GAME OVER?

NO WAY! DEVELOPING WAYS OUT TOGETHER

Documents from the event series
"**Politically Active without Burning Out**"

Foreword

You're now holding the second edition of our brochure 'Politically Active without Burning Out' in your hands – which, in the meantime, has also become known as 'Game Over? No Thanks!' We were a little bit unsure when we printed 1,500 brochures with our first edition whether we could really distribute them all. We were already relieved of our worries after 1–2 weeks. The booklet met with immense interest (although the praise we received was a bit effusive for our tastes) and after about two months all brochures had either been distributed or reserved. Having already received almost 500 pre-orders, we have now dared to make a second edition of the same amount. So if you like the brochure, feel free to recommend it to others. We will continue trying to offer free delivery (in any case, the booklets are available for free and also downloadable as a PDF).

Those who downloaded the PDF from the AFB site in the summer months will have certainly noticed that we have had to make a change in the original text: for reasons that didn't have to do with the brochure itself, one of the presenters asked us to remove the text about their presentation. We respect this decision and correspondingly immediately changed the online PDF. Concretely, this concerned the workshop on 'Stress and Burnout Prevention'. In spite of our hopes, there will unfortunately not be an alternative text here. As the topic had to do with the central theme of our event series and the present brochure, however, we have decided, independent of the event, to write some thoughts on the issue. You will find this contribution on page 41.

As already written, we have received a lot of positive feedback to the brochure, but we've also received a comprehensive critique. We take this critique seriously and would like to try here to respond to it and clarify a few things (also in the consideration that similar critiques simply weren't verbalized to us):

This brochure is not purely about documentation. It contains commentary and evaluations from our group, especially in the segments entitled 'Conclusion'. For us, this work was essentially an attempt to distill some 'best practices' out of events that weren't, or weren't clearly, brought out in the events themselves.

For most if not all of the themes in this brochure, we did not make a claim to be experts on the matter. We also struggle in praxis with many of the questions discussed in the reader and don't want to sound as if we know best. If this happened nevertheless at some points, please forgive us and let us know which ones, so that we can work on expressing ourselves better.

Both the concrete results of the workshops as well as further conclusions have been written from our perspective and do not have universal validity. Even so, for us it was immensely important to give other interested political activists a corresponding framework for a thematic field about which we talk all too often but still never manage to find concrete guiding principles for understanding. Correspondingly, all ideas in this booklet are only suggestions and must necessarily be adapted to concrete situations and practices or just thrown out. We call for experimentation!

At this point we'd like to point out: we are regularly asked whether we could repeat the event series or certain events in it in other cities. Now? We'd rather not! For the reasons mentioned above, we see you all as just as capable of holding the events, especially since for most of them a practical and relatively detailed written framework for implementing the events has been given. And not last, in the meantime we also have other projects of our own and we're very anxious to avoid political burnout.

In this sense: have fun reading and trying things out. Please send your feedback on to us: kaputtnix@riseup.net.

Members of the Project 'Politically Active without Burning Out?'

The Organizing Group

We, group X, organized this series. We are a small group that has been regularly meeting and doing various projects for about two years. In the process, we've taken on different themes like federation, (a critique of) mutualism, and a critique of the left scene. We also do actions and activities under other names. gx is thus more of a placeholder name that we sometimes trade for other names during concrete projects. This has various reasons that differ from action to action. Often we want to foreground the action more than the group, to work against the pressure to label, to find new names that better fit a given action, and maybe also to cause a little confusion. ;-)

As a group, we are a part of the Anarchist Federation of Berlin (afb): http://afb.blogsport.de. That means that, now and then, we send one of our members to the general meetings of the afb to report on our activities and to find out about the activities of other groups in the federation, who support the afb in various things like regular meetings, Dokument A (Annual Anarchist Publication in Berlin), tabling and opportunities for networking, and who also use the resources of the afb (office, workshop materials, blog, information and experience, …). For its part, the afb is a part of the Federation of German-Speaking Anarchists (FdA: Föderation deutschsprachiger Anarchist*innen), which in turn is part of the International of Anarchist Federations (IAF/IFA). So it's a nice, wide-reaching anarchist network with many opportunities to exchange information and experiences and networked actions.

In our gx group meetings, we also have a few 'best practices' that we'd like to share with you: we start with a round where everybody briefly says how they're doing and what sorts of anarchist things they've experienced since the last time. After that, we normally summarize the points that we want to discuss and establish how long we want to spend on each point. Before we get into the details of the organization or content of current projects, there is usually also a short input from one of us about a topic that we're currently engaged with. This way, we can pass on knowledge and inspire one another. If it might be of interest to other groups in the afb, we happily pass on the information.

Contents

Idea workshop: "Passing on Knowledge across Generations" / "How do we grow?" - Part 1: Generations with gx and the ASJ

In the run-up to the event series, we as organizers had various encounters that made the significance of this topic clear. Among these were the (almost outraged) comment of an older comrade, who said that the current (political) discussions had already been had 30 years ago, and the complaints of younger comrades that they had been left completely to their own devices and had to relearn everything from scratch. In addition, we regularly hear reservations about collaborations across different generations in political contexts. If we as anarchists are striving towards a society in which all generations are integrated with equal rights, then we should also try to effect that in the here and now - especially in our political groups.

With this idea workshop, we hope that better transmission of information between generations ("old experiences and knowledge" for younger people as well as "new developments and technical know-how" for older people) could bring a slew of practical advantages: e.g. fewer losses due to friction in groups with multiple generations, support for the "aging" of political groups, the use of the knowledge that already exists, avoiding all the extra effort put toward independently developing or acquiring this knowledge.

Note:
As is clear in the announcement that follows, at this event there were two idea workshops running in parallel, which is the reason that some parts (especially at the beginning and end) were conducted together. At this point, we will only address the topic "Passing on Knowledge across Generations." The topic "How do we grow?" will be treated elsewhere.
This idea workshop was repeated in a different form several months later. The second version is also documented in this reader (immediately following this workshop).

ANNOUNCEMENT FOR THE EVENT

Leading up to the event series Politically Active without Burning Out, there will be an idea workshop dealing with two topics important for sustainable political work. On the one hand, we want to explore how we can transmit knowledge across generations most conveniently and effectively, and on the other hand we wish to consider how we can interest people in libertarian ideas and create motivations for organized action.

ABOUT THE ANARCHOSYNDICALIST YOUTH (ASJ: ANARCHOSYNDIKALISTISCHE JUGEND BERLIN) OF BERLIN

The event was organized and put on as a cooperation between group x/afb and a comrade from ASJ Berlin. The Anarchosyndicalist Youth of Berlin identifies as a cultural and struggle-oriented organization of young people striving for autonomy, with the goal of social autonomy in all areas of life, in order to ultimately realize a society without domination of one human by another. Their membership is comprised of school and university students, apprentices, and youth with and without work.

COURSE OF THE EVENT

· Introduction, method: short presentation
· Division into two groups (one workshop each) and determination of the starting point, method: combined sociometric arrangement
· Making a transparency of experiences, method: hand signals

Separation of the two workshops
· Creating the right mood for the topic, method: whisper circles
· Gathering ideas, method: world-brainstorming (see below for explanation)
· Concretizing the ideas, method: whisper circles

Bringing the two workshops back together
- · Gathering the results, method: presentations in plenum
- · Closing, method: lightning round

The time-frame was approximately from 20:45 to 23:00 on a Monday.

After a short introduction to the event series as a whole and to the evening's two topics in particular, we used a 'sociometric' arrangement in order to establish the preferences of those present and to enable a division into two separate idea workshops on the topics "Passing on Knowledge across Generations" and "How do we grow?" We combined the question which idea workshop do you prefer with the question how urgent do you considered an engagement with the topic to be.

Immediately after this (with the people still standing where they had been), we asked, using hand signals, how much experience people had in the "leftist scene."
For this, the organizers called out three categories one after another (everyone, who felt that a category applied, was supposed to raise their hand):
- · 0 – 2 years
- · 3 – 10 years
- · more than 10 years

The resulting picture was a mixed one, as far as experience went, but unambiguous as far as preferences: the larger part of the group (practically all the younger people) wanted to work on the topic of how we can grow, the smaller part (practically all those with more experience) tended to prefer the idea workshop on transmitting knowledge.

Each group got their own room. We got into the topic of "Passing on knowledge across generations" with three whisper circles using the two questions "How did I gain my knowledge?" and "How did I pass it on?".

These conversations weren't recorded in writing, so we can't comment on their contents. But we had the impression that some of those present had difficulties with these questions or had come to the workshop with other topics of their own.

As a next step we used four questions that we had formulated in advance as a basis for a "world-brainstorming." This is a concept invented by us and describes a combination of brainstorming (where everybody contributes ideas without restriction) and the "world cafe" (where different questions are discussed at different tables, and everyone is periodically asked to switch tables).
At each table, there was a question for which people were supposed to gather ideas:

1. In what form can knowledge be collected in order to be passed on?
2. What forms of passing on knowledge can be implemented in the context of different generations (beyond "lecturing")?
3. How can older people be relieved of the burden of passing on knowledge (or unburden themselves)? ["It's fatiguing to always have to explain the basics again."]
4. How can fears of contact between different generations be eliminated? [E.g.: for the purpose of integrating different generations common groups or networks.]

After this, all the participants were given enough time to view the results.

As a last step, small new whisper circles developed various project ideas on the basis of the brainstorming discussion. The output of the groups turned out totally differently: while one group didn't get any concrete ideas on paper, another group developed or recapitulated seven different realizable ideas.

The concrete ideas were then presented along with the ideas from the other idea workshop in a common plenum.

In the following is a compilation of the results. The results are roughly sorted into the following categories: general thoughts on the topic | personal behavior | structures | concrete projects

1) General thoughts on the topic
- associating one's own knowledge, own experiences
- continuously passing on knowledge, so that everyone has it
- transparency
- mental models
- taking language barriers into account
- older concepts, e.g. / abbreviations / youth slang
- the "mental" atmosphere of places/centers

2) Personal behavior
- Nonviolent Communication (NVC)
- accepting changes in the forms of behavior and world views from one generation to the next without fighting against it
- more friendly, polite, respectful, and aggression-free ways of dealing with others
- creating/rediscovering a positive relationship to one's own themes/processes, so that the dissemination of the basics is fun again
- asking questions
- older people should also strive towards new knowledge
- looking for (social) spaces where other generations also hang out
- without shutting oneself out
- being open
- having the confidence to approach younger/older people
- formulating and actively overcoming one's fear
- demonstrating a fundamental sympathy for others
- assuming good faith
- not looking for a barb behind everything
- not always saying "back in the day"
- less arrogance
- less from above
- being actively responsive to the perception of people of other generations (barriers/fears/perspectives)
- not addressing older people formally

3) Structures
- creating multipliers
- compiling theoretical readers
- (mixed!) reading groups, acquiring knowledge together
- documenting knowledge/experiences
- creating special structures to do this → Dissemination working groups.
- ally-politics [cf. footnote 1]
- founding generational organizations
- alliances between groups of various "ages"
- (founding) intergenerational groups
- making a point of inviting older comrades
- turning away from youth organizations
- making groups more "user-friendly" - also accessible to people with work/kids/etc.
- dealing openly with failures
- more self-criticism
- role-playing
- constructively meeting new developments/shifts of ideology

4) Concrete projects
- · city tours by "experienced" comrades to visit groups who want their tips and advice
- · selectively seeking out older comrades to record a series of oral history interviews
- · more public (more regular) consulting hours (in a bar, e.g.) for questions of infrastructure ("knowledge of the scene")
- · creating transparency within projects and groups by means of a better overview of personal skills and contacts
- · an event series on "general" topics, in which the (historical) discourse of each topic would be retraced - e.g. with the participation of comrades from different generations (e.g.: antiracist struggles of the last 30 years / feminism since the 19th century)
- · compiling a reader on the topic of "Communication between Generations" with collected tips and ideas (see point 2, above)
- · an event series on "New Knowledge for Experienced Activists," e.g. information on the newest developments but also including technical workshops.

At the end we asked everyone for short feedback in the form of a lightning round, where everyone was supposed to briefly address the following two questions:
- · How satisfied are you with the course of events?
- · Do you have spontaneous tips for further idea workshops?

MOOD AND FEEDBACK

The eight people present sat at three tables. The conversations, however, were somewhat stiff - possibly because some people weren't totally sure how to deal with the ideas proposed. In the context of the brainstorming round, there arose a tense situation when one participant said that gender and generational problems are often simply excuses. One participant disagreed strongly. But the discussion wasn't continued, because of the conceptual framework of the exercise (the brainstorming idea is designed to avoid discussion of the points suggested, so that as many ideas can be elicited as possible).

The result of the assembled round was mixed: there was varied feedback, from one person who said that she hadn't heard anything new, to another who thought that really interesting approaches had been found (or at least documented).

At the end of the workshop, a handful of people spontaneously agreed to divide the sheets documenting the entire brainstorming and mindmap sessions amongst themselves. Just to be safe, photos had been taken of all the posters so that nothing would get lost. And indeed, the data made its way in over the next few weeks as promised.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the idea workshop, we decided that we have to act more quickly, or rather, more decisively, as soon as a discriminatory statement is made (without necessarily considering the conceptual framework). Disruptions (when participants feel ill at ease) have priority.

After the event, it was still unclear to what extent the methods we used could lead to the creation of "new" project ideas. The topic of the idea workshop was met with great interest, but an implementation of the ideas developed didn't arise on its own. What was really positive was the spontaneous readiness of those present to document the results on their own.

We believe that there are certain areas where an increased engagement would be very worthwhile. Among these are all forms of documenting knowledge that already exists (especially the experiences of older comrades, which may soon no longer be available), but also the development of ideas concerning, for example, the vexing topic of the concrete transmission of (theoretical) knowledge in political groups. This latter aspect is clearly marked (in the perspective of many) by the way that, over and over again, "older" comrades gradually grow frustrated and increasingly unwilling to spend time initiating "younger" comrades, time that they would otherwise use on their own projects.

To this extent, it can make sense to have groups separated by their ages that each work on their own acquisition of knowledge. But that should not lead to the loss of contact between them.

One of the best best practices in passing knowledge across generations is thus - surprise, surprise - the federation (an insight that certainly comes as no accident, given our own endeavors at political organization :-)):

· Small buddy-groups with people of the same age for the purpose of learning in common on an equal footing, exchange of experience, etc.
· Support with individual questions or with projects by people from other age groups → encouragement, passing on knowledge
· A federation inclines towards documentation and a longterm existence → knowledge tends to be secured

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[1] "Ally politics" describes the cooperation of groups that are exposed to different structures of repression or have different needs and are thus each organized for themselves, but have a common goal or want to organize a common action. For example, people who lack a residency permit or those who have to take medicine daily cannot, out of reasons of self-protection, put themselves at risk to the same extent as others. Ally politics is also used against leaders from the ruling class or a self-appointed vangard for the benefit of the self-organization and emancipation of people who are exposed to similar discrimination (multiple oppression). But ally politics does not in principle support a separation into population groups defined in various ways.

Idea workshop "Passing on Knowledge across Generations" / "How do we grow?" - Part 2: Growing with gx and the ASJ

Many who are convinced by anarchist ideas cannot understand why others don't go along with the supposed "best" idea. They think: it can't take much, a good event, a good book, a brilliant slogan … and then others surely have to understand … When this doesn't happen to the desired extent, frustration often results. Next to this desire to grow on a level geared more toward social change, there is also the need of political groups themselves to grow: there are many ideas of things that could be done, but too few people to implement these. Many groups suffer from a lack of personnel, which causes further frustration. If no new people come along, things eventually run out of steam. They lack new ideas and new hopes. For these reasons, in the idea workshop we want to look for possibilities for how we can grow.

Note:
This idea workshop took place in parallel (chronologically and methodologically) with the idea workshop "Passing on Knowledge across Generations." The latter is documented above. Since the announcement, cooperation with the ASJ, course of events, introduction, impression of the mood, plenum, and conclusion are identical to those of this idea workshop, or rather, took place in common with this workshop, those sections of the documentation are omitted here.

CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVENT

In order to get into the topic, get to know each other a bit, and exchange personal experiences, we first separated into small groups to discuss the questions, "How did I become active?" and "What were the reasons?". Sometimes listening to each other's political histories can help us find new ideas or new motivations in our own lives. The exchange was quite personal and for that reason is not reproduced here. I made note of two interesting general observations from my own group:
- In the leftist scene, there's a very specific atmosphere that doesn't agree with everyone.
- There are many people on the left and people who don't position themselves politically, who like anarchist ideas, but think that people in the leftist scene are crazy.

After this, we divided into four groups to brainstorm ideas about the question of the idea workshop "How do we grow?". The question was divided up into parts: on each of four tables there was a poster with one question and a lot of space for writing down ideas. Everyone could find a place at one table and then switch tables when a timer rang, until everyone had been at every table.

The questions:
1. How can we politicize more people (people we don't know)? [E.g.: for increased participation at demonstrations and events]
2. What active steps can we take so that more people begin to organize? [E.g.: actively recruiting new people or founding new groups]
3. How can we involve interested individuals (better) in political groups? [E.g.: in temporary projects]
4. What basic conditions are necessary for people to want to organize? [E.g.: personal relevance, respect, interest, …]

In a second phase, we tried to develop concrete, implementable measures from the notes we made during the first phase. Because there was some overlap between the various answers, questions 1 and 2 were merged for the presentation of the results. The results for question 1 could also be used to answer questions 2 and 3.

There are many ideas for possible action. It seems important to us to note that the long list doesn't mean that every "good" political group has to carry out as many of these as possible. Certain people like certain forms of action more than others. And of course it's always important to have fun. So pick out a few forms that suit you, try to be versatile, and don't feel compelled. Instead, it makes more sense to cooperate with other groups who have other forms of action covered, or to join a federation.

What can we do to politicize people for the first time?
Our attempts to affect others should meet the following criteria:
- friendly, with a sense of humor, easygoing, awakening others' desire for resistance through our positive attitude
- interesting, competent, oriented towards daily life (even with radical topics), present (in many channels of information and places)
- capable of taking criticism, reflective
- enthusiastic, full of perspectives, hopeful
- inviting, easily approachable, open (e.g. showing that the interest of others makes you happy), seriously interested in the other person and their problems, approaching others (taking the first step)
- open (as a group/space as well as as a person, towards those who think differently, and also open to sometimes sharing personal stories), unprejudiced, nonjudgmental (at most judge actions, not people), curious (a desire for new things), transparent (making your own motivations/work/group clear to others)
- involved in structures and groups (not approaching others as an isolated weirdo), versatile (in terms of topics, forms of action, presence, information channels), not too "scene-ish"
- avoiding a group identity, or rather giving an impression of excess familiarity, since it would otherwise be difficult for "newcomers" to integrate themselves into the group
- noticeable, a bit provocative at times

That may sound worse than the requirements in a job advertisement. ;-) But here too: don't stress about it. It's only important that you regularly reflect on yourself (as an individual and as a group) and that you also get occasional feedback from outsiders on the impression you convey. In this way, you can avoid sliding over time into an arrogant or detached posture towards "newbies."

By what kinds of concrete measures can the desired public image described above be achieved?
a) On the personal level
- individual conversations, personal exchanges also in your own environment (with friends, coworkers, neighbors); make and maintain direct contact; personally invite people to events
- open, regular meetings
- give others food for thought
- start conversations in everyday life (on the train, shopping, waiting rooms, …)

b) On the level of information
- stickers, zines, videos, etc. with appealing layouts; use various media (bourgeois as well) and types of media (flyers, blogs, radio, …)
- readers, events, reports, presentations with the basics (e.g. self-organization, what is anarchy), make FAQs with questions and answers often asked of anarchists
- more theory/content in material for mobilizations
- make the scope of the consequences of capitalism clear, expose the bullshit; at the same time, pay attention to the effects of word choice
- demonstrate perspectives

c) On the level of action
- bring anarchist culture into other areas of life: yoga, non-judgmental painting, etc.
- street theater, other striking/new forms of action
- open platforms for action
- large campaigns, but also continuity of campaigns
- alliances
- low-level posters, like those at http://www.loesje.de/, for example.
- actively approach people (e.g. with flyers), show them alternatives and so provoke them to think about things (taking part in the Anti-Racist Shopping project)

d) On the organizational level
- low-threshold opportunities for participation like people's kitchens, parties (free beer ;-)), free time activities, sports, games, in spaces that are easy to find
- shared cultural activities: educational trips, watching films together or listening to the radio, political theater

· diversity shows itself in (among other things) a broad selection of music, various target groups for different actions
· make resources available to new people, opportunities for education (e.g. according to expressed interest), offer support in organizational things/resources
· open groups whose work and orientation are well-known, whose structures are transparent, who are present and offer open meetings (nevertheless, there can still be internal plena)
· brochures on open structures (e.g. http://www.schwarz-bunte-seiten-berlin.org)
· continuous promotion of events and group meetings, not just within your own scene
· open house meetings, meetings for new people
· availability and approachability through set assembly times and places + an up-to-date internet presence and functioning email addresses
· recruitment working groups

What can we do to integrate new people into groups?
The public image described above is helpful here as well. The measures also fit, in large part. The following points were collected as specific answers to this question:

a) On the personal level
· ask people what they'd most prefer in a given situation (e.g. to be left in peace or to jump right into things)
· discover people's interests and be responsive to them
· ask for opinions
· don't overburden people
· pay attention to social integration (e.g. go drinking)
· give honest feedback: don't avoid criticism (but formulate them more cautiously)
· allow people their autonomy, place importance on the initiative of the individual, only give input at certain moments
· show a value-free interest in the "whole" person, not only in their "political" side
· invite new members personally to private meetings/events, but not at first to group meetings in private spaces, since the impression could arise that one did not yet intend to invite them - as a new person to the group - and that they are not welcome.
· have fun
· build trust

b) On the level of information
· have an info sheet ("Welcome to …") on the group, its structures, resources, calendar, … for more transparency and easier integration, but don't represent the structure monolithically; create transparency (explain internal structures)
· always offer help/support in dealing with problems (job, apartment, authorities, environmental pollution in the garden, too much traffic on the way to school)
· recount and reflect on one's own history in the movement

c) On the level of action
· in activities, offer the possibility for meaningful contributions and further development; shared activities bring people together
· temporary projects (political and personal)
· political festivals / camps
· action trainings as the opportunity to come together
· break down hierarchies of knowledge, preferably through action
· alternative culture and leisure activities

d) On the organizational level
· Sponsor system: buddy ("sponsor") from the group as a personal contact person for questions, e.g., and as the person who feels responsible for maintaining contact; don't leave integration to chance
· small groups, so as not to get lost in large structures

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· make it easier to join, leave and rejoin
· clearly achievable goals
· assigning smaller tasks (not asking too much of people)
· offer tasks (if desired)
· keep in contact (integration into the appropriate communicative structures)

What can we do so that people will begin to organize / form new groups?
The answers to the previous questions can also provide inspiration here. Additionally, the following points were collected:
a) On the personal level
· ask our acquaintances if they will organize with us
· keep one's own eyes and ears open for interesting groups or opportunities for organization and tell others about them

b) On the level of organization
· guidebook with the basics of organization for new groups
· decision-making possibilities
· explanation of words (e.g. consensus, veto)
· how do you take good minutes?
· different ways of holding discussions (facilitation, hand signals, etc.)
· security culture (no names and illegal things in the minutes, PGP, leaving cell-phones outside)
· forming new groups
· emphasize the necessity of organization / make the advantages clear:
· better prospects for improving one's life-situation
· exchange of knowledge and experience
· continuity of work
· trusted environment
· contact to new people
· regional and transregional networking
· more capacity and ideas
· larger sphere of influence
· better external image
· Point out the problems of not being organized
· Education (e.g. about repression)
· Broad social demands

c) On the level of action
· organize organizational events (e.g. A-Congress)
· make public presentations of existing groups and their orientation (http://www.schwarz-bunte-seiten-berlin.org)
· share and remember the experiences of success

d) On the level of organization
· offer help to newly formed groups, also as a practical exchange of knowledge and experience
· have a member of an old group participate
· divide existing groups   good mixture of experienced and inexperienced people
· continual individual networking and group networking
· solidarity support in the face of repression
· the mutual support of groups for each other during larger actions (e.g. conventions)

MOOD AND FEEDBACK
About 20 people participated in this part of the workshop. The feedback for the "growing" part of the double idea workshop seemed more positive on average than the feedback from the "generation" part. Some participants were quite enthusiastic about implementing a few of the ideas and passing the ideas on in the form of this documentation.

Ideas are easy to come by - so why is it so difficult to find people who will actually put them into practice? We have the impression that almost all those present were already quite heavily involved and preferred not to get bogged down in even more new projects. People who came along as newcomers and aren't yet involved might, on the contrary, wish to develop their own ideas (and make their own mistakes) rather than putting predefined ideas into practice. How can this be overcome? One idea would be to evaluate current projects with respect to their benefits and costs. This should perhaps be done not by the groups themselves, but rather by friendly external groups or, if it exists, a federation. If it turns out that the continuation of some projects doesn't make sense anymore, then these could be ended in a sensible and coordinated way and new projects could be initiated. Another idea would be to integrate those people who still have free time and the energy into the process of developing ideas from the very beginning, so that the impression does not arise that everything has already been planned and now merely needs to be put into practice.

If existing structures are not replenished with newcomers, they will eventually run out of steam. There is then a lack of new ideas and new hopes. "Old timers" should consciously avoid devolving their disillusionment onto the "newcomers", and instead let themselves be infected by their hopes. "Newcomers" should also not be made implicitly responsible for introducing a new momentum, nor should their absence be used to justify disillusionment. Even if we don't "grow," it is our responsibility to keep our enthusiasm for the idea of anarchism alive and to communicate it sympathetically and enthusiastically.

Idea Workshop "Passing on Knowledge across Generations"
2nd run with gx at the "Week of the Wayward".

On September, 2011, days of action commemorating 30 years of the squatters' movement took place in Berlin, under the motto, "History is made - Week of the Wayward." This was a space for "old " and "young" to come together to critically illuminate their experiences, initiate exchange, and build a bridge between "back then" and "nowadays," in order to get to know each other better and to fight, laugh, struggle, network, and move forward together. With our workshop "Passing on Knowledge across Generations," we wanted to share in the process of designing this bridge, and to provide impulses and possible approaches for better formulating intergenerational exchanges.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Generations of politically-active people come and go - and in the process a lot of knowledge get lost, new, young people have to reinvent the wheel and get no support. Older generations, for their part, lose a possible connection to the latest developments in theory and practice. In this workshop, we would like to work out together how we can most conveniently and effectively transmit knowledge across generations.

ON GX/AFB

Group X is a part of the Anarchist Federation of Berlin and organized and ran the event series "Politically Active Without Burning Out," during which an initial workshop on the same theme was conducted.

COURSE OF THE EVENT

· Round of introductions
· Getting an idea of the mood/sociometric arrangement
· Whisper circle
· Plenum with brainstorming
· Clustering the results
· World Cafe
· Plenum with a presentation of projects
· Voting on the project ideas
· Feedback round

The event took place on a Sunday from 2 to 6 pm in Mehringhof. Despite minor delays and spontaneous changes to the plan, we managed to keep reasonably to schedule. Possibly because at the beginning of the workshop we asked the participants if they were okay with us keeping time and to pay attention to the time as a group.

CONTENTS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVENT

After a short round of introductions, we briefly went over the plan for the workshop, fixed the schedule, and formulated the goal. This was to work out concrete suggestions during the workshop and, at the end, to form a working group in order to put one of the project ideas into practice.

Detailed sequence of the workshop:

Mood/sociometric arrangement, in order to capture the mood and first impulses of the participants. To do so, three questions were asked and those present position themselves on an axis from "very little" to "very strongly." We asked individual participants for commentary on their positions.

How much transmission of knowledge between generations is there in your group?
Very mixed assessments. Even within a single group, the transmission of knowledge can sometimes turn out very well, sometimes very poorly.

How satisfied with it are you?
  Here, people spoke of excellent experiences in conversations with individuals, but also of the frustration of older people who didn't feel like their voices were being heard.

How long have you been active?
  The experiential background of those present was very mixed, but generally higher than we had assumed: it ranged from only a few years to several decades.

Whisper circle with the exchange of personal experience
How did I gain my political knowledge/experiences, and how to I pass them on?
  Possible cause for a lack of transmission of knowledge between different generations: the war generation was gone, no transmission of knowledge possible → no culture for passing on knowledge in the following generations

Plenum with brainstorming
  · What current examples are there of knowledge being passed between generations and how successful are they?
  · What other ideas are there?
  · Why are seemingly reasonable ideas for passing on knowledge from generation to generation not put into practice? What prevents us from doing this?

The results were recorded on index cards and then clustered. The clusters were:

Dealing with knowledge
Obstacles:
  · Sufficient or insufficient justification of paranoia
  · paranoia
  · self-protection
  · arrogance
  · no time
  · openness is stressful
  · closed attitude of one's own group towards "newcomers"
  · lack of interest
  · the feeling of being retired
  · embarrassment
  · "over-intellectualization"

Ideas for dealing with these obstacles:
  · foster friendliness among people of the left
  · closed and open structures are important
  · direct communication, "talking to one another"
  · approach "newcomers" with interest/"get to know one another"

Structural aspects (Society/scene)
Obstacles:
  · no language of our own, "people don't talk like that here"
  · structural division of age groups
  · academic "right"/ "wrong" models of power
  · competitiveness
  · compartmentalization by codes of the scene
  · activities that become ritualized

Ideas for dealing with these obstacles:
  · subvert absurdity through humor and by doing so, open possibilities for action
  · compendium of strategies: "exchange know-how"
  · "program with contemporary witnesses": concrete actions with veterans
  · bring social "relationships" to the fore instead of system-oriented action/thought

- in groups: reflection e.g. in small groups of mixed age (regularly)
- intercultural projects
- group consciousness for structure
- view from the outside → have a clear idea / goal

Interpersonal aspects
Obstacles:
- Instrumental relationship
- self-censorship
- difficulties accepting help
- arrogance
- deficiency in dealing with others (e.g. lacking openness)
- prejudices concerning non-scene behavior/language
- how welcome is being "other"?

Ideas for dealing with these obstacles:
- Accept others in their "otherness"
- humor
- openness
- question yourself as well
- consciously strive for an exchange on various topics (political topics, methods, …)
- with paranoia: are there also other explanations (for specific behavior)?
- take others seriously, for example through "actively listening to them"
- don't take yourself so seriously
- grant the possibility of development to others
- does everyone have to become like you are?
- exchange of ideas and experience at meetings and the corresponding methods (e.g. feedback)
- don't be complacently self-sufficient
- as a group, create a framework for an explicit interchange (e.g. for people who don't talk much)

World Café
Division into groups at three tables dealing with the guiding concepts established above; at the tables, discussions were held in periodically rotating small groups. The goal was to come up with suggestions for concrete solutions.

Plenum with short presentations of the suggestions
- Regulars' table (Stammtisch) (Objection: better to call it a story-cafe (Erzählcafe) for historical reasons), personal exchange, opportunities to get to know one another, points of contact, places to run into people
- ABCs of the "scene language"
- take a intergenerational approach, in organizing projects
- video documentary → on the internet (experienced and less experienced people)
- repoliticize older people
- "supervision," supervision teams
- carry "good resolutions" (best practices, forms of conduct) into groups

In the last phase of the workshop we had planned for the participants to introduce new projects in small groups. However, those present were all already strongly committed to various projects and didn't have the resources to start new ones.

MOOD AND FEEDBACK

All in all, the mood during the workshop was quite good and very relaxed. Several younger people found it exciting to listen to the older people when they shared things from their wealth of experience, without drifting off into a schoolmarmish tone. In general, people found it difficult to discuss things comprehensively, since the questions and definitions were conceived very broadly. Because of this, there was the danger of digressing too far into generalities. Even though no concrete projects resulted, it was nevertheless good and important to treat this theme. In the process, we

provided each other with some food for thought and (in the words of one participant) "tore a few holes in the wool before our eyes".

CONCLUSION

In contrast to the first workshop on this topic, the focus here fell more on the problems of passing on knowledge between generations. Moreover, we didn't want to stop at suggested solutions, but intended that at least one should be concrete implemented in a project. At least that was our goal at the beginning of the workshop. Indeed, a few good basic approaches came up, but for the most part, they did not go beyond good intentions. The difficulty lay in moving from the rather generally conceived questions back to the concrete level. On the other hand, concretely putting ideas into practice proved difficult, since participants didn't have the time or resources to tackle new projects. On the one hand, this is something of a shame, but on the other hand, it shows that the 'best practice' of not losing oneself in a multitude of isolated projects was definitely being applied. Even if no concrete implementations resulted from the workshop, important impulses originated there nevertheless, impulses that will (possibly) be carried back into the participants' various groups. The generational aspect should at least be considered - as far as possible - in every project, and ideally, projects or actions should be planned and put into practice intergenerationally.

It also seems important to us not to categorize people by their age or to base one's expectations of them on such categorizations: older people shouldn't feel exposed to the pressure of having to know everything or to possess a rich trove of experience. And younger people shouldn't be judged as inexperienced and naive. Abstracting from attributions based on age in groups can be as expedient in the one case as a consideration of the age dimension when planning actions can be in another.

We're still here! - An event with three people who have been around in the scene for a long time. with gx

When it comes to the number of activists in the "scene," one of the most important problems is the absence of people over a certain age. Usually in one's early thirties or in the years afterwards, participation decreases abruptly, so that only a few "older people" remain. Besides social aspects like careers or raising children, important causes are also the lack of motivation and the way people interact in political groups and in the "scene" more generally. In order to find ways that we can all remain politically active even at an advanced age, we decided to invite three "older" comrades to a "salon discussion." It was especially important to us to get to background aspects of their biographies and experiences that might also be relevant for others.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The second event in the series "Politically Active without Burning Out" is a salon discussion in which activists who have been active in the leftist scene for decades will discuss what motivates them to keep going and how continuity is possible. The goal is to develop (in cooperation with the audience) as many broadly applicable ideas as possible to enable us all to remain continually active and motivated.

ON OUR GUESTS

The "salon conversation" was moderated by a member of the preparation group, but the concrete content was brought to the table by three activists who had been specifically invited to the event. These three people were from different generations (47, 56, and 69) and are still politically active (and indeed in diverse areas that changed over the course of their biographies: e.g. anti-nuclear and autonomous movement).

COURSE OF EVENTS

1. Short introduction to the event series and a greeting of the guests by the moderator
2. The three guests introduce themselves based on a short biographical sketch (with a focus on the main question of the event)
3. Shared reflection and search for solutions (with audience participation)
4. Closing round

The event took place on a Monday between 8:30– 11 pm in New Yorck in Bethanien

CONTENTS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVENT

Methodology of the event:

The event consisted of two parts, the first of which was to end after about 45 minutes:

1. Input by our Guests

Where possible, the following questions were to be taken into account:

· Since when / for how long have you been active?
· What motivates you (and continues to do so)?
· How do you deal with setbacks?
· Are there repetitions (within the scene)?
· How do you continue to develop?
· Are there problems with age differences?
· What does the scene give you?

Uschi:

I'm 56 and I've lived in Berlin-Kreuzberg since 1977. I've been active in the autonomous, radical-left movement since 1974. I'm an academic, but I was never active as such. For four years I've been working with other women in a guidance collective.

Berta:

I grew up in West Berlin in the 60s and 70s. As the eldest daughter in a classic nuclear family, I was socialized as feminine but relatively independent. My father and mother had learned technical trades. My father was a wage laborer outside of the house, and my mother was one in the house. We lived in a bourgeois, conservative area, but in a public housing development, which back then still had affordable rents for tiny rooms. Often several adults or children would live in one room. In the middle of a lot of (German) extended families, disabled veterans, and single (grand-)mothers raising children, we were more the exception as an "intact family." My father, a left-leaning socialist, autodidact, a friend of Marx, but an "enemy" of the GDR, was an important point of orientation in my political education. As was the lefty comprehensive school I was allowed to attend despite a recommendation for the Gymnasium. It was with the school's young teachers, members of the generation of 1968, that I went to my first demonstrations in West Berlin and against nuclear power plants in West Germany. The hip mainstream at the school was alternative, leftist, and environmentalist and also experimented with drugs, something I largely avoided. In the 70s and 80s it was relatively simple, in my opinion, to become critical, educated, leftist, and independent with this sort of educational and parental background. And at the beginning of the 80s, when I left school, West Berlin offered the best conditions for getting quickly connected with "the scene." Back then, it was easy to belong as soon as you were there and actively waded into the diverse campaigns and other activities that were going on in the 80s. In the following years, when the movement got smaller and the opposing forces grew stronger, I was lucky enough to always live in larger social contexts. In this way, it was easier to stay integrated and keep a sense of the optimism that is somehow part of who I am. I always enjoyed organizing things with others, with dedicated, interested people who see autonomous politics not as an obligation but as a process that also enriches and changes all of us. I'm happy that I don't have the tendency to be a lone warrior, because then I would have given up in frustration long ago. For me, wage labor was always a means to an ends: survival, not self-affirmation. Because of this, in the movement's dry spells, I never fell into the trap of making a virtue out of necessity and finding the meaning of my existence in paid work.

The scene's hostility towards children in the 80s was fine for me, since I was only in relationships with men who had had vasectomies. Later, as it was becoming easier to live in communities with children, I had just decided not to have children of my own. I liked living with children, but I wasn't faced with the pressure that parents have to decide to remain politically active or not. That can also be a path back into bourgeois life.

Claus:

I was born in 1941, during the war, and my politicization began through conflicts with my parents, who were caring, but Nazis. My brother, who as a disenchanted member of the Hitler Youth recognized the insanity of the Nazis, strengthened my basic antifascist position (influenced, for example, by Anne Frank). I found this position again in the student movement - after all, many others had similar experiences with their parents, teachers, almost the entire "older generation" and in this way undergone a collective politicization, so to speak.

In 1962 I joined the SPD and found myself shortly thereafter in the left wing of the party, in the early period of the student movement: movements against emergency laws, the Vietnam War - and naturally antifascism. I was an academic at the university in Berlin for a few years. While my active comrades from the movement entered the working world, I chucked my job like they chucked their studies and earned my money over the next 25 years as a taxi driver in the newly established taxi collectives.

In 1981, my 14-year-old son and I became squatters - both in the "non-negotiating wing," both active to defend ourselves - so of course we became "Autonome." For me as a father that was only possible because we could depend on a functional support environment as an important condition for continuous political work.

The defeats of the student and squatters' movements were cushioned for me by a network of connections among many people who offered each other mutual support. I see this at work today in the structures of the Project Workshop towards Mutuality (PAG: Projektwerkstatt auf Gegenseitigkeit), which still has many older activists, but of course primarily younger ones. I like working with them as long as I'm not seen as a "surrogate grandpa" because of my age.

"Passing on knowledge across generations" is fun there! New approaches of the younger people on the one hand, the older people's long experience, e.g. in dealing with repression, on the other hand. In this regard, it's important for me to look together for new ways and solutions, since past experiences can only rarely be transferred to current situations.

It's funny to observe the way that cops believe that people who have been active for many years and are already a bit older must have a cadre-function. This has led to repeated investigations directed against me, conducted according to § 129a, among others, most recently before the G8 summit in Heiligendamm. But in this respect, too, with increasing years one becomes somewhat more easy going.

(The following points could also be topics for further discussions: how do we deal with repression, and under what conditions can we stay politically active with children, in case we have to care for a partner, or have less physical endurance.)

The motivation will remain: current conditions are getting nastier rather than better - and there are many more who are defending themselves.

2. Reflection/analysis, in order to take something away for our own praxis as well.

The public was included. We only wanted to make sure that the discussion didn't set out too broadly on tangents and that old disputes weren't dug up again, etc. The conversation was not supposed to progress rigidly along pre-formulated questions, but to take place in a relaxed group, if possible.

A few core topics we nevertheless wanted to address during the event, if possible, were:
· motivation
· organization/collectivity
· continuity
· the "bad outside world," or dealing with social compulsion
· social alliances

We didn't want to take a break since the event was already supposed to begin late. Smokers simply went outside when they needed to. We wanted to respect this and request that the requisite concentration was given nevertheless.

Results of the event:
Although the introductions to the three guest speakers moved entirely along the guiding thread of the event, they still only went into concrete solutions to a limited extent. The same applies (unfortunately) to most of the contributions made during the event. For this reason, the planning group, which had taken a great deal of notes during the event, tried to distill certain (generalizable) lessons and ideas from the minutes taken.

To start with, three types of ideas could be distinguished:

1. Ideas for shaping one's own personal environment, personal trajectory, or ideas about one's own mindset.
· Social context is important (with a common political idea)
· an individual attitude of openness/optimism (personality structure as a possible determinant)
· hope for changes in the long term
· instead of having struggle as one's sole goal in life ("I have to fight and so I can't go on vacation"), a multi-faceted lifestyle - one doesn't always always need to bow to pressure, but can also do this for pleasure
· experience deep-reaching social movements/changes (instead of always running at full blast and burning out in 2–3 years)
· get to know yourself to the point where you can recognize what actually works for you
· develop a sense for security
· less dogmatism
· more cooperation, more trust
· think the personal and the political together
· see conflicts as learning opportunities

- no impulse without fractures/changes
- continuity and self-knowledge strengthen the possibility of continuity
- motivation through a desire for justice
- optimism: viewed historically, we're on the right path (in terms of the last half millennium); I won't be there to see it, but I'm doing well
- it's important to witness radicalization/change
- one has to have one's own experiences: it only helps to a limited extent to pass them on

2. Ideas for shaping political praxis (e.g. in one's own group)

- activities with people you like (this also helps you handle frustration, for example from political defeats like failed campaigns)
- new input through new discourses (instead of repetitions, it's better to pay attention to the new aspects of discourses and further one's own personal development)
- create a political perspective (the shared formulation of a utopia/strategy)
- diversity in political praxis (despite one's own clear political ideas)
- the lived experience of self-organization (instead of a politics confined to the gaps in everyday life) on various levels
- in political activity, pay attention to your own needs, or rather, develop these out of your political activity
- pay regular attention to your own feelings, but also to those of others
- working (even politically) all the time isn't a good idea, because people who don't (always) want to/can't work all the time will eventually leave and not come back
- make connections to people, not only on a political level
- keep the needs of society as a whole (beyond the political) in mind
- it has to be enjoyable for me

3. Ideas for shaping the "scene"

- you can't focus on the youth movement (or constantly invoke it), because then only youth will actually come out
- more natural ways of dealing with kids
- absorb economic pressure through collective structures (structures of work or other kinds of structures)
- get away from thoughts about how to keep the scene pure
- accept discontinuity (hiatuses)
- make it clear that even people who can't commit 100% are welcome
- allow people the chance to grow/change (e.g. after a sexual transgression)
- be open/welcome (don't exclude people)
- provide space for closed/focussed groups
- even just exchanging ideas on this topic (continuity at different ages), e.g. being able to voice one's own ideas and hearing the experiences of others, can be motivating
- Autonomen tend feel responsible everything → don't only be 'against' things
- it's important to try things out → house projects
- against blanket judgments: a career as a teacher could also be something revolutionary

Further thoughts and evaluations

- people who talk radical are often those who leave quickly
- people leave because they don't know themselves; they don't have the confidence to say what they want
- difficult for people with work/children: with all the plenums, we're asking too much, we're impatient and ungracious → accept people for the contribution that they can make; in recent years this has been dealt with somewhat more positively
- development of the scene: a more casual/less dogmatic way of dealing with kids; older people tend to be integrated
- motivation: no problem when I have a lot of time; with other stress it's difficult to keep motivation at a high level
- difficulty: finding concrete possibilities for activity
- always start something new when something gets stupid
- it's amazing that the thought of justice plays such a large motivating role, although it's so often derided outside of the scene
- it's important not to dismiss emotional rounds as hippy nonsense
- important motivator: getting feedback from others

- · motivation: in a capitalist society, things from within the scene catch on (e.g. in the working world: cooperation, talking about feelings)
- · avoid exclusion: don't keep people out, change → that makes the scene attractive, since this sort of thing can't be found anywhere else
- * · counterargument: people are often excluded because they've experienced shitty behavior and couldn't put up with staying in the scene. Scenes have broken up because of things like this
- · leaving the scene can also be a good things sometimes, e.g. when the scene is nostalgically pining over the past
- * · the motivation for leaving is decisive: rest/break or conformity?
- * · not good: moral pressure to return/remain; trust the feelings of every individual, since everyone knows what's right for them
- · important: being there when something's working, since that creates a great feeling
- · this kind of event wouldn't have been possible in the 80s (e.g. saying that people need time out; or asking older people questions)

MOOD AND FEEDBACK

The guests sat on a large, comfortable sofa, beside the moderator. The 'audience' sat on sofas and chairs in front of them, in a half-circle. The space was more than full, with about 60 people present, and everyone showed a lot of interest for the topic, taking part regularly. To some degree, the self-presentations took up too much space and we lost sight of the focus of the event (motivation and strategies to stay active longer). One individual disrupted the event repeatedly (without really being aware of it) with off-topic comments that all had the same content. After various (unsuccessful) attempts to point this out, as the event went on, the disrupting person was simply ignored.

In general, there was a lot of participation by many people (of different generations), showing a real need to discuss the issue. Even if it was a bit disconnected at times, in the end it was basically positive.

As the organizing group, we weren't always able to guide the discussion back to the actual theme: possible solutions or ways of motivating yourself. Nevertheless, we can take away some potential approaches from our notes and present them here. The ideas that fell under the three main headings above could be summarized in the following way:

On a personal level, it's very important to avoid stubbornness (dogmatism, one-sided orientations toward the 'political struggle') and, instead, to constantly reflect on what is good for us and our environment. Get involved in new things and accept the needs of those around you, without trying to avoid all conflicts or setting your expectations (particularly about the results of your political work) too high.

On the group level, almost all suggestions aimed at creating a comfortable interpersonal atmosphere and a sense of commonality, with consideration for the specific needs of all participants (including needs that exist outside of the scope of political work). In short, we have to understand our own political groups as more than just people who do actions or have discussions, but rather as political and social spaces that include the personal and in which cooperation is encouraged, and must be organized, on many levels. If people are going to stay involved, then, at the end of the day, they have to feel comfortable being there. And when they can't find a personal connection, they won't stay long.

On the 'scene' level, the discussion also focused strongly on reducing the exaggerated expectations made of activists (whether in terms of 'dogmatic purity' or the degree of engagement). We have to react more sensitively to the individual situations of the participants (or at least start talking about them!) and formulate realistic goals (instead of daunting, overwhelming ones) with connections to real life. As the event showed, concretely discussing the biographies and experiences of other people can be a great way of passing on knowledge and of motivating yourself. And once and for all, it has to be possible for people who have children or jobs that take up a lot of their time and energy to continue to participate and feel welcome. Which leads us to the theme of another event in this series.

Being Politically Active with a Child or Work with gx

WHY THIS TOPIC?

In the preparation for the event series 'Politically Active without Burning Out' there was a lot of demand for addressing the topic of creating consistency between, on the one hand, political work and, on the other, wage labor and/or caring for children. But despite the apparently great interest in this topic, it proved impossible – despite our best efforts · to find speakers or other people who wanted to explain a bit about their own best practices in this area. The interest this topic has excited, we think, is also clearly visible in the regular participation in the 'with whom, why and how do we live' camp at Burg Lutter, which has taken place for the past three years. This is additionally a topic that relates to many people and often creates tension in political activities. We found the topic even more exciting because of its focus on organizing in everyday life, making it a great site to examine whether anarchy works only in theory and in utopian contexts or whether it can also be tried out and implemented in the here and now. This seemed relevant because the apparently huge rift between our ideals and reality can make it easy to feel that we have to give up or burn out. For this reason the preparation group decided that we would create a participatory workshop on this issue.

ANNOUNCEMENT

In this workshop we'd like to discuss how it's possible to avoid political burnout in the face of work (outside of the scene) and activities as a caregiver for young people. Why are these activities so hard to unite? Why do we see them as being separate in the first place? We'd like to share best practice
   · that is, approaches proven through praxis
   · as well as to think up and in turn realize new and perhaps utopian ideas. Cooking from 18:00, eating from 20:00. The event will begin at around 20:30.

ABOUT GX

Group X is part of the Anarchist Federation of Berlin and organized the event series. You can find more about us in the foreword. We created and held this event without support from speakers or other groups.

COURSE OF EVENTS

We conceived of the event as a workshop with five sections and a focus on best practices
   1) Explanation of Content. Method: Short Presentation.
   2) Introduction of the participants and sharing of best practices people are already aware of. Method: Go-around, casual conversation.
   3) Utopia Phase: a gathering of creative ideas on further possible best practices. Method: Short questions, brainstorming, standing on our heads, cards …
   4) Making Individual 'Best Practice' Ideas Concrete. Method: concentrated work in small groups.
   5) Feedback. Method: Go-around.

The event was planned to take three hours. We started after the vokü at the Anarchist Infocafe, at around 20:30, and we were delayed due to some spontaneous restructuring of our original concept. As a result point 4, on making ideas on best practices concrete, unfortunately ended up being too short.

CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVENT

1) Explanation of Content

To start with we tried to make it clear that we neither could nor wanted to represent ourselves as experts. Instead, we were merely the people who had prepared a structure for the workshop, whose content the participants would fill in. We apologized that the time was inconvenient and warned that we would be proceeding using unclear terminology (Work, Children). Nevertheless, we didn't want to debate terms but rather best practices and to that end gave some short definitions:

· Children: young people who need asymmetrical support
· Work: productive and reproductive activities (wage labor, work at home, 'raising' children, studies, further education, welfare)

The focus of the workshop was intended to be on phenomena related to working and children and the ways in which they make it difficult for those in the currently existing leftist scene to be politically active without burning out.

We see differences between the spheres of life associated with 'work' and 'children':
· Fulfillment: Wage Labor is seldom seen as a calling (or, when it is, this view often has internal contradictions). Generally we earn money either out of necessity or fetishism, and this usually offers us little fulfillment. In contrast, living with children can greatly enrich our lives.
· Responsibility: Responsibility for children is not comparable with responsibility for a job.
· Domains of responsibility according to dominant socialization: 'women' are responsible for 'reproductive activities,' including 'raising children' in contrast, 'men' are responsible for 'work'.

Why did we connect these two themes, then? What do these themes have in common?

· Overcoming the division between 'womanly' and 'manly' specializations
· There's usually no connection between political work and working/caring for children; these are divided worlds, while engaging in the one it's not possible to talk about the other.
· We should question societal trends (as well as voluntary isolation) that dictate that one has to deal with work/ children alone.
· Contradictions between political ideals and reality.
· Time conflicts with political activities; one isn't always 'available'
· These responsibilities create a lower readiness to take part in political work with high risks (imprisonment, bodily harm, …)
· The inherent necessity of these things can be questioned (for example the pressure to perform in school or work, societal norms for relating to children)
· Everyday issues

-> We need working anarchist practices for everyday life in order to be believable and sympathetic.

2) Sharing Best Practices

Sharing best practices is an important matter for us. For that reason we made a go-around in which people could introduce themselves, discuss some of their experiences and swap best practices related to the topics of work and children. Some things which were mentioned, among others:

· Not wasting your time: When you're short on time, concentrating on a few projects can help.
· Organizing instead of content: When it doesn't seem like there's time for deep engagement with content, you can still participate through organizational activities.
· Flexibililty through independence: Independent activities make it possible to fit in political activities flexibly within one's schedule. However, one has to accept that they will be perceived as being that person who 'always has time' and for that reason gladly has tasks given to them.
· Flexibilty and stability, simultaneously: the disadvantage of independence, high personal risk and the stress associated with these things can relieved through activity in a collective. When some independent people from similar situations bring themselves together they can not only support each other but also compare fluctuations. In Berlin there is a network of collective businesses who want to exchange with each other.
· Living with children opens new insights into political activity: What really makes sense? What could contribute to really changing the society in which children will live?

General Notes and Suggestions:
Work
· Support roles in political activities are more feasible when you have to work 40 hours a week
· To avoid facing a whole pile of tasks without end we should not undertake political work that focuses on a particular

event but, rather, focus on work that occurs on regular dates which can be more easily integrated into everyday life
· Self-sufficiency makes you more flexible
· Appreciation rather than judgment ('Hobby anarchists')
· The point is not to say whose stress is worse but rather to minimize everyone's stress

Children
· Breaking out of family patterns
· Being aware of children's needs
· Thinking about things like being the only one with authority to pick kids up from school
· Contact person for rural regions
· Less emphasis on risk and more on sincerity in political activities (instead of fooling around), since a kid is there (less randomness)
· Free stores with kids and games
· Non-smoker areas!!!
· Support Network (Friends, acquaintances)
· Co-parenting to support biological parents
· Co-parenting as an opportunity for people for whom it would be difficult to 'biologically' have a child.
· Be there from the beginning with biological parents (discuss how to bring up the child, etc.)
· The important thing is to decide to have a child (in a group of 3, for example) before conception
· The child should not think that they are a problem because parents have to organize people to take care of them
· Compromising on free-time needs: non-dangerous demos and street festivals
· Political activities which can be done from home (Support, Layout)
· The child can change their sleeping place through various living collectives – this isn't a problem (but all living collectives should be in the same part of the city and have the same playground)

In the run-up to the event the organizational group gathered the following ideas:
· Easing time demands: Co-parents, people responsible for specific activities, collective living
· Relaxation through networks/cooperation/mutual aid: cooperatives, collective living
· Easing financial tensions: Financial coops, gift economies, community gardening, collective living

3) Detach from the now, from limitations of thought, from circumstantial constraints, from the lack of alternatives, from binaries...
Idea: live anarchy; overcome the divide between theory/utopia, on the one hand, and praxis on the other.

Method: Headstand method in small groups. The headstand method tries to transform obstacles to the realization of a goal into productive solutions through a 'headstand' (reversal of the idea).

At this point we were in groups of five.

This part of the discussion was split into three questions:
a. How can we make sure through our political work that people with work/children possibly can't participate?

Negative Answers:
· smoke more
· drink more
· create uncomfortable, child 'unfriendly' atmospheres
· meet late in the evening or at night

Headstand:
· create smoke-free rooms
· have alcohol-free times (children may still not be able to process the sight of drunk people)
· choose times which are compatible with children (and their caregivers).

b. How can we (in the scene) permanently damage our relations to people with work/children?

Negative Answers:
· Reject children – "whoever would put a child into the world these days…"
· "Whoever works is bourgie and supports society"
· "Whoever lives on welfare (Hartz IV) is betraying their ideals"
· "I don't want to hear about child-related crap or work while I'm doing politics"

Headstand:
· See children as also being an enrichment
· Respect the life situations of others
· Incorporate and be aware of work and children when planning/doing political activities

c. How can we organize work/'raising' children in such a way that we are as isolated as possible?

Negative Answers:
· Make children afraid of other people
· Use children as an excuse for everything
· Keep children away from (different/bad) experiences
· Keep children away from every possible potentially dangerous thing
· State daycare → Conform to society
· Perfectionism

Headstand:
· Bring children into contact with an open environment
· Collectively search for causes and solutions instead of placing blame
· Give children their own space for development
· No paranoia
· Participate and organize as parents; preserve both your own boundaries and your radicalism; Give children their own development opportunities
· Reflect on your own needs

4) Form small groups with practical interest in these categories.
Goal: Work on (partial) realizability in the now. Be as concrete as possible. (In the feedback round we wanted to talk about to what extent these ideas are realizable). We don't have to reinvent the wheel. It's fine to think further on already existing best practices.

Unfortunately the time and energy had already been used up by this point. This is a recurrent problem with workshops. We and other groups who have experienced this always intend to do things differently in this respect but we keep screwing up. Possible 'best practice' ideas for this problem:

· Organizational groups should plan in breaks and have a test-run of their workshops to see if the planned times are realistic
· Make clear to participants at the beginning that the scheduled activities right at the end are especially important and that enough time should be preserved for those points. Then collectively decide whether the schedule should be *exactly – followed or whether the schedule should be followed more loosely, being aware that in the second case there is a danger that there won't be enough time at the end.

These points were briefly discussed in the workshop:
· Incorporate a consciousness about freedom from smoke into groups: Through personal talks or signs which get this across if possible, without accusing anyone.
· Networks/Self-help groups for people who want to be politically active despite their profession: possibly over a riseup-forum.

MOOD AND FEEDBACK

Unfortunately only three people outside of the organizational group took part in this workshop. (The organizational group was disappointed by this, since they put so much energy into preparing the event.) Two others had to go right after they had arrived, because their babysitter had called and said that they could not calm down the child.

CONCLUSION

The late time we scheduled the event at seemed to be a crucial point. We failed to use the free day better by meeting at an earlier time. Especially for this topic, this would have made it simpler for the 'target audience,' that is, activists with children, to manage their time. An earlier time might have also been better for those who had to get up early the next day to go to school, work, etc. We wouldn't want to do other workshops at this time in principle because someone always seems pressed for time.

From further discussions that took place long after the workshop, other best practices emerged. Part of that was a group acceptance of the particular situations of people with children (recognizing that they may appear irregularly or on an alternating schedule to group meetings, or that spontaneous schedule shifting must be possible in certain situations). Another important aspect was the delegation of 'parenting' activities, which are, for example, temporally flexible or without pressing deadlines, etc. It is the task of the group to find these sorts of activities.

De-escalate Conflict!?

with Anna and Gerd from "AkKu"

We've observed that intense conflicts keep occurring in our political environment, which unfortunately often lead to the destruction of structures. In a living collective or a house project these personal issues can't be evaded and must escalate until they finally result in either a solution or someone moving out. In a political group, fights over expertise or informational hierarchies can lead to conflict. You're often at your wit's end when working in a political network and dealing with state repression, exhaustion and large plans that end in disappointment, and as a result small personal conflicts can bring about huge drama. We become uncertain how to deal with conflict particularly in the context of politics: We're convinced of the realizability of a society free of domination, however when concrete conflicts occur in our immediate environment we are often unable to act due to a fear of doing something 'wrong' or, in other words, of not living up to our own political ideals. Many projects have unfortunately come to terms with the everyday existence of conflicts and there is a lack of conflict competency and strategies among many particularly radical projects. We are also unsure how much 'work' we should put into 'feelings things' when there are so many other important projects to work on.

In this workshop we hope to
 · Reduce fear of conflict
 · To become more sure of ourselves in dealing with conflicts

ANNOUNCEMENT

Conflicts are a part of political work. Changes, whether personal, group-internal or societal, frequently can't occur without conflict. But enduring these conflicts is stressful, often wears us out and seems to prevent us from taking part in group work. Can this work differently? What types of conflicts are we faced with in political work? What makes dealing with conflicts so difficult? How would we deal with these conflicts in an ideal situation? And what could help us to achieve that? We'd like to develop answers to these questions together with you.

ABOUT 'AKKU'

The working group for conflict support (AkKu) is a collective of people who have an interest in supporting leftist people and groups, for example, collectives, house projects and political groups, in finding a solution to their conflicts. AkKu aims to create a greater awareness about conflicts and an improved ability to deal with conflicts in 'the left' through their offerings of moderation and mediation. According to their flyer, AkKu is motivated by years of experience in leftist collectives, house projects and other groups, as well as a belief in conflict as a possibility for change.

Anna and Gerd have studied mediation at the Mediationsbüro Mitte (Berlin). AkKu's flyer has had a wide circulation and demand - the idea seems to have created interest. When AkKu doesn't feel competent to deal with a request or doesn't have resources to help they give the request to another collective (for example Prosys) and vice versa. This is the advantage of networks.

Further information from AkKu's Flyer:
When is conflict support needed? (excerpts):
 · When the same topics continually lead to argument
 · When conflicts lead to silence
 · When development is blocked or when the conflict puts the vision of the project in question

What is Mediation?
Mediation is a structured discussion for working on conflicts. It is shaped through the self-determination and free will of participants and attempts to find a solution according to consensus principles. All the content of the mediation and suggested solutions should be brought in and worked out by the parties in conflict themselves. The mediators are neutral and impartial. Their role is limited to structuring the discussion. They take on responsibility for the order of events and create a framework that is as safe and non-hierarchical as possible. Power imbalances are consciously

worked against. All the content of the mediation is handled confidentially by the mediators. Depending on the conflict and the degree of escalation work is done on both a logistical and an emotional level. The goal of a mediation is to collectively develop a solution that all participants agree to. In this sense it is fundamentally open-ended.

The event took place on a Saturday from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. at New Yorck im Bethanien.
- Introduction round, Method: Self-identification with postcards
- Create a safer space, Agreement, Method: Collective agreement
- Getting attuned to the theme, Method: Sociometry
- Expectations, Method: Card prompts, clusters
- Conflict Visualization, Method: 2 person groups
- Definition of conflict, Method: Brainstorming
- Practice conflict resolution methods (active listening, mirroring, open questions), Method: Small groups
- Worksheets and theory, Method: presentation with visual aids
- Conclusion, Method: round

CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVENT

Post Card Method as an Introduction Round

While the participants trickle in the AkKu people are already laying postcards in the middle of the stool circle. After welcoming everyone, the first task for the participants is to choose a card that encompasses their own mood and/or expectations. Afterwards, everyone says their names and why they chose the postcard. The idea is – and this was the plan of the AkKus – that the participant's current condition becomes apparent through explaining their choice. Through this introduction everyone was incorporated, laughter was already shared and there were some initial personal glimpses into what others were bringing with them in terms of mood and expectations.

Safer Space and Agreement

After the introduction round the AkKus said a few general things on the framework of the event. Alongside a rough time-plan a collective agreement was made:
- Disruptions (if someone feels really unwell with something): these have precedence since they're a sign that something is not OK
- Respectful attitude
- Self-responsibility: If something bothers me it is my responsibility to say something. Others can only play a support role
- Confidentiality: Personal information stays here / among us. Meanwhile, new insights should leave the room

Sociometry

In order to get into the topic of conflict and to get a first overview from participants on the topic of conflict and their ways of dealing with it, we used the method of sociometry. In doing so, we asked questions that could be answered with answers ranging from 'very weak/little' to 'very strong/much'. Then the participants stood in a line corresponding to their answer. As the organizers, we learned from the AkKus that it's important not just to let the participants position themselves but to also ask about 3 people to say something about their position. The organizers might talk to people in certain places and ask them to explain the reason for their position.
In our case, the questions were:
- How satisfied are you with how you deal with conflict in the groups you are a part of?
- How strongly does conflict influence the political work of groups?

Expectations

In an individual work each individual writes their expectations for the workshop on a moderation card. Then everyone explains their points and arranges them on the wall, so that a growing cluster of expectations appears. Here is an extended excerpt from the expectations:
- More motivation in political work
- How can we establish a culture where we can use conflicts productively and deal with them comfortably? (instead of attempting to avoid conflict)

· Dealing with the need for harmony <-> holding onto different positions
· How do I deal with different approaches and strategies?
· Are conflicts solved better individually or with mediation?
· Tension Triangle: Consent, informal hierarchy, obligation
· I am interested to see how I can deal with conflicts better in groups (without engaging in a group process)
· How can a group react to the strong dominance of a single person?
· How can conflicts be responded to most effectively?
· How can I set up reasonable communication in a conflict situation?
· How can better communication be achieved within the group? Prevention of conflicts.
· Problem: Critiques of / attacks on the content of political positions has a similar effect to attacks on persons/their identities/whatever -> quick feeling of being singled out/hurt
· How can the group recognize when there is a conflict there?
· Basic possible ways of dealing with conflict in groups
· Which types of conflicts were already experienced by other groups, how did they deal with them?
· How can 'methods' contribute to a hierarchy-free society? (for example moderation and mediation)

During the course of the workshop the AkKus kept making reference to the gathered questions. Right before the end, in particular, a few of these points were addressed.

Making Conflict Present
As a basis for our later plans we now had the task of thinking about concrete experiences of conflict in groups of two. The goal was, on the one hand, to make us aware of the personal involvement entailed in the topic of conflict and, on the other, to prevent the discussion from becoming purely theoretical, as it did for example in the following brain-storming session on the definition of 'conflict'. In groups of two we each chose a conflict in which we are or were recently involved in and explained it to the other person. A personal insight: difficulty in comprehensibly explaining the conflict in words to others implies an insufficient self-examination of the conflict.

Brainstorming 'Conflict'
Together with the entire group we brainstormed what 'conflict' meant for us. Here are the results of the brainstorm:
· differing perceptions
· differing sensibilities / empathies / tolerance for frustration
· differing interests
· dominance, gridlocked structures/rolls
· relationship problems are carried over onto a material level
· prejudices/ stereotyped thinking
· fear of loss
· vexation, personal frustration, bad mood
· apparent obviousness, lacking agreement about the concrete
· identity conflicts
· crisis and chance
· different approaches to conflict
· too many demands
· lacking respect

Participants want to know what they should do when there are differing opinions even on the question of whether or not there is a conflict:
A conflict exists as soon as one person thinks there is / feels unwell. Anything else would be against the anarchist principle that the needs of everyone should be respected / listened to.

Then someone gave some input on different types of conflict:
· Situational conflict: Caused, for example, by a lack of information, faulty information or different interpretations / judgments.
· Conflicts of interest: Caused, for example, by a real or perceived competition of interests.
· Relationship conflicts: Caused, for example, by a lack of recognition of / the exploitation of power relationships.

· Value Conflicts: Caused, for example, by differing criteria for judgment, differing goals or ways of life.
· Structural conflicts: Caused, for example, by unequal control, resources, time pressures or environmental conditions.

If it's possible to define a conflict with the use of these categories, finding a possible solution may become easier as a result.

Dealing with conflicts

There are, fundamentally, at least four options for how to deal with conflict:
· I can assert superiority over the other (win-lose situation)
· We can both give up and go into the abyss together (lose-lose situation). This often happens through a polarization of interests.
· I can sink into feelings of guilt and inferiority (lose-win situation).
· Those involved in the process manage to integrate the differing interests and to find a cooperative solution through acceptance and valuing each other (win-win situation)

The AkKus gave some input and explained to us how conflicts can be dealt with and which methods are appropriate. First of all, it is important to be clear with yourself what you can do when you are not doing well and there is no support from the group. This is important so that you do not fall into a relationship of dependency and so that even in crises you can say what is troubling you and what is needed. For the 'I' of the individual as well as for the 'we' of the group it is sensible to deal with the topic of conflict again and again: What is a conflict for me/us and how do I/we want to deal with that, what do I/we need during conflict resolution?
To give conflicts space means:
· Readiness to work on conflicts
· Time
· Structures that facilitate dealing with conflict
· Methods/Competencies related to dealing with conflict

The AkKus suggest that despite the seriousness of the topic and the theories surrounding it, that we shouldn't be afraid (of complexity, of irrepairability, etc.) but rather we should have courage to experiment with trying out different conflict solution methods in order to find out what is best for the group / the conflict. Even when a conflict seems impossible to resolve at first it is helpful to have trust in the conflict resolution process.

Conflict Resolution Methods

The type of communication in conflict resolution plays a central role. It is often suggested that no insults should be made and that everyone should speak from an 'I' perspective instead of generalizing. The representatives of the conflict resolution method 'Restorative Circles' suggest, however, that these kinds of rules about the 'right' way of communicating can create hierarchies since some people are able to easily use this type of language while others aren't.
In conflict resolution, the following three basic speech techniques have been used again and again in different variations

1) 'Active listening' means giving your full attention to the person speaking and wanting to understand what they are saying. This implies asking questions but not giving any commentary or suggestions for solutions.
2) 'Mirroring' means to repeat in your own words what you have understood. This might seem a little silly at first but it has a positive effect: it stops the dynamics of a conversation from getting out of proportion, avoids misunderstandings, helps in really concentrating on what was said, makes the focus of the other clearer and offers a chance to really understand the point of view of the other. Mirroring can also help the speaker to notice when they may have not fully communicated something, that is, said things that seem self-evident to them but aren't for other people.
3) 'Asking open questions' means asking 'what', 'how', 'where' questions that leave a field of possibilities open for answers. 'Why' questions should be avoided as they are often associated with a pressure for justification and moral judgment.

In small groups, we tried applying these methods. The exercise was to tell your partner about a concrete conflict: How I reacted in the conflict, what helped me/could have helped, what made things difficult. Your partner should respond

methodically. Persons or small groups had the task of observing and, later, giving feedback. A lot of people perceived this exercise as overwhelming because a lot of things had to simultaneously be observed at once that they weren't used to paying attention to.

Nonviolent Communication

Gerd and Anna were educated as mediators with a concentration on 'nonviolent communication' (NVC). Nonviolent communication is often recognized as a method, but actually it is more usefully understood as a way of positioning oneself - having a positive image of other humans, with an assumption that all people do not do the things they do out of malice but do things because they think that their actions are the best way to fulfill their needs. Applying nonviolent communication in conflicts means deeply exploring associated feelings and using them as a marker for fulfilled and unfulfilled needs. Both for feelings and for needs there are lists that can help in finding the right words. In a conflict, it often seems to the parties involved that there is only one viable way to act (strategy). When fundamental needs are expressed, more possibilities for meeting these can become apparent.

Support in Conflict Resolution

Depending on the conflict, the level of escalation of the conflict (see below), the group, the situation, the competencies for conflict resolution and the resources at hand it can make sense to get support when trying to resolve a conflict. An outside view can help you to rethink an internally gridlocked situation. AkKu recommends not having any scruples about asking for outside help: mutual aid is an important leftist theme.

Mediation

One of the AkKu rules of thumb for deciding when mediation is necessary is: Mediation is necessary when several sides feel that they need to be heard. Mediation is a structured conversation that consists of five phases:
- · First, a safer framework is created. Usually this consist of talking with each other about the course of the discussion and making agreements.
- · Afterwards, the topics of conflict are identified.
- · In the following phases, further explanations are made so that the causes of the conflict (for example, unfulfilled needs) are clear to both sides (also from the perspective of each side).
- · In the fourth phase, possibilities for solutions are sought after
- · In the last phase, these can be made more concrete through a collective agreement.

Anna and Gerd explained some models that can help to better understand conflicts

Subjectivity of Perception

An image for visualizing differing perceptions: A bottle is in the middle of some people sitting in a circle. The person on one side sees a different part of the bottle than the person on the other side.

TCI-Triangle

Another model comes out of the theory of theme-centered interaction (TCI). It describes what factors play a role in influencing conflicts. In the TCI triangle, which comprises the conflict, in one corner is the topic (collective concerns, tasks), in the second corner is the self with its own interests, motivations and needs and in the third corner is the collective we with the relationships between people and different roles. The triangle is embedded in an environment that is defined by time, situation and context. As these three factors within the triangle influence each other, a positive change in one corner of the triangle can also help in improving other corners.

Iceberg Model

In the context of conflicts, the iceberg model describes how in a conflict, as with an iceberg floating on the water, only a small part is visible or articulated. This visible conflict is mostly comprised of formulated topics (theories, arguments, positions, demands …) and the observable actions of the parties involved in the conflict. The far greater part of the conflict is not immediately visible, often remains unarticulated and is, nevertheless, massively present and effective. In this submerged part of the conflict iceberg there could, for example, be interests, needs, feelings, relationship problems, values, misunderstandings, structural conditions, taboos, pressures, insecurities or 'old' histories. Mediation methods are mostly there to reveal this under layer (for example, through NVC questions) and to find the

causes of conflict and ideas for a solution there. Then, the idea is to reemerge to make the solution more concrete on a material level.

Phase Model of Escalation
This model describes the phases that a conflict goes through when it continuously becomes worse. The nine phases go from hardening and debate/polemics (1-2), to actions instead of words, images and coalitions, humiliation and strategies of intimidation (3-6), to limited destruction, splintering and, finally, collectively going into the abyss (7-9). The characteristics of these phases could, for example, be read about on Wikipedia under 'Conflict Escalation according to Friedrich Glasl'. AkKu's opinion was that groups in phases 1 and 2 can usually solve the conflict themselves, while phases 3-6 are the classic areas in which mediation can be applied. It's recommended, though, that you don't wait too long! Many groups first come when they've already gone outside of this area. Starting with phase 7, it's not possible to differentiate between persons and attacks anymore.

What is particular to conflicts within political groups?
This question was first dealt with shortly towards the end of the workshop. Some participants wanted more input on this discussion. However, it seemed to AkKu that there were not major differences between conflicts outside of political groups and those in the leftist scene since people in political groups are also influenced by the system. An additional potential for conflict can be seen in the activities of political groups since political topics often have an emotional background and many people within the scene go into political activities with huge aspirations. The disappointment of these can contain a potential for conflict. There is particular brisance in the fact that occasional moral determination can sometimes give way to personal attacks and insults. Ideological narrow-mindedness can also contribute towards seeing others as inferior or, in extreme cases, as enemies. Contentions involving the concrete needs of this person are, in this way, blocked on an ideological level. Another point specific to political groups is the need for appreciation that is often unfulfilled. There is often little appreciation available within the scene and it's even rarer that one receives positive feedback from those outside it. Due to the increased conflict potential here, AkKu recommends also 'working inwards'. That is, not just doing one action after another but paying attention to how individuals are doing and if a conflict submerged under the water is starting to solidify.
Further Content Related Points
· True consensus, that is, decisions in which everyone agrees, is not possible when people don't speak or when there is a ruling atmosphere in which it's not possible for one or more individuals to say what they would like to.
· One strategy for dealing with conflict that was thrown out provocatively by one participant and whose reasonableness could be discussed: Always just keep going so that there is no time for conflict.
· The need for harmony is a problem.
· Structural Conflicts / informal hierarchies like 'white, male, heterosexual, …': Gerd doesn't have any certain answers here. It is important to look at power structures.
· Some participants addressed the problem that the responsibility for resolving conflicts lies on the individual. Or, even worse, that this isn't taken seriously and, for example, people are insulted and called hippies. For the time being there aren't any answers here other than trying to talk and to directly express a wish for sharing responsibility.

Reference to a book on Mediation with a NVC Background:
Mediation in Teams und Gruppen: Praxis- und Methodenhandbuch. Konfliktklärung in Gruppen, inspiriert durch die Gewaltfreie Kommunikation, Verlag: Junfermann, Monika Oboth, Gabriele Seils

MOOD AND FEEDBACK
In accordance with the wishes of AkKu, the number of participants was limited to 16. In the announcement we wrote that delegated political groups were preferred. There were 13 participants there, most of them registered. They consisted of people from groups in Berlin and Dresden. This may have had to do with the many alternative events happening on this particular weekend, for example, the Transgenialer CSD.

The mood of the workshop was mostly very relaxed. In our opinion, it was noticeable that Anna and Gerd had internalized the position of nonviolent communication. They came across as comfortable and authentic (in some people who

have just started learning NVC sometimes they get overwhelmed with the schematized way of acting through focusing on observation-feelings-needs-request). As an example of this (and also as another best practice), dealing with opinions of individual participants that aren't so related to the topic or are very critical:

- · Variant 1: 'Thanks for your opinion.' Then change the subject to go back to what was being discussed before the comment.
- · Variant 2: Talk about your own feelings in relation to the opinion (for example irritation, 'I notice that your comment really irritated me') without making any accusations or acting insulted. Open the possibility of further discussion but with a tendency towards sticking to the topic: 'I could react to that with an opinion but at this point I wouldn't like to stray too far from the topic'.
- · Variant 3: Ask for the reaction of other participants.

 A feedback from AkKu was that despite the large amount of time put at their disposal it was hard to decide which topics to tackle, since there was a lot of important information and exercises. The participants would have also liked more information but, at the same time, expressed their understanding that not all expectations could be fulfilled in a single day. Some people wanted more of a focus on conflicts within political groups. Others found it difficult to understand the idea of an NVC position when it wasn't really discussed fully enough. On the whole, the workshop was found to be helpful and encouraging. It's good to deal with the topic of conflict. Exchange with others can be very helpful in not feeling isolated with the problem of conflict resolution and finding support.

CONCLUSION

We have a few thoughts on the question posed in the workshop about what people in political groups can do when they have the impression that they are alone in dealing with conflicts:

- · ask others directly how they are doing with the situation at the moment in order to encourage thematizing the conflict. Speak to others individually in private or to everyone during a group meeting. For example, 'I've noticed that at the moment I am not very motivated to come to the meeting and wanted to ask how others are feeling'
- · remember anarchist principles: take the needs of everyone seriously, let everyone speak, listen to feelings (without being moralistic)
- · true consensus is only possible when an environment is created in which everyone feels at ease in expressing themselves
- · if a person feels unwell this is not the private problem of the individual but concerns the entire group

Some people feared that dealing with conflicts could take up too much time and new conflicts could always be 'found' even if 'objectively' everything is OK but we don't agree with them. If an individual sees a conflict then there is one - arguing with objectivity means respecting the needs of everyone. Maybe after not dealing with conflicts for a long time a certain amount of time is needed to work through old histories. In doing this it's important to pay attention to only talking about past things that still effect the present, so, those things that have led to people feeling unwell now. Past events for which that isn't the case shouldn't be drawn out again. Besides, we think that working out conflicts leads to more energy and authenticity for other, externally oriented actions than we would have had keeping our mouths shut in a sort of pseudo-harmony.

As the organizing group, we thought it was particularly important to note that there can be fears in dealing with the topic of conflict resolution. The fear of conflict can lead to a situation where conflict is not expressed and, in the end, at some point everything just blows up really violently. Making conflict a topic of discussions helps to find ways of talking about it. It is even better when at some point an ease and joy of experimentation can emerge in conflict resolution. This, however, is only possible when it isn't already too late – that is, when the fronts haven't become hardened. Finding a relaxed way of dealing with conflicts also implies, in our opinion, conceding to others that a conflict exists and being able to ask for support when needed. In this respect, the AkKus correctly reminded us that mutual aid is a central theme in the left.

Email Lists in Political Contexts

with Katja Cronauer

WHY THIS TOPIC?

Even though a lot of communication and organization now takes place at we.riseup.net, so far as we have seen, mailing lists continue to play a large role. Moreover, similar dynamics and patterns of behavior can be observed in the tools that are replacing mailing lists, such as forums and wikis. In networks and federations beyond the local level and in collaborations between people who contribute at very different times, that is, in cases where an actual meeting cannot take place, these forms of digital communication play an important role. Still, conflicts can arise. In the circle of the afb, there is a mailing list from which numerous people have removed themselves due to what many perceived as terrible ways of treating one another. Even when conflicts don't come to the surface so clearly, the use of mailing lists and other digital tools can change group dynamics or lead to the emergence of hierarchies - something we as anarchists would, of course, like to avoid. ;-)
Seriously, though: we think this topic is important because the effects that mailing lists have on group dynamics can be very subtle and still contribute insidiously to burnout. A considered approach and some "best practices" can help us to recognize mechanisms of dominance - and not just on mailing lists.

ANNOUNCEMENT FOR THE EVENT

How do email lists contribute to the formation of hierarchies and how can this be prevented? What kinds of problematic dynamics can develop on email lists and what kinds of approaches are there to resolving them? When do these lists empower subscribers to become more active and when do they prevent this?

ABOUT KATJA CRONAUER

Katja Cronauer is the author of "Communicating, Organizing and Mobilizing over E-mail Lists" (Verlag Edition AV, very clear, helpful and highly recommended). In this book, she describes her study of behaviors on email lists and the effects they have on group dynamics. She also shows some possibilities for nonhierarchical ways of using email lists. Katja is active in the Verlag Edition AV (http://www.edition-av.de/) and works as a translator (of Jane Doe's Anarchist Farm and other texts).

COURSE OF THE EVENT

Katja Cronauer presented, with the help of a presentation and citations from her book, the methodology and results of her analysis of email lists. Afterwards plenty of time for questions was planned in and we made good use of it. The timeframe was around 8:30 to 10:30 pm with about 45 minutes of casual conversation afterwards.

CONTENT OF THE EVENT

In her investigation, Katja Cronauer deals with the question: 'Do email lists contribute to the creation of hierarchies?' She observed two email lists that focus on political work and carried out surveys. Both lists had approximately 400 subscribers.

Dominance and Concentration of Competence
First, she determined that only a small number of subscribers sent emails themselves (in one case, less than 40%, in the other, barely 15%). Statistically, people who are more politically active offline write more emails. Men write disproportionately many messages. The most dominant person on the list wrote in one case 29% and in the other 15% of the messages. The four most active contributors taken together were responsible for 63% and 29% of the email traffic, respectively.

This observed dominance has several consequences:
*Those who write the most largely determine the themes discussed and establish themselves as 'leaders.'
*Those who write the most receive the most answers (possibly because they are perceived as 'cool' or as experts, be-

cause they are simply better known, or because in the flood of information only 'important' emails get read). This selective communication has as a result that those who already write less often go unanswered, and so their motivation to write decreases further.

· Because many people receive no answers, in a way, their voices are taken from them. Even if this happens unconsciously, it can lead to exclusion.

Some Possibilities for Dealing with these Issues:

· Reflection and Taking Breaks: Inform yourself about these issues and sensitize yourself to possible effects on group dynamics. Consider asking those who write the most to step back and take a break.

· Rotation: Reassigning responsibilities is often a good idea. For instance, the person who sends the emails of one group over the list could rotate inside that group. This not only helps share skills, but also to avoid forming email list hierarchies.

· Talk to people who write a lot and perhaps confront them with a statistic. This can help, as people who write a lot often don't realize *how much they actually do. It may also be necessary to create consciousness for the dynamics, described above, that these behaviors can create. An anonymous survey, for example, can help to make an uncomfortable feeling about a list concrete and believable.

· Limiting the number of mails per person per week (e.g., 2 a week): Some lists have had good experiences with this. The effect was not less discussion, but more focused discussion. Katja was only aware of one attempt by a person who wrote a great deal to get around such a rule by having others write messages for them, but doing so is strongly discouraged, as it does not reduce the problem of dominance.

· Moderation: another possibility is, for a time, to place people who write too much under moderation. That means the moderators can decide, how often and which emails by these people are forwarded to the list.

· Since dominant behavior online seems to be related to dominant behavior offline, it is important reduce these behaviors offline as well.

· To keep less active contributors from feeling excluded, it is important to contextualize emails. This means writing them in such a way that people who have not followed all the discussions or who are less familiar with context and dynamics of the group offline can also understand them. If an email is not intelligible to the subscribers of the list (or is not even intended to be), then it has no business being there.

How to Deal with Information Overload

Sometimes, the sheer quantity of information that is sent over a list is so large, that many people simply cannot or do not want to take the time to read through it all. This can lead to the dominance of those who can endure the flood. Some possible solutions to this issue:

· Breaking up lists into various sublists (e.g. Organization, Information, Background). This way, people can subscribe to only parts of the list.

· Long emails tend to frighten people off. Different topics should be discusses in different emails. This way, it is also clearer who is determining how much of the content.

· If necessary, remind people of the purpose for which the list was set up. Subscribers should review their emails for relevance.

Anonymity

In the investigation, the anonymity of email lists was often mentioned as an obstacle to greater participation. Some suggestions:

· If possible, organize offline meetings.

· For smaller lists, introduction emails are one possibility to overcome anonymity.

· In forums and wikis, the organization group has had good experiences with using "Who's who?" introduction pages. If so desired, contact information can be provided there as well.

· In group messages (emails that sent on behalf of a group), it is important to make clear who is writing for whom.

· Also, if a message is the result of a group process, it is important to state that explicitly.

Forms of Communication and Conflict Resolution

Several people in the study expressed that out of fear of harsh criticism, they had decided against writing emails, or even against sending emails they had already written.

Some suggestions:
- Reduction of anonymity (see above)
- Make sure all participants are following an agreed upon netiquette
- During conflicts, consider what belongs on the list, and what should be resolved outside of it.
- If emails are being written in such a way that it is no longer clear for most subscribers what the conflict is about, then they do not belong on the list.
- Quotations generally produces more problems or potential conflicts, often due to false interpretations. Summaries (in one's own words) are better than direct quotations. This shows what came across and, potentially, what was misunderstood.

Excerpt of Katja's Book (in German)
http://www.edition-av.de/Leseprobe/e-mail-listen/teil_2_tipps_fuer_organisatorInnen.html

MOOD AND FEEDBACK

Katja sat comfortably in an armchair by a coffee table. About 10 participants sat across from her in two rows of couches. Very relaxed living atmosphere with a projector. Katja delivered her presentation unhurriedly, taking time now and then to reflect or look up quotes in her book. The moments of silence (as Katja paged calmly through her book) allowed people to say things that they would not perhaps have contributed otherwise (by the end, every participant had said something). The speaker answered questions with honesty and competence. It is clear that she has approached the subject in an intensive and scholarly way. After the official part is over, Katja was available for smaller, more personal conversations.

During the feedback, participants expressed their thanks for the well-researched information and the best practice ideas.

CONCLUSION

Katja's presentation offered many ideas for 'best practices.' As always, the difficulty seems to consist in applying them to one's own context. This means establishing a certain willingness for reflection in one's own group - even despite and in the middle of the time pressures of political action. Whenever someone musters the courage and energy to discuss possible dominant behaviors in such a way that it is seen as a possibility for further group development and not as an attack, then a great step towards deconstructing domination has been taken.

From our own praxis, we think that another approach can be including all participants in smaller groups. Reflecting on one's personal relations is much simpler in this context, and the expertise of individuals can be passed on to others much more directly.

Further mailing list best practices that occurred to us are:
- Whenever possible, we believe it is helpful to get to know each other personally (that means at a physical meeting out there in the real world). This allows everyone to evaluate what the other people on the list are 'like' and some reactions by email might be more understandable as a result.
- In case of a conflict, in our opinion, it's good to get people involved who are not directly affected and have them explain what disturbed them about the situation (not to speak for others). For example: "I wish our conversations could be free of discriminatory jokes, because I need a respectful environment in order to express myself comfortably and I want other people to be able to speak their minds as well."
- We try not to send emails written in the heat of intense discussions out immediately - even if we feel the need to write them immediately. After a day or so, it's easier to reflect on your point of view and formulate it in a clearer way. It's not a question of sweeping your anger and annoyance under the rug, but rather of finding a way to communicate those feelings so that they will be understood. Often that just doesn't work if you immediately 'retaliate.'

Another idea from the event was to create a political email list netiquette guide, using Katja Cronauer's materials and other sources, which could then be passed on to new subscribers. (Netiquette is a portmanteau word assembled from the words '[inter]net' and etiquette.)

Content

This email list was created for a certain purpose (which will be described more precisely here). Subscribers generally do not want any contributions that are not on topic. When new topics are introduced, it is helpful to write briefly why they might be relevant to the list. In order to keep the amount of information small and readable, it's a good idea to be concise and, if necessary, give summaries. It is particularly important to choose short and fitting subject lines, so that subscribers can decide whether they want to take the time to read the content.

It is important to ensure transparency, so that people who do not read everything can understand the context. This can be accomplished by sending short summaries of the current state of the discussion. The authorship of every email should always be made clear. In discussions, it is helpful and important to give reasons for opinions and to ensure transparency in decision-making and other processes (by establishing clear formal procedures).

Etiquette and Atmosphere

Computers and email lists may be very technical things, but please don't forget that behind them there are actual people you are communicating with. Because body language is missing and there isn't the opportunity to question and confirm your understanding, and because we often take written messages more dramatically than spoken ones, it is important to pay attention to whether emails could be misinterpreted or come across as aggressive. One tip here is to ask whether the email contains constructive suggestions or destructive criticisms. Attacks, insults and discrimination, of course, are just as inappropriate here as in actual meetings. If you send something that you didn't actually want to send, apologize. If you send invitations to private places over the list, bear in mind that this can give new subscribers the impression that they are not welcome on the list (since it seems to be a closed circle of friends).

Dominance

When the importance of a topic is stressed with CAPITAL LETTERS or "!!!" in the subject line, this can be perceived as pushy or dominant. If certain individuals write significantly more emails than others, this, like other dominant behavior, can have a negative influence on group dynamics. In order to reflect on this, it helps to make clear who writes how much, and whether or not the same people are always answered. Subscribers can count for themselves how many emails they write in comparison to other and, if need be, reduce their contributions or even take a break. It is also interesting to reflect on gender dynamics: how large is the quantity of emails from men and how do men react when women write as much or more than men?

Conflicts

When discussions become heated, and you have an emotional reaction to an email, it's good to wait before responding. If I, as an uninvolved person, am annoyed or saddened by the behavior of the participants, communicating to the list can help to clarify matters. When conflicts are not comprehensible to less involved subscribers, either provide sufficient information to explain the situation (people outside the conflict can ask for the participants to summarize their points of view) or resolve the conflict off-list.

Technical Issues

People who have fewer computer skills can learn these by working with more experienced subscribers to accomplish computer tasks. The follow technical tips are often covered by good mailing list software and so they are intended mainly for people who are setting up a list. It makes sense for it to be obvious to everyone how they can unsubscribe from the list. For instance, this information can be included in the signature line of every email. It's also helpful if the mailing list software includes an abbreviation at the beginning of each subject line (usually in the form "[abc] Original Subject," where "abc" is the name of the group or list). The email addresses of those to whom the message is being sent (so, those who are on the list) should not appear in the header, to prevent the email addresses from getting into the wrong hands (at least on big lists; on small lists it can actually improve trust). We recommend setting the reply function of the list to the list address, to avoid accidentally sending answers to individuals.

Security

It's important to create and maintain an awareness that people for whom the messages are not intended might read them as well. This happens not only when such people are on the list, but also when emails are intercepted at points in the network through with the emails pass. When forwarding emails, make sure that there are no email addresses of uninvolved parties in the header. Confidential information should be sent with pgp encryption (although this is only possible for smaller groups, whose members know and trust each other) or communicated at meetings, in person.

New Subscriber Information

Make new subscribers feel welcome. Don't forget that getting to know each other is much easier in person. New subscribers to the list should receive a succinct, up-to-date text that introduces them to the customs and practices of the list (perhaps similar to this one). We think it's important that this text comes from a collective decision by the group. Make sure to say whether or not the list is moderated. An encouragement to contribute to the list can make participation easier. This text should explain what kind of information can be sent on the list, and what is too private or too secret. It's also helpful to introduce the current subscribers of the list. If several subscribers do not stick to the general agreements, this text can be sent over the list again. In individual cases, personal emails are sufficient.

Political Burnout and the Loss of Motivation in Groups

WHAT IS PRESENTED HERE?

The following text, in contrast to all the others included in this brochure, is not the documentation of an event but is based on our own research and experiences. In our event series, there was a workshop on stress and burnout prevention for political activists with a presenter from 'Out of Action'. Since we couldn't document this event, the following is a replacement, composed of our own thoughts on the topic. As with all other texts in this reader: please don't see us as experts but as people who, like you, sometimes get stuck in the middle of problems or gain new experiences.

Note: We asked some comrades about their experiences with the topic of burnout. We've documented some of the answers in the corresponding areas in boxes.

WHY THIS TOPIC?

We decided to include the topic 'stress' and 'burnout' in the event series because:
- We think that (political) stress often arises in the activities of the leftist scene. We don't allow ourselves any peace as long as injustice still reigns somewhere. As a group, we put big hopes and expectations into actions that often aren't fulfilled.
- We think that stress also arises in the internal processes of groups. Because there isn't more time to manage interpersonal things or because stress has led to depression or aggression, which can make communication in the group massively more difficult.

WHAT IS POLITICAL BURNOUT?

According to Wikipedia, burnout syndrome or 'being burnt out' has to do with a situation of pronounced emotional exhaustion together with a reduced capacity for achievement. It can be seen as an end state or a line of development, beginning with idealistic enthusiasm and leading through frustrating experiences to disillusionment and apathy, psychosomatic sickness and depression or aggression and an increased danger of addiction.
You can read further there that this physical, emotional and spiritual state of exhaustion is precipitated by stress that, due to reduced resilience, can't be handled. So, finally, burnout is a state that becomes worse and worse through a vicious cycle if you don't manage to hit the breaks in time.

Under the idea of political burnout, we mainly understand burnout caused by political activity. Political burnout is, first of all, a personal phenomenon in the sense that the individual is affected by its consequences. In our experience, however, group processes (having to do with political activities in the context of a group) play a prominent role both in the emergence and in the prevention of burnout. In other words, to a large extent, it also has to do with the group whether a person burns out politically or whether they can avoid this effect. We want to go into these group processes a bit more in what follows.

In this text, we don't specially focus on the burnout effects caused by repression. On this topic, we'd like to point you in the direction of the highly knowledgeable Out of Action groups (in Berlin or other cities, https://outofaction.net/) and their work on precisely this issue.

WHAT PARTICULARLY CAUSES BURNOUT IN POLITICAL WORK?

Generally accessible counselors are only of limited help in dealing with burnout from political work, since they mostly look for the causes in working life. Political work mostly functions quite differently than wage labor, though. So what are the special causes of political burnout?

In political work, recognition is often too limited. So, feedback (or praise!) is an important source of motivation here. It's sometimes hard to recognize the effects of your own actions, there mostly isn't remuneration involved and 'say-

ing thanks' can often be really hard (more about that in the afterword). Many political groups are entangled, internally or externally with other groups, in a kind of trench warfare. Instead of urgently needed recognition, accusations of political irrelevance, false tactics or insufficient theories fly in every direction.

Collective decisionmaking is a quality of emancipatory groups. When the individual feels that they 'have to have a say in everything' this can lead to stress, though. A false understanding of DIY (Do It Yourself) can lead to an overloading of capacities. Mutual help and support are at least equally important signs of emancipatory collaboration.

It happens again and again that our images of another society lead to us feel under pressure to immediately realize something like this and impose strict morals on ourselves. In accordance with these morals, we judge and condemn ourselves and others. Dissatisfaction with the fact that we still can't live up to all these ideals can emerge because we were socialized in the existing society, not in our ideal one, and this can cause additional stress.

In this context, the claim that 'the private is political' can lead to a situation where, even when we're not taking part in political groups and political activities, we are sometimes caught up in stressful processes (reflecting on our consumption practices, the division of work in our living collectives, ways of talking, ways of interacting with children, our performances of gender, …) and there is hardly any space left to relax.

What's often not considered in general suggestions about burnout is that a large part of stress is caused by the environment in which we live, including the broader society in which we are situated. Advertisements, the pressure to achieve, value judgments, artificial limitations on resources and existential anxiety are just a few of the main points here. The contradictions between our own needs and the possibilities for fulfilling them in society go along with additional stress when our political work deals with critiques of society and domination.

Radical political work in the sense of striving for change implemented at the roots can, after an initial period of enthusiasm ('well yeah, obviously we need another society, immediately, the existing injustices can't be tolerated any longer'), lead to deep disappointment: through steps towards societal change that don't leave behind perceptible effects, through a lack of support and enthusiasm from other people for your own ideas or through resistance from conservative forces. These disappointments can likewise contribute to burnout.

HOW CAN POLITICAL BURNOUT BE RECOGNIZED?

The symptoms of a burnout are divided into three main categories (according to Wikipedia):

Emotional Exhaustion: This exhaustion results from excessive emotional or physical exertion (strain). This is the stress dimension of the burnout syndrome. The affected person feels weak, powerless, tired and faint. They suffer from a lack of motivation and are easily irritable.

Depersonalization: With this reaction to overload, the affected persons create a distance between themselves and their personal social environment. This is expressed in increasing apathy and partially in cynical views towards other persons. In other words: they don't let the problems and needs of their friends and comrades get to them anymore and focus on the material aspects of the relationship. Working together becomes a purely impersonal, routine affair.

Experience of Failure: The affected persons often have the feeling that despite being overloaded they don't manage to accomplish much or to act effectively. Experiences of success are lacking. This can lead to a situation in which the demands (on yourself) constantly quantitatively and qualitatively increase and change and thereby your achievements constantly seems smaller in comparison to these demands. The discrepancy between demands and achievements is perceived by the affected person as personal ineffectiveness or inefficiency, which leads to them losing belief in the sense of their activities.

Wikipedia further describes the various phases of burnout syndrome, as established by the psychologists Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North:

· The compulsion to prove something to yourself and other people.
· Extreme ambitions and efforts to achieve in order to fulfill especially high expectations.
· Overwork and neglect of personal needs and social contacts
· Covering up or disregarding inner problems and conflicts
· Doubt about your own system of values and about previously important things like hobbies and friends
· Denial of problems that arise, a sinking tolerance and a low estimation of other persons.
· Retreat and thereby avoidance of social contacts, which are kept to a minimum.
· Obvious behavioral changes, increasing feelings of worthlessness, rising anxiety.
· Depersonalization through loss of contact with yourself and other people; life is increasingly functional and mechanized.
· Inner emptiness and desperate attempts to cover up this feeling through extreme actions, for example through sexuality, eating patterns, alcohol or other drugs.
· Depression with symptoms like apathy, hopelessness, exhaustion and lack of perspective.
*The first thoughts on suicide as a way out of this situation; acute danger of physical and mental collapse.

Our opinion is that there are no generalizable signs of stress and no ways of dealing with stress that will work for everybody. Every person reacts differently. Often a combination of the symptoms mentioned above can take place (with varying intensities).

Which signs of burn out have you observed in yourself?

· I react with irritation and resignation when additional complications emerge or things don't work out. Restless sleep, withdrawal and bodily discomforts like back pains can be signs I experience.

· Constant tiredness; depression; the feeling of having no prospects; aggression; lethargy

· Tiredness, loss of the desire to deal with new things, easy irritability, easy to start crying. The tendency to speak negatively about the work of others. Reduced feelings of self-worth. Feeling that my own activities are nearly senseless and ineffective. Feeling responsible (in a way that objectively makes no sense) for others, for example for person A cleaning their crates out of the hallway because person B told me that it bothered them.

· Low valuation of my own body and its health, even leading to self-destructive tendencies ('a lack of sleep is bad for you? Then I'll stay up even later, I'm already feeling bad anyway').

· Three lines from the song "Dein Haus ohne Türen" ('your house without doors') from Früchte des Zorns, although it isn't about burnout, describe the feeling very well in my opinion: 'And the wish that someone would have chopped my arm off / because that's easier to see than this pain / because you wouldn't be so alone with that'.

· Mood swings / tiredness / lack of emotions / shutting out influences that don't have to do with political work / the desire to throw everything away or do something totally different / rushing around / headaches

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HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH AND PREVENT POLITICAL BURNOUT?

Since all people deal with stress, it's important that each person find out for themselves what causes stress for them and what is good for them in these situations. Are we aware of our own (stress) boundaries? In particular, it's important to be able to care for yourself autonomously, but it's better when stress isn't understood as an individual problem and the group is ready to offer support. The more intensely a group works together, the more important it is, in our opinion, to have an exchange about what stress means for each individual and what they would wish for from the group in stressful situations. Everyone in the group is responsible for everyone else's wellbeing.

Even when groups feel overwhelmed by the topic of burnout, it can help to talk about it. Even just recognizing that you aren't alone in suffering from stress can be a huge relief.

It's clear and understandable that in political groups there will always be people who are more active (and/or take on more responsibility) than others. People's economic/social situation, their personal or family situation, the phase of life they're currently in, their current mood, their general drive, the possibility of double or multiple workloads through multiple activities or just the way people set their priorities – all of these are factors than can cause people to engage to different degrees at a certain point in time. We believe that this is unavoidable and is also not, on principle, something that should be criticized. We don't see the basis of collective responsibility as resting on the 'equalization' of everyone involved but, rather, this basis primarily consists of becoming conscious of circumstances and different conditions and the fact that it is not a private matter whether group members take on political activities or not.

How does your group support you in dealing with this?

· We regularly give each other an overview of our lives, talk about out activities outside of political life, our current motivation, the things that are causing us stress in everyday life. That helps to no end in being able to realistically estimate the situation of other people and strongly contributes to no longer having to speculate about the capacities of other group members. In the group there are regularly offers made to take over many of my activities, since others in the group feel that I'm overdoing it.

· Not at all.

· In a discussion, we consider together which tasks could be temporarily or completely taken over by other persons from the group. The group tries to warn people who are in danger, since sometimes you don't notice it yourself so quickly.

· At each group meeting, there is a round about people's current state at the beginning and a feedback round at the end of the meeting. Since the group is really small and we get along with each other really well, although we don't really take particular time to build a really developed friendship, this is a safe space in which honest expressions of our own current state are possible. If people tend towards taking on too many activities, they aren't prevented from doing this but the others still ask pretty quickly how the person is doing with this. Thoughts of leaving the group can also be expressed. We then consider together what that would mean for the person leaving and the rest of the group and what room for maneuvering is there.

· Interestingly, I can express my burnout tendencies more easily in my political group than in my living group. Maybe this is because the political group takes time for this and looks after creating firm structures for expressing how you're doing, while in the living group the stress of the everyday and all the necessary activities that pile up get in the way. Maybe there's also (not necessarily just from me but from many people in my living group) unconsciously a wish for a bit more distance, in order to compensate for living together in such tight quarters. For me, that's not the situation I would wish for, but at the moment it's the reality.

CONCRETE BEST PRACTICES FOR DEALING WITH BURNOUT

The following best practices emerged out of our own experiences or those of people in groups we are friends with.

- In all projects, we consider whether parts of these could be taken on by others. This reduces the strain not just on our own group, it also supports the networking of groups and connects new people looking for a point to connect to existing structures in a way that makes sense.

- In a 'What's up Round' at the beginning of a meeting, everyone has the opportunity to express themselves if something is preventing them at the moment from concentrating on activities in the political group. If most people just

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say 'I'm tired' the method is not that helpful, though. Is there not enough trust there to discuss the causes of stress? A collective retreat might help everyone to simultaneously de-stress and get to know each other better.

· We have considered the overvaluing of decisions and the stress caused by this in another project: from an anarchist perspective, we find it important to keep the number of decisions and the free agreements resulting from them low. This can be realized through taking into account the following points during consensus processes:
· At the beginning, you can consider whether the point requires a decision at all.
· Only those who feel affected make the decision.
· Hold preparation discussions for those who are interested in the topic and/or in small groups.
· Create the possibility to not take part in the decision ('stand aside': group X does X, while persons A and B don't take part but don't block) or go in different directions on a certain question ('fork': partial group A does X while partial group B does Y).

Additionally, an atmosphere of being in a 'do-ocracy' (everyone just does things as long as no one's against them) can contribute to deconstructing decision-making stress.

· The tactic of motivating others by taking on lots of activity yourself is a double-edged sword. It can be successful, but it's better to do it together with someone else, also in order to be able to better deal with drops in motivation after failures. This method should only be implemented for a limited time period, since otherwise it can easily happen that the people who you were trying to motivate become dependent, or feel patronized or pressured.

What do you do yourself to prevent burnout when you feel threatened by it?

· When overload leads to depression, I usually have no desire to eat much and try to stay up later and later. But this just makes everything much worse. When I try to go to bed at a sensible time and eat healthy, regular food instead of just chowing down on the occasional chocolate or piece of bread while riding my bike, my mood usually improves quickly.

For me it's also helpful to overcome my desire to sit alone with my computer and eat sweets and to go meet friends or political groups or sports partners. Despite my original lack of motivation, doing this usually noticeably improves my mood and brings more motivation along with it. I try to structure my thoughts when they've gotten stuck in negative patterns: what is stressing me, exactly? What could help me to reduce stress? It helps me most to take notes on this. An analysis of unfulfilled needs in the sense of nonviolent communication sometimes helps to move from a 'person x annoys me, I feel like puking' point of view to one with fewer judgments and more constructive ways of seeing things.

It would definitely be good to go on vacation sometimes, but I haven't managed to decide to do this yet.

· I try to find reliable people who can take on my tasks. Things that aren't so urgent can be put off. I stop doing some things and try to do more things that support my relaxation and my feeling of wellbeing (nature, movement and reading).

· I step back.

· When it seems to me to make sense, I accept offers from others to lighten my workload. Alternatively, I concentrate on a single project. Occasionally, I just take a break.

In addition to the already mentioned reasons for preventing political burnout, we also think it is important to deal with this topic in order to question the societally imposed understanding of achievement, individual responsibility and self-sufficiency and to replace it with our own concepts like the joy of living, mutual aid and the ability to ask for support. Letting yourself take advice from someone else doesn't need to be seen as a weakness anymore but, rather, as something that's totally understandable and a sign of strength. Developing our thinking in this direction, step by step, can help to create not only more calm and joy within our political groups, it can also decisively change the effects you have outside of the group. Because how can we hope to convince people that our understanding of another society is better than the current one, if we ourselves are constantly on the verge of collapse?

Here's a quote about that from the self-understanding of Out-of-Action: 'We speak out against achievement-centric forms of thought and a culture of hardness, which we continually encounter even within emancipatory movements. Individualizing psychic problems while ignoring their societal level is also a typical phenomenon in capitalism and one which, again, continues to be widespread even in our own political contexts.'

CONCLUSION

Many best practices for dealing with stress might sound trivial at first glance. We tend to react with 'but that's obvious' or 'that doesn't work for me, it's too simple.' So for that reason a meta best practice for dealing with stress seems to us to be to continuously take time for yourself or in your group to reflect on dealing with stress. What does stress mean for me/my group? How is stress dealt with by me/my group? Which of the possible causes for burnout in political activities described above can you see affecting you/your group and what do you want to do about that? What do I or my group need when I am/we are stressed? The point of answering these questions is to identify your own best practices. What seems trivial for someone might work for others, what one person perceives as too technical might be something really stabilizing for others when they are in crisis. What's important is to really seriously try out the best practices you find for yourself even in more relaxed moments. Because even if the methods seem banal, in our experience they will only be used in more serious situations when they have previously been tested repeatedly.

In our opinion, the topic of 'dealing with stress' isn't about getting better and better at controlling stress so that you can achieve more and more. The effects of stress can partially even be seen as positive and valued: in the workshop, for example, someone reported that in stressful periods it can be fun to complete a to-do list in a mechanical, almost hypnotic trance. Of course, there is the danger there of strain if the list of things to doesn't seem to get any shorter and as a result causes stress.

Consider that in order to accomplish things you don't only need reasons to move – for example, motivation – but also the strength to move. The strength to move includes things that enable you to become active, for example time, bodily strength or energy, materials and friends. These strengths are only partially influenced by whatever motivation exists. It doesn't help to stress yourself that there are so many things left to do when there just aren't the resources available to do them. An honest assessment of your strength of movement and of what is realistically possible can make the pressure of a to-do list less intense.

The goals is to determine for yourself, as much as possible, the state of your strength and to be able to decide how you want to deal with stress. In other words, consciously deciding to be really active for a certain time and to just deal with the stress or to decide for yourself to take a break from stress (and feel as little pressure to be active as possible).

Radical Peer Support with Sascha from the Icarus Project

WHY THIS TOPIC?

This workshop wasn't part of our series of events "Politically Active without Burning Out," but took place around the same time, organized by the Nature Friends Youth of Berlin (Naturfreunde Jugend Berlin [NSJ], http://www.naturfreundejugend-berlin.de). One of us went and reported back. We decided to include this event in our documentation because we think that the topic fits well here. On the one hand, we are interested in approaches to 'Radical Peer Support' that are based on mutual, friendly support and radically leftist politics in general. We think that these approaches, even when they are tailored to a specific subject, as in this case, can be adapted to other areas or serve as an inspiration. We want to see networks of experience in which people develop and share best practices. The Icarus Project, of which the speaker is a part, is a good example of such a network.

On the other hand, we see (precisely in the leftist scene) a real need for experience interacting with people who are suffering psychically. Many people in the leftist scene, in our opinion, move between the poles of self-preservation and 'going crazy,' as a reaction to a sick society. We know some people who are identified outside the scene, or by themselves, as 'crazy.' Some of them have had traumatic experiences during their political activities, with police brutality for example, and still suffer from it today. Others have been seen as 'odd' since they were kids and found a place in the leftist scene where they could be more fully accepted than outside it. Although this acceptance does exist, there are still great uncertainties in everyday situations. These presumably have similar causes to those described in the documentation on the event about conflicts: for example, the fear of doing something 'wrong.'

ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE NFJ

Although many people have experienced crises that brought them into contact with the psychiatric system, or seen friends in similar situations, and the number of those affected in the 'leftist scene' is, if anything, growing, the subject still stands far outside our everyday discussions. What's more, it is often relegated to a mere personal issue and is rarely seen in its context with a social critique of capitalism. It seems that talking about one's own weaknesses and breakdowns is hard to reconcile with the image of an autonomous street-fighter. Instead of discussion and mutual aid, we are referred to the 'professional help,' of those who know about the 'issue.'

The Working Group Psychiatry Critique of the NFJ would like to intervene here. We want to break the taboos and ask how – outside of the often repressive, individualistic and patriarchal system which equates health with productivity - we can build up structures of support that are consistent with a radical critique of society.

The workshop, offered by a member of the Icarus Project, a politically radical and artistically active support network from the USA, by and for people who live and struggle with what are generally labelled as 'mental illnesses.' The Icarus Project advocates for a culture and a language which reflect our actual experiences without trying to pack our lives into pre-made boxes. You can find out more about the Icarus Project at http://theicarusproject.net.

The workshop will take place in English with small group work in German. Translation from English to German and German to English will be provided. This will be a safer space, in which people, if they are strongly affected by the contents of the workshop will be given space and can (if they wish) talk with contact people. Afterwards there will be time for discussion and exchange. With food, followed by film screening.

ABOUT THE ICARUS PROJECT

http://theicarusproject.net/

The Icarus Project has been around for nine years. It was started by two people who had direct experience with psychiatry. At first it was solely, and remains for the most part mainly an internet project. The reason for this was that it was easier for many people to exchange their experiences over the internet than speaking in person. On the other hand, however, communicating solely online can easily lead to misunderstandings. Today the site has over 13,000 members.

The name of the project is that of a boy from Greek mythology: Icarus had wings of wax and feathers, with which he could fly. In the end, though, he flew too close to the sun, which made the wax melt, and he plummeted to the ground. The Icarus Project sees in the story of Icarus an analogy for the lives of people with psychic suffering. The wings are a "dangerous gift," which bring special abilities on the one hand, but on the other can lead to terrible crises.

One goal of the project is of a substantial and cultural nature: we want to redefine 'mental illness.' To this end, the project wants to develop a new language and culture for dealing with psychic pain. The basic idea is that those who are affected are in most cases in the best position to determine what the effects of their suffering are and how they want to deal with it. An example of how the current language for discussing (mental) illness is inadequate: 'healthy'/'normal' in our culture mean being capable of waking up in the morning and going to work. The 'treatment' of the mentally 'ill' has the goal of restoring their fitness for work as far as possible. Since this can hardly be the point of living, it's important to develop a new idea of 'health.'

The Icarus Project's second goal is to form a network of support groups and to spread information. Icarus Groups are a mixture of self-help groups and political groups. These groups gather experience and develop methods for effective group organization, which aren't only important for groups whose focus is mental health. All of the network's publications are available for free on our website. Among these are the publications "Navigating the Space between Brilliance and Madness" and "Friends Make the Best Medicine" (this work in particular is suggested for anyone who is looking for best practices for forming groups and having meetings). Our website, info events and materials extend an invitation to form new Icarus Groups and join the network, in order to exchange experiences.

One further principle that's important to the Icarus Project is an impartial openness to those who take psychiatric drugs and those who don't, as well as for those who find diagnoses helpful and those who don't. Everyone should find the 'right' answer to these questions for themselves. What's important is not to split the scene over these decisions.

COURSE OF THE EVENT

The workshop took place on Sunday, 26.6.2011 from 1 to 5 p.m. in the SFE (School for Adult Education).

· Introductions: say your name and how you are doing (this was called the 'check-in')
· Organizational Details (Safer space, translation), meeting agreements
· In between, another check-in on the question of delaying the break
· Input by the speaker, Sascha, about his history and the Icarus Project. Method: talk with whispered translation in the corner
· Discussion of expectations in groups of three. Expectations were written down and hung on the wall. The organizers read them and sorted them into clusters (during another 5 minute long input)
· Spontaneous response to a participant's wish: another input about concrete methods
· Group work on topics from the clusters: What can we do concretely here in Berlin?
· Report back by speakers from each group
· "Check-out": say your name and how you are doing again.

CONTENTS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE EVENT

Sascha very neatly integrated me into the event, even before it began. He was busy sorting copies of the Icarus brochures, folding them and wrapping them in rubber bands. He looked around for people who weren't engaged in a conversation at the moment, saw me and approached me, saying "Hi, I'm Sascha. What's your name?" Then he explained very pragmatically and precisely what I could help him with and asked if I would like to. I said I would and got started. Soon after, he found another person who sat next to me folding fliers and keeping me company. A nice introduction to the ways that the members of the Icarus Project interact with people.

Meeting Agreements

At the beginning, meeting agreements were handed out, printed on A5 paper in English and German. These were then read aloud, so everyone had the opportunity to remind themselves of things that might seem obvious at first and to settle in. The people from the Icarus Project told us that they had worked on these agreements for a long time. They

can be found in the Icarus publication "Friends Make the Best Medicine." Some of these are:
- · Listen with solidarity, in a way that respects diversity.
- · Stay conscious of how much space you are taking up (pulling back if you talk a lot, encouraging those who talk less)
- · The intersectionality of forms of oppressions is recognized and should be understood and opposed in group work. This is everyone's responsibility.
- · Considerate "Owl Vision" (see below)
- · What is said here, stays here; what is learned can, may and should be passed on

Some other basics of the Icarus Project's way of working:
- · People who have a problem are in the best position to know how to deal with it
- · Radical in 'Radical peer support' means: originating from the root/from the practice
- · Structure/Organization:
- * · Friendship is the most important
- * · Meetings are split half and half between mutual support and planning and preparing actions
- * · Using methodological suggestions from Alcoholics Anonymous (without the religious stuff, only taking what makes sense)
- · The name is not protected. In fact, we call for people to start new Icarus groups and network with us.

Best Practices from the Experience of the Icarus Project
- · "Owl Vision": pay attention to the person who's speaking, but keep everyone else in view as well
- · "Map maps"/"Wellness plans": Write down what I need when I'm not doing well, how I know when I am doing well (so that I can tell when I'm not), what I need to keep feeling good
- * · Give these lists to friends (Peer approach)
- * · Life and psychic pain won't seem as threatening
- * · For example, my friends tell me (Sascha) that I should really just go to sleep when I'm not feeling well.
- · An example of content to work on (more suggestions in "Friends Make the Best Medicine"):

groups discuss questions like: "Where is society sick, where is it the individuals?"

Sascha's Story
According to Sascha, he was politicized in the squatter scene in New York in the '80s, which was inspired by the scene in Berlin. There he got to know a culture of self-empowerment and mutual aid. On the other hand, though, he saw a lot of people burning out on political struggles and efforts and noticed that many people, who pressure themselves to work very hard to change society, have trouble relaxing. He noticed that it was easier in these groups to fight the 'enemy' that to keep the group together. (One of his friends said: "It's much easier on the right: they only have to make a scapegoat and frighten people with it. We actually want to get along.")
The suicide of a friend was the catalyst for Sascha to think about other kinds of political activity. He discovered that both his group and the scene in general were totally overwhelmed by the suicide. Many had trouble asking for support and realizing how vulnerable they are. Networks seemed like a possible solution.
Everyone has personal reasons to be politically active. For Sascha, it was the fact that since he was 18 he had been locked up repeatedly in psychiatric institutions. Many are crushed by the experience. Sascha was fortunate to have so many friends and experience with mutual aid, which saved him from a breakdown. Sascha thinks that all of us carry a story around with us (how we became who we are, why we are politically active). These stories are very important and consequential. For one, in order to understand one's own motivations and, for another, to be able to really communicate your position to others.

Analysis of the Current Situation (from the expectations group)
- · 'Productivity terror' in the leftist scene, having to stay functional -> alienation between political work and one's own well-being
- · There's a lot of information on antiracism, anti-sexism, anti-capitalism, etc. but almost nothing about how to interact with each other. All these approaches can seem dishonest if we can't even figure out how to relate to each on a basic level.

Concerns about the Icarus Approach (expressed by the participants)
- What should people do who don't have friends: people who aren't able or willing to build up such relationships (for instance, people with Asperger's)
- Peer support can destroy friendships
- People with similar problems attract each other -> risk that everyone might need the same kind of the support at the same time

Resources in Berlin (mentioned by the participants)
- Trialogue groups (the affected person, their relatives, 'professionals')
- Weglaufhaus
- Out of Action
- The "Prost" Group (social workers) who organized the safer space
- The Krisenpension

Ideas for Radical Peer Support in Practice (results of the group work)
- Collecting e-mail addresses for the 'Methods' Project: gathering methods from our own experiences, on a blog for example, so that other groups can find things they can use
- When everyone is stressed out, everyone should do less
- Even when there isn't energy for support, it's important to formulate and express the wish to support people, though it isn't currently possible -> for example, at least making someone a cup of tea
- Include a "Do you need anything?" emotional round, otherwise a helpless feeling can remain

Notes on the Reader "Friends Make the Best Medicine"
- Language is powerful. It can contribute to understanding or lock us (e.g. with diagnoses) in sad and separate boxes.
- Monocultures (also taken socially) are unstable, unsustainable and suffer from a lack of imagination.
- You aren't alone. Your life is supported by countless others.
- Weave networks of solidarity and community to change the world: "conversation = communication = revolution"
- Groups are no guarantee that problems will be solved.

Notes from the Reader "Unraveling the Biopsychiatric Knot:
the Future History of the Radical Mental Health Movement"
- Biopsychiatry, the idea that psychic problems are caused principally by bio-chemical imbalances in the brain, is relatively young.
- Modern psychiatry has its roots in the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, when the whole of society was being reorganized according to market principles and traditional methods of caring for the sick and elderly were destroyed.
- In the 1940s, psychoanalysis was dominant. In the '60s and '70s other schools of thought and a growing anti-psychiatry movement developed. In the '80s, the biomedical school of thought won general acceptance. It assumes that psychic problems can be diagnosed with scientific objectivity using a detailed checklist of symptoms. To this end, the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual" (DSM-III), which contains detailed checklists of symptoms, was developed and became, with the support of the pharmaceutical industry, the bible of psychiatry. Part of the concept is the privileged knowledge and interpretive prerogative of 'scientists' and 'experts.'
- One effect of the application of the DSM-III to diagnoses was the 'Prozac Revolution' (Prozac is a well-known anti-depressant). The symptoms of 'normal sadness' and 'melancholy' are very similar and so normal sadness has to a great extent been pathologized and medicated, although unlike melancholy it has external causes. The DSM-III only takes into account symptoms as they appear on scientific, objective checklists.
- Parallel to this development in psychiatry, a 'neoliberal revolution' in politics and economics was taking place in the 1980s: the privatization of public property, the reduction of wages and the erosion of social nets together with a change in consciousness that understood poverty not as a social problem but as a personal failure.
- The pharmaceutical industry became very influential. Antidepressants were advertised in the media and even today, industry sponsored 'depression screenings' are put on in schools and universities.
- It became simple and more 'natural' to talk about chemicals in the brain than to discuss social conditions and family issues.

- Like psychiatry in the '80s, neoliberalism purported in its language to be neutral and scientific in order to hide the ideologies that underpinned it.
- If we look closer and more critically at the causes of mental problems, we will likely notice that these arise from the same ideology that offers biopsychiatric solutions.
- Medicalizing psychic pain helps to disguise its political causes.

MOOD AND FEEDBACK

The workshop was very well organized by the NSJ/Working Group Psychiatry Critique: Safer space, food, translation, lots of people supporting the facilitators and going into the smaller groups, a note with the 'meeting agreements,' transparency about the plan for the workshop, information about the infrastructure … what didn't work quite as well was that it was repeatedly unclear how things should continue when the needs of the participants differed from the plan of the organizers. It would have been better here to quickly take a temperature check of the group, using hand signs instead of having everyone say their opinions aloud, have a suggestion from the organizers and then take another temperature check to approve this (or another) suggestion.

There were a variety of responses to Sascha's highly emotional and energetic way of speaking (described by one participant in an individual conversation as 'American motivational speaker style'). Some found it funny in a friendly way ("I will scream if you aren't all back in time from the break!"), others unfamiliar and overwhelming (once when there was no response to a question, Sascha said "What's up? This is all participatory here!" and a participant told him that he couldn't expect active involvement from 'Germans').

In the small groups that were supposed to discuss concrete approaches for Berlin, it became clear, as in other workshops from our series, that although the participants thought the topic was important and had ideas for what to do, they had no time left over from other activities to actually try them out. People exchanged contact information, but so far as I know, no one came to the follow-up meeting. I also was surprised that during the 'check-out' (a closing round, in which everyone briefly said what they got out of it), only two people of about 30 or 40 expressed any kind of thanks

CONCLUSION

I was very taken by this workshop: by the content and organization, as well as the enthusiasm of the speakers, which translated into motivation and joy for the participants. It was a real success. I definitely recommend the website and brochures of the Icarus Project. The collection of best practices is based in years of practical experience. In the context of our series, "Politically Active without Burning Out," we found the approaches to political activism with people with psychic pain, the culture of the project and their willingness to share practical experience interesting. The Icarus Project can also be seen as an inspiration for how to organize in a developing network of political groups. There are collective resources and support for groups that in turn contribute information, material and events to the network. The whole thing seems to function with autonomy for the member groups and without a lot of extra organizational effort.

One important assertion from the workshop is: "motivation by guilt does not work." You can't successfully convince people of your own ideas about another society by criticizing their consumer choices or their egotism. In fact, this just reproduces the model of reducing all problems to the individual level. A different approach to motivation, used by the Icarus Project among many other groups is storytelling. This can communicate one's motives for political engagement in an emotionally gripping way while share practical experience. For the person telling their story, this leads to reflection, the strengthening of their own motivation and the appreciation of their own activities by others, which is also very important. Although they exists, in our opinion, there are comparatively few events or approaches which use this sort of strategy.

Skills in Collective Self-Organization

with Tom Novak from the Libertarian Days 2011 in Dresden

WHY THIS TOPIC?

This workshop was not a part of our series "Politically Active without Burning Out," but rather took place a few months later during the Libertarian Days 2011 in Dresden. One of us participated and reported back. We decided to document this event as well, since we thought the topic fit in well here. Collective structures are the basis of our political work. We expect a lot from these structures and from our cooperation. Because of this emancipatory groups have to put in a much more self-organizational effort than hierarchical ones. Besides the heightened potential for conflict that comes along with different political views and personal animosities, there is a further danger that doesn't always stand out as clearly: different skills and strategies with which we satisfy general needs. The needs of collective members don't always coincide and sometimes we aren't even sure ourselves what we would really like to do (in contrast to what we wish that some idealized version of ourselves would want to do).

ANNOUNCEMENT FOR THE EVENT

In this society, the skills we need for collective self-organization don't just fall into our laps, because our society isn't set up such that we acquire the skills in abundance growing up. For collective or plural self-organization, emotional, motivational, social and technical skills are all necessary. Without these basic skills individuals can hardly create a society in which exchange, money and domination are overcome. The social desire for a society organized on a voluntary basis depends on the belief that enough people will acquire the necessary skills.

To what extent do the demands placed on the individual grow with the size of the project? Is the thought of a society based on voluntarism rejected by most people because they feel overwhelmed by the challenges? What does the development of those people who want such a society look like? What are differences between the investigation and acquisition of skills in a neoliberal sense and in an emancipatory sense? How can skills be acquired under the current, difficult conditions?

ABOUT TOM NOVAK

Since writing his thesis on self-organization in collective structures, Tom has continued to grapple with this topic in depth and now often appears as a speaker. He lives in Stuttgart.

PLAN OF THE EVENT

The event took place on a Sunday afternoon in Dresden, from 12 to 4 pm, in RM 16.

1) Talk about "Skills in Collective Self-Organization"
2) Open discussion
3) Workshop about skills with an emphasis on emotional skills

CONTENTS AND COURSE OF THE EVENT

Talk

The event began with a talk which, because it was read aloud, was quite dense but also very interesting.

Here an attempted summary of the ideas:
By skills, we mean basically clusters of abilities with which one can come to terms with new situations. We live in a hierarchical, achievement-oriented, capitalist society and our skills are developed with its ends in mind. The skills, learned in and for a neoliberal world, have limited usefulness for collective self-organization among equals. So for emancipatory self-organization, it is necessary to acquire some different

skills than those for neoliberal organizations. This can be difficult inside of a capitalist structure, but nevertheless Tom thinks it is delusional to believe that these will come automatically with the revolution. Conversely, a revolution, or better transformation, without hierarchies can only take place if there are enough people who have the capacities for it.

Tom investigated four basic kinds of skills: technical, emotional (interaction between thoughts and feelings), social (interaction between personal needs and those of your environment) and motivational (under what condition do I like to work?). Often people only explicitly acquire skills from the first group, although it would be helpful with the other groups as well.
The insight that many of these abilities are not learned alone, but rather in dialogue seemed especially important to us. One difficulty in acquiring skills for self-organization is that many of them have to do with feelings and needs, which are socially conditioned. One way of dealing with this is "self-reflection on one's own development" and (with the support of an affinity group) the investigation of the reciprocal interactions between social structures and individuals and the potential reorientation of both these structures and oneself.

Tom's hypothesis is that as the belief that anyone can acquire the skills necessary for a nonhierarchical society grows, so does our capacity to imagine and the desire to have such a society. So it is crucial to create the conditions under which such skills can be learned.

According to Tom, the usual polemics in the leftist scene are a way of expressing criticism which separates people. He sees diagnosing others as being a dominant behavior. We could transition from accusing each other of incompetence to, one the one hand, self-disclosure and, on the other, asking each other about our feelings and needs.

The difficult things about relearning one's own patterns of behavior is the transitional phase of insecurity that normally sets in. This so-called 'space of confusion' doesn't necessarily leave us incapable of action, but brings with it a tentative slowness before we return to a less self-conscious, more natural state. Many shy away from this temporary loss of dearly loved security in their actions, even those who otherwise advocate for social emancipation.

The lesson Tom draws from this is taking basic skills into consideration has to mean more than merely expressing negative criticisms (which as we know often meet with defensiveness or are simply ignored). Positive ideas also must be brought into the discussion: new utopias, possible concrete forms of organization, ways of dealing with needs, decision-making processes, hierarchy-reducing forms of (re)production, distribution and management of collective goods. We have to find (or invent) and spread methods of handling and learning about emotional, social and motivational skills. This gap in our knowledge leaves more conservative people cold; they cannot imagine in the slightest how and with what skills we could possibly organize ourselves in without strict hierarchies to provide for our needs on a global scale. Trying to imagine how to start a satisfactory worldwide system of (re)production overwhelms many people. So they nip this seemingly unrealizable desire in the bud, imagining totalitarian or chaotic worst case scenarios, and give up their hopes for emancipation.

Discussion
After the talk, there was an extensive discussion, which we unfortunately did not document.

Workshop
The workshop section of the event began with an empty piece of paper, on which everyone was supposed to write what they thought helped and hindered effective collaboration in a collective. This was then read aloud. Certain problematic situations, of course, were mentioned repeatedly, sometimes in different terms. The second step, which we could not take because of time constraints, would have been to trace these points back to common needs.

The next part of the workshop was about the explicit acquisition of skills. We limited the conversation, which Tom supported with a short introduction to the methods of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). In the concrete practice section, we discussed conflicts in collectives and how to recognize the needs behind them. First, everyone was supposed to think of a concrete conflict which they had with an actual person. Then we tried, in an imaginary conversation, to bridge the gap between us and the other party of the conflict, using the techniques of active listening to resolve (or at least approach a resolution to) the conflict. We wrote down the questions that we would ask individually. One person volunteered to present their solution.

During the first part of the event, more than 10 people were present. Eight people stayed for the workshop. The reactions to the talk were mixed; some people had the impression that they couldn't really engage with content. The attendees were very understanding, however, and encouraged the speaker to try to speak more freely. Apart from that, most people were quite taken by the workshop, the information they learned (or heard again) and the trusting atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

One of the various best practices that we took away from the workshop was definitely engaging with yourself and your own interests or, more concretely, with your own preferences for working. These are, as Tom pointed out, difficult to determine, because they are often unconscious. Nevertheless, it's worthwhile to figure out what are actually good working conditions for us. These concern the immediate situation (like your sensitivities, the meaning of the work, the environment, etc.) but also, beyond this, the ways in which we collaborate.

One tip, which can make a big difference, was to develop a higher tolerance for ambivalence, that is, to accommodate a certain amount of like and dislike in a single situation. This means avoiding extreme reactions and trying not to make enemies out of people you don't like or disagree with.

As mentioned above, one inspiring ideas of Tom's was that "the more people believe in their own skills for realizing a nonhierarchical society and in the skills of others, the more prepared they are to commit themselves to a society without domination."

If this is true, then even the most amazing propaganda can effectively engage only those people who already have this confidence. Correspondingly, we would have to change the focus of our events to investigate how we can strengthen or inspire such confidence.

As is well known, one's own experiences are the best (and most lasting) tools for learning, so we conclude that letting people experience real collaboration (and not just philosophizing about or imagining a wonderful, free society) is a good opportunity to strengthen the foundations of a new form of living together.

Final Thoughts

So, that's it, our documentation of the series "Politically Active without Burning Out." It took us some serious time, staying power and desk work to get it finished. Now and then we were seized with doubt, whether it made sense to put time in to it, and whether anyone would read it and find it useful. But, again and again, people who had participated in the events or who couldn't make it would ask how far along we were with the documentation. That was encouraging! And hey, we're proud of our little group for really doing it. In the 'leftist scene' (ourselves included), we've often had the experience that things get planned, intended, announced or even promised, but never get done in the end. The gap between what was agreed on and what was realized seemed especially large after the summer camps.

Why did we hold out and put all this effort into documenting the series?

First of all, the documentation of the series was part of the idea from the beginning, because we thought that a series about best practices, in which best practices were to be shared and spread, would be half-hearted at best, if we weren't prepared to share and spread these ideas ourselves.

Second, people encouraged us to.

Third, we agreed at the very beginning that we would, and we keep our promises. Responsibility and commitment, from our point of view, are important for ways of relating to one another that are free of domination and based on solidarity. We think that the attitude 'I'll do whatever I feel like doing today' is compatible with one's own need for freedom, but not with a free and equal approach for everybody.

Fourth, we understand holding on to the insights from the series as a way of showing our appreciation for the contributions of all the speakers and participants who brought up these ideas. We heard back, for example, from the AkKus, that they were very pleased with the documentation, since they weren't sure how much came across in their workshop.

We think it's important in all (political) activities to know why you are investing your time. What are the motivations, what are the goals? This is particularly important with time-intensive and/or mundane, dull work. Our motivations for this documentation are as follows: We don't want to keep good ideas secret or lock away our treasured practices in some ivory tower. Instead, we want:
  · to spread and develop them
  · to share our skills and so
  · to improve all of our lives :-)

We weren't sure at first in what form the series should be documented. A concise reference work of best practices or something more detailed, since many of the methods and ideas only make sense in context? In the end, we decided for a generally more detailed document that gives a vivid impression of the events, enriched with individual best practices as bullet points, out of the belief that new insights and best practices might result from the description of the events themselves. It may be easier to imagine introducing methods into practice when they aren't given in purely technical descriptions. Whether this form will work for you, we don't know – feedback is welcome at: **kaputtnix@riseup.net**.

We hope that you are not disappointed by this documentation. Maybe you were hoping for some quick help for acute problems in your political groups and think now, after reading this, that you've heard a lot of it before, but putting it into practice is still hard, even desperately so. We think it's important not to place demands that are too great on pre-made best practices. They aren't a cure-all. We all have our own experiences and have to fit the best practices of others to our own needs and circumstances. For subjects like communication and conflict, there can hardly be some fast food style of transmitting best practices. Because what's necessary is a change of consciousness.

We developed the following best practices from our own experiences with this documentation:
· If you would like to document an event, write it up as soon as possible after the event takes place. Your memories are most vivid then. Not everything can be retained in notes; a few months later they can seem incomprehensible or irrelevant if your memory of the event is gone.
· If you want to write a documentation text, talk about the content in your group. On the one hand, it's generally very informative to think about the contents together and, on the other, the fact that seemly objective documentations are always subjective in the end (since they are the written perspective of one person) can be offset by other points of view. Another advantage of this practice is that, by fixing deadlines in the group, it is easier to push yourself to complete a text. Otherwise, texts often fall victim to procrastination. Better still is to prepare texts two or three days before the next group meeting so that everyone can read them. Reading texts for the first time at a meeting can take a lot of time that could be used more productively for discussing the contents.
· If producing the texts drags on too long, taking time and motivation from other projects, it can be helpful to find ways of getting it over with. You could spend a weekend together and work on it intensively or reflect on whether the desired level of perfection is really necessary. Ask how the writing could be sped up or be more fun to do.

What did we as a group get out of the series? What lessons did we take away? We got a lot of supportive, positive feedback and had a lot of interesting conversations. We were shown weak spots in our own ways of organizing and planning workshops and often supplied with possible solutions. We got to know a lot of people and made a lot contacts - people who want to network with other working political activists.

One topic that we thought was missing was Critical Whiteness. This means asking questions like: why is the leftist scene dominated by 'white' people, what does it mean to be 'white,' what privileges do we have and to what extent are we aware of them? We would like to that up these issues as a group next year and - who knows - possibly organize a second round of "Politically Active without Burning Out" in which this topic would be contained. Another topic that was touched on but could have been examined in greater detail was dealing with disappointment. Many people have big dreams, wishes and hopes when they think about and fight for a nonhierarchical society. But such developments often don't come as quickly as we might hope. Could this be the most important reason why many people eventually leave the leftist scene, disappointed? How can we prevent this? Big dreams are great, but not when they make us so frustrated we give up.

What were the highlights of the series for us?
· The most important thing is having dealt with issues oneself and as a group, and to keep doing so.
· Consciousness is more important than techniques. Techniques without consciousness won't be understood. But techniques can help us to gain consciousness.
· It's important to make structures in which consciousness can be developed (for example, reflection rounds).
· It's important to engage with yourself, to take time to think about your own ways of dealing with stress and conflict. (This applies to groups as much as to individuals.)
· When you can tell that a certain activity is going to overwhelm you, say "Stop" clearly to your group, and either get other people to help or give up the task (at least for the time being) entirely
· If people are disrupting an event, it's good when everyone takes responsibility together and finds a way of dealing with it, instead of putting all the responsibility on the facilitator or organizers. Depending on the situation, this can mean calling out disruptive behavior directly, ignoring comments or temporarily separating someone from the group. It's important to stick together, because if enough people don't speak up, the disturbance will likely go unchecked. And for everyone, individually: don't feed the trolls.
· It's helpful and encouraging to make yourself aware of your own history and the reasons for political action that have come out of it and to share these with others.
· We ask for outside help all too rarely (whether with organization, content or mediation), although mutual aid is a common goal in the Left.
· Different people have different life plans, different approaches, possibilities and focuses. We should bear this in mind and respect them, instead of evaluating (hierarchically) which is better or more revolutionary or something.
· The slogan 'each according to their possibilities' shouldn't be taken in a utopian sense; it should be applied to political practice here and now.

· Watch out for each other. Allow for, appreciate and mutually support emotions, instead of reducing activists solely to their function (in service of the revolution).
· We develop trust in a nonhierarchical society by acquiring skills in self-organization. And we learn these best through practical collective experience.

While working on the documentation, we rediscovered another best practice to suggest for the toolbox of any federation: chats between political groups. For example, at one meeting we had a question that we thought people from another group could answer. One person from the group was logged on to jabber (an instant messaging service) and responded to our questions in real time. We also know of other groups federated in the Federation for German-speaking Anarchists (FdA) who use instant messaging to coordinate on short notice.

And now? What will we do with all the best practices we've collected? Will someone read them? Or even implement them? Reading a collection of best practices can be exhausting. It can be boring, because you've know a lot of it already, or frustrating, because you know how great it would be if you could use them, but it's just doesn't work that way in practice. Confronting such a large number of suggestions can be so overwhelming that they don't end up being used. And taking advice can be painful. But we think it doesn't make much sense to pressure yourself to use all of these best practices. A more promising approach might be to take one every month and try it out, either alone or better yet in a group. After a month, you can see if it has really earned its name: whether it still feels alien and disturbs your process, or if it has integrated itself into your way of doing things - or even helped. What would you think of a monthly newsletter which explained one best practice each issue with encouragement to try it out in the coming month? Is there a group that would be interested in putting one out?

One more best practice: we think that one technique that is given short shrift in leftist circles and whose lack can contribute to burnout is thanking each other. Saying thanks can seem strange to an emancipatory way of thinking. After all, we don't (or don't want to) have bosses, employers, hierarchical relations or subordination. We make the claim of doing what we do of our own free will and desire. So why say thank you? In truth, we've noticed that we always feel a bit strange when we thank someone for their contribution to a project. Aren't we placing ourselves above them somehow? What gives us the right to bestow our thanks upon them? Aren't we all equals? Nevertheless, this strange feeling only stood out to us in collaborations where there was a strong imbalance among individual contributions, and so the acknowledgement, if not further reflected on by the group, could be misunderstood. Perhaps, in cases where misunderstanding is a risk (groups which aren't used to working together, emotional topics), it is better to say explicitly what you want to express with 'thanks': "It was fun to work with you today. I like the way that we watch out for each other." "I like your text. I think it will really speak to some people." "I'm relieved that you took this over. I was really stressing about having to do it." Does that sound weird? It might still be better that being worn down by political work that goes unrecognized.

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· each other for the great team work

So, that's all from us. **Be careful, don't burn out.**

Your Organizing Group

THE GAME IS ON.