

IS THIS THE JUST SOCIETY WE WANT TO MODEL?

A MODEL FOR JUSTICE?

COLLECTIVES WHO CHOOSE to base their organizational structure on equality, direct democracy, and/or consensus usually do so, at least in part, to model the just society we would like to see in the world at large. Social change involves not only campaigning for radical reform in the broader society but also being, or embodying, the better world we hope to bring about through activism. This fundamental belief can and should be used by egalitarian collectives to inform the decisions and actions they take, especially when it comes to how group members treat one another.

It doesn't make any sense for an activist organization to be fighting for justice and social equality while at the same time allowing back-stabbing, nasty rumors, and manipulative power plays to dominate or influence the internal interactions of the group. Yet, this happens all the time. At times it's intentional: one or a few members control the group by creating feuds and distrust; the persons or positions they favor prevail while those they wish to eliminate are made to seem suspect and fall by the wayside. Other times injustice is the result of bungling ineptitude or lack of clarity or knowledge about how egalitarian systems can be expected to work.

Often, an organization insists on using consensus, which in many activist scenes is treated as the only acceptable form of decision making for any group that wants to call itself radical—to the point of

faddishness—without any real understanding of how consensus functions and what it can and cannot accomplish. People may expect that cooperation and mutual understanding will automatically flow out of the consensus process. As a result, the group creates no guidelines for dealing with friction or other interpersonal difficulties. They may even feel that rules are antithetical to personal autonomy. Autonomy is itself interpreted as being synonymous with selfishness, therefore selfishness is considered well and good.

When the inevitable conflicts crop up, the radical egalitarian collective often does not even have in place the conventional forms of fair dealing that are built into mainstream society, such as the judicial process. Instead, in handling (real or perceived) offenders, collective members tend to skip right over any notions of due process, since they don't think an egalitarian group should have any need for all that bureaucratic baggage, and proceed straight to the basest of human instincts: name-calling, spreading or repeating baseless allegations, lying to cover up one's own bad behavior, and—everyone's favorite—banning, usually perpetrated out of hand and in anger, without anyone looking into any of the alleged facts nor allowing the accused to offer any defense.

We need to ask ourselves: is this the just society that we want to model? Wholesale expulsion from an activist group is painful enough, but when that happens one can still go on with the rest of one's life. What if the group in question were the community where one lives, works and has familial ties? Would we want to be a part of a world where a person can be expelled from his community because others find him annoying or inconvenient,

or because he loses his temper, and where people can malign, slander, and judge him without even his having a fundamental right to a forum where he can speak up for himself?

Many of us rightly condemn the injustices of the societies in which we live, but then we fail to turn that same scrutiny and skepticism onto our own activist organizations and anti-authoritarian collectives. Do we accord one another at least the rights that are written into the United States' system of justice? (The authors live in the U.S.) Or are we even more authoritarian and less just than mainstream institutions whenever we condone the wholesale condemnation of people and behaviors we may not even know firsthand, and when we fail to establish fair procedures to air grievances and resolve conflicts?

THE DEARTH OF DUE PROCESS

Due Process of law implies the right of the person affected thereby to be present before the tribunal which pronounces judgment upon the question of life, liberty, or property, in its most comprehensive sense; to be heard, by testimony or otherwise, and to have the right of controverting, by proof, every material fact which bears on the question of right in the matter involved. If any question of fact or liability be conclusively presumed against him, this is not due process of law.

—*Black's Law Dictionary*, 6th Edition, page 500

IN OTHER CHAPTERS, we discussed some of the aspects of collective process that pertain to fair decision making within egalitarian groups. However, these different issues might have varying degrees of importance in

relation to the broader notion of how a fair and democratic society should function. And in that sense, due process is essential.

Among the definitions of due process, the item above, from *Black's Law Dictionary*, will suffice as well as any. The basic concept of due process is that no one should be assumed to have committed any violation without having a fair hearing in front of people who can judge her impartially according to reasonable objective standards and without prejudice. Essential to the fairness of such a hearing is the idea that anyone accused has the right to face her accusers and defend herself (or have an expert defend her, if the complexity of the laws or process require it). Stated simply, everyone is innocent until proven guilty by just and fair means.

This idea is very well established in mainstream culture and society. In fact, it has been established in all concepts of modern democracy ever since modern democracy developed, during the Middle Ages. It can be traced back to English common law and the Magna Carta. This is why a basic text such as *Black's Law Dictionary* (a very mainstream text found in any stuffy law firm) contains such a good, concise and fair definition of the term. It is also why there are significant references to due process in two Amendments to the U.S. Constitution (Fifth and Fourteenth). While the legal systems and agents of the State may do things to undermine due process, and the police and courts sometimes blatantly violate it, the concept itself is considered legitimate in all corners of legal argument. It is not, by any means, radical or utopian.

Unfortunately, once we look at the conduct of many egalitarian collectives, due process does begin

to look like a radical idea. This is a disturbing irony. Egalitarian collectives are supposed to build upon the basic concepts of democracy and strive to make things more democratic. The people within these collectives are supposed to view the basic standards of fairness in conventional society as being relatively minimal compared to those of the society that we all want to build. And yet, sadly, as we examine the process (or lack thereof) among many of our egalitarian comrades, such standards often seem to comprise a maximal, nearly unattainable goal.

In a number of cases, we have witnessed the following sort of process take place after someone has been accused:

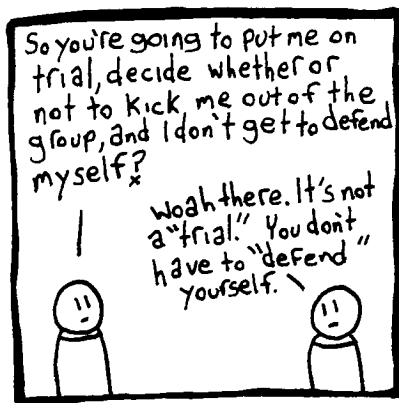
The accused may be told about problems that people are having with something he did, but specifics are rarely mentioned, and a fair hearing is never suggested. Bad words and rumors are accumulated against the accused, often in forums that he cannot access, such as hidden meetings or special e-mail lists. A closed-door meeting takes place in which it is decided that the accused has caused certain problems or committed certain violations or crimes. Evidence is said to have been produced, but the accused never knows what that evidence, exactly, was. A judgment is made in the accused's absence, and the poor accused individual becomes the last person to know about the conviction and the sentence (which usually involves some deprivation of liberty—such as ending that person's participation in a given group). In sum, there is no fair hearing, no right of self-defense by the accused against the accusers, and no adequate revelation of the charges or reasons provided for the penalties. Some sort of trial takes place in which everything is wrong.

We would be outraged if this happened even within a single collective, but we have found that this awful mockery of justice occurs dismayingly often.

There may be a number of reasons why collectives are experiencing this dearth of due process. The most common may be that people who call themselves “anarchists” or “anti-authoritarians” are used to rebelling against rules, and many will use their opposition to authority as an excuse to reject any and all rules at their convenience.

A lot of people might get this idea about “anarchism” from rebellious subcultures that have a very individualistic and possibly nihilistic focus. For instance, in the past few decades (and then some), many people in radical groups spent some formative time in the punk rock movement(s). Certainly, punk has been a positive influence sometimes: it has fostered egalitarian attitudes, starting with the democratization of performance (i.e., by encouraging the idea that anyone in the crowd can become one of the artists and rejecting the passive star worship that has often characterized mainstream rock). There is nothing wrong

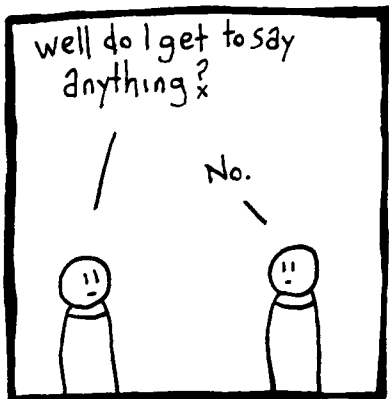
with coming into a collective with that kind of attitude; it is very appropriate. On the other hand, a collective will probably not be helped by those people (punks and lots of others) who think that freedom simply means rejecting all ideas as well as all rules.



A true authoritarian might benefit greatly from some rebels' instinct to reject all rules, since that also means rejecting rules that have been developed to check the power of authoritarians. And that category definitely includes the rules of due process.

Contrary to the sloppy thinking that is all too common, there is no situation in which someone has been accused of something serious (i.e., a deed that might warrant limitation of freedoms or exclusion entirely) that can be addressed fairly while ignoring due process. Moreover, due process is not, contrary to what some might think, merely a way that a society deals with the commission of crimes. One of the main reasons for due process is that we often don't even know, until there has been a fair and impartial proceeding, whether a crime or transgression has been committed. Even more often, even when we know that someone has done something that upset people, we can't be sure about the nature, degree, or seriousness of her actions—at least not until they can be investigated in a fair and impartial way.

Without due process, not only do we risk the unfair treatment of known criminals and a poorly planned way of dealing with crime; we also run the risk that crimes might be completely invented and people might be turned into criminals for reasons



that have nothing to do with anything that actually happened. Without due process, anybody runs the risk of being made a criminal by individuals or cliques who hold power, who feel in any way challenged or threatened by the accused. Without due process, even people who do not have any power or influence might easily vilify someone who is innocent if they can figure out how to influence or manipulate a powerful individual or clique. Due process, followed correctly, is the specific mechanism through which innocent dissenters and iconoclasts can often make sure that they are not instantly, unjustly turned into villains or pariahs.

Sometimes, people feel that due process should be altered or circumvented when the person(s) making the accusations belong to a traditionally oppressed group. This is a problematic concept that is actually supported by many people on the left. For instance, an accusation of racism or sexism stemming from an argument might be acted upon without adequate investigation of the contents of the disagreement or the intentions of the accused. Intentions are sometimes simply assumed, without anyone asking for proof. Often, out of some eagerness to pursue an "anti-oppressive" policy, an egalitarian collective will approach an accusation with strong prejudice against the accused. At best, the burden of proof then falls upon the accused (i.e., he is guilty until proven innocent). At worst, there is no proof even requested: the accusation itself is considered sufficient.

Take another look at the last sentence of the excellent definition of due process above: "If any question of fact or liability be conclusively presumed against him, this is not due process of law." In the world of left-leaning or

egalitarian groups and collectives, where people might have particularly strong desires to right certain wrongs found within our society, that is a thought well worth keeping in mind. Prejudice in judgment is unacceptable regardless of the gender, race, ethnic identity, or any personal characteristic of the accuser or the accused.

The presumption of guilt, in general, is an even more common problem than the blatant violation of due process that we described earlier. As we discussed in "Creating Pariahs," there are numerous ways that accusers and their allies can spread ill opinion long before a supposedly fair and just trial takes place. It is a frequent tactic of vilifiers to spread the bad word in forums to which the accused does not have access. As we have said before, when this tactic is used in advance of any trial, then the trial might as well not happen.

In standard legal practice here in the U.S., the accused theoretically has the right to change the place of trial when the immediate surroundings have already been poisoned with news or publicity that create prejudice. True, this usually happens when the accused is wealthy or famous or is being accused of an infamous crime, but this is a right that seems to be universally recognized, at least in principle. Unfortunately, within many egalitarian collectives, such a right seems not to be known at all. Thus, in circles within which someone has been totally vilified, and people have discussed and built up rumors to which the accused might not even have had access, the local "fair trial" is pursued anyway, as though it still could be fair.

This kind of situation is unacceptable in a collective committed to egalitarianism and fairness. When local rumors and accusations spread like wildfire, it is important to

move the trial beyond the places where the fire has spread. That is why the local group from which a case originated is usually the last place where that case should be tried. If there is another place within the larger organization where a controversial or much-talked-about case might be moved, then it should be moved as soon as possible. If there is no group outside of the small local group involved, then maybe outside mediators should be called in.

There may be many more examples of the violation of due process within collectives. Nonetheless, we recommend that collectives address the most obvious and immediate problems, at least as a start. Egalitarian collectives owe it to themselves and others to pursue important principles such as due process in more advanced ways than conventional society, rather than acting as though they are ignorant of the conventions of justice that most people already recognize.

Admittedly, due process isn't in such great shape in mainstream society either. In the age of the PATRIOT Act, secret military tribunals, and the "War on Terror," the conventional rights that everyone knows about have been repeatedly trampled on or ignored. Many egalitarian groups, among other factions (both left and right), are fighting the good fight to protect people's civil liberties. However, groups may lose credibility if they don't protect the civil liberties within their own situations as well.

It is also important for people within egalitarian collectives to know what they're fighting for. By addressing the dearth of due process in their own circles and communities, these activists may also become more skilled and articulate in advocating for the new world that they

would like to create. If they lose track of the basic principles of due process at the same time that due process is being stifled in the mainstream community, then the outcome might not be so good. The dearth of due process within our collectives might simply contribute to the death of due process everywhere.

WHAT ABOUT FREE SPEECH?

EVERYONE WHO SEEKS a more democratic society would naturally agree that freedom of speech is essential. Moreover, no egalitarian collective would ever claim to oppose freedom of speech. Yet, in practice, not all collectives (nor lefty groups in general) support free speech, whether it means allowing free speech in debate or on e-mail lists, or allowing other groups the same freedom to express themselves and demonstrate their own beliefs freely.

Regarding Free Speech at Meetings

In order to allow freedom of speech at meetings, groups need to create an atmosphere in which all the participants feel maximally comfortable about expressing themselves. If any people feel at any time that their ways of self-expression, their choice of words, or their tone or approach simply can't meet a group's particular standards, then they certainly will not have a chance to enjoy the true freedom to speak or participate.

This is true whenever the homogeneity of a group might be seen by an interested observer as intimidating or unwelcoming. Many of us are aware that more effort should be made in activist circles to include diverse viewpoints, yet we overlook some simple steps we could take to be more inclusive and approachable, such as easing up on demanding

that people adhere to the most stringently correct jargon. Whenever we raise a collective eyebrow at someone who says “reform” instead of “shut down” or “vote” instead of “reach consensus,” we are stifling dialogue.

Now, of course, there are limits in terms of propriety. It is understood that people shouldn't be espousing views that are way off the mark in terms of the focus of the collective—e.g., in most collectives, it would not be appropriate to launch into a completely right-wing kind of agenda. However, this problem occurs extremely rarely, and when it does occur, the instigator is usually simply ignored. More often, at a meeting, people whose opinions are perfectly relevant will feel overly inhibited or cautious regarding how they express those opinions. Too often, for example, members of a collective feel pressured to watch every word they speak for fear that they might unknowingly and unintentionally reveal some connotations of racism or sexism. Unfortunately, this strict kind of political correctness often helps to ensure that the group's true reach remains limited to an extremely narrow range of people, i.e., those who are well-trained regarding what terms, phrases, or methods of speaking are politically fashionable and acceptable.

We are not saying that people should be encouraged to babble sexist or racist slurs—and if they do, certainly other members of a group have the right to protest freely. Yet, self-conscious political correctness within these groups has sometimes gotten extreme enough that some participants—especially among those who are not part of an acknowledged oppressed identity group—are double-checking every word they say. We think it's a shame that people feel a need to be this self-conscious.

At the same time, the patterns that have allowed the bossy and outspoken to dominate agendas persist. Each of us carries his or her own baggage into group discussions culled from a lifetime of experience: the sense of entitlement that is wrought by a privileged upbringing; the self-congratulation that comes from years of praise and approbation; the sense of hopelessness that can come about from experiencing bad jobs and poverty; the self-doubt brought about by years of having been dismissed or criticized. Group members' feelings of either inadequacy or grandeur are not erased by an insistence on proper terminology.

It would be a shame if a large number of people in our community even occasionally resisted expressing their opinions simply because they felt that their comments might seem politically incorrect due to the race, gender, or ethnicity of the people involved in the debate. Likewise, those who aren't versed in the rhetoric of activism should not be made to feel that if they speak up they will be chastised on their choice of words. It is bad enough to feel overcautious about the content of one's arguments, but it is simply stifling to know that such content will also be heavily judged according to context. That situation would certainly not be conducive to free speech; in fact, it might result in an atmosphere that diminishes free expression for everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender.

Regarding Free Speech on the Internet

Within the radical activist community, there has lately been a frenzy to establish strict guidelines for e-mail lists, internet forums, and public comments on articles and blog

postings, and to purge people whose comments on those venues are considered provocative or upsetting. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, as e-mail used to be a very free medium, back in the earlier days of the Internet.

Too often, we have seen e-mail lists, internet forums, and other interactive websites flooded with ideas about strict protocol to limit the things that are said. Very often, there are rules against “flaming,” meaning that no one should say something that might be interpreted as a direct insult or attack on another person. While it is understandable that we don’t want people to be scared away from lists and discussions by nasty or vicious infighting, we also think that honest conflict is essential to open debate. Moreover, it always becomes quite apparent that anti-flaming rules, by nature, are extremely subjective, and that the decision to ban or restrict list participation is usually made single-handedly by the website administrator or the supporting clique in power.

As with all the kinds of purges that we discussed in “Creating Pariahs,” the people who are usually kicked off e-mail lists or interactive websites present no threat to the group and hold no power. They are often banned or restricted because people who do have power consider them to be annoying and/or disruptive. Yet the people who are kicked off these venues are rarely the true disrupters. While we often hear about how e-mail lists and activist websites need to guard against provocateurs and saboteurs, the people who deliberately provoke to undermine a group’s politics are usually sufficiently shouted down and leave soon enough anyway.

Often, there are urgent pleas to silence or ban disruptive posters on the grounds that the group’s work needs

to be protected and given priority. Yet the work could very well continue unimpeded if people were willing simply to disregard postings they found offensive or personally disruptive instead of engaging and encouraging them. We have found that after an annoying subscriber is removed from an e-mail list, the traffic on that list often ceases, since there is no longer any provocation to get heated about. We believe that someone should be banned from a list, forum, or website only as an absolute last resort. (Perhaps only if the volume of mail or comments submitted by that one person is untenable—say, dozens of e-mails or comments every day....)

Meanwhile, we can't help noticing that those who do have power and influence with groups are rarely watched or criticized for any of their own aggressive Internet behavior, even as they drive to get others silenced or expelled. In other words, the people who are most eager to silence others are often simply the kind who can dish it out but can't take it. If too many such people are allowed to have their way, then the freedom that was once so prevalent in internet discussions will probably be lost forever.

Regarding Free Speech for Others

Just as we need to allow maximal freedom of speech within our own circles, we need to extend this principle outside of our circles, even if it means allowing the expression of views that horrify or disgust us. Otherwise, we will not truly be sticking to our own principles, we will lose moral credibility, and we might even leave ourselves open to charges of hypocrisy.

Ironically, some of the people on the left who make the most noise about not being allowed to speak or assemble

freely are the same ones who might violently try to stop ideological opponents from exercising those freedoms.

Regarding Free Speech in Publications

Publications—such as newspapers and magazines—are a more complicated issue, because of limited space and editorial prerogative. Clearly, a publication devoted to a certain kind of viewpoint has a right to reject articles that are completely inappropriate, especially when space is limited. Nonetheless, a publication should at least stick to its own professed values. If a publication professes openness to a wide range of left-radical or anarchist viewpoints, then it shouldn't suddenly turn around and suppress some viewpoints for fear that they might be too controversial. If a publication has a letters or feedback section that is supposed to be open, then the editors shouldn't be cautiously screening those who disagree with them.

Freedom of speech becomes a bigger issue at a publication when the editors follow inconsistent or sloppy process. A publication that is supposed to be run or edited by a collective should stick to this principle. Unfortunately, some publications that claim to be run collectively really do have an editorial hierarchy with some chief editor to whom almost everyone defers, and that chief editor often is the ultimate judge of content. When that sort of hierarchy occurs, there is more danger that collective members may find their viewpoints suppressed.

One important guideline to keep in mind with regard to all editorial work is whether the editing done is actually necessary and/or helps to make the writing

stronger, or whether the piece is chopped up more arbitrarily, for reasons having little to do with the strength of the writing. If the piece is edited in such a way as to cut out certain opinions being expressed, then we might begin to ask questions regarding freedom of expression. If the writer of the piece consistently finds that her articles are being chopped up more severely than others' even though the quality of her original writing might be at least as good as anyone else's (or perhaps even better), then it becomes clear that she is being subject to some arbitrary standards: are some editors who have more influence and power suppressing her writing because of their general opinions regarding her or her viewpoints? That sort of question certainly will raise issues regarding freedom of speech.

In General

We admit that freedom of speech or expression is not always a one hundred percent clear issue, especially when it must be weighed against seemingly contradictory principles such as editorial prerogative or the right of any given group or individual not to be treated disrespectfully. Nonetheless, in most cases, the choices are quite clear. Distasteful speech needs to be addressed with dialogue and engagement, in the spirit of increasing awareness and understanding on both sides. There are many ways in which groups that theoretically support freedom of speech need to be more careful about following their own stated principles. Almost always, if this kind of question even arises, it is best to err on the side of maximal freedom.

CRUELTY

IN A GROUP that is committed to equality and justice, the way that we choose to treat each other is vitally connected to what we hope to accomplish as activists. If we hope to bring about a fairer, more compassionate world, we have to start with our most basic interactions. The fact that deliberate cruelty does not lead to greater justice should be too obvious to mention. Yet in collectives it's very often considered normal, not even worthy of a mention or of a raised eyebrow. It's common practice to torment someone mercilessly until he flees the collective—or even the entire local activist scene—because he is so afraid of encountering further abuse. We've rarely heard anyone speak up to say that it's morally repugnant or to try to stop it in any way.

When people start to condone and accept cruelty as though it were simply business-as-usual, that can become a way of life. Such an approach will only promote social injustice and a more vicious, less tolerant world. Therefore, we must vigorously oppose cruelty whenever we find it within our own midst.

Too often, our activist collectives display the same kind of behavior that we saw as children in school playgrounds, where an individual was singled out for no other reason than that she was an easy mark. We can't help recalling such bad memories when a member of a collective is gleefully subjected to a campaign of abuse. Are we so conditioned by our upbringing in a society that forces us to conform to authority that whenever the mantle of established authority is removed (as it is in an egalitarian collective and in a playground), we can think of nothing better to do than prey on each other with

cruel name-calling and senseless attacks? A frequent consequence of new-found freedom is to immediately establish and follow new hierarchies based on who is more popular or stronger, or the best at manipulation, versus who is unpopular, out of the group's mainstream, the easy target, etc. It's just like *Lord of the Flies*...

Individuals who believe they have been mistreated by their fellow group members feel genuine pain. Sometimes it can even have a profound effect on their lives. It is not possible or appropriate, in our view, to explain away somebody's pain by pointing to the group's positive work or invoking regulations that the pariah in question may or may not have properly followed. Do you honestly believe that anyone deserves to have cruelty visited upon her? Even if she's a pain in the ass, if she's impossible to deal with—even if she herself is cruel—that is no reason to taunt, torment, bully, slander with vicious lies, etc. As activists, we hope to create a world in which difficulties can be addressed and every attempt is made to resolve them, not one where suppression, intimidation, and violence (psychological or physical) are resorted to if the group's majority or most vocal members do not get their way.

It is not possible, in our view, for a person who feels pushed out or abused to simply be mistaken in perceiving a sustained campaign of attacks and vilification by the group (or a faction of the group). Even if an ugly situation can be explained away as a misunderstanding, it isn't possible for the victim to have misunderstood his own pain. The hurt that is expressed over and over in situation after situation is undoubtedly real, and it should not be dismissed, regardless of whether or not

the person experiencing it was originally (or continues to be) at fault.

Regardless of the merits or faults present in each situation, it's not okay for us to inflict emotional pain on one another. That should be a basic tenet.

A commitment to compassion and justice and against cruelty (yes, that's what it is) needs to be overtly stated as the basis for how an egalitarian group operates.

We only need to look at the current political situation to see the wages of indifference and casual acceptance of cruelty. Once we have relinquished our moral compass, we can condone both small and huge moral insults with logical arguments and pragmatism. In the early years of the current war, where was the outrage of the American public at the deaths and injuries of Iraqi civilians? Even for those who believed the war to be politically justified, how could ecstatic cheering be the overwhelming reaction to death, suffering and destruction on a massive scale? Wouldn't the more human reaction be sober regretfulness that sometimes harm is done in order to achieve a purportedly worthwhile objective?

The purpose of activism, fundamentally, is to create a better world, one where there is greater justice, equality, and harmony and less pain and hardship. It is not to put forward a particular agenda. When we overlook this basic truth and allow ourselves to act with deliberate cruelty toward people in our own collectives, then go on to justify our actions by saying that we vilified or attacked our comrades because they were interfering with important political organizing, we have twisted our motives into an indefensible moral pretzel.

THE COLLECTIVE IS NOT ALWAYS MORE CORRECT THAN THE INDIVIDUAL

ONE MISTAKE OFTEN made by people who want to strive for a more equal society is to assume that the collective can always be trusted above the individual. Unfortunately, in many radical-left circles, if we talk too much about individual rights and even suggest that an individual's opinions and observations might be closer to the truth than the votes or consensus of the collective, we might be accused of pushing "individualism," which supposedly is a bad trait typical of "bourgeois" society, not to be tolerated in egalitarian circles. Yet, this kind of mentality, at least when taken to the extreme, enabled a lot of really nasty totalitarian societies to exist in the past century, and the history of those societies basically proves the point that individuals (who were suppressed) can often be more correct than the group.

If we are really striving for a fair and egalitarian society, then we need to give utmost importance to the rights and liberties of the individual. This does not mean promoting the kind of "individualism" that dictates that each person must look out for her/himself and that collective decision making and concern for the community are a hindrance to true liberty. What it does mean is that each of us is unique and must be considered, judged, and observed according to our own unique combination of circumstances. This means that our behaviors are far more complex than might be assumed by the knee-jerk sort of ideologue who would say, for instance, that any of us enjoys certain privileges above others for belonging to one particular group based on race, gender, or ethnic origins. It also means that nobody's behavior should

be judged by a formulaic checklist, so that in any given situation, one person must be assumed to have certain politically undesirable characteristics based on a particular incident when we don't know the backgrounds, tendencies, or histories of the individuals involved. (So, for example, a man who shouts at a woman or says something vaguely disrespectful to her is automatically assumed to be "sexist" when a closer examination of the histories of the individuals involved might reveal a dynamic that is far more complex, with more equal hostilities, etc., than anyone realized.) When we fail to recognize the potential uniqueness and complexity of the individual, then we are failing to create a situation in which each individual might enjoy a maximum amount of freedom and liberty.

Sometimes, moreover, the individual can be very badly misunderstood by a group which has made assumptions or followed presumptions that might not really apply to the person involved. In judging individuals, groups can make terrible mistakes, sometimes based on unexamined bias and prejudice. This is illustrated not only by the countless collectivist mistakes made throughout history, but also by the many smaller examples of collective injustice and manipulation that we have already discussed in this book. When a group is manipulated, becomes misguided, or simply fails to be vigilant about judging everyone fairly and equally, it can become more wrong than any single member.

The individual also might have a particular outlook or opinion in a given situation that ultimately proves to be wiser or more accurate than the outlook of the group. This is why it really is necessary to listen to the opinions of individuals within the group who may not be going so

well with the collective flow. Dissenting opinions sometimes can change the mind of the entire group, once the group considers the dissenting opinion fairly, allowing each person within that group to weigh the merits of each (differing) point of view.

In examining other literature dealing with problems within collectives, we have seen quite a few articles talking about how to deal with the difficult person who won't go along with the group, the ornery person, the malcontent whose behavior or opinions seem to disrupt the group's smooth functioning. The issue is thus usually depicted as finding a good way for the group to collectively deal with a problem member. Unfortunately, this is only one way of looking at things.

A truly democratic and egalitarian collective can't always assume that the only problem to be considered in group-versus-individual conflicts is protecting the integrity of the group against the disruptive individual. Sometimes, the problem involves protecting the individual against the group.

MAKING IT WORK

FOR NEWCOMERS

IN MAINSTREAM SOCIETY, we usually have to wait for someone to give us permission or acknowledge our worth before we can contribute our skills and ideas to a project. Anyone who has been grilled and scrutinized at a job interview knows that first hand. An egalitarian collective, by definition, presupposes that we each have something to offer and that everyone's contribution is valuable.

A newcomer won't necessarily feel instantly at ease (collectives have a tendency to have their own internal culture that has developed over time), but most collectives are very happy to see new members who want to offer their help. One of the most rewarding aspects of working in a collective is the sense of community. Very often (uhm, notwithstanding what you've read here...) collectives have an easy, relaxed camaraderie. The fundamental egalitarian belief that everyone has a place in the world means that egalitarian groups will accept a new face easily, as matter of course, without prejudging anyone and without applying some predetermined assessment of fitness. It's then up to the individual to live up to that initial trust through her actions.

It may take a little time to figure out the unspoken rules, the climate, and the general expectations of the collective. Some collectives may be strict about following protocols that will be unfamiliar at first, or that might even seem obtuse, while others may have little patience for process sticklers and may function much

more organically. Some groups will welcome initiative, while others may frown when someone takes on tasks or initiates projects without following some particular procedure. A good first step might be simply to ask what help is needed.

This book outlines some of the difficulties that can crop up in collectives. A newbie probably won't be in a position to directly address possible squabbles or power plays, even if she can perhaps see them most clearly as an outsider. We don't recommend sticking one's neck out to tackle difficult issues right off the bat—or ever, if the major players in the collective have developed entrenched positions of unacknowledged power; otherwise, the poor hapless newcomer may find herself unhappily referring to the chapter on creating pariahs and painfully recognizing herself in its pages. But anyone can help ensure the health of the group by refraining from jumping to conclusions or giving credence to baseless rumors, and by being the level head who is willing to listen to all sides.

If you have a genuine desire to be helpful and productive, you will almost always be appreciated. Collectives are often strapped for time, resources, and people, so anyone willing to contribute will likely find that it's not difficult to become an integral part of the group.

FOR OLD-SCHOOLERS

IN MANY CASES, people who are old hands at collectives have developed a particular style that works for them. But collectives tend to be in constant flux, and old habits may need reexamining from time to time. Within a given group, there's usually a core of volunteers or workers who have taken on the lion's share of the group's daily functions.

That can be a comfortable arrangement, but a truly egalitarian collective makes room for newer members. In other words, new members should be kept adequately informed and be allowed to participate in discussions, contribute ideas, and ask questions. They might be in the best position to see old, unproductive habits for what they are. And as they contribute their own fresh knowledge and style, the collective will grow organically.

It's not unusual for small collectives, or their core membership, to become cliquish. It might be fun sometimes to tell old stories (and stories at the expense of past members are especially fun...), but that sort of behavior can turn newer members off. When influential or longstanding members display a particular style—such as a predilection for sarcasm—or make frequent references to inside jokes that only the core of the membership can share in, this can become ingrained as the culture of the collective. Newcomers can feel lost or intimidated. They might sense that they are unwelcome, or, at the very least, that they had better get with the program if they have any hope of fitting in. This creates a sort of closed loop: an exclusionary culture is cemented into place, even though nobody intended or wished for such a thing to happen.

A collective should look somewhat outward, rather than getting stuck in its own little world (or little history). It may be easier to fall back on familiar patterns than it is to try new things, but that can be a recipe for stagnation. Even worse, if the collective is not willing to admit past mistakes, it could continue on a negative path, alienating or dividing its members.

Longstanding members are usually in the best position to address problems when they crop up. This is especially

true if they have gained respect for their many contributions. But they also have a particular responsibility to remain vigilant about negative dynamics, offering their considered judgment and listening to all sides carefully. It can be harder to keep a level head when one is deep on the inside of a conflict, but that involvement should not result in bias. Personal loyalties must not take second place to the principle of fairness towards all.

Experienced members are also in the best position to create a legacy. The collective must be able to thrive as its membership changes. If the experienced members share their skills and knowledge, that collective will be able to continue even after a highly valued member leaves. A collective can't remain healthy in the long term if it depends too much on the contributions of any one person.

RELINQUISHING CONTROL

THE EGALITARIAN GROUP affords its members little opportunity to control other members or the group itself. Because there are no leaders, no one is in a position to force another person to act or refrain from acting in a given situation; only the collective as a whole can intervene, and then it should be only to limit unprincipled behavior. Since the entire collective has to become involved in order to restrict someone's autonomy, such a measure should be undertaken only if the behavior in question is extreme. (We have seen many instances in which small gaffes are trumped up into serious charges as a way of exercising control, but that's another topic, discussed elsewhere.) In any collective, we are likely to encounter some people who have annoying quirks, others who are chatterboxes, and others who just don't

think before proposing stupid ideas. But these are not the egregious kinds of behaviors that require official control. Galling as they might seem at times, they must be allowed to exist. (The corollary to this is that group members have a responsibility not to make themselves a nuisance to others.)

When a collective member tries to force a desired outcome according to her personal wishes, she is basically violating the principles of maximum autonomy and free choice. This tendency will almost always lead to arguments and ruffled feelings. (Note, however, that someone making a principled objection can sometimes be accused of expressing a personal peeve, since that is a standard way to discredit an opponent in a debate.) A truly egalitarian collective will likely not be smooth or harmonious—though it may be loving and collegial—but highly heterogeneous, rife with rough spots and bumps.

In an egalitarian group, not everybody has to agree or like each other, or approve of the work that is being done: they merely have to consent to it. This means that unless something is really important or central to the values of the organization, the wisest course is often just to let things be. That can be hard to accept when we have been accustomed to value results over all other considerations.

Almost all people who come to the movement for social justice were brought up and have been functioning in conventional society, which presupposes supremacy of one person over another according to status or perceived superior ability. Whether we mean to or not, we bring these biases and expectations with us when we join groups that operate according to equality and collectivism.

Those who are accustomed to emerging as natural leaders (for instance, those who've been successful in academia) may have an unacknowledged belief that others will readily recognize their wisdom and defer to it as a matter of course. We may assume that, egalitarian goals notwithstanding, the opinions of people who have distinguished themselves in some way will naturally carry more weight. Or we may become concerned that the outcome of the group's work will not be of the high caliber that we ourselves feel capable of achieving. Others among us may readily accede to individuals who seem knowledgeable and capable of taking on challenging problems, and may even frown on those who don't allow themselves to be molded, further alienating individuals who challenge the leadership.

Many conflicts arise out of the desire to control other people's behavior and to control the output of the group's activities. Whenever an attempt is made to manage or direct another member of the group, no matter how well meaning (to preserve harmony, end disruption, make time to tend to the work of the group, ensure high quality, etc.), that person will inevitably feel resentful, and possibly very hurt or angry. If she reacts, conflict begins. Many conflicts that drag down collectives for months, often resulting in indelible feuds, could have been prevented if the collective's members were more willing to tolerate the coexistence of different opinions, approaches or strategies, objecting only when a fundamental principle was at stake.

A longtime volunteer may bristle at the possibility that a newcomer has as much say about a group and projects that he himself helped build with his sweat,

maybe for years, but the issue here is not recognition of individual contributions, it's what will produce the best outcomes for the group and its work while maintaining its adherence to core values. Although some people might have a tough time accepting this, collectives are not meritocracies.

The end result of a project that has been produced collectively is an uneven patchwork of viewpoints and ability levels. Making room for everybody to contribute, even when ability is not equal, is a strength, not a weakness; so is letting the process show. We are accustomed to valuing a slick, polished presentation, but if we let the seams show, this will empower others with information about how something was put together. If we accept a heterogeneous, bumpy outcome as a given, before the work even begins, we will avoid a lot of head-butting further down the road.

Because groups based on equality presuppose mutual trust and a shared sense of mission, many of us may expect solidarity, harmony, and kindness to permeate such groups. On the contrary, adhering to egalitarian, anti-authoritarian principles means applying minimal interference to one another, or letting people be who they are—including the annoying, the trying, and the obnoxious—and accepting the outcomes as well.

STAYING TRUE TO THE MISSION

MANY EGALITARIAN COLLECTIVES consist of activists working to achieve a just society and were formed for that purpose. Even collectives that don't have specific political aims have made a commitment to social justice by virtue of being anti-authoritarian and pursuing equality as a

fundamental goal. It should be obvious that internal power plays, deceitful back-room plotting, rumor mongering, and marginalizing or ridiculing are behaviors that do not befit a group fighting for fairness and against oppression. Yet, people in collectives do these things all the time, and usually without even inviting a raised eyebrow.

Collectives that incorporate as nonprofits are required by law to draft a mission statement letting potential supporters know about the work that the organization exists to achieve. Fulfilling the mission is a nonprofit's legal reason for being (as well as the reason it doesn't have to pay taxes), just as a for-profit company's all-consuming purpose is to make money for its owners. Most collectives have no such mandated requirement, but it's still a good idea to compose a mission statement to refer back to whenever a decision needs to be made on how the group should act in a given situation. This position paper should spell out the fundamental belief that the collective must operate internally by the same high standards of fairness and democracy that it is working to bring about in the larger society. If it fails to do that, then it has failed in its most basic goal.

WHAT'S A LONE PERSON TO DO?

IF YOU'RE READING this book because you see a problem in your collective that you think should be addressed, you may well be alone in your quest. If you've actually raised your concerns with the group, you may suddenly find yourself the outcast, with the rest of the members possibly either openly hostile or utterly indifferent.

It's all well and good to say that all the people in a collective need to take responsibility for the group's

operation in order to avoid power inequalities and ensure a true spirit of collectivity, but if you're just one person, and the group is in fact not taking responsibility and is allowing a self-appointed leader or faction to steer decisions (including the newly arrived at conclusion that perhaps you are no longer a valued or wanted member), what can you, alone, do?

We wish we had the answer. This chapter is more than anything a cautionary note. Because you have read the contents of this book (and hopefully a number of others) on the topic of collective function and dysfunction, you may consider yourself armed with an arsenal of information and insight on what is going wrong with your group. You may feel confident that you can make a good case to the membership for the need for self analysis and reassessment of priorities. But that doesn't mean you won't still find yourself alone and the subject of attacks and slander.

Evidence from books is very unconvincing to people who won't make an effort to try to understand the situation or the underlying problems, and even less so to anyone who has already reached a conclusion based on rumors, speculation, and innuendos. There is a saying, which unfortunately is all too often appropriate in collectives that are experiencing conflict: "My mind is made up, don't bother me with facts."

In many cases, people who feel they have carved out their little corner of power are not going to give it up easily, no matter how trivial their sphere of influence may seem. If you threaten the hegemony of someone in a position of some authority, whether his leadership is overt or subtle, (or even if you haven't done anything that

could be construed as a threat but he thinks there's the potential that you might, perhaps because you've been outspoken) you may very well see another side of him, one with bared teeth and hissing.

It has been suggested that rather than going it alone one should set out to build a coalition, persuading each person individually, through private conversation, before making one's concerns public. This is classic political strategizing. We feel very ambivalent about this. On the one hand, it might work, and it could be preferable to exposing oneself as a sole target to a verbal battering. On the other hand, it's a manipulative tactic that could be characterized as sleazy, depending on the amount and quality of the persuasion involved.

Furthermore, you will always be out-sleazed by the other party if she is willing to go further than you are. This is not a competition worth entering into unless you're willing to go over to the dark side. After your fellow collective members have figuratively beaten you up with personal attacks, vilification, and calls for your banishment, we think you will want, at least, to walk away with your integrity.

THIS COULDN'T HAPPEN IN OUR COLLECTIVE

IN READING THESE chapters, members of a collective that is friendly and collegial, and who feel a genuine sense of community and shared effort within their group, may think that these issues don't apply to them. If you're lucky, there is, indeed, a chance that your group might never have to contend with such concerns.

But the nature of collectives is that they are constantly in flux. Assuming that a given collective doesn't have to

pay attention to process because "We feel we can trust each other and none of us are going to do any of these dastardly things you describe" could be a recipe for future disaster. We're not suggesting you should become paranoid or mistrustful. Our recommendation is just that you seek clarity: establish and write down the basic principles and guidelines that your group will operate by so that you are not suddenly blindsided by an unexpected breakdown in group dynamics without any compass to help steer the collective back on course. And remain vigilant for the red flags we have outlined here.

It is much more difficult to deal with power imbalances and underhanded or authoritarian tactics once they've already been established and have taken hold. Sometimes, in fact, it becomes impossible. Anyone who brings up the issue once it already exists is likely to be cast as a malcontent or troublemaker; then he might find himself the target of hatred and vilification. The best, and perhaps only, way to stop this kind of manipulation of the collective process is through prevention.

GETTING THINGS DONE

BECAUSE THIS IS a book about collective process, it may give the impression that we are advocating that collective members should do nothing else but pay attention to process, or that they should sit through endless meetings at which people air their grievances, engage in conflict resolution, and discuss power sharing.

That is not what we are advocating. In fact, when we spend too much time on procedural issues or on addressing people's complaints and their perceptions of having been slighted, that can become very tiresome.

Sometimes it can even be a reason why people become fed up with their participation in collectives. We are suggesting, instead, that fair dealing and transparency should simply be built into the process of the collective. These matters do not have to be discussed ad nauseum. The process needs to be agreed upon, written down, and put into use as a day-to-day protocol that is always present in the active mindfulness of the collective's members. This will serve to ensure that an underlying framework of clarity and trust is the basis on which the collective's functioning is predicated.

SOME CARDINAL POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN CONFLICT ARISES:

1. Do not draw any conclusions about an issue without hearing from both sides. Hear each side out to the extent that each feels is necessary (i.e., don't assume you've heard enough just because someone seems tiresome, pedantic, or emotional). Talking to a friend of a person involved in a conflict is not the same as getting the lowdown straight from the horse's mouth.
2. Although you may feel it is your duty to throw your support behind a friend or close ally who is in distress, giving emotional support is possible—and desirable—without having to draw conclusions or take sides.
3. Corollary to #2. Regardless of who you believe is right or wrong on a given issue, give emotional support. It is not okay for the feelings of the people involved to be trampled on, especially if someone is clearly suffering, even when one or both of the parties are acting like jerks. It is

especially not okay to jump in and join the faction doing the stomping on someone's hurt feelings.

4. Assume that every concern is legitimate and address its substance, even if the tone or context in which it is delivered seems overblown, emotional, or vindictive.
5. Corollary to #4. Do not dismiss concerns just because the manner in which they are brought up seems strident or out of place. It is one of the shameful practices of the adversarial court system, which we don't want to emulate in our own collectives (at least not in this respect), to discredit complainants who are emotional or enraged. For centuries, women's grievances, in particular, have been successfully shunted aside by overbearing men by claiming that a woman who is outraged to the breaking point by the injustices and abuses she has had to suffer is hysterical. (Keep in mind that men can be very emotional too, and just as readily dismissed for being so.)
6. Never assume that someone who is raising a concern is just wasting the group's time. (That can happen, of course, but, at worst, the outcome of such a situation will simply be a certain amount of time wasted.) Much more often, someone who feels threatened by the concern raised will try to persuade the group to squelch it on the grounds that it is a time-waster.
7. If a concern is in fact taking up too much of the group's time, create a subcommittee to look into it. The subcommittee should include the person raising

the concern and at least three other people who are neutral or uninvolved in the issue but who are willing to take the time to ferret out the facts and study them thoroughly.

8. Sometimes someone (or a group) can be so controlling or self-involved (often without even realizing it) that he sees any disagreement with his chosen course as sabotage or disruption and will react angrily to what he sees as an unnecessary obstacle being created. This is a very common source of conflict in collectives. The solution is to treat every concern that is raised as legitimate and to address it as such. There are often fundamental differences in the basic values or beliefs of group members that get swept under the rug in a flurry of angry accusations and are only brought to an end by driving out or expelling the weaker faction or individual. This is a terrible breakdown of collectivity and should never be viewed as a successful resolution to a conflict.
9. Be the solution. Volunteer to create a committee to look into a problem and, after thorough study, recommend solutions. Volunteer to seek outside mediators. Talk to both sides to try to understand each point of view.
10. Instead of listening to empty accusations, look for plausible motives for people's behavior. When someone is accused of acting a certain way because he is "crazy," that just does not hold any water. People usually act badly either because they are upset, insecure,

frustrated, or afraid, or because they have something to gain by that behavior. Why would someone who has nothing to gain go around sabotaging or undermining the group's work? Could it be that they in fact have a legitimate concern they feel needs to be raised and are only being painted as saboteurs by someone who in fact has something to gain (such as consolidating his own power) by shutting them up?

11. A solution to a conflict does not have to—and should not—assign blame nor declare a victor. When conflicts arise, emotions often run high. People who feel they have been wronged or mistreated can react badly. Often, one side (or both) has become so overwrought by the conflict that she does not want to resolve the problem but merely crush the perceived offender. It is necessary to create an atmosphere where both sides can come back to the group relatively whole. That can only happen when all the issues have been thoroughly addressed and resolved to an extent that both parties can live with.
12. Not assigning blame does not mean not acknowledging the wrongs that have been visited on either side. When people are not made to feel that they are under attack, but that their concerns will be genuinely listened to, they are much more likely to admit their mistakes. Create a means for people who may have acted badly to make amends, so that everybody can move on. (But do not be the judge and jury. People can honestly make amends only for errors that they acknowledge. No one can be forced to admit she was

wrong if she does not in fact believe it. It may be that someone who is adamant in her position is in fact correct in her claim that she has been unjustly vilified. A situation that is still in this stage has not been thoroughly dealt with yet.)

13. A conflict between two people who were previously close friends or have been involved in a romantic relationship should never result in the group taking sides against one or the other party. The facts of the conflict that involve the group as a whole should be addressed as such (i.e., s/he has been excluding me from activities; badmouthing me within the group; will not leave me alone when I am doing work for the group, etc.). The group should absolutely not become complicit in eliminating the former friend or partner from the complainant's life by driving him or her out of the collective. It should become especially obvious in such a case why assigning blame is fruitless: people who have been hurt sometimes do stupid or cruel things. There's no need to rub their faces in it.
14. People become involved in conflicts because they have some unaddressed need. Find out what the need is and determine a way to address it, with the collaboration of those who are in disagreement. That is the only way to resolve the conflict: it needs to be addressed, worked through, and straightened out.
15. Anytime someone is kicked out of the group or leaves voluntarily in order to stop a painful conflict, there has been a terrible breakdown, not a conflict resolution.

CODIFYING THE COLLECTIVE PROCESS

IT'S TOO LATE to try to decide on a fair way of resolving an issue once the shit has already hit the fan. Whenever there's a problem within a collective, whether it involves back-and-forth accusations of wrongdoing, factional splits, or fundamental disagreements, emotions run high. This is not the time to decide on proper procedures. When people are already angry at someone or some group, they're often all too happy to just let the person(s) fry, process be damned.

That's why it's paramount that the collective have a set of procedural guidelines in place that can be referred to when difficulties crop up. Here, we offer a few suggestions to start with, but please keep in mind that it's up to each group to determine what they might find appropriate.

1. A Statement of Guiding Principles or Mission

This should form the basis to inform all other decisions.

Ideally, the mission statement should not be too prescriptive or narrow. For instance, including statements like "All members will treat each other with respect at all times" may sound good on its face but doesn't take into account the reality that people may sometimes lose their temper or their patience and should not, as a result, have to face the accusation of having violated a basic tenet.

On the other hand, a guiding statement should include the seemingly obvious, since in times of crisis common sense and common decency are often among the first casualties. It may be useful to overtly state that the group supports ideals such as kindness, equality, fairness, and openness while opposing bullying, lack of transparency, lying and manipulation.

With such a statement in place, it won't be as easy for a faction or individual to hijack the group's thinking or opinions whenever problems arise. It will be harder for someone to claim to be acting in the collective's best interest when her behavior is clearly at odds with the group's fundamental mission and principles.

There's a fine line here, however. A manipulative person can use the basic tenets codified in the mission statement as a weapon to attack a dissenter or someone he sees as a threat. To prevent this, the group may want to state explicitly that the mission statement is meant to guide the collective as a whole; it is not meant to be used as a prescription for individual behavior, nor, especially, a tool for sanction and punishment.

2. *A Definition of Membership*

This often becomes a tough issue, especially when a group is in crisis: who gets to have a say? Who gets to make a proposal? Who gets to vote on or object to a collective decision?

The question to ask is: how should decisions be made so that they are least likely to result in some part of the group being manipulated or silenced, or a more powerful person or faction getting their way in an underhanded manner?

If the collective lets newcomers or relative outsiders have a say in its work, that should limit cronyism. But sometimes newcomers who don't know the history of certain issues are the ones who fall prey most easily to manipulation by persuasive individuals or more senior members. A manipulative person might also seek specifically to bring in "plants" (people who are there just to shore up his position).

Generally, we recommend erring on the side of openness. As members of collectives committed to egalitarianism, we want to believe that everyone's input is valuable and that everyone has something to contribute. Many collectives find it useful to stipulate that anyone who has been volunteering for a given amount of time, say a month, is considered a member of the collective.

It may also be useful to ask: who has a stake in the success of our group's work? When establishing the guidelines on who gets to have a say, everyone who fits that category might be considered as a potential voting member.

3. A Decision-Making Procedure

This should be fairly cut-and-dry. It may be stipulated, for instance, whether decisions must be unanimous, or by two thirds majority, or whatever other manner the collective deems appropriate, and whether a certain percentage of the membership must be present for important decisions to pass. (Some definition of "important decision" might also be included.)

4. A Grievance Procedure

Grievances are slightly different from requests for conflict resolution since there may be only be one side that perceives a problem, but in either case, the procedure for resolving the problem can be the same.

It is imperative that grievances be heard by an unbiased, outside observer, or a panel made up of people *who are not members of the collective where the problem originated*. We cannot stress this enough. In a small group it's extraordinarily easy for rumors to spread quickly and biased opinions to solidify instantly.

We recommend that a collective establish a grievance committee, whose job it is to maintain a contact list of outside volunteers who are not, and have never been, members of the collective and who can be called in when needed.

The outside volunteers can hear the grievance and make recommendations for how to resolve it. If the recommendations include some action to be taken by the collective, then the collective must agree by consensus (or by the voting process established by that collective) on the action to take. Since the aggrieved person(s) are part of the collective, as are those against whom their grievance is directed, *neither side should be excluded* from this decision-making process. If an aggrieved member has been intimidated by the hostility of his detractor(s) and general disapproval of the collective, he may be too afraid to speak up or even attend the collective meeting, but a decision cannot be valid if it's made in his absence or without his input.

In many cases, the aggrieved will wish only to have their grievance heard and their concerns acknowledged and may not require any action on the part of the collective. It's possible also that the outside volunteers will determine that the grievance is frivolous or without merit and, if so, will reflect this in their recommendations.

5. Nuts and Bolts

Basic guidelines should not be subject to alteration on the whims of whoever is around at a given time, nor should they be based on the personalities who are active in the group at the time that they are drafted. For instance, even if the group trusts the current treasurer, it

should not ignore the need to lay down basic accounting guidelines. The same holds true for other areas.

THERE'S HOPE

VIRTUALLY ALL PROBLEMS in collectives can be overcome by applying compassion, and by being thorough and even-handed in our thinking.

Recognize that some people are a big pain in the ass, but that doesn't mean that they are agent provocateurs. And even if they are, the best way to deal with disruptors in either case is probably to give them a certain amount of leeway to be themselves, to let them carry on instead of demanding that they cease. Provocation can be defused simply by not engaging it.

If the level of annoyance is such that it cannot simply be tolerated, then talk it over with the person: let him know what behaviors of his are causing problems for you and help him find ways to change them. Actions that we may see as negative usually arise from a need on the part of the person engaging in them: whether it's the need to be listened to, to get to the bottom of issues, etc. Our job is to help find a way for the person to still be able to have his need met if he agrees to drop the offending behavior. The only way to do that is to talk to him. People who are being a nuisance don't see themselves that way. They have a reason for what they're doing. Try to learn their perspective. Some people act in bad faith. Learn their perspective too, so you can expose it for what it is.

If we care, genuinely, about mutuality and inclusion, if we believe this to be one of the basic reasons why we want to work for a better, more just world, then we need to ask ourselves a simple question: if this person whom

we cannot stand were a member of our family, would we turn her out into the street? Or would we put our hearts ahead of our frayed nerves and learn to deal with her annoying character traits? Likewise, if a member of our family spoke frankly and unkindly to us (“Look, you’re driving me nuts: could you please just shut up?”), would we demand that the whole family intervene to sanction her?

Because most of us tend to throw caution or our sense of fairness to the wind whenever someone has made us very angry, we recommend having clear and concrete protocols in place that can be called upon whenever conflicts, differences in approach, or hurt feelings crop up. Rules, however, though they can help us keep our priorities in order, cannot take the place of basic human qualities: compassion, patience, tolerance, and the desire to seek out the truth. Without our humanity as our foremost guiding principle, no set of guidelines can come to our rescue. We need to always keep referring back to what’s important when striving to make decisions on how to proceed, especially in a difficult or trying situation. What’s important is not the work of the group nor effecting political change: it’s the fact that we care about and value one another, as we do all people. That’s why we’re in the struggle for social justice, after all.

Some groups may have no patience for tending to the weak and the whiny. They may feel that those who do not contribute or are slowing or bringing the rest of the collective down need to move on and get out of the way. Any group can choose that path, of course. But if they do they have a responsibility to do so honestly and openly. Such an enterprise can no longer call itself egalitarian

The premise of equality rests firmly on the belief that everyone in the group is valued and necessary to maintain the integrity of the whole. It presupposes a shared effort and mutuality which cannot be undermined by picking and choosing who is valuable and who is not.

An egalitarian collective is meant to accept and incorporate differences and heterogeneity. The task is to create a productive, relatively peaceable community out of all the different and sometimes contradictory personalities that form the group. No collective will ever be a perfect picture of unity, but it doesn't have to be. A working collective is more like a crazy-quilt of disparate styles, all stitched up by a common thread. Frayed edges and all, that's what a functional egalitarian collective looks like.