

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

THE ANARCHIST LABOUR MOVEMENT

ORGANISATION BY AFFINITY GROUPS

The basic unit of Anarchist organisation is called an Affinity Group. These are also sometimes referred to as Working Groups or, simply, Collectives. Anarchists organise along the decentralised principles of Federalism. Power rests with the members of the group who make decisions democratically (decisions are made by those who do the work) - each group is autonomous and consists of about 2 to 20 people (or more). Sometimes, group members are *irregulars* who participate in some group activities, but not others. They co-ordinate their activities through recallable delegates who have no authority themselves. When an affinity group becomes sufficiently large, it may choose to break up into smaller groups or simply have smaller project groups within the larger collective. The emphasis of affinity groups is organising and propaganda/education work at the local level and not the co-ordination of large-scale organisations.

Affinity groups form informal working relationships with other affinity groups in their region for the purposes of mutual aid and co-operation on major projects. As they become established, more permanent regional and national federations are formed as a medium for exchanging information. The strength of these federations is that they are decentralised and avoid tendencies to centralise their activities that are wasteful of resources and tend to foster conflict. Anarchists believe that we have no need for "leadership" - "strong people need no leader, they are their own leaders" (Emiliano Zapata).

People form Collectives with others who have common goals and objectives - groups survive because individuals are committed to these objectives. Because they are small, people know each other on a personal basis - it is difficult for police, agent provocateurs (like Communists or organised crime) and opportunists to infiltrate them. A small group also makes it easier to keep information confidential - a necessity when planning direct actions or organising workplaces.

Small working groups enable a group to communicate more efficiently and to operate by consensus. Without parliamentarism, there is less risk of factionalism. But the best way to protect against this is an effective conflict resolution mechanism and an emphasis on co-operation and mutual aid. Factionalism is generally avoided when the workers themselves make the decisions for their own projects and people who make proposals for actions only make proposals for actions they are willing to carry out themselves.

Anarchist collectives are all economically self-sufficient: They fund all their own activities and emphasise "sweat equity" (if you want something done, DO-IT-YOURSELF - you don't need money when you can donate your labour). The advantage of a D.I.Y. approach is that people don't have to have a lot of money to be politically and economically effective. It is an ongoing educational experience called "capacitación" (capacitation) where workers learn what works by doing the work, develop their own skills and abilities, and get to spend time with their fellow workers so they know what is going on at work or in their community. It is also a form of "propaganda by the deed" - demonstrating to people what is possible by doing it and inspiring others to get involved in changing society.

In labour organising, affinity groups in the workplace would fight for the creation of Workers Councils. These Workers Councils would be open to all interested workers in the workplace with all decision-making being made democratically by those workers at general assemblies. Historically, these have formed the basis for workers self-management of entire industries. Workers Councils can be organised to unionise a workplace or to create union democracy in a workplace with an authoritarian business "union" like those in the AFL-CIO which have a history of selling out their workers (many deny workers the right to elect their own representatives). Anarcho-Syndicalist organisations like the Workers Solidarity Alliance (USA) also organise affinity groups outside of specific workplaces to do labour propaganda/education and organising work in their community. Anarcho-Syndicalism aims at the self-management of all workplaces and communities by the workers themselves so much of the work in educating the Working Class must be done within Working Class communities. Many Anarchist collectives include labour organising and education work as a part of the projects they are involved with.

At the turn of the century, Anarcho-Syndicalist and Syndicalist organisations had their own stores; they created mutual aid funds to take care of the sick and families left without financial support when a worker was killed on the job. They organised self-defence groups to protect against attacks by gangsters (so-called "detectives") hired by their bosses as strike-breakers, vigilantes (so-called "night riders" or "death squads"), and Fascist paramilitary groups and street thugs.

The idea of large scale Affinity Group based organisation was planted in the United States on April 30, 1977 when 2,500 people, organised into Affinity groups, occupied the Seabrook, New Hampshire, nuclear power plant. This model was

adopted by the growing anti-nuclear power and disarmament movements. More recently it has been used by the anti-intervention, lesbian/gay liberation, anti-apartheid and Earth First! Movements. It is the predominant form of Anarchist organising in North America.

Affinity Groups in the 1936 Spanish Revolution

The Spanish Anarchist Movement, which pioneered Affinity Group based organisation, provides an exhilarating example of a movement, and the actual possibility of a society based on decentralised organisation, direct democracy and the principles behind them.

Small circles of good friends, called "tertulias" - who might meet at favourite cafés to discuss ideas and plan actions - were a Latin tradition. In 1888, a period of intense class conflict in Europe and of local insurrections and struggles in Spain, the Anarchist Organisation of the Spanish Region made this traditional form (tertulias) the basis of its organisation. Decades later, the Iberian Anarchist federation (FAI) also adopted the tertulias as the basic element of its more formal organisation, and called them "grupos de afinidad" (affinity groups). Begun in 1927, the FAI at times included an estimated 39,000 members, all of whom were also influential members of the Anarcho-Syndicalist CNT (National Confederation of Labour). The CNT, Spain's strongest labour federation, claimed well over one million members.

Wherever several FAI Affinity Groups existed they formed a local federation. Local federations were co-ordinated by committees made up of one mandated delegate from each Affinity Group. Local committees organised assemblies of Affinity groups. Mandated delegates were sent from local federations to district committees and finally to the Peninsular Committee. *Tierra y Libertad* and numerous small newspapers helped to facilitate communication. Affinity Groups remained autonomous as they carried out education, organised and supported local struggles. The intimacy of the groups made police infiltration difficult.

In July 1936, Francisco Franco, with a group of [Nationalist] generals launched a military revolt to take power from Spain's Republican government. Spanish workers and peasants armed themselves and defeated the military through much of the country, particularly in Anarchist strongholds. Millions of Spaniards took action, not to revive the treacherous Republican government, but to restructure society along revolutionary lines. The sweeping Social Revolution that followed was the culmination of 60 years of Anarchist organising, education and agitation.

Factories, transportation, telephones and even wholesale and retail stores were taken over and run collectively. Assemblies of workers in each workplace made decisions and delegated committees to carry out administrative and other tasks. An estimated 1,200 to 1,800 self-managed workers' collectives were formed. Over 3 million people were involved. Workers' self-management effectively replaced the remnants of government and private institutions, providing the every-day necessities of life - food, clothing, shelter and public services.

In rural areas 7 to 8 million people were involved directly or indirectly in the collectivisation of more than half the land not controlled by Franco's forces [Nationalists, Royalists, Carlists (Catholic religious fundamentalists - mostly hereditary landowners of large estates and members of the Aristocracy), and Falangé (Fascists)]. Peasants and land labourers established free communal systems of production and distribution. They also created a decision-making process based on popular assemblies. These decentralised collectives continued for over two years under the strain of Civil War until Franco's military victory in 1939 [actually, Stalinist Communists returned many factories and large estates to their former capitalist and aristocrat owners before the Republican Government surrendered. Many Anarchists were killed or imprisoned by the Communists and labelled as "Trotskyites" or "counter-revolutionaries."].

Includes text excerpted from: *Affinity Groups: Legacy of the Spanish Revolution* (1988) by David Solnit which appeared in the *Direct Action Manual Project Draft* assembled in the early 1990s by the San Francisco Web Collective, an affiliate of the now defunct Love and Rage/Amor y Rabia Revolutionary Anarchist Federation.

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