

*Don't wait for
Freedom to be given
to you, take it!*



social or otherwise. This is an exceptionally difficult task, given that "the personal is political", that we are all to some extent motivated in our politics by personal experience. Passion abounds in political organisations, as it should. And yet we must learn to temper our passion with compassion. This, I think, is the task before us, and it will be energy better spent, than has been our efforts to bring our leaders down to a level of uniform mediocrity.

In summation, history makes clear that anarchists must organise if we are to be successful. And it further makes clear that to the extent that we seek libertarian ends, we must use libertarian means (that is to say, our anarchist organisations must be like the society we hope to build, free and equal.) And finally, within these organisations and that society, we should not worry overmuch about the authoritarian implications of leadership. Let us see to it that none has power over another, that is to say, that none may punish another who disagrees, in any way. If these conditions are met, than we will be well on our way.

*Leadership is not authoritarian,
authority is!*

From the October 2004 issue of *The Dawn Magazine*

Anarchist cartoons by Donald Room



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Towards More Effective Political Organisations

The Role of Leadership in an Anarchist Society

by *Prole Cat*, who tries to play a positive leadership
role in anarchist politics in the southeastern US

The debate over whether or not anarchists should organise is a long and rich one. Much has been written on the subject. So it is likely that most anarchists, at least those who have been politically involved for a significant length of time, know where they stand on this topic. At any rate, the value of organisation will not be argued here.

Rather, this text is addressed to those who are already convinced of the value of anarchist organisation, but who may have doubts about what form such organisation should take or, more specifically, about what should be the role of those whose personalities incline them to be at the front of most efforts, and who have ideas that they believe to be in advance of the rest of the membership. In other words, what are we to do about "leadership" in our organisations?

This essay will attempt to define, in general and practical terms, how an anarchist activist, organiser or organisation may thread the needle between authoritarian Leninist vanguardism and post-left disorganisation. The following comments are based on personal experience, within and outside of movement organisations, informed by anarchist theory and history.



What Should an Organisation Look Like?

The challenge of the anarchist organisation is to “organise without authority,” or to “self-organise.” The words roll smoothly from the tongue of one well versed in anarchist lore, but the challenges of practical application are in fact quite daunting.

First, let us quickly dismiss the notion that organising in a libertarian manner can wait until “after the revolution.” Organise we must, even as we categorically reject the idea that the challenges of battling capitalism require us to suspend our principles of freedom and equality. Apples do not grow on orange trees, and a free society will not spring up in the wake of a revolt fostered by an authoritarian political organisation, any more than it will happen of its own accord. As Rudolf Rocker famously said, “Socialism will be free, or it will not be at all.” In a similar vein, so too will the anarchist revolutionary organisation be free.

What, then, are the obstacles to such free self-organisation? To begin with, few people have any experience with self-organisation. Everywhere we turn in capitalist society is hierarchical organisation or, more simply put, the boss system. The world is divided into authorities and the submissive: police and citizens, bosses and employees, clerics and the flock, journalists and television viewers, *ad infinitum*. The habits and perspectives that accompany such a social arrangement do not automatically disappear as one enters the gates of the revolutionary movement. There are quite a few of us who sincerely wish to be actively involved in movement politics, but who hang around on the outskirts because we do not know, exactly, what needs to be done? and we are waiting on someone to tell us! What else could we EXPECT well intentioned people to do? Folks do the only thing they know how to do, until they learn otherwise?

On the other hand, movement organisations also have an ample supply of those who chafe at the restraints of libertarian forms. They complain of the tediousness of the consensus process, of the lack of follow through of the “do nothings.” Without explicitly renouncing anarchist politics, they often begin to drift into modes of behavior that are decidedly authoritarian. Or perhaps their activist life becomes one long struggle between their desire to accomplish social change, and a conscious effort to stifle their impulses to “lead.”

The leaders and the followers, the by-products of an authoritarian society: this is the raw material from which we must build the free society. We do not have the option to fast forward to some post-revolutionary utopia in which everyone is whole and healthy, and in which capitalism is just a dim memory, a defeated demon of an age gone by (and only then will we know for sure how much of our social pathology is learned behavior, and how much is human nature). We must begin our egalitarian relations today, among our damaged selves, if we are to live in a free world tomorrow.

The question, then, is “How do we accomplish this feat?”



Let It Be, Yeah, Let It Be?

The solution is simplicity itself: let the leaders lead, and the followers follow. To an extent, the best course is to allow people to fall into the roles with which they are most comfortable (since they are going to anyway!). We cannot change people overnight, nor should we try to. Rather, our task should be to discern where the boundaries lie between leadership and authority, and act accordingly.

There are at least two types of leadership that are decidedly positive, leadership by example and persuasion. Few would argue the first point. Setting a good example for others to follow is almost universally lauded. The second point is almost as non-controversial, once it is explored. What is anarchist propaganda, after all, but a sector of the population trying to lead by persuasion, not trying to assume the reins of authority, but rather to convince others to give libertarian social ideals a try? In the words of Bakunin, “we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exercise over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted, and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever.” And so we find the platformist idea of “the leadership of ideas” given ever greater credence.

It is only when leadership crosses the border into authority that we are called to revolt. What defines authority? The presence of sanctions. Think about it: a police officer carries the implied threat of jail, the boss of firing, and if you think the pastor carries no authority, you must never have heard of a place called Hell.

Defying authority brings down consequences. The consequences may be implied rather than explicitly defined, but it is these sanctions, these consequences that separate the exercise of authority from legitimate free leadership.

No serious anarchist wants to reproduce authoritarian social relations within our organisations. On the other hand, how many of us have watched an anarchist collective collapse into paralysis as it struggled to eradicate every last trace of dreaded “leadership” from its ranks? There is a happy middle ground in which leadership, but not authority, is accepted and even encouraged. (Ironically, it has been within the ranks of such non-political groups as home school associations and 12 step groups that I have most often seen these principles successfully applied. The political groups I have been involved with tend to err to one extreme or the other. Some were informally authoritarian, with social rejection being the sanctions with which the leadership kept the troops in line. Others, in an effort to prevent such authoritarian social dynamics, self-destructively attacked any trace of leadership as authoritarian.)

Obviously the critical element, the key ingredient of any organisation trying to navigate this divide, is the ability to discuss politics, theory, strategy and tactics, without it becoming at all personal. Only in such an environment will each and all feel free to voice their opinion without fear of sanction,