 6pm on Sunday, April 26, at 24260 132nd Ave SE, Kent - right next to the Gurudwara Sacha Marg.*
>
> *Come eat, and contribute whatever you can - even $1 or 50 cents - to help Harpal Supra and Tajinder Singh.*

When we finally won our year-long fight against Lorig Associates, one of their conditions for giving in was that we formally agree not to hold any more charity bake sales for Bruce Lorig.

***Tenant investigation.*** When fighting a large landlord, you might find it worthwhile to go door-to-door informing all the other tenants of their rights and asking about landlord abuses. We call this a "tenant investigation". We generally go in with a half-page flyer that lists a bunch of common landlord-tenant problems and invites people to get in touch if they'd like more info about their rights. We make a point of leaving some of these lying around the building, so that management is sure to know about our visit. This tactic tends to make landlords pretty ner-

vous, and it's a great way to establish good relations with the other tenants who are not directly involved in the fight.

***Noncompliance pact.*** We've been in a couple of fights in which a group of tenants were all facing evictions or major rent hikes. In this situation, a powerful tactic has been for everyone affected (or as many as are willing) to form a mutual "noncompliance pact", and to inform the landlord that none of them are going to comply or voluntarily vacate the building until all their demands have been met. This puts the landlord in a tough position, since forcibly evicting even one tenant can be a lengthy and expensive process, so for a whole group of tenants it may be more trouble than giving in to the demands. Here's an example of a "noncompliance" letter, signed by ten residents in an apartment building:

> *We, tenants of the Kasota apartments who are not Sound Mental Health clients, hereby notify you that we cannot accept the cruel and unjust way in which we are now being forced from our homes. You have presented us with a rent increase which is so extreme, you must be aware that we could not possibly afford to pay it. It appears that the intent is simply to drive us out.*
>
> *If we are to be forced out of our homes, then we respectfully insist that you provide each of us with relocation assistance, so that we can find other places to live and not join the ranks of the homeless.*
>
> *We hereby pledge:*
>
> *Unless and until each and every one of us has received adequate relocation assistance, none of us will pay the increased rent or voluntarily vacate the building.*

# MEETINGS

***In which we discuss what it takes for solidarity network meetings to be inclusive, democratic, and effective at getting things done.***

Meetings may be a boring topic to write or read about, but in fact, we spend more time together in meetings than we do on picket lines. Meetings are where the actual planning of our campaigns happens. Meetings are also where we put direct democracy into practice. In this section, we'll go over a few of the key practices we've developed in the course of three years of SeaSol meetings.

***We meet every week, and we really get stuff done during these meetings.*** When SeaSol first formed, we only met twice per month. The long gaps between regular meetings meant that most of the logistics and planning of our fights had to get done separately in between these meetings, in small ad hoc planning sessions among the most active organizers. This made it hard for newer people to start participating in a meaningful way. It was also hard on our schedules. When we finally switched to meeting every week, splitting the meeting into smaller "breakout" sessions where needed, it seriously improved our ability to grow and to take on more fights. Now, these regular meetings are the place where almost all of our actual planning gets done, and there's rarely a need for separate planning sessions in between. The regular meetings now provide a space where any SeaSol member who wants to step up can easily start participating, alongside more experienced folks, in the planning and execution of our campaigns. Having this "permeability" within the group, where new people can easily volunteer for jobs and can get involved in real organizing very quickly, gives a huge boost to our ability to bring in and develop new organizers. Also our meetings are now much better attended, since they're much more worth attending.

***We assign clear responsibility for specific tasks.*** In a representative democracy, or in a staff-driven organization that has a Board of Directors, there is usually a fixed distinction between "legislative" and "executive" roles, in other words, between those who make the decisions and those who carry them out. In a direct, participatory democracy like SeaSol, this is not the case. Because we have no fixed "executive" who can be expected to carry out the decisions of the group, whenever we decide

to do something, we then have to ask, "which of us will take responsibility for making sure this task gets done?" Otherwise, more often than not it won't get done at all, and our democratic decisions will be meaningless. When we give someone responsibility for a specific task, this does not mean we're giving them authority, in the sense of a coercive ability to order others around. They just have to ask nicely for help, and hope that others are willing to cooperate. If all else fails, they just have to do it themselves.

***We create an agenda at the beginning of each meeting.*** Whoever is present at the beginning of a meeting has an opportunity to contribute agenda items. This process doesn't take long, because the main items tend to be the same every week: incoming calls, breakouts to plan ongoing fights, outreach to bring in new members, etc etc.

***Time is of the essence.*** Some people like to use group meetings as opportunities for ranting at great length on various topics. If we allowed this, our meetings would run on forever and we wouldn't get much done. To prevent it, when making the agenda we set a time limit for each item, and we ask someone to play the role of "time keeper" for the meeting. This allows us to manage the overall length of the meeting, and to make sure everything essential gets done.

***We use strong meeting facilitation.*** In our experience, probably the most important factor in making a SeaSol meeting work well is having a strong, competent facilitator. It's the facilitator's job to make sure that we're moving through the agenda, that decisions are being made democratically, and that everyone who wants to participate has the opportunity to do so. This is a tricky skill, and it takes time, effort and practice to develop it. We're always trying to help each other get better at it.

Here are some tips we've put together to give to new people in SeaSol who want to try facilitating a meeting:

## Tips & Tricks for SeaSol meeting facilitation

*---Listen for proposals in what people are saying. Try to steer the group towards making decisions and acting upon them, instead of talking in circles.*

*---Restate proposals to make sure everyone knows what's being decided on. A few phrases you can use are: "What I'm hearing is..." and "We have a proposal to..."*

*---When in doubt, take a vote.*

*---Keep "stack", i.e. a list of people who want to speak on a topic. Call on people in order. If it's too much to keep track of, you can recruit a helper to keep stack for you.*

*---Don't be afraid to cut people off if they are talking out of turn, over time, or interrupting other people.*

*---Don't abuse your position as chair to give your opinion more weight / time / authority.*

*---Be neutral when you ask for votes, and use the same tone of voice for all options. As in: "All in favor." "All opposed." Rather than: "Does anyone want to vote against this?"*

*---Always have a time keeper and note taker.*

*---Add up the length of the agenda at the beginning of meeting so the group knows what they're getting into. This may cause people to decide to spend less time on certain items.*

*---You can ask the time keeper to give you warnings (5 min, 3 min, 1 min)*

*---Ask meeting attendees' permission to extend the time on an agenda item (possibly through a quick vote).*

*---Periodically check back in about the meeting's remaining time, and when the meeting is projected to end.*

*---Need a break? Ask someone else to take over as chair.*

*---If your mouth gets dry, it's a sign that you're talking too much.*

# MOBILIZING

***In which we describe how we consistently turn out enough people for our actions.***

Since the point of a solidarity network is to engage in direct action, mobilizing people for actions is one of the most important things we do as a group. We take our ability to mobilize very seriously. We try not to waste people's time or mess people around by frequently canceling or rescheduling actions, and we try to make sure our actions are worth showing up to.

SeaSol's main tool for mobilizing is a phone tree, currently with about 170 people. Each member of the organizing team (What's that? See the section on "Organizing capacity and group structure") is a "branch" on the tree and has about 10 people to mobilize each time we have a major action. Whenever possible we want to use the strength of existing social bonds, so for example if someone on the phone tree is a close friend of one of the organizers, then they should probably be on that organizer's calling list. We also have a mass email list for action announcements. Mass emails rarely cause many people to show up, but they're useful for a reminder or for reference. An individual email sent to a friend who checks email a lot ("Hey Kate, can you come out for this?") is a different story -- personal invites can work well in any medium, depending on the habits and preferences of the person you're inviting.

Regardless of how we're contacting someone for an action, our goal is always to get an answer from them — yes, no, or maybe — as to whether or not they'll be coming. A person who has said "Yes, I'll be there" to another human being is much more likely to show up to an action than someone who's just received a message. For that reason, when making phone calls we make a concerted effort to actually talk to people rather than talking to their voice mail. Before leaving a message, we try calling on two different days, sometimes at different times.

It's important to have realistic expectations about turnout. If you want to get a lot of people to an action, it usually takes a lot of work and organization. Out of thirty people who say "yes", we've generally found that

somewhere between fifteen and twenty will show up. Out of ten people who say "maybe", we might expect between zero and two (maybe means no!).

To consistently do a good job at mobilizing requires some structure and some collective responsibility. Our organizing team always has a deadline for when we should get our calls done. We report our results to each other by email. Then the person who's "bottom line" for the action follows up with anyone who hasn't reported yet, to see if they need help and to make sure it gets done.

# STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZING CAPACITY

***In which we discuss the challenges of organizational structure and of developing solid organizers.***

At the beginning, SeaSol had almost no formal structure. There wasn't much need for it, since we were a tiny group of people with a low level of activity. We realized that we might later have more need for formal structures, as the group got bigger and more active, but we did not try to set them up in advance. In hindsight, this seems to have been a wise decision. If we had spent our time arguing about, planning, and then maintaining formal structures that we hypothetically might need at some point in the future, it would have been a serious drag on our ability to start taking action and building real strength. Instead, over time we have added on pieces of structural organization (e.g. an organizing team, a secretary role, a definition of membership) on an as-needed basis, as the group's increased size and complexity has created both the need for them and the capacity to maintain them.

For example, for our whole first year we informally left almost all administrative work to one dedicated, reliable person who had a ton of free time. That was who answered the calls, replied to emails, and set up the initial meetings for new fights. The role was not elected or even formally defined. The work just needed to get done, and if we only had one person who was able and willing to do it consistently, that was who had to do it. Then later on, once we had multiple reliable and committed people who were able to shoulder that burden, we created a formally defined role called "secretary duty", which changes hands almost every week.

As we've developed SeaSol's structure, we've always wrestled with the fact that there have been dramatically unequal levels of involvement between different people in the group. In principle we would prefer to have everyone participating equally. However, this doesn't seem to be possible in a volunteer-based organization. We will always (if we're lucky) have some people who want to spend half their waking hours on solidarity-network organizing, while others only want to receive an occasional email, and the rest are somewhere in between. SeaSol has decided to accept this unevenness as a fact of life, and to develop a structure that makes room for different levels of involvement. We try to make it as easy as possible for people to move from one level to the next.

When someone signs up online for our action-announcements phone list or email list, and they haven't yet been to an action or a meeting, at first we consider them a "supporter". At this level, at most they'll get a phone call about once per month inviting them to an action. Once someone comes out to an action, at the end of the action they'll be invited to become a "member". Being a member doesn't require them to pay dues, but it means considering themselves part of SeaSol, committing to come out to actions whenever possible, and receiving much more frequent phone calls and emails. When someone enlists SeaSol for their own job or housing conflict, they're required to become a member if they weren't already.

The highest level of commitment is to be an "organizer", i.e. a member of the organizing committee (or "team"). Although it's technically an elected committee, we encourage as many people to join it as are willing. Organizers commit to coming to all weekly meetings and to being the "branches" on the phone tree whenever we do a mobilization. Organizing committee members are also the ones who return calls and who take the lead on meeting with people for potential new fights. The organizing committee does not have any special powers, nor does it ever meet separately from the rest of SeaSol. It's a position of responsibility, not of authority.

Having this committed core group is absolutely essential to SeaSol's ability to keep things going and to get things done consistently. When projects don't have a group of people who have committed to doing a certain amount of work, they tend to end up with one or two poor overworked souls actually doing everything, while the people around them say, 'Wow, this just works! It's easy! It's so organic!'

Whatever energy we can spare from the basic organizing, we try to spend on developing new people's organizing capacity. We have semi-regular trainings covering the basic skills it takes to run a direct action campaign. Afterwards, we often do one-on-one followup sessions where we share our strengths, challenges, and goals as organizers.

There is often a difficult balance to strike between developing newer people and making sure stuff gets done. People don't like to feel micromanaged, but on the other hand, leaving them to fail at a task or drop the ball can be even more demoralizing and disempowering. We have a few strategies to try to walk this fine line. First, we maintain a group culture that more or less frowns on flakiness and values solidness. When you take on a task, everyone expects that you will actually do the task by the time you agreed to, and then report back on your progress. When you do so, you gain some respect within the group. When you don't, you lose some. This generates real social pressure to follow through on what you say you're going to do. Second, we make an effort to push people to move past their fears and try out new aspects of organizing. This can be as simple as doing a task with someone the first time, and then the second time asking, "Why don't you try taking the lead this time?" The standard axiom for this is, "see one, do one, teach one," although it should probably be "see a few, do a lot, teach one". Third, we follow up with each other to offer support and to help work through any obstacles people are facing in getting stuff done. When a new person volunteers to bottom-line something, we often have someone who's more experienced volunteer to be their "backup" person, to help them through any difficulties and to pick up the ball if it gets dropped.

Finally, it's worth mentioning that the most common obstacle to people developing their organizing capacity within SeaSol has been personal disorganization, i.e. not keeping a calendar. Just by the simple step of starting to keep a calendar, we've seen hopelessly flaky people go through dramatic transformations and become awesome organizers.

# INSIDE ORGANIZING

***In which we describe our current efforts towards the building of worker and tenant commit tees within workplaces and apartment buildings.***

So far, most of SeaSol's workplace-related fights have been in support of someone who has already quit or been fired, and either they're owed wages, or they were fired unjustly, or the employer is still retaliating against them in some way (threatening to sue them, stopping them from getting unemployment or injury benefits, etc). Likewise most of our landlord fights have been in support of someone who has moved out of the building and has had their deposit stolen or been charged unreasonable fees. In these situations, the ex-employee or ex-tenant no longer has much to lose in fighting back, since the target employer or landlord is no longer in a position to fire or evict them. This makes it possible for us to launch almost immediately into a public action campaign to deal with the individual injustice.

On the other hand, when we're working with someone who wants our help in fighting their current boss or landlord, the strategy has to be different. If an individual worker or tenant were to target their current boss or landlord with a SeaSol campaign, while still isolated within their own workplace or apartment building, they'd be almost certain to get hit with extreme retaliation, if not outright firing or eviction. Therefore in this situation, instead of immediately launching an open campaign to support the individual, our first task is to help them build up a strong committee of workers within the workplace, or of tenants within the apartment building. This has to happen "under the radar" as much as possible, through careful one-on-one organizing. Only then, when there is a united group within the workplace or apartment building, does it make sense for them (or for SeaSol) to launch into an open, public struggle against the boss or landlord.

SeaSol is only now starting to put serious work into developing the capacity to do this kind of "inside" organizing effectively, while continuing to carry on our usual "outside" fights at the same time. We're going into this effort jointly with the IWW, making heavy use of the IWW's on-the-job organizing training curriculum. It's the next frontier. [cue inspiring theme music]

# SECTION 2
# WHY YOU SHOULD START A SOLI. NETWORK

People often accuse anarchists of being opposed to all forms of organization. Some of us are quick to point out, however, that it's not all organization we are opposed to—just apparently the effective ones.

When I first became interested in Anarchist politics, there weren't many groups for me to get involved with. All of the collectives I joined seemed to form, fall apart, and reform—always the same people reshuffling into new groups, disbanding, and starting over again. If they took part in any discernible action at all, it was normally because some other group had organized it.

All over the U.S., in fact, the Anarchist organizations I had worked with could be summed up in one word - they were aimless.

They had vague objectives. They had no discernable, immediate goals. Actually, if you asked most of them what they were doing, I'm not sure you could get a straight answer.

Sound familiar?

These are chronic issues in much of the Anarchist movement today, and if my experience is any indicator, you've probably run into similar problems.

There is, however, a way to get around these issues: with perseverance and a little bit of elbow grease, you can start your own solidarity network.

Although by no means does this model offer the only solutions to these common problems, the solidarity network model, nonetheless, does offer some practical insights and examples of how we can:

*1*. Win fights against our bosses and landlords, *2*. Attract new workers to our organizations, many of whom will have never even heard of Anarchism before, *3*. Empower ourselves and our fellow workers, and *4*. Establish a stable and positive presence in our community, off of which we may continue to grow in new directions.

***To Begin:***
The Seattle Solidarity Network, or SeaSol for short, started in 2008 with only a handful of activists, from a variety of backgrounds. Some had experience in labor organizing, others in anti-summit work against the G8, and others still in various anti-war campaigns.

In part, the intention of the first organizers was to build off of the great work of people who had come before them. The vision for SeaSol, in fact, might best be described as a blending of the "direct action casework" of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and the "solidarity unionism" of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Since its founding, SeaSol has grown to encompass a membership of over 100 people, and an organizing committee of 15. These fifteen organizers, moreover, can rely on a mobilizing list of 400 supporters to call out to actions when needed, of whom we can reliably count on perhaps 20—30 people to turn out.

Largely, SeaSol's growth can be attributed to its success rate. Out of 25 fights SeaSol has taken on, we have won 22.

Further still, SeaSol's success rate can be attributed to its organizing model - which brings us to the first reason to start a solidarity network in your home town:

**1. *Winning Fights Against Bosses and Landlords:***
"Winning," a SeaSol organizer once said, "is like a drug." A very intoxicating and empowering drug.

For those of us who have poured our hearts into a lot of "symbolic" anarchist projects—a lot of anti-police brutality work, anti-war organizing, anti-G8 campaigns, and so on—for those of us who have spent time around these campaigns, we have often felt extremely demoralized.

We have felt this way because despite all the sacrifice, we never won anything. The campaigns never seemed to end after the enemy had conceded something; instead they always seemed to stop when people just became exhausted.

Because of this, the SeaSol model stresses that organizers should have both a good understanding of how to take on bosses and landlords (what tactics work, what don't), and also on how realistic winning a potential new campaign could be.

We like to show this relationship—between our strength and our demands—in our "Winability" graph.

In the graph at the end of this article, we can see that as our demands on a boss become greater, it becomes necessary for us to find more leverage to hurt them. So, the smaller the demand, the less leverage we need. The bigger the demand… you get the idea.

You might think this sounds obvious, and to Anarchists it probably is. This graph is just a nerdy way of teaching people a concept Anarchists have always deeply appreciated—Direct Action.

Even so, Anarchists could still learn a thing or two from SeaSol's take on that old idea.

Part of what makes SeaSol so effective is that we base our actions on our actual strength. If, for example, it was going to take us "5 units" of pressure to win a demand from a boss, but we could only reliably keep up "3 units," we would decline to take on that fight.

Of course, there is no way to quantify any of this, but you understand the concept.

The idea, in a nutshell, is to make sure that we aren't ever spending time on fights we are not yet strong enough to win. By choosing fights carefully, we can focus our energy somewhere we can have a bigger impact. It is, after all, results that people most want to see.

Once the fight is underway, SeaSol uses two basic principals to plan the campaign: escalation and sustainability.

First, we brainstorm what tactics might be effective in the campaign, and we rate them from least to most powerful. We do this because we want to escalate as the fight goes on. "Its not the memory of what we did to them yesterday that will make the bosses give in," explains a SeaSol organizer, "but the fear of what we will do to them tomorrow."

The process of mapping out a fight in this way is helpful not only because it allows us see just how much support we will have to mobilize—its helpful also because it allows us to see if our initial plans are sustainable.

**2. *Attract new workers:***
There are undoubtedly a lot of reasons people may choose to join an organization. How friendly people are, how inclusive the group is, whether or not they agree with the principles of the group—all of these are important considerations for people.

Unfortunately, they are often the only considerations many anarchist organizers have when starting new groups. But there's another consideration we should take into account—people may also want to know what your organization is doing.

The fact of the matter is that its hard to attract most people to your organization with great ideas and inclusiveness alone. People really want to see things get done.

Its also hard to retain people if there isn't a sense that progress is being made - if there isn't some sort of momentum. People tend to burn out pretty quickly in groups where there is not a lot getting done. And who can blame them?

One of the reasons SeaSol has had more sustained growth than any other Anarchist organization in the Northwest over the last two years is

that it offers something practical and concrete to people: mutual support, community, and a real, practical defense against your boss and landlord.

What's more, the retention of new members has also been helped along by our momentum: there is always enough work to go around.

No matter how involved someone wants to get initially, we can always find space for them to come lend a hand. When we attract new people through our ongoing fights and new campaigns, we are increasing our capacity, which means we can take on more fights, thus attracting yet more people.

**3. *Empower ourselves and others:***
"Empowerment" is a term bandied about a lot in radical circles. "We need to empower them and empower them…" It can, at times, be used so often it becomes meaningless.

It is also used quite often in circumstances where, quite frankly, nothing of the sort is happening.

In SeaSol, however, we see it very concretely every day.

The process by which we accomplish the goals of our organization—winning fights against bosses and landlords—involves a lot of formal training. People need to learn how we make mobilizing calls. They need to learn how to conduct a meeting with a potential new fight, and they need to learn how to get a picket line together.

To these ends, we have a lot of one on ones, and we have a lot of group trainings.

But people don't really learn how to organize by hearing a talk or by attending trainings. What's most important about the education people get with the Seattle Solidarity Network is that they are given a space in which they can put ideas into action. Any worker that has a few spare hours every week has a place to come and learn the art and science of people power.

There is more to empowerment, however, than just learning new skills.

Even if the people involved in SeaSol are not ready to become full on organizers, the experience of taking on a boss and winning can still be a very radicalizing experience. It increases not just our power, but our confidence in ourselves.

The campaigns we conduct concretely show us all the real class divisions rife in our society, with workers on one side, and the bosses, landlords, cops and courts on the other. Arguably, the fights we conduct are able to reach many people in a way that our extensive libraries cannot.

**4. *Establish a stable and positive presence in our community, off of which we can grow in new directions:***
Starting a new political group is hard. Getting a group of people together to start any new group is hard. You need to find new ground rules, set new boundaries, find a space to meet, and just get a feeling for how you're going to work with each other. This takes a lot of work.

Arguably, then, it's a problem when groups are constantly falling apart. Unfortunately, that's exactly the state of the Anarchist movement today.

If you are interested in avoiding a lot of the redundant, and frankly unnecessary work of constantly forming new groups, the Solidarity Network model has some advantages.

First, there is never any shortage of workers being screwed over by their bosses or landlords. As long as organizers are dedicated to fighting back, your work is cut out for you.

Secondly, the longer you're around, the easier it is to build a bigger and more inclusive community. It just makes sense. If you're around for years, and are engaged in work that is important to your community, people are going to know about you. If you're around for all of two months, no one is going to get a chance to get in contact with you.

In the end, the Solidarity Network is just a beginning to something we all hope will be something much broader, and more encompassing.

With a larger network—and the community of struggle it builds—new possibilities become apparent to us. People have pitched ideas about the Seattle Solidarity Network taking on fights around police brutality, around violence against the LGBTQ community, or even around a case of sexual violence at a local high school.

These are all legitimate fights we may well be capable of dealing with. The point is, this model offers the chance to build a foundation for greater things down the line.

SeaSol provides us with the people power we need to start building a movement, and as the network grows, new possibilities will present themselves to us.

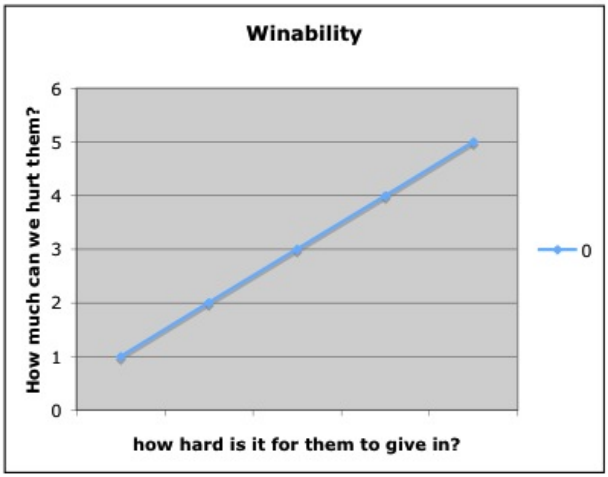


***fig. 1**: SeaSol's winability graph*

# SECTION 3

# INTERVIEW WITH SEASOL

***Libcom.org interviews a member of the Seattle Solidarity Network.***

***Who are you?***

I'm Matt, currently unemployed and living in Seattle, having moved here from England six years ago. I've been a member of Seattle Solidarity Network since it started. Before that I was in the IWW in Seattle and various anarchist groups, such as the Anarchist Federation in the UK.

***Briefly, what is the group?***

Seattle Solidarity Network (SeaSol) is a small workers' and tenants' mutual aid group that focuses on winning small fights against bosses and landlords, over issues such as unpaid wages and stolen deposits, through the use of collective action in the form of pickets and demonstrations.

***How big is it and what dates was it active from?***

It's hard to say exactly how big SeaSol is. If we quantify it by official membership, which has only recently been introduced, around sixty. Ten to forty people turn up to the average action, and we have a contact list of around four hundred people—I'm guessing that at least half have participated in one or more actions or events. The 'organising team'—the people who have agreed to a slightly higher level of commitment, who do most of the day to day work such as manning the phone tree, answering calls and meeting with new people—is made up of around a dozen members.

SeaSol started in the last months of 2007 and is still going strong.

***How did it get started?***
It got started because a small group of us, mostly IWW members and anarchists in Seattle, were frustrated with our current lack of activity. The Seattle IWW general membership branch was too small and lacking in resources to attempt to organise any workplaces—the best we could do would be offer training and support to any workers who approached us interested in unionising their workplace, something that happens only occasionally and hasn't yet progressed to an organising drive. My own perspective originated from frustration with symbolic and ineffectual anti-war and anti-globalisation protests and anarchist propaganda groups that had limited relevance to most people's lives, including my own.

SeaSol started from a mixture of notions such as trying to create a flying picket squad or a direct action casework group in the vein of OCAP. Some members had a minor experience with wage reclaiming, in an individual case where a friend had been hired for one day at a restaurant and then told she was no longer needed and would not be paid as it was a "training day"—by turning up at the restaurant as a large group, they forced the owner to pay her. Another member already had a website and email list for strike support news in Seattle, so we put it to a new use as well as taking its name.

At the beginning we did not have a clear idea of exactly what we would do but decided to focus on supporting workers and tenants in struggles, in ways where we could win immediate gains rather than getting bogged down in everlasting campaigns. Also in ways that would benefit ourselves if we ever got into a conflict with our own bosses or landlords. For that purpose we designed two posters: "Problems with your boss?" and "Problems with your landlord? Contact us." We put these posters up around Seattle, got a few phone calls, and that's how it started!

***Why were more other more traditional organisations (e.g. trade unions) not appropriate?***
We wanted to do it ourselves, not through some other organisation. Persuading some other group to take up this relatively unknown approach would have been a waste of time. It made sense to create SeaSol as a separate organisation from the IWW for various reasons—we would not be subject to secondary picketing laws, not all the initial people involved were IWW members, and it would allow us to be more flexible. The various bureaucratic NGOs and unions were too slow moving to take or

even follow initiative in the area of small housing and work-related fights, anyway.

***What problems did you come up against at first? How did you overcome them?***
As I've mentioned above, we didn't initially have a very clear idea of what we were going to do—that became clearer as we went on. At first I was skeptical about the idea that posters would actually generate valid campaigns we could involve ourselves in—but it worked. One of the first few calls we received was from a shipyard worker who was pissed off about the bad conditions and the complacency of his union in his workplace—so we got together with him and made some flyers that he would distribute in his workplace. Unfortunately this approach didn't work, there was little interest from his co-workers and all we received was an angry phone call from one of the union officials for that workplace. We didn't really have a coherent plan for how to approach this campaign. Over time we would develop a set of tactics and ways of doing things. As we went along and won a series of fights, we gained allies and recognition from other groups, something we were lacking at the beginning.

***Which remained problems the whole time?***
Retaining the involvement of people who approached us for help has often been a problem. We always state that Seattle Solidarity Network isn't a charity or social work, it's a mutual support network, which means we expect that if we help you in your fight, you will help others in other fights. Often, people will stay involved and participate in a few actions other than their own for a month or two but then not be heard from again. However, some people who initially contacted us for support in their struggle have taken a more active role and joined the organising team, and many that don't do that keep participating for months after their fight has been won. With the introduction of membership, and a greater clarity about what being a part of SeaSol is, it looks like we're starting to keep people involved more. I expect that some people will always leave after their own fight is won—that shouldn't dishearten us.

Another issue that was pointed out by a former organiser is that there is a 'demographic disparity' between the organising team and the people who often approach us for help in their fights. That is to say, the core activists are mostly white, and the people with the issues are more often from ethnic minorities. This may be an obstacle for some people to get more involved in the group. There isn't much we can do, except keep fighting and as we grow, our organisation will attract people from a wider

range of backgrounds. This seems to be happening as we gradually pick up people from the fights we've been involved in.

One problem we've noticed in workplace-related fights is that some employees, if for example they are faced with a picket outside the restaurant they work in, buy into the management's side of the story and resent our presence which results in reduced business and therefore lost tips for them. We've successfully started countering this by making a collection amongst the demonstrators to make up for the lost tips, and clearly explaining to workers that we are not against them, we are against their boss. We need to keep doing this, and start communicating more with workers before beginning a campaign.

***When did things start to gain momentum/take off?***

It took over four months since we first started putting posters up. Our first real fight was when we were contacted by some people living in the Greenlake Motel. This "motel" was really a pay by the week long term residence for people who couldn't pass the checks necessary to get higher quality, lower cost housing—because they had a criminal record or bad credit or housing history, or couldn't afford the usual first and last month's plus a damage deposit of rented housing. They had seen our poster and complained of terrible living conditions—mould, leaks, broken heating, etc. After some door knocking to gauge the situation some Sea-Sol members and tenants drew up a demand letter listing the repairs that needed to be made. We gathered a couple of dozen people and with one of the tenants (unfortunately the other tenants were too nervous about being evicted) we went to the landlords' more respectable hotel and delivered the demand letter to the perplexed receptionist.

A few days later the landlords went round each flat and made the necessary repairs, while warning the tenants not to talk to "those communists". This was our first significant success. This wasn't the end of the Greenlake Motel story though—a few months later, we were contacted again—the motel had been condemned by the Health Department. The tenants, since they were technically short term motel residents and therefore not entitled to the same legal protections as regular tenants, were facing immediate eviction. They were more willing to fight as a group this time, and won relocation assistance (three months' worth of rent each) to move to better places.

***What struggles were you involved in?***
Since the beginning of 2008, we've started at least 21 fights and won 17 of them. The issues being fought range from unpaid wages to unfair evictions. For a comprehensive list, our website lists almost every fight we've been involved in—apart from a handful that never got off the ground or were resolved before we had to take action.

***What types of action did you take?***
Every fight starts with a 'demand delivery' like the one linked here. We turn up as a large group at the boss or landlord's office or business. The person with the issue hands a demand letter stating what needs to be done to the boss by a certain deadline of one or two weeks. This is basically a show of strength—the worker or tenant is supported by a large group of people—and a warning. The boss or landlord can give in now, or there will be trouble later.

If we're lucky, the boss or landlord will give in before the deadline. If not, we start an escalating campaign. We start fairly small, then increase the pressure by adding more types of actions, more often, of increasing size. Our mainstay is a picket of a dozen or so people outside the enemy's place of business. If it's a restaurant or shop, this often proves economically devastating, reducing sales by half or more during the times we are there. Other techniques we use are poster campaigns to turn away prospective tenants, public embarrassment by leafleting the boss's church or neighbourhood, interfering with suppliers or business partners, phone and internet actions, and anything else we can think of. We try to be pretty imaginative.

***What links do you have with other groups of workers? (Other sectors, other countries, political groups, etc.)***
We occasionally cooperate with the Comite de Defensa Trabajadora of Casa Latina, the more direct action oriented section of a local NGO. We support each others campaigns and sometimes do joint actions. We've also done strike support, such as turning up to the picket lines at the recent Coca Cola strike. We were planning to support a campaign around reducing mortgage rates by a militant section of the plumbers' union, but that never materialised. We work closely with the IWW where applicable, most recently by doing a solidarity action for the newly formed Jimmy Johns Workers Union.

The newest joint project is with IWSJ, a student and worker group at the University of Washington centered around a rank and file group of janitors. They are interested in doing SeaSol-type actions within the low-paid immigrant communities they have good links with, and we are interested in learning about workplace groups from them. We'll see how that develops.

We are trying to support and encourage the formation of solidarity networks around the world, such as the Olympia, Tacoma, and Glasgow Solidarity Networks. We are offering support and training to new groups whenever we can. We have also been in contact with workers' centres, which have some similarities to SeaSol, such as the Lansing Workers Center, and are interested in learning more about the advantages and differences with this kind of organising.

Personally, I've been trying to convince anarchist groups and individuals of the usefulness of setting up solidarity networks....

***How would you respond to criticisms that these small victories are all well and good, but they are not a model for creating social change faced as we are with an onslaught on jobs, housing, public services, etc across the world?***

As you have pointed out the struggles are rather small scale, involving an issue that only affects a single individual or family, or a small group of workers or tenants, who have often left their old job or rental situation. This is the main limitation of our current organising method. However we don't see this as a huge obstacle because we aren't intending to limit ourselves to just these small fights forever. Instead we view them as first steps to more ambitious projects. As we build up experience, confidence, membership, a support base, contacts, reputation and so on, we intend to branch out into other forms of organisation, such as helping set up and assisting tenants' and workplace groups—the first steps to do so are already underway. We are committed to a flexible, experimental approach. I view these small fights as a training ground for class struggle organising, from which we can progress to bigger, more collective, more prolonged projects. They aren't a model for social change as such but they contain a key ingredient required for large scale social change—direct action by the people facing a problem themselves.

SeaSol is in some sense an adaptation to modern conditions of high turnover and small workplaces— as one member has said we "organise the

worker, not the workplace". Any worker who joins SeaSol after a problem at their old job is much better prepared to fight back if they encounter problems at their new job. It's an organisation of militants spread across different work and housing situations. Obviously, working towards organisation in specific workplaces and neighbourhoods is still vital.

You might also note that most of the fights only involved correcting a violation of the law by a landlord or boss. This is because it's an easy starting point, and often the person with the issue only wants this violation resolved. However, we've already won several fights where the demand went beyond merely enforcing the law, and instead was about what the tenant or worker, and the group as a whole, thought was a reasonable and achievable resolution of the issue. We need to be—and are— going further in this direction, of imposing our will on the bosses and landlords, until "what is reasonable" changes completely, and a totally different society becomes imaginable, even obvious.

***Do you think that there is a danger that the group could be seen as or become some sort of radical charity, which is reliant on volunteers who basically help other people, like yourself?***
As I said earlier, we try to make it clear that SeaSol is not some charity or social service. We offer solidarity, not charity. The person or people with the issue must take be willing to take a lead in the fight—they are the ones handing the demand to the boss, they will participate in and help plan all the actions in the campaign, and they have agreed to support other peoples' fights too. If they expect us to do all the work for them, and stop showing up to meetings or actions (without good reason), we'll eventually drop the fight. This is in contrast to a charity or social service that merely does things on behalf of the passive recipient.

***How open is SeaSol with their politics? Are you openly anarchist?***
As an individual member I'm openly anarchist within SeaSol (as are many others). SeaSol isn't an anarchist organisation, but it is based on principles of mutual aid, direct action and direct democracy. While all the founding members were anarchist or close to it, the majority of the membership aren't necessarily. SeaSol is however an environment where almost everyone is open to anarchist ideas, because they are a logical extension of what we are doing—fighting together against bosses and landlords, planning things collectively, pooling our resources, realising that we have power together.

***Do you have a favourite anecdote or memory related to the organisation?***

It's been amusing to see bosses' anguish when things don't go their way. They are often quite disappointed when a quick call to the police doesn't result in our disappearance, since we are doing nothing illegal. I like seeing the look of confusion and panic when a large group of people suddenly invades their private space. One particularly funny memory is being threatened with a baseball bat by a hotel owner's minion, who then decided to call the police on us. He ended up admitting intent to assault with a deadly weapon to the police....

***What have you learned from your experiences in the group?***

Many things. I know that in any future job I would be far more confident in fighting back against management. I feel more able to organise at work, when I wouldn't really have known where to start before. It has been very satisfying to apply anarchist ideas of direct action and solidarity and see them work effectively. I've learnt how to view things tactically and strategically. I've learnt how to investigate and research targets, how to communicate better and build links with people. I've tasted collective power. I think it's been quite an empowering experience for many of us in SeaSol, and I hope it continues....

***What lessons do you think other workers can take from your group?***

That even in these times of defeat and economic depression it's still quite feasible to fight back and win. That anarchist ideas work in real life. That collective direct action around small issues is an effective starting point for further struggle....

*This pamphlet was created by the* **Workers Solidarity Alliance**

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