

# Charted and Uncharted Territories:

*Common Cause and the Role of  
the Anarchist Organization*



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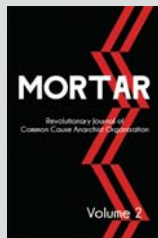




# Charted and Uncharted Territories:

## *Common Cause and the Role of the Anarchist Organization*

by 1 Kitchener-Waterloo member,  
1 Toronto member,  
and 2 Hamilton members



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as opportunities for escalation, lest they become occasions for recuperation.

Glimpses of the exciting potential for neighbourhood assemblies can already be seen in cities like Athens, Barcelona, Madrid, Istanbul, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Following the M15 plaza occupation movement that swept through Spain in 2011, twenty autonomous neighbourhood assemblies were established in Barcelona alone (up from about half a dozen that had been functioning previously). These assemblies have since functioned as a kind of glue that holds together a vast network of self-organized initiatives, and have served as feeders to larger, city-wide mobilizations such as general strikes and riotous May Day celebrations.

Neighbourhood assemblies in Canada would face different material conditions than those of Spanish or Greek urban centres, where the effects of neoliberal austerity measures have been more keenly felt by the population. Yet without waiting for things to get worse here (and realizing that they almost certainly will), we can begin to imagine some campaigns that neighbourhood assemblies could attempt to take on in the here-and-now. For instance, what if a determined and well-organized assembly decided to set its own neighbourhood minimum wage, and enforced this decision through a campaign of targeted economic disruption of those businesses who refused to comply? Or if tenants in a high-rise apartment block all decided to collectively determine their own rent, and resolved that Canadian Border Service Agents not be allowed to enter their building to carry out deportation raids? What if neighbourhood residents took a page out of the Italian auto-reductionists' playbook, and started setting their own public transit fares, or refused, *en masse* to pay increased rates for their gas/electricity—while simultaneously vowing to defend one another from disconnections?

We don't yet have the answers to these questions—but if you'll kindly bear with us, we intend to find out.

in promoting a shared neighbourhood identity (albeit for entirely different purposes), and many of their tactics can be easily replicated and subverted. Community events such as block parties, BBQs and potlucks play an important role in breaking down the atomization of contemporary urban life that so often proves a barrier to organizing with one's neighbours. These casual get-togethers can also be the sites of discussions on neighbourhood-wide issues that can serve as early precursors to neighbourhood assemblies. Producing and distributing community newsletters can be a way of building up a neighbourhood identity while simultaneously informing local residents of upcoming events and campaigns being carried out by intermediate organizations. Cultural events, such as anti-capitalist music festivals, film screenings, community sports leagues, youth-themed events and theatre troupes also play a constructive role in building up a neighbourhood identity, particularly if they are the products of local residents' self-organization. These types of events can help spread anti-capitalist politics by embedding them in a local counter-culture that can sustain itself during lulls or other periods of low conflict. While they are no substitute for confrontational class struggle, they are nonetheless fundamental for the growth and long-term reproduction of neighbourhood autonomy.

## Conclusion

It is worth stressing that members of Common Cause view the establishment of neighbourhood assemblies as a strategic medium-term objective, not as an end in and of itself. While not a panacea to the ills of capitalism, the drive to establish territorially-based assemblies provides a tangible goal around which to orient our efforts in the here-and-now, and a viable project of working class recomposition that will put us in a more advantageous position to confront future crises. The actions undertaken by these assemblies, their capacity, orientation, and comfort with militant tactics, will vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and will be conditioned, at least in part, by the struggles that go into building them.

Neighbourhood assemblies are political projects, in the literal sense that they seek to serve as the collective decision-making bodies of emergent systems of dual power. But since they exist within a hegemonic system of representative democracy that is fundamentally subservient to the dictates of Capital, their efforts to assert their autonomy will inevitably come into conflict with the dominant system in those areas where politics and economics intersect: namely with laws protecting private property and the sanctity of the so-called free market. Anarchists will need to be active within the neighbourhood assemblies, making the case for strategies and tactics that treat these conflicts



## I. On the Question of Organization

*The decision by a group of people, no matter how few, to commit themselves to collective and protracted struggle and to reject 'on the go' politics, shapes everything that follows.*

**Grace Lee Boggs (1972),  
Organization Means Commitment**

These days, the phrase "anarchist organization" is widely seen as a contradiction of terms. For those whose opinions of anarchism are shaped by dominant society, this is perfectly understandable. In the crude caricature fashioned by capitalist media depictions and reinforced through popular culture, anarchy is synonymous with chaos, spontaneous violence, and a vicious, Hobbesian state of nature.

However, more pertinent to us is that even within anarchist circles, the idea of an anarchist organization is often seen either as an oxymoron, or more commonly, as an inherently authoritarian structure somewhat akin to a Leninist cult. And as anarchists who have derived considerable practical benefits from our participation in a formally structured organization, we feel that much of this confusion boils down to a misunderstanding of terms and history.

There has always been well-defined distinctions between different types of revolutionary organization. Whereas Marxist-Leninists of various stripes have sought to lead the masses to revolution under the strategic direction of a vanguard party (with the goal of seizing state power for themselves), anarchists have sought to create, through the establishment of specific anarchist organizations, a "vanguard of ideas." That is, through direct participation in struggle, and

through the creation and distribution of revolutionary propaganda, anarchists have historically attempted to provide insight on movements of the class, while popularizing anarchist strategy and tactics. Because specific anarchist organizations yield no kind of authoritative power, nor do they seek to, they rely solely on the strength of their ideas and practice to influence others.

Going back to the founding of classical anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin viewed the ideal anarchist organization as a decentralized federation able to direct a people's revolution "... by a force that is invisible ... that is not imposed on anyone ... [and] deprived of all official rights and significance." He argued that organization was necessary in order to clarify ideas, maximize the revolutionary classes' strength, and contend with the massive power and resources of the capitalist class.

Ericco Malatesta, too, made his stance on organizationalism clear in his arguments against syndicalism:

*...anarchists must work among themselves for anarchist ends, as individuals, groups and federations of groups. In the same way as there are, or should be, study and discussion groups, groups for written or spoken propaganda in public, cooperative groups, groups working within factories and workshops, fields, barracks, schools, etc., so they should form groups within the various organizations that wage class war.*

Nestor Makhno's bitter accounts of anarchists' activity during the Russian Revolution consistently stressed the importance of formal organization. Writing from exile in Paris, following the success of the Bolshevik counter-revolution, he suggested that "... had anarchists been closely connected in organizational terms and had they in their actions abided strictly by a well-defined discipline, they would never have suffered such a rout....Disorganization reduced them to political impotence." The level of connection and revolutionary discipline that Makhno describes can only be achieved through the establishment of formal anarchist organizations.

In our contemporary context, formal organizations have fallen out of favour to the extent that a fetishization of informal structures and affinity groups has become popularized through the spread of insurrectionist and post-structuralist theory. Adherents of the former camp are often heavily influenced by the theories of Alfredo Bonanno, whereas those in the latter are often inspired by the writings of academics such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari.

For our purposes, we will attempt to address the critiques made by insurrectionists, as they come from fellow anarchist comrades, with whom we

deportation), long-term single-issue organizations (such as anti-poverty groups) or more dynamic multi-issue organizations. A crucial aspect of intermediate organizations lies in their capacity to develop the class consciousness and militancy of their participants through the shared experience of struggle. Due to their dynamic nature, they are also well suited to make strategic interventions against the cultural and material manifestations of white supremacy, patriarchy, and disableism that divide working class residents of a neighbourhood.

Over the past several years, SolNets have become a sort of go-to intermediate organization for anarchists. Beginning with the launch of Seattle Solidarity in 2008, these networks have since spread to dozens of cities across the United States and Canada—to the extent that they are often referred to as "the Food Not Bombs of workplace organizing." This rapid proliferation stems from the fact that SolNets are relatively easy to set up, and often crudely effective in achieving their aims—their tactical repertoire often boils down to getting a bunch of people together to brainstorm creative ways to harass bosses and landlords into paying back unpaid wages and stolen rent deposits. Yet despite their popularity, SolNets in many cities have faced recurring problems of limited retention and growth. Their traditional focus on cases where individuals have already lost their jobs or moved out of their apartments means that those who come to rely on their assistance often have little incentive to keep engaged once their particular case has been won. This problem with long-term engagement means that these organizations often run the risk of turning into what essentially amounts to an unfunded social agency—albeit one that engages in direct action pressure tactics. There is nothing inherent to the SolNet model to limit them to these types of actions, and in fact on the neighbourhood level, these networks can easily be re-purposed into community groups focused on addressing recurring problems such as landlord harassment, above market rent increases, and the failure of landlords to deal with pest infestations or needed repairs. At their core, SolNets are essentially just organized mobs. This makes them an ideal structure for addressing a wide variety of grievances within a given neighbourhood. The trick for anarchists is to proactively seek out the day-to-day class antagonisms that people are socialized into viewing as individual burdens, and re-frame them as collective problems that require a collective response.

Intermediate organizations offer an effective means of normalizing confrontational tactics and exacerbating class tensions within a given neighbourhood. This makes them indispensable for anarchists seeking to help foster a combative neighbourhood identity. But they are not the only options available, and should be seen as encompassing part of a broader strategy. Resident and business improvement associations are often quite successful



improvement associations in the area? If so, who are on their board of directors, and where do they live and work? What are their ties to local politicians and the police, and how are they involved in ongoing gentrification efforts? What are the most apparent sources of class antagonism (gentrification, slumlords, heavy handed police or immigration enforcement agents, etc)? What are the main contradictions within the class (racism, sexism, anti-immigrant sentiment, homophobia, etc)?

These are some of the questions that an anarchist organization should attempt to answer before its members jump directly into organizing. No neighbourhood is exactly alike, and there is no cookie-cutter formula to follow. In order to be strategic in our efforts, we need to know the terrain we're operating in.

## Getting Down to it

Any anarchist strategy for neighbourhood organizing should seek to exacerbate class tensions, while contributing to the development of a combative neighbourhood identity. There are a number of ways to do this, and different approaches are called for in different situations. In some cases, it might make sense to join established organizations that are already active in the neighbourhood, and in some others it might make more sense to start new organizations/campaigns. The important point is that these decisions should be based on existing conditions, not driven by purely ideological considerations.

Working within existing mass organizations, such as tenant unions and community associations, poses both benefits and pitfalls to anarchists. On the one hand, they are often excellent repositories of experience and knowledge about the neighbourhood, and tend to attract some of the most active members of the community. On the other hand, they often possess an entrenched hierarchy with established relationships to agencies and/or local politicians, and therefore tend to channel class antagonism into advocacy and other legalistic avenues. Sympathetic workers at local social agencies can often be vital resources—they may be able to provide free photocopying and access to translators but ultimately the non-profit corporations that they work for are hamstrung by legal mandates and their reliance on state and private funding streams, so strategies that depend on their cooperation should be avoided.

Intermediate organizations are an important terrain for anarchist organizing, as they draw in the most active members of the community and are generally free from the pitfalls of more established mass organizations and social agencies. They can take many different forms, whether temporary, informal coalitions set up to accomplish a particular goal (such as fighting a school closure or a

share a common aim (and, as some of our critiques of post-structuralist and related thought are laid out in the other articles in this journal).

In the pamphlet *Insurrectionary Anarchy and Revolutionary Organization*, a member of the Black Wave Communist Collective, writing under the pseudonym Sabotage suggests that much of the debate around formal versus informal organization is based on a false dichotomy.

Insurrectionist anarchism, in its contemporary form, emerged from the struggles that took place in Italy in the 1970s, and was centred around a critique of closed militarist groups such as the Red Brigades, as well as anarchists grouped into either specific organizations of synthesis (such as the Anarchist Federation of Italy, or FAI) or specific organizations of tendency (such as the platformist Anarchist Groups of Proletarian Action, or GAAP).

As Sabotage explains:

*It was out of this reality that a third type of specific organization emerged, around local groups based on affinity. Affinity in this scenario did not mean that anarchists should just organize with their friends, or not organize at all like the anti-organizational individualists, but based around clarifying where comrades are at based on political discussion, analysis, and most importantly through experience working with each other in struggle. In short, a focus on building unity with others through praxis.*

Particularly in North America, affinity groups are often spoken of dreamily as something of a non-organization. The reality, however, is that any group of people consciously working together is an organization of sorts, whether they want to conceive of themselves that way or not. Affinity groups are deliberately determined associations of comrades who seek to build a shared politics through action—the same as any more formal organization. Structured organizations simply tend to be more deliberate, and thus more effective with this process.

In other cases, affinity groups are temporary associations formed purely on the basis of executing a specific tactic, such as those carried out during participation in a black bloc. While this makes immense practical sense, it should be noted that this tactical role of affinity groups does not preclude the presence of a more long-term anarchist organization — and in fact the existence of one can only compliment the other. An unfortunate consequence of the absence of more long-term specific anarchist organizations in North America has been that anarchists often spend a disproportionate amount of

time focused on tactics, without giving much thought to the very strategy that those tactics are intended to implement.

As we have already mentioned, within much of the anarchist milieu the very idea of formal organizational structure is often labeled authoritarian — but it is worth stressing that the question of authoritarianism here is incidental. Jo Freeman, in her critical essay *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, addressed this point by noting that the development of informal structures (or cliques) are inevitable in any organization. The absence of formal structures to put a check on these groups' influence thereby contributes to the creation of an unaccountable elite. Freeman was addressing her arguments to the so-called “unstructured organizations” of the 1970s women's liberation movement, but her point remains salient: informal structures and affinity groups are prone to authoritarianism, just the same as any formal organization. In fact, informal groups of comrades, more often than not, lack any kind of structure to prevent or discipline harmful behaviour, thereby contributing to an informal authoritarianism often centred around friendships and the cult of personality.

Anarchists' mistrust of formal organizations is not entirely without merit — countless leftist parties and organizations are to thank for decades of betrayal, recuperation, and outright repression of anarchist militants. Having said that, we feel it is extremely short-sighted to ignore the vast amount of time, effort, and rigorous debate that anarchist theorists and militants have put into thinking up and creating systems of organization in line with anarchist principles.

The key to finding the proper organizational structure is to avoid “organization for the sake of organization.” Specific anarchist organizations must always be linked to the concrete struggles and needs of the class, and should never outlive their usefulness. They must be flexible, and adaptive to the ebbs and flow of material conditions.

As members of Common Cause, we feel very strongly that the current state of anarchism in southern Ontario requires a serious change in trajectory. We are plagued by cliquy social circles, pet projects, a general lack of strategy, and correspondingly poor tactics. We need a more sustained and collaborative approach to revolutionary organizing. This requires formal, ongoing spaces for collective thought, scrutiny, mutual support, and development. It has been our experience that these things are done best in formal political organizations. This is not to suggest that these types of organizations are without their challenges, or that they somehow accomplish these goals automatically. Organization is

pretension that our interest in radical politics somehow imbues us with an overriding level of theoretical clarity that is in any way relevant to those who are justifiably turned off by what they identify as the hidden agendas behind our rhetoric. It means meeting people where they're at, which in turn requires humility, empathy, and patience.

Before putting our shoulder to a particular campaign, it is important to spend some time mapping out the surrounding neighbourhood in order to better understand the complex dynamics at play within the territory. Otherwise, anarchists are often prone to ambulance chasing, or cycling through a laundry list of projects (SolNets, Food Not Bombs, CopWatch, etc.) in the vain hope that something will stick. Also, this should be obvious, but it is nonetheless worth stressing that anarchists should be rooted in the neighbourhoods where they organize. The saviour complex so prevalent among much of the revolutionary Left is a rather disgusting and transparent attempt at self-validation, and this dynamic is only compounded when activists parachute themselves into areas because their analysis tells them that material conditions are ripe for revolution, and then pick up and leave as soon as things get tough.

The first step in this process might be figuring out the territorial boundaries of the neighbourhood, if these are not well established. As cities undergo gentrification, neighbourhoods are often given trendy new names as part of a re-branding campaign aimed at attracting investment and new, wealthier residents. These artificial hamlets are usually carved out of existing working class neighbourhoods that have their own histories and shared cultural identities. An example in Toronto would be South Cabbagetown, a partially gentrified area in the city's downtown east end that has historically been part of the working class neighbourhood of Regent Park. Anarchists should be particularly attentive to these re-branding efforts, as they point to potential sites and agents of class conflict.

Once the territorial boundaries of a neighbourhood are well established, the next task should be to begin researching the area's physical geography and class composition. Where is housing most concentrated, and where is it more diffuse? What is the proportion of renters to homeowners? Who are the major landlords/property owners in the area? Where are the schools, hospitals, community centres, and other community/service hubs located? Where are the areas that people congregate—the spaces of encounter where activity in the neighbourhood takes place? Where do the people who live in the area work? Where do they shop? What types of working class and/or community organizations currently exist? What about past organizations or campaigns from recent history? Why did these campaigns succeed or fail? Are there any resident or business



ways in which our class is stratified and shaped by the institutions of white supremacy, patriarchy, and disableism, and confronting the myriad of ways in which these systems manifest in the material world. This means replacing the hierarchical power dynamics that shape everyday life under capitalism with new relationships based on collective and individual autonomy.

#### 4. Expandability/scalability

Systems of dual power are a manifestation of struggles against the dominant order, which must constantly deepen, lest they face stagnation and recuperation. Within a specifically defined territory such as a neighbourhood, the trajectory that this development takes must be measured in terms of the density of organization and the qualitative development of the previous three criteria. So antagonism to the State and Capital might begin with an agreement to not cooperate with police, but should develop towards an understanding that police not be allowed to operate within the physical territory uncontested, whereas a disdain for slumlords should develop towards questioning the sanctity of private property and a corresponding increase in support for expropriation. Spatially, the structures and forms of dual power should be easily reproducible, so that they can serve as an inspiration to those living in other neighbourhoods who want to form similar institutions.

We believe that building these systems of dual power in the here and now is the most important task for anarchist communists living in urban environments. But, it's definitely worth repeating that this theoretical analysis is useless unless it is rooted in action. So, with that in mind, where do we start? We will now offer some potential starting points and strategic considerations, based on our reading of past and present urban struggles, as well as recent experiences over the past three years with urban organizing in the Toronto neighbourhoods of Parkdale and the Downtown East, and to a lesser extent, anti-poverty, anti-police, and SolNet organizing in Kitchener-Waterloo and Hamilton.

### Mapping the Terrain

Neighbourhood organizing can often seem like a daunting task, particularly to leftists who have grown accustomed to perpetual hand-wringing about the inadequate level of political consciousness found within the working class. It requires breaking free of the insular circles of speaking events and political workshops that seem to be our bread and butter. It means dropping the

simply a vehicle, or structure for sharpening our praxis collectively. As the Batko Group succinctly put it, in a postscript to an issue of their journal *Dissident* entitled *Insurrection and Anarchy*: "form is always dependent on the capacity of initiative."

## II. Common Cause's Historical Development

*Only if we recognize the relationship of organization to class struggle can we be clear about what is possible and practical in the here and now.*

**Solidarity Federation (2009),  
*Strategy and Struggle***

To give some context to these arguments, we will now look briefly at Common Cause's historical development over the past several years, focusing specifically on those themes most relevant to the subject of this article. As such, this should not be taken as an exhaustive history of Common Cause. Instead, we will focus on three main areas of organizational development: a) our partial shift from platformism (as we practiced it) to a more cadre-inspired form of organization, b) a move away from what in practice amounted to a simplistic "rank and file" movement strategy to our present disillusionment with that strategy and the institutional Left, c) and to a lesser extent, a partial move away from workplace organizing to a growing focus on territorial-based neighbourhood organizing. As we will attempt to demonstrate, these developments have been the result of our theories being tested in practice, and an increased intellectual engagement with a broader range of revolutionary thought and traditions.

### From WSM-style Platformism to Cadre-lite

Common Cause was founded in the summer of 2007, emerging out of discussions between a small group of anarchist communists from the platformist tradition. The main driving force for this process came from a crew of Irish anarchists with a combined experience of decades organizing in the platformist organization, the Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM). The others involved were mainly either past members of the North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC) Toronto collective, or individuals otherwise somewhere in the NEFAC orbit. With the WSM widely seen as a successful example of a platformist

organization, and given the key role played by longtime WSM members in the organization's founding, the WSM was very much the model that we sought to replicate in Ontario. In other words, platformism was the main influence on the organization in its initial years.

The context of anarchist organizing in Ontario (and largely in North America) is also important in terms of explaining why platformism was initially chosen as the core political tendency of Common Cause. At the time, platformism seemed to a lot of us to provide the only approach for an anarchism linked to the historical anarchist movement; that is, an anarchism rooted in class struggle and focused on building both a specific anarchist organization and combative mass organizations of the working class. This was important because by 2007, nearly a decade after the start of the anti-globalization cycle of protests, many of us had come to see major weaknesses in the affinity group, informal anarchist organizing projects centred largely on summit demonstrations, or their localized equivalents. Platformism presented an attractive alternative to those of us looking for a political organization and tradition that could go beyond the limitations of these anti-globalization networks, which many of us had been, or continued to be a part of. In other words, this was not a wholesale rejection of this model, but a means of surpassing some of its perceived limitations.

Also, as far as the anarchist movement itself was concerned, platformism was, to put it mildly, far more appealing to us than the then not-insignificant primitivist scene, as well as the often overlapping "lifestyle anarchist" scene. Neither of these approaches offered much to anarchists like us, who for a number of reasons (not least of which being a more blue/pink collar class background), were more attracted to the classical anarchist tradition. As with every new political project, over the next few years we underwent our share of growing pains, while managing to maintain a decent level of internal and external activity. More importantly for a new political group, we survived—mainly by attracting a small but steady stream of new members that brought new energy and experience to the organization.

However, throughout this period (roughly between 2007 and 2011) we found ourselves running into a recurrent problem of recruiting new members that we would soon come to realize did not share a proper understanding of the core politics of the organization. In other words, we began to identify a tension between growing in numbers and maintaining theoretical and tactical unity. This realization was driven home by the loss of an entire branch in 2010 almost at once, followed by the slow death of a second branch over the following two years.

directly affected by their outcomes. These local structures would be federated, when necessary, into larger decision-making bodies that could address issues of broader regional significance—such as water and waste management, the maintenance and construction of critical infrastructure, etc. The level of self-organization that this type of society requires won't emerge out of thin air, but is something that must be built through struggle. Neighbourhood assemblies provide an important medium-term goal in the realization of this vision, as they can serve as prefigurative nodes of dual power with the potential to swell and multiply during periods of heightened social rupture. More than that, the struggles that they serve both as the conduit and political manifestation of, can help to heighten class antagonisms in the broader capitalist society, thereby aiding in the creation of social ruptures themselves.

When we speak of institutions of dual power, we are describing systems that meet the following interconnected criteria:

### **1. Antagonism to the State and Capital**

Institutions of dual power operate as a competing framework of legitimacy, based in opposition to the institutions of the State (politicians, bureaucrats, state-funded NGOs, police, judges, courts, prisons, etc.) and Capital. On the level of a neighbourhood assembly, this might begin with a refusal to dialogue with local politicians and state agencies, non-cooperation with the police, and a healthy aversion to wage labour, slumlords, and the depredations of financial capital.

### **2. Capacity to provide services traditionally provided by the State and Capital**

The seeds of autonomy lie in the capacity to replace the myriad dependencies reproduced under capitalism with new inter-dependencies firmly rooted in solidarity and mutual aid. In material terms, these services might initially include any number of local experiments, such as projects dealing with conflict resolution and local decision making, independent media, cultural production, autonomous community health clinics, local food security, and labour and skill-sharing mechanisms such as time-banks or mutual aid networks.

### **3. Prefigurative social relations**

The purpose of dual power structures is to create spaces where new social relationships can be formed that prefigure a society beyond capitalism. A vital component of this work entails understanding the

when applying this framework to workplace struggles, often point to unions as the prototypical example of a mass organization. Because of this, one of the primary roles of a platformist organization often becomes to coordinate the activities of their members within a particular union—or within unions more generally—in order to move workplace struggles in a more anarchist direction.

The intermediate-level analysis is a refinement of this model that attempts to paint a more accurate picture of how struggles and campaigns actually play out in the real world. As the name implies, the intermediate level is conceived of as existing between the mass and political level. Intermediate level organizations might be comprised of active members from the mass level and/or a number of militants from the political level who, despite holding different political views, see the utility in working together to accomplish short to medium-term goals—either by taking on a shared project or coordinating actions within their constituent mass organizations. In keeping with our earlier workplace theme, a good example of an intermediate organization in Toronto would be the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly (GTWA). The GTWA is comprised of members of various trade unions, as well as a hodgepodge of radical leftists loosely united around the idea of building a stronger voice for socialist politics in Toronto. While this is a rather particular example, in practice intermediate organizations dealing with workplace issues can be as simple as a flying squad—a group of individuals who organize together for the sole purpose of demonstrating solidarity with striking workers.

While much of the existing writings on the intermediate level tend to focus on workplace issues, we believe that this model has great utility when applied to neighbourhood organizing. Instead of focusing solely on existing mass organizations (the most obvious corollary on the neighbourhood level being tenant unions and religious/cultural groups), we find it more useful to view the mass level as encompassing the entire neighbourhood itself, as this allows us to deal with the totality of class composition and capital accumulation within a given physical territory. The task for the specific anarchist organization, then, becomes one of organizing within both mass and intermediate organizations to aid in the construction a new mass formation—one which is deliberately fashioned as a self-organized manifestation of working class dual power. We believe that the ideal form that such a formation should take is the neighbourhood assembly—similar to those that have now spread across neighbourhoods in Spain, Greece, Turkey, Brazil, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montreal.

As anarchist communists, we imagine a post-revolutionary society as being composed of a decentralized network of autonomous, self-governing assemblies and councils, where decisions are made collectively by those most

This contradiction was made worse by our emphasis on growing quickly. Inspired by the WSM's stated goal of becoming a political organization of thousands, we did not develop sufficient standards for membership, or devote enough time to internal work (study groups, collective writing, etc.) It's more than debatable whether platformism calls for the establishment of a mass anarchist organization, but that's how we understood it at the time. And we believed that this growth would be achieved by maintaining a fairly high level of external work — both in terms of propaganda and work inside mass organizations like the unions. In other words, we did not place sufficient focus on developing our members' politics (what we call internal education), largely because we stretched ourselves too thin. In hindsight, we would have benefited at the time from a more inward focus and from being more deliberate with our external organizing.

This problem of member retention was made worse by the Ontario-wide scale of our organization, which made internal work more time consuming and expensive. It's not the only reason, but the local branches that have been around the longest are located in cities that are less than 100 km from one another, while the branches that we've lost have been those that were the furthest away from this geographical core—the most far-flung, for example, was located over 400 km away from the nearest branch.

Starting in 2010-2011, a number of new members joined Common Cause, just around the same time as some of the key founding members left (the WSM exiles returned to Ireland for personal reasons). These new members, who were often experienced militants, exposed the organization to a wider range of political traditions and tendencies, such as the contemporary Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), insurrectionist anarchism, especifismo, various strands of libertarian Marxism and the Black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

During this same time period, a great deal of new anarchist and libertarian Marxist theory was being produced, which we became aware of thanks to our growing international networks and of course, the Internet. A key concept that the organization studied closely was the “intermediate-level analysis” (more on this in the following section) developed by the anarchist communist group, Miami Autonomy and Solidarity (MAS). We also began looking at the organizing and writings of new cadre groups such as the Black Orchid Collective and the wider tendency that they belong to.

So to summarize, we were being exposed to new ideas, while our own experience was telling us that our platformist-inspired model needed changing.

It was within this context that the quality over quantity model of cadre groups, combined with the application of an intermediate level strategy seemed to provide an answer to one of our key problems. Here was a potential solution that provided us a way to maintain a high level of political unity among members, while allowing us to work with and mobilize a broader layer of sympathetic militants without the need for, or emphasis on them joining Common Cause. The political organization of hundreds or thousands of members that we had originally envisioned could be replaced by a smaller, but more politically coherent organization working within larger intermediate networks of militants to influence the direction of mass struggles. This, in broad strokes, is the organizational strategy that Common Cause is now pursuing. Its main features are a higher bar for membership, a greater focus on developing our members' politics, a greater commitment to subjecting our members' external organizing to collective scrutiny and direction, and an orientation towards movement building that puts the emphasis on growing networks of anti-authoritarian revolutionaries — rather than on growing Common Cause itself.

It should be emphasized that we have come to see that developing an internal culture of collective scrutiny and “thinking together” is the foundation upon which successful practice is built. It is also the most challenging aspect of this strategy, because the tendency has been for members (especially our strongest and most active militants) to act as free agents in their organizing—within the bounds of Common Cause's core politics, but with little collective direction beyond that. We can see now that too often in the past this amounted to us acting more like an activist club whose members would meet regularly to inform one another of our activity, than as a political organization where the organizing efforts of individual members is strongly guided by the collective politics of the organization — politics developed through a process of deep discussion and intense, but constructive criticism.

This internal cultural shift continues to be a work in progress. Realistically, for the immediate future we will continue to face both individual resistance to change, as well as our fair share of collective mistakes. There is also, of course, a fine line between constructive criticism and being shitty to one another. These factors are also made more difficult by the persistent influence of a broader activist culture that tends to shy away from critical discussion of tactics and campaigns (lest friends offend each other) and has little patience for the hard work of developing theory. One consequence of this culture is the preponderance of actions guided by considerations of what issues are currently trendy, or by the repetition of worn-out tactics. Common Cause members are not immune from this influence, and this is something we continue to struggle against internally.

### III. The Anarchist Organization and Neighbourhood Organizing

*The fact that we have brought our focus to the neighbourhood we inhabit spares us from the abstractions and mediations of politics, allows us to measure our success not in meaningless figures like the number of people who come out to a protest, but in very real, increasingly visible quantities, such as the extent to which we know each other, to which we are no longer strangers in our own neighbourhoods, and the extent to which these relations of acquaintance are transforming into relations of material and emotional solidarity.*

**Peter Gelderloos (2011),  
Reflections for the US Occupy Movement**

While strategy and organizational structure are important, ultimately they are of little consequence if not firmly rooted in practice. With this in mind, we will now share some of the lessons we have learned through our early experiences with neighbourhood organizing, and some projections on where we hope to go. To do this, we will first elaborate further on something we view as a particularly useful conceptual tool, the “intermediate-level analysis” put forward by Scott Nappalos, a member of the Miami branch of the IWW and former member of MAS.

Both the WSM-inspired platformism that Common Cause originally pursued, and our more recent cadre-inspired organizational structure belong to a broader anarchist tradition known as dual-organizationalism, or “specificism”. Implicit in this concept is the idea that there are two different types, or levels of organization: the mass level and the specific/political level. Broadly speaking, under this model the role of the specific anarchist organization is to develop theoretical and strategic cohesion, and a shared anarchist politics, which can then inform its members' participation in struggles on the mass level. This distinction between levels is partially a matter of scale, but also a matter of orientation. The term “mass” is often ascribed to organizations that have large numbers of members, but more importantly, it describes organizations that exist not on the basis of political affinity, but collective self-interest. Specific/political organizations, on the other hand, are often smaller groups of people based around a shared political analysis, which pursue a more long-term strategy in the service of their particular brand of political ideology. As we've noted, platformist organizations,



communist organization, to a contemporary cadre-inspired organizational model. The four platformist principles of theoretical unity, tactical unity, collective responsibility, and federalism remain in our constitution, but how we understand and how we practice our politics has changed. And platformism is now only one influence among a set of other libertarian communist traditions. Second, we have learned the hard way that if we want to go beyond the limits imposed on class struggle by the institutional Left (and the post-World War II class compromise that, increasingly, only they remain loyal too), we need to build autonomous power outside of the structures of existing mass Left organizations—be they in the form of autonomous worker committees, student mobilizing committees independent from existing student unions and federations, or neighbourhood groups that are disconnected from the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, progressive city councillors, and the New Democratic Party (NDP).

Most recently, we have begun to put more of a focus on neighbourhood organizing. This shift was partially influenced by our experiences in the unions. While our members remain active in workplace organizing — mostly within the Toronto IWW, and Hamilton and Kitchener-Waterloo SolNets — we were certainly left with a bitter taste in our mouths after our experiences within the institutionalized Left. And yet that frustration only nudged us into looking more carefully at our own members' lives, at current class composition and at the strategies of global capital. We don't have the space to properly cover it here, but our internal discussions on this subject have been extensive. These have included dedicating an entire Day School to the topic, numerous branch and organization-wide strategy sessions, reading groups, a handful of external workshops, and one of our members helping to organize the Contested Cities conference, held in Toronto in April of 2013. Some of the resulting analysis from these discussions, and our early research can be seen in the first issue of *Mortar*—especially in the articles *Run This Town: Building Class Power in the City* and *Short Circuit: Towards an Anarchist Approach to Gentrification*. Out of this work has come a decision to focus on the spaces where we live, and on building autonomous institutions of neighbourhood dual power that do not forget the workplace as a key site of struggle.

Nevertheless, in a relatively short time we have made some important steps in developing an internal culture of collective thinking and scrutiny. The most visible manifestations of this shift have included the replacement of our quarterly *Linchpin* newspaper with a theoretical journal (and its attendant emphasis on the collective writing and editing of articles) and the tripling of our organization-wide Day Schools (day or weekend long conferences of internal workshops and strategy sessions). It has also been marked by a de-emphasis from being present at every (often ritualistic) protest or action and the organizing of public events such as speaking tours, in favour of setting aside more of our members' limited time for study groups and strategic discussion of our organizing, which otherwise remains at a high level of activity.

### **From “Organizing the Rank and File” to “Building Autonomy” and Open Conflict with the Institutional Left**

The testing of our ideas by practice — specifically our experiences organizing inside the institutional Left — produced another important change in our politics: the move towards open conflict with the living dead subjects of what remains of the historic working class movement.

By 2013, several of our members had been organizing for five or more years inside their unions — above all in universities as precarious academic workers — and inside student unions—mainly within locals affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). The approach that had guided much of our mass work up to that point was a formula prominent in platformist circles: organize with your co-workers/ classmates inside the unions, because despite their many problems, they remain the main mass organizations of the class. Following this formula, we worked inside the structures of the institutional Left to reform them, and to build up the militancy and activity of rank and file members. The only real clear direction that we gave ourselves in doing this work was that we were not to take up positions that were not elected by the rank and file. Everything else, such as running for executive positions or working within the legal labour relations framework, was fine so long as we believed that what we were doing increased the activity and militancy of the rank and file.

Accordingly, members at various times served on local executives, participated in several rounds of state-sanctioned bargaining and strike mobilizations (including a short-lived strike of teaching assistants [TAs] at McMaster University in 2009), did a fair amount of solidarity strike support (with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers [CUPW], Ontario Public Service Employees Union [OPSEU], Canadian Auto Workers/Unifor [CAW/Unifor], various Canadian Union of

Public Employees [CUPE] locals) and attempted to reform their organizations through available institutional channels such as mobilizing around grievances and bargaining, changing local bylaws, moving motions at provincial and federal conferences, and other similar efforts.

Following this period those of us most involved in this work had become thoroughly disillusioned with our efforts. While warning signs could be seen prior to this, the rather rude wake-up call that our approach was not working came in 2012, with the failed strike mobilizations of CUPE 416 (City of Toronto outdoor workers) and CUPE 3902 (TAs at the University of Toronto). To make a long and complicated story short, in both cases, members in Toronto spent a significant amount of time preparing for strikes that were ultimately contained by the union bureaucracy. This did not happen without a fight. For example, at CUPE 3902, one of our members was instrumental in mobilizing their fellow TAs towards both a record turnout for the strike vote (unheard of in the sector) and a record strong strike mandate. Despite this, our member's efforts were ultimately recuperated by entrenched union staffers, who used the high level of mobilization to negotiate a contract with slightly less concessions than they otherwise would have received, while simultaneously demobilizing the membership in order to avoid a strike.

This experience, as well as other similar, if less dramatic examples inside other unions, began a discussion inside the organization that would fairly quickly end with us concluding that fighting on the terrain of the institutional Left is a losing battle. Our goal had always been, and still is to go beyond the limits of the existing bureaucratic and legalistic union form — or its equivalent on campuses and the non-profit sector. We learned the hard way that we could not fight and win, no matter how well we organized, against the entrenched Left bureaucracy as long as we played within the rules that they had spent decades crafting and testing against exactly the kind of organizing we were doing. As long as we did this, our efforts, despite our intentions, would amount to serving the function of a “loyal opposition.” Our organizing would ultimately be made to serve and strengthen the institutional Left, rather than destroy it. It's truly depressing to think of how many people we inspired to action only to see them ultimately recruited by the promise of well-paying careers doing “good work” for the working class. Or even worse, how many workers and others we convinced to go along with the faux-fightbacks of the institutional Left, despite their better instincts. After a short period of reflection we decided that instead of playing the role of an unwitting loyal opposition, we should focus on building autonomous organizations—as opposed to rank and file groups based within the legal institutional framework of unions, student unions and community NGOs.

This decision can and has taken several forms. We very quickly realized that we can ignore the institutional Left completely whenever possible, and that the terrain free of their presence is pretty wide by now, and growing every day. This understanding has been useful in our subsequent neighbourhood organizing in Toronto, and for the Solidarity Networks (SolNets) that all our branches are involved in, to some extent. Or we can organize within and against the institutional Left, while showing no respect for its structures—except, at most, as a temporary tactic. This was the approach taken in the IWW-led organizing efforts during the Porter Airlines refuelers strike at Toronto Island Airport. This campaign saw this international airport shut down three times in “illegal” strike actions (carried out with the aid of the black bloc tactic) that escaped the control of COPE, the union formally representing the workers—at that point, in name only. Another example was a community picket line put up at a local high school in Hamilton on the day that the Liberal provincial government took away teachers' right to strike, without the permission (or even knowledge) of their union.

The massive Quebec student strike in 2012, in which a large percentage of our members participated in a significant way in some form or another, was another big inspiration for our current work. Not only was it the most significant social movement in Canada in decades, it was also initiated by a student federation created by militants who had pursued a strategy of combative syndicalism—that is, who had built a fighting organization outside of the structures of the institutional student Left. The lessons learned here helped to inspire the current and ongoing Canada-wide defederation campaign from the CFS, which our members are active in, and which comes after years of trying to reform the student federation from within.

It is early still, but so far the impact of this new direction on Common Cause seems to have been to earn us the disdain of those sections of the activist community most loyal to the institutional Left, while bringing us closer to our neighbours, classmates, and co-workers—especially those among them who are already fighting back on their own terms. It is a trade-off that we should have made from the beginning, and one that is unavoidable for any revolutionary organization working to loosen or avoid the zombie-grip of the institutional Left on the precarious struggles of today.

## **On to Neighbourhood Organizing**

To sum up, first, in the six years that Common Cause has been around, we've moved from a contemporary platformist focus on building a large anarchist