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An Organizer
Active Revolution
Organizing, Base Building and Dual Power
2002

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Active Revolution

Organizing, Base Building and Dual Power

An Organizer

2002

Editor's Note[1]

Although we welcome the author's insights and analysis around dual power and grassroots organizing, we reject his final conclusion which claims that anarchists must "stop trying to build a movement of anarchists, and instead fight for an anarchistic movement." Those of us from NEFAC would argue that both are equally necessary.

We do not believe that an activist strategy based solely on anarchist methods of organizing (self-organization, mutual aid, solidarity and direct action) will inevitably lead us any closer towards anarchism. Such a strategy, on its own, only serves to provide a radical veneer and egalitarian legitimacy for liberal-reformist or authoritarian activist trends.

A successful revolution will require that anarchist ideas become the leading ideas within the social movements and popular struggles of the working class. This will not happen spontaneously. We believe that, if only to wage the battle of ideas, anarchist organizations are necessary. The purpose of such organizations, for us, is to connect local grassroots activism to a larger strategy of social revolution; to create an organizational pole for anarchists to develop theory and practice, share skills and experiences, and agitate for explicitly anarchist demands (in opposition to liberal-reformist or authoritarian trends) within our activism.

[1] The editorial note is from NEFAC, or North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists, which was a platformist influenced anarchist organization based in the North East of the U.S and for a period of it's history in French speaking Canada. The group emerged in the early 2000s period of anti-globalization protests seeking to move beyond protest politics. Following changing their name to Common Struggle/Lucha Común in 2011 the group merged into Black Rose/Rosa Negra at it's founding in 2013.

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expense of losing the local organizations. This does not have to be the case.

We need to develop massive resources of our own — social and economic — if we want to make similarly massive changes in society. Our forms of organization must infect and transform society away from competition, capitalism and oppression.

The challenge is to initiate broad-based organizing and popular education to build both counter-power and counter-institutional organizations and to construct intermediary confederations to connect them. We must stop trying to build a movement of anarchists and instead fight for an anarchistic movement.

that are either enhanced or limited by our choices of organization and action.

2. Becoming More Radical and More Grassroots

More than fifteen years of modern anarchist gatherings, conferences and events haven't led to a coherent anarchist movement — on a continental, regional or local level. This is significant because other groups of people, similarly collected together on the basis of political or issue affinity have developed a higher degree of movement organization. Why? First, anarchists have tended to form organizations that are not integrated with a grassroots base and, second, anarchists have not built effective intermediary organizations.

The lack of a grassroots base is the result of an anti-mass conception of organization among anarchists. Favoring collectives, anarchists have constructed insular groups that are simply not relevant to the lives of their families, neighbors and co-workers. While collective organization is useful under certain conditions, it is not conducive to building a movement, which implies a much higher level of mass participation. Learning organizing and popular education theories and skills is the answer for anarchists interested in building a broad-based and diverse movement.

Additionally, North American anarchists have not developed intermediary organizations to connect locally organized radical groups with each other, and then to regional/national/continental networks. Anarchists seem hellbent on remaining a collection of individual people and their individual groups due to a reluctance to be accountable to a wider constituency through engaging in the process of strategic organizing and popular education. Simply arguing for a network (locally or continentally), presumably for communication and mutual aid, also hasn't taken off despite numerous tries. And in the case of the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, it did work for almost a decade, but at the

Introduction by Adam Weaver

While the larger radical/anti-capitalist left has arguably few universal tenets of strategic agreement, the statement that "a strong left is one that's rooted in working class and oppressed communities and struggles" is easily one of them. The question that all tendencies and formations grapple with is how do we understand this process and what are the methods to transition from being isolated and powerless players to a left with deep roots within powerful working class social movements.

A welcome discussion along these lines is from Philly Socialists and the Marxist Center conference and a recently compiled reader around the concepts of 'base building' and 'dual power' titled "It's All About that Base." If you're not familiar we recommend giving it a read.

With this post we wanted to highlight a number of writings with similar themes coming out of the contemporary US anarchist milieu stretching back over 20 years into the late 1990s. Likely the entry of the concept of dual power into the vernacular of US anarchism first came with Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation in numerous writings and made the point in their Draft Political Statement that "The creation of a general state of dual power is a necessary requirement for a successful revolution."

The reprinted article below, "Active Revolution" by James Mumm, published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* (Issue #4, Spring/Summer 2002) and circulated in other forms in the late 1990s, provides an extensive treatment on the difference between activism and organizing, dual power, movement building and collective power. While we may not agree with all the particulars today and these discussions have advanced and evolved over time, this piece is an important reference point for those active in US anarchism since the 2000's. (We also would highlight the "Editor's Note" from *The Northeastern Anarchist* at the end which takes issue with the piece's position on political organization).

Other reference points since the publication of this piece are those of the late Joel Olson with Bring the Ruckus in his 2009 piece "Between infoshops and insurrection: U.S. anarchism, movement building, and the racial order." Influential pieces include "Back to the Roots: Anarchists as Revolutionary Organizers" by Ian Martin circa 2005 which highlighted the need to "build relationships," "organize relationships into a structured form," and "build leadership and empower people" toward the goal of dual power. This and other similar pieces are included in "An Anarchist Reader for Effective Organising" published by Zabalaza Books in South Africa.

An important landmark especially for those of us Black Rose/Rosa Negra is the influence of the South American current of anarchism known as "especifismo" which introduced a new vocabulary around relating to movements, concepts such as "social insertion" and later the concept of "popular power."

From "Especifismo: The Anarchist Praxis of Building Popular Movements and Revolutionary Organization" published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* (Issue #11, 2007):

> "Social insertion means anarchist involvement in the daily fights of the oppressed and working classes. It does not mean acting within single-issue advocacy campaigns based around the involvement of expected traditional political activists, but rather within movements of people struggling to better their own condition, which come together not always out of exclusively materially-based needs, but also socially and historically rooted needs of resisting the attacks of the state and capitalism."

Later documents such as *Anarchism and Social Organization,* a 2008 organizational and programmatic document of the Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro (FARJ), provide more detailed discussions. Translated into English in 2012 (we recommend reading the

the space to try out new ideas. With a careful eye to the issue of distance, cooperatives are an effective means of organization.

Mass-based Organizations: Mass-based organizations, like the IWW, have the potential to be influential elements of a popular revolutionary movement. There is no effective way to build a mass-based organization except through organizing. A cursory reading of history shows mass-based organizations growing as movements spring up in response to injustice — and then they fade away when justice is met. This conception of history ignores the countless years of work that go into every "spontaneous" movement. Spain had a revolutionary anarchist movement in 1936 because of the incredible organizing that began there in the 1860s.

Intermediary Organizations: Organizations that directly encourage the creation and development of the above forms of organization are necessary adjuncts to a holistic conception of revolutionary organizing. In an anarchist model, intermediary organizations are most effective in the form of a confederation. Intermediaries can provide:

Dialogue and Action — as a political formation, counter-institutional and counter-power organizations would come together to engage in revolutionary praxis (action and reflection).

Training — on the basics of organizing, facilitation, issue analysis, direct action techniques, organizational, issue and membership development, etc.

Technical Assistance — participatory research on issues, access to technology, technical knowledge on the "how-tos" of things like forming economic or housing cooperatives (where to get money, how to get started, etc.).

Financial Assistance — grassroots fundraising, grant writing, and the investigation and implementation of resource pools.

The point is that anarchists must think strategically about their forms of organization and strategies of action within a particular historical context. We must make conscious and informed decisions about the prospects for effective revolutionary social change

such a group. That is why I encourage you to learn from the many models of organizing and education that are currently operating in the world before you strike out on your own.

Part III: Concrete Directions for Dual Power

1. Current Anarchist Forms of Organization

Anarchists have used a wide array of organizational forms and strategies of action in the past one hundred and fifty years.

Collectives: Cadre organizations (or closed collectives) and open collectives closely resonate with an activist strategy. Infoshops, for example, operate as open collectives. As activist groups, they tend to coalesce around an issue — in this case anarchism itself. Most infoshops of the 1990s who attempted to move beyond the limitations of activism were hampered by theoretical and practical barriers. The Beehive (Washington, DC), Emma Center (Minneapolis, MN)and the A-Zone's (Chicago, IL) attempts at anti-gentrification organizing have been intermittent and rarely effective. Issues and analysis must be developed in conjunction with the people affected by those given issues, or the separation between people and analysis leads to vanguardist distance. You cannot be an ally without first choosing the method of alliance — what is your relationship to the people affected by an issue, and how will your organizational form contribute to effective work on that issue? These are central questions for anarchists operating on a local level and who are interested in grassroots struggle.

Worker/Consumer Cooperatives: Worker cooperatives are a special category of closed collectives — as consumer cooperatives are of open collectives. As needs-based organizations, they combine elements of activist and organizing strategies. It is critical for grassroots cooperatives to commit themselves to organizing's participatory model of action, but it is also vital that they are allowed

English edition introductory note) the document details their perspective on building popular movements and how these relate to political organization. In sum, we think pieces like "Active Revolution" and the other writings mentioned here can be useful reference points in discussions today around these concepts.

Part I: Anarchist, Grassroots Dual Power

Dual Power Defined

The term "Dual Power" has been used in several ways since it was first coined. The following definition builds on the previous meanings of Dual Power, most importantly by articulating the equal and necessary relationship between counter-power and counter-institutions. In the original definition, dual power referred to the creation of an alternative, liberatory power to exist alongside and eventually overcome state/capitalist power.

Dual power theorizes a distinct and oppositional relationship between the forces of the state/capitalism and the revolutionary forces of oppressed people. The two can never be peacefully reconciled.

With the theory of dual power is a dual strategy of public resistance to oppression (counter-power) and building cooperative alternatives (counter-institutions). Public resistance to oppression encompasses all of the direct action and protest movements that fight authoritarianism, capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the other institutionalized oppressions. Building cooperative alternatives recreates the social and economic relationships of society to replace competitive with cooperative structures.

It is critical that these two general modes of action do not become isolated within a given movement. Counter-power and counter-institutional organizations must be in relationship to each other. The value of reconnecting counter-institutional organizations with explicitly oppositional counter-power organizations is

a safeguard against the former's tendency to become less radical over time. As counter-power organizations are reconnected to their base, they ground their political analysis in the concrete experience of counter-institutions — mitigating against the potential political "distance" between their rhetoric and the consciousness of their families, fellow workers and neighbors.

Dual power does not imply a dual set of principles, and therefore processes — one for public resistance and other for building cooperative alternatives. The process used for both strategic directions has the same set of principles at its root. The anarchist principles of direct democracy, cooperation and mutual aid have practical implications which inform the dual power strategies for revolution.

Direct democracy means that people accept the right and responsibility to participate in the decisions which affect their lives.

Cooperation means that our social and economic structure is egalitarian, that we cooperate instead of compete to fulfill our needs and desires.

Mutual aid means that we share our resources between individuals and groups toward universal need and desire fulfillment.

These principles lend us the foundation for creating inclusive, anti-authoritarian relationships as we work in grassroots organizations. Regardless of the strategic direction within dual power that is being pursued, we will follow the same process — building relationships, organizing these relationships into groups, and moving these groups toward collective action.

We organize in order to build power with others — power that gives us the opportunity to participate in the decisions which affect our lives. It is in the conscious construction and use of this power that we find true democracy.

Should we concentrate on organizing within our own communities? I cannot answer these questions for you — I simply don't have the answers. But, I do know that they are critical and must be resolved before an organizing or popular education project may begin.

6. Active Participation by Anarchists in Community, Education, Labor and Issue-based Organizations

It is not a concession to liberalism, nor a descent into reformism, for revolutionaries to participate actively in organizations that are not explicitly radical. Neither are we their vanguard. The only realistic way to build a mass movement is to work directly with oppressed people — in essence, we are transformed as we transform others.

We join existing organizations to build our skills in the realm of political action. Through immersion in grassroots struggles we develop an understanding of the process of radicalization — beginning where people are at, using dialogue and research to build our collective analysis, taking action, and reflecting upon that action in an ongoing circular process.

There are some hard learned truths in these ideas. First, your vision of a better world is incomplete and impotent without the participation of grassroots people in its construction.

Second, you cannot impose your ideas, however radical you think they are and however backward you think others' beliefs are, without compromising anarchist principles. So then, how do we move forward?

Participation in existing organizations allows us to gain experience in political action. We can then use this experience to create new organizations that are based more closely on anarchist principles, but which are still dedicated to a grassroots base. But, you should not presume that you are ready to start a grassroots organization without having a clear idea on how to build and sustain

with a sense of humor, a vision of a better world, a willingness to work with others, and a desire to learn and grow in the context of action. As relationships are built between leaders, organizations are formed which can move into action on collectively defined issues.

This is the critical point — it doesn't matter what issue people choose to work on. And we shouldn't steer people in a direction that we think is better or more radical. Organizing is not about identifying an issue and rallying or mobilizing people around it. Organizing is about building organizations that can wield collective power. Action may begin as reform to the existing system, and that is OK. We cannot expect people to take radical action if they have not yet given up on the "system." It is our job to encourage action in many forms, and to reflect upon that action in order to learn from it. We must trust that such action and reflection will radicalize people over time.

Finally, how do we organize non-anarchists, or more seriously, people with different class, race, cultural backgrounds from ourselves, or do we? We must begin by locating ourselves in the complex matrix of oppression. What is your identity, in what ways do you experience oppression? In this way we can identify the social networks in which we either have relationships, or because of our identity could readily form relationships.

Then we must ask ourselves — where do we want to have an impact? In what communities can we identify a constituency for our organizing efforts? Do we have a common identity with these identified communities? If not, why do we consider them a possible constituency?

It is very important to identify the constituency in which we want to have an impact before we identify issues that we will work on. To do otherwise takes us backward, and initiates an authoritarian process in which we are dictating issues to a constituency.

Getting back to the question — is it wrong for an organizer to define a constituency that is not a part of their history or identity?

Part II: Defining a Process for Revolutionary Social Change

Liberation is the struggle to be fully present, to have the ability to act — to become powerful, relevant and therefore historical. Liberation through action is one of the ways in which people experience such self-actualizing transformation. Of course, liberation can also take place through other means — chief among these are popular education, cultural work and identity-based activity.

But, in our complex and oppressive society, a holistic strategy for liberation must be multi-faceted and geared toward some measure of action.

Once we get beyond this general agreement on the centrality of action to liberation, the debate on the specifics of action begins. There is a clear distinction between the three most common forms of action in the United States — activism, advocacy and organizing. Their effectiveness as strategies for change is at the heart of this essay. First, a summary of each strategy.

Activism An activist is a person who is responsible to a defined issue and who helps address that issue through mobilizing a base of people to take collective action. Activists are accountable to themselves as moral actors on a specific issue. Democratic structures are a utilitarian consequence of activities designed to win on the defined issue (my definition).

Advocacy An advocate is a person who is responsible to a defined issue and who helps address that issue through collective action that uses the instruments of democracy to establish and implement laws and policies that will create a just and equitable society (Advocacy Institute).

Organizing An organizer is a person who is responsible to a defined constituency and who helps build that constituency through leadership development, collective action and the

development of democratic structures (National Organizers Alliance).

To clarify, power is simply the ability to act — and it can be used over or with others. As anarchists, power with others forms the core of our belief system. In each of the above strategies, power is gained through collective action — how each uses that power begins to illuminate considerable differences. The democratic structures created to focus that power also shed light on these differences.

Relationships form the foundation of all collective action. The intentionality of those relationships determines if your primary commitment is to your constituency or to the issue around which a constituency is built.

People participate in collective action because they have a self-interest in doing so. Self-interest is a middle ground between selfishness and self-sacrifice, determined most practically by the activities in which people spend their time, energy and money. Self-interest is the activity of the individual in relation to others. It is in the self-interest of people to participate in social change because such activities resonate with a need or desire within themselves. Thus, people choose issues or organizations because something about them is in their self-interest.

In addition to a shared commitment to collective action — power, relationships and self-interest are all critical elements that the three strategies of action have in common. The differences emerge in the use of power, the degree of intentionality placed on relationship-building, and the emphasis on issue or organization as the point of connection between people.

1. Use of Power

Activists and advocates use power primarily to win on issues. Given that power is currently derived from two sources — people

tence on elevating issues over relationships and its tendency to use organization and people as means to an end.

Organizing begins when we make a commitment to develop the capacity of ourselves and those people with whom we work to affect change. The intensity of conscious action and reflection is the engine that drives organizers to build relationships, construct dynamic organizations, and move those relationships into collective action. As anarchists we must learn the theory and practice of organizing if we are truly committed to revolutionary change.

5. Organizing Theory/Organizing Skills

A holistic framework of effective organizing (through community, labor or issue-based organizations) must include some conception of relationships, self-interest, power, and organization. Again, relationships are the means with which we communicate and regulate our social existence. Relationships are always political, and as such are the foundation of all conceptions of power. Self-interest is the self in relationship to others, and signifies our political bonds and individual priorities for how we spend our time, energy and money. Power is simply the ability to act, and can be used as either power with others or power over others. Organizations are social constructs with which power is exercised.

The skills of effective organizing are all geared toward building relationships, organizing those relationships into groups and moving those groups into collective action. One-on-one meetings are structured conversations that allow each person to share their experiences toward identifying their individual and mutual self-interests. These meetings may be scheduled, or they may take place going door-to-door, house-to-house, or over the phone. A network of one-on-one relationships can be increased exponentially by asking people to hold “house meetings” where people invite their own networks (family, friends, neighbors or co-workers). Through this process we can identify people who are potential leaders — people

4. Revolutionary Social Change

Perhaps the greatest difference between these three strategies of action is in their ability over to time to create revolutionary change. In the final analysis — primary commitment to an issue is in contradiction to a primary commitment to power with others. The faith of anarchists lies in the ability of people to govern themselves — on holding power with others. This faith implies a staggering level of trust in others, and a monumental commitment on a personal level to participate publicly in social change. Activism and advocacy have no such trust in others — their faith is in their analysis of, and moral commitment to, an issue. By putting their faith in an issue they are removing their faith from people. Relationships do not form the basis for their action, and therefore they cannot be said to have a primary commitment to power with others. Of the three strategies of action, only organizing has a primary commitment to people — to power with others — and to anarchism.

The modern anarchist conception of dual power encourages us to build liberatory institutions while we fight the oppression of the dominant system. Activism and organizing exist in both arenas, while advocacy exists only in the latter.

There is room to construct and practice a fresh revolutionary organizing process that is relevant to our current historical context. Aspects of such a revolutionary program would certainly incorporate radical social service, counter-institutional economic development, counter-power, educational and cultural dimensions. To maximize our effectiveness, it is important to define our strategy for action clearly across the range of possible activities and organizations.

As a model approach, organizing offers a starting point for a strategic social change process. Advocacy, as a contradictory and liberal strategy, may be necessary in order to keep the system from degenerating at a faster pace but it is insufficient for anarchists interested in revolutionary change. Activism is flawed by its insis-

and money — activists and advocates try to mobilize a quantity of each to affect change. More often than not this means mobilizing a lot of people, and a little bit of money. These two strategies differ in that advocacy is explicitly about altering the relations of power in the established institutions of society, while activism doesn't necessarily place its faith in the perfectibility of American democratic institutions.

Advocates make a serious error in not differentiating power over others and power with others. They try to negotiate for a change in the relations of power between oppressor and oppressed, failing to understand that these two conceptions of power cannot be peacefully reconciled. Advocates end up negotiating to share power over others, and in doing so find themselves transformed.

No longer are they building power with others, but power for others — which is just a lighter shade of power over others. The struggle between these two types of power is a zero sum game — as one wins, the other loses. Only power with others is limitless; power over others always implies a finite amount of power.

Activism's power is derived first from its ability to affect change on issues and secondly on the potential force for change embodied in organized people. Organizing uses power differently — by first building an organization. For organizers, issues are a means to an end (the development of peoples' capacity to affect change). Organizers' use of power with others to alter the relations of power over others inherent in government or capitalist corporations forces such authoritarian groups into a debilitating contradiction. Opening such contradictions creates room for change. Authoritarian institutions may well react with violence to preserve power over others, or these contradictions may result in real social change. Liberation and revolution take place as relationships change from authoritarian to egalitarian.

Too often organizers and their organizations fall prey to the same negative transformation as advocates — in negotiation to alter the relations of power they begin to build power for others

rather than power with others. The authoritarian government and capitalist system are frighteningly seductive. They promise to change incrementally, and then slowly lull organizers, advocates and activists into a reformist sleep. However, the strength of organizing lies in the deliberate construction of a constituency that holds itself, its organization and its organizers publicly accountable. A commitment to relationships rather than issues is key to public accountability, and to insuring a lasting dedication to building power with others.

2. Relationship-Building

All action has the potential to be liberatory. However, it is the degree of intentionality placed on relationship-building that determines the quality of the learning that takes place. Organizers differentiate between public and private relationships. Public relationships are those in which there is an agreement between people to act and reflect together in the process of social change. Organizers cultivate deliberate public relationships and bring people together in situations that foster relationship-building among those taking action. Intentional reflection upon action is key to maximizing learning. In organizing, people recognize relationships — not issues — as the foundation of their organizations.

Activism and advocacy use relationships as a means to an end — victory on an issue. Relationships are an end in themselves for organizers. This element of the debate centers on the question of constituency. The constituency of activism is other activists and potential activists, motivated through their individual moral commitments to a given issue. Advocates have no primary constituency. The constituency of an organizer is the universe of people who are potential members of a given organization with a defined geographical area or non-geographical base (through affinity or identity).

3. Issue vs. Organization

Relationships are built between people; only through abstraction can we say that people have relationships with institutions or issues. There is an inherent contradiction in activism's attempts to mobilize people around an issue, given that issues are conceptual while people actually exist. People are not in relationship with issues — they can only be in relationship with other people.

Organizations provide the context for public relationships. As anarchists we build organizations based on the 'power with others', non-hierarchical model. We believe in organization — how much and in what form are the debatable points. But, as anarchists, we know that organization is necessary as a vehicle for collective action.

Multiple dynamic relationships (organizations) are the product of an organizer's work. For activists, organizations are a utilitarian consequence of their work on a given issue. And for advocates they are a utilitarian tool used to negotiate for power. Organizers trust in the ability of people to define their own issues, a faith that rests in the knowledge that maximizing the quantity and quality of relationships produces dynamic organizations and therefore dynamic change. Advocates synthesize issues from a dialogue between people and dominant institutions, and they struggle for practical changes to the "system." Activists engage in continuous analysis of issues, producing clear and poignant agendas for social change — and then rally people around those agendas.

The problem of "distance" is primarily one of both activism and advocacy. People who spend a great deal of time developing an issue have a tendency to create an analysis that is significantly different than that of most other people. As the distance increases between the depth of understanding between an activist or advocate and that of other people, we find increasing polarization. Such distance can breed a vicious cycle of isolation.