Where are the factory gates?

Extracts from conversations on community organising

why were we not there?

The idea was born one afternoon, fully formed in my head, at the end of a mildly unsuccessful anti-fascist action in London. We'd been building as part of a feminist anti-fascist assembly and the women's strike, a big formation of anti-fascist organising led by women. Women of colour and sex workers and trans women and migrant women.

And we kind of stopped the fash very successfully at some point in 2018 and then we stopped them less successfully. And we were being beaten up by police and we were in this position of being hurt, and also kind of feeling that we were losing on the street to our enemies. And I was like, this is a terrible way to fight fascism.

I mean, the performance and the spectacle is useful. It's important. It's building confidence. But if we're fighting these men when they're already coming to fight us, we're too late. Where were we when, wherever they came from back on the estates and the towns and the streets where they come from, like, why were we not there?

And as the horses and the police and everything were kind of beating us up, I was like… What we really need is a network of community food co-ops.

Where are the factory gates?

Maybe community organising at its core is about trying to re-politicise everyday life. Trying to think, what is the thing that we can build communities around? Establish relationships, politicise people? And trying to pin that around some kind of material need people are facing, whether it's housing or food or being harassed by the cops. Like, these are the things that are happening to us all. How can we make relationships around that and fight against it?

It's the question about the factory gates. Where are those factory gates? In previous generations, you'd stand there and distribute union literature. And you would agitate and organise and educate simultaneously because everyone shared the same boss and they lived in the same factory neighbourhood and had the same schools. That's gone completely.

Where are those factory gates? What is the entry level point into thinking about all those things together without an institution? We need to engineer them sometimes, we need to come up with them. You know, when I was thinking, where should we be that we're not? In my mind, it was the youth clubs, the churches and the football stadiums. Three places that are not my spaces, and I don't feel comfortable in any of them, but that's where I am now. So, you know, it's about doing the things that are not comfortable for us. I don't give a shit about football, but we're there because that's where people want to be. Let's break in, let's talk.

What does it look like?

It looks like spreadsheets. It looks like minutes. It looks like, does anyone have a tea urn? It looks like, who's doing the cooking? Why is no one doing the cooking? Is there childcare? Why isn't there child care? Why is it that no one in this group needs child care? What does that say about how we're organising?

What it looks like is obviously responsive to the needs of people that we're working with and are in community with, right? With migrant solidarity work, that can be everything from organising noisy demos outside detention centres, to organising vigils, to doing clothes donation pickups for asylum seekers living in awful temporary accommodation. It can look like doing political education work. In the pandemic, in South London, we were cooking hot meals for kids through local community centres because the government stopped free school meals. It can look like doing trade union organising with people in your workplace, or other workplaces, in a way that doesn't centre trade unions themselves as institutional structures that have to be deferred to.

So I think it can look like a lot of different things depending on what the need is that you're responding to. But I think the main distinction between community organising and other types of political activity is that you functionally have to fight quite hard to remain in struggle with the people that you're fighting with, rather than just advocating for them or just mobilising them. And seeing yourself as equal partners in that struggle.

When they come for our estate

The traditional trade union organising, the tenants organising that we're familiar with, they both depend on that point of conflict. A workplace campaign happens at the point of conflict when somebody is being sacked or there are redundancies or pay cuts or whatever. Same with housing. You start organising at the point of conflict.

And very often that's too late because we are not organised to save our estates. Generally speaking, we're not. We're losing them. The commons, the public, is bleeding properties. And the idea of community organising for me is to kind of pre-empt that. We start practising on something easy, something that is low risk, that doesn't involve any kind of big battles, but we already know all our neighbours.

So when they come for our estate – because they will – then we're organised. We already know everyone on the balcony and we already know that on Wednesdays there is a free space at the church and that somebody has the urn and the cooking facilities. We've already done childcare for each other. We practised all that, the soft organising. Maybe the deeper organising. So when they try to close our library or close our primary schools – they're closing like every day! – you know, when they try to close our pubs, we're already organised.

The people who know people's birthdays

The organising idea is that we speak always to the first two, three people in the community, those community anchors that maybe generations before would identify, they're still there. You know, the mums on the estates, they're the best in every community. As soon as you tap into the auntie's network, you're there.

It's kind of identifying those people – they often come to us, we don't come to them – who already know everyone in the community, right? The people who remember people's birthdays and they know your kid's name and they know who to call if your kid is being naughty and all that kind of stuff. And assuming that those people are already doing the work.

And if we just introduced this idea that we can all save money together by buying food together, it's just giving a name to the thing that they do already. They go and speak to their neighbours. We don't need to go and speak to the neighbours because we don't know their neighbours.

And that happens in every community. I might door knock on an estate. I would knock on a hundred doors. But once I knock on that one door, where this woman who knows everyone lives, my job is done.

So many latent traditions of struggle

There were these two workers in particular at the Burger King on Rye Lane, and once we spoke to those particular workers, it spread like wildfire. Suddenly half of the high street was in a group chat, and coming to union meetings.

We hadn't done anything special in terms of looking for the right people. Most of the precarious workers who are working in the fast food industry, at least in South London, come from diaspora communities or are themselves migrants. And these two workers in particular, the reason they were so keen and the reason they were able to mobilise people really quickly was that both of them, their fathers had been killed, one in South America, one in West Africa, for trade union organising. Which is part of their story of migration.

So there are also these histories and legacies of solidarity, of organising and of struggle. And I think that was a big turning point for me. From seeing my role as a trade union organiser as someone going to raise consciousness or someone going to teach anything, and actually much more being like, there are so many latent traditions and histories of solidarities and struggle. It's as much linking up, and me learning so much, as anything else actually. And they did their own organising, you know.

Where do we have the conversations?

There's this idea that the organiser has the answer, the organiser is educated, trained. And the community knows nothing. Whereas I think we all probably agree that in our community, we're all smart and we're all capable and we're all resourceful and we all already know all those things.

Yeah, sometimes when I hear people who are deep in sort of traditional political education talk, I'm like, I'm so disengaged right now. And anyone like the young people I know would be so disengaged in what you're saying. Sometimes it feels a bit like an ego thing, and sometimes it just feels like with the best intentions people have gone down this deep rabbit hole that isn't necessarily helping in the way that they would like it to be. So I think it's like finding language that is more grounded. That is actually for your community.

There's this Leninist, Stalinist vibe of like, once the Vanguard have worked out a plan, then we, us, the organisers, the leaders, we need to 'bring' the community to the point where they have achieved political education, to the point that they are politically ready to take it on.

And I think the dangers of that are precisely why I think it's hard to talk about a coherent theory of change in community organising, beyond relationship building and linking people up with infrastructure that can enable them to organise autonomously.

But I also do want to fly the flag for political education a little bit. Just by insisting that we have to expand what is traditionally meant by it. It can be anything that imparts some way of structuring or of thinking about a certain way of doing community work, or addressing needs, that people might not have heard of before, right?

I think this is really interesting, what you're both saying about feeling ambivalent about political education. Maybe it's an assumption in community organising that people organising around their material conditions is inherently politicising without having an analysis being shared with them. And I just wonder about that, is that true? The idea that people, we already understand our conditions, we know that our bosses exploit us, we know that our landlords exploit us, we know what we need to do about it. I wonder about that. I feel like in my life, I've read things or heard things from people that have given me some analysis of my life that's totally changed how I've seen something. And meant that I've been able to understand things and take action in a way that I couldn't before.

When we organise with people, is it enough for renters to fight their landlord? Do they automatically, through that, develop an analysis against landlordism and how we should have housing justice? I think there is a question about supporting people to develop a political analysis, and I think sometimes that does have to be more explicit.

I'm thinking about the example of abolition. When we were campaigning against increased police powers in Lewisham, people would say, well, okay, if it's not the police, then what is it? How do we make this neighbourhood feel like it's safe to walk through? So I think we're moving to a place where some of those ideas and imaginative projects are going to have to start materially manifesting a bit more within the community, if we're serious about abolition becoming a framework that people understand. The people in New Cross and Deptford already don't fuck with the police, for very good reason. They have a history of what it means for that to be the way in which we're kept safe. But I think probably the role of those of us who do hold to abolition as a framework is to start trying to build towards the things we imagine.

Something that I've found really difficult to navigate is people who have lived experience of state harm, still wanting and relying on institutions like the police. It's a hard conversation to have because you don't want to invalidate someone's lived experience. And I can understand, especially for parents, how deep that feeling of protection must run. But the methods of protection actually lead to more harm. I guess it just has me thinking about how to have conversations about abolition.

What really struck me when I started to read more about abolition was the ways in which it was expressing things that I already did know, kind of. Or expressing ways of thinking about things I wished were possible that I didn't think were possible, right? When we're talking about what kind of political education is useful, maybe it's more about the language and the frameworks that are able to animate the things that we already are experiencing, and collectively trying to work through, in our daily lives.

Yeah, where do we have those conversations? In what situation can me and another mum at school talk about all those issues? We don't share anything apart from our kids going to school. What are the community situations? What is the infrastructure out there? The youth clubs were taken away from us, right? And part of reclaiming that infrastructure, the church halls and the community centres and the tenants halls, is actually reanimating them in order to keep them there. Developing community infrastructure to have those conversations. Or they emerge through that point of conflict.

Nah, this isn't it

I think there's a question a lot of us face about the people most affected by the thing that we're organising against not being involved or leading in our organising. And I think it can be to do with a lack of political confidence about how to organise with people and build relationships with them. Maybe an anxiety around having power over people, or being an outsider. And I feel like, even though that comes from a good political motivation of being reflective, sometimes it can be an impediment to people being organised. It can stop us just getting out there and meeting people and making relationships.

Thinking, well, if I go and speak to those people, how will I come across? Will they even want to engage with what we're doing? What will their politics be? I think that can actually be a real barrier. And I just think there's a core question about solidarity. About how to actually make solidarity meaningful and real.

I think in particular around whiteness is where I've come across that. At the height of the pandemic was also when we had the resurgence of Black Lives Matter. And at that point there was a lot of well intentioned self reflection, which was quite important, in our mutual aid group. Which was in Peckham and mostly white. And yeah, don't get me wrong. Fucking weird.

But the drive then kind of started to become, why aren't there more people of colour in this group? We need to get more people of colour in this group. It wasn't intended to be tokenistic, it was intended to be like, we'll deliver food and pick up your prescriptions. But what hadn't actually been ascertained was, are people not in this group because it's racist? Or are there actually quite big and well established diaspora communities in Peckham who couldn't have survived unless they had some structures and unnamed mutual aid in place in any case? Right?

And so it kind of became this self flagellating, like, 'oh god, we're so white'. And I was like, I know, and I love you, can you calm down?! We're serving the needs of the local community and each other. I was also surviving off those food packages at the time, do you know what I mean? But I think there was a real kind of desire from some people to be like, Oh, well, once we get this, it'll be fine. And then kind of we'll have done our BLM thing. And aside from anything else, I was like, that's not going to solve the whiteness here. Like, we can still talk about the whiteness here. It's, it's not that though. Do you know what I mean?

I think a big thing is just accountability. We all have egos, right, but trying to come away from that as much as possible. If you are from outside a community, but you're really looking to support, or whatever it is you're looking to do, and someone turns around to you and goes, Nah, this isn't it. Like, trust that. Sit with it. Reflect on it. And don't feel this need to rush and have all the answers because that's when things go really wrong. And where you end up acting for yourself, or for an agenda that actually isn't informed by people that it should be informed by.

So just being able to sit in those awkward moments where you might not get things right. And as much as possible trying to come away from those hierarchies that mean that it's never going to build and it's just going to end up sort of like imploding in on itself.

If we don't do this then no one will

I think there's also something about the fact that the ways in which we organise do determine the political horizons that are available to us. There is so much work to do and when you're committed to trying to fight the things that you're seeing with your comrades, obviously you can take that on and individualise it and be like, if we don't do this, then no one will. Which is maybe true to some extent. But I think it leads to the entrenchment of hierarchies within organising spaces.

I think what often happens is a crisis presents itself, like a need to stop council homes being sold off, a need to stop 20 policemen being stationed in schools, or whatever it is, right? Whenever that need arises, often it can be in a time of crisis.

And so you have simultaneously a hive of activity, and the desire to build an infrastructure beyond that. To do some community construction, so it's not just an action.

As that is happening, I often find there's also a centralising drive that naturally starts to happen. Which is that the people who at the beginning have committed so much... And I do think that when we talk about community organising, it still is normally a small set of people who get things going, right? And when that happens, power starts to centralise because the amount that people are giving in terms of their time or resources then has the effect of foreclosing the political possibility of the work that's being done. Because people can't just give every single minute of time that they have, because they have dependents, they have elders, they have kids they need to care for, or they just need respite from wage labour sometimes.

So probably one of the most important things in terms of doing community organising well is that from the start, we have to constantly be thinking about how to delegate out from the initial small cell of people who have started an anti raids network, or a copwatch group, or who are coordinating anti fascism in a particular area, or who are rallying tenants in a particular tower block. As soon as possible, first the work has to be delegated out, there has to be a clear route for people to come in. And then power has to be disaggregated. Because otherwise the political possibility - that community you're trying to construct in response to crisis - necessarily has, written in its beginning, its end.

what we deserve is still what we're fighting for

We stopped them putting 20 new police officers in Manchester schools. And it can be really hard to celebrate those wins because they'll say, oh yeah, no, we've stopped this because we actually decided that. They never gave the campaign credit for that. Even though we know it was because we came together and we listened to people who had experienced police in their schools and then those people talked to others... It was a whole word of mouth thing. So then parents and teachers and community members could walk into schools and be like, I know what's going on and I'm not fine with this.

But it can feel like the battle's a bit never ending. And moments like that win make me think of that more. Because it's often after those wins that you end up having quite a big dip. One of my questions is about how we take on the ebbs and flows of community organising. How we keep things going without pushing ourselves beyond the point of exhaustion. How do we – how do I – keep doing this? Both as a collective and also as an individual?

Yeah, there's so many ways in which the state or the forces of capital respond to the things we're doing and co-opt them, or claim things that actually we've won as like, 'oh, we were going to do that all along'. It makes you feel like what you're doing isn't significant or powerful. But imagine if we weren't doing that, imagine if we weren't doing all the millions of things that we're doing to try and fight this shit. It's massive.

And maybe part of being in this for the long haul is thinking about how we can lose well. How can we put ourselves in a position that we're able to keep fighting, if we win, if we lose this thing, what are we going to do next? And having enough still in us to do the next thing.

And I think we can mitigate against those massive highs of activity and then the drop. And I think we can put structures in place that mean it's not the case that we only see each other when we're doing really hard emotionally difficult work. It's also that sometimes we're socialising.

But at the end of the day, most of us are necessarily having to be loyal to the need to make rent first and foremost. And that does just inhibit the care that we're able to integrate, the time that we're able to actually put aside. And there are always things that we have to do better to encode care into the ways in which we organise. I think 'the movement' insofar as it exists is quite shit at it generally. But there also is a reality which is that if it was possible for us to create communities of care in which harm could be dealt with in the way that it should be, and in which we all were able to fulfil the needs of each other, then, well, we would have abolished wage labour. So there's also that difficult reality. That what people deserve in terms of how they're organising, actually, that is still what we're fighting for.

The places where we practise

We all already know the reasons for our poverty. We know that we're poor because our bosses don't pay us enough money. I mean, you don't need to go to university for that. And we know that our landlords are parasites. That's where we are. We're at this bit between those two ends.

And we know the solutions. We need to obviously earn more money or take over our workplace and control it. And we need to take over our housing and control that. And all the bit in between is where we practise that.

We practise in the community at our school PTA, at our tenants halls, at our food co-ops, at the save the local library campaign. Those are the places where we practise the methodologies and working together and trusting each other and developing the confidence to go and fight the bastards on both ends. And then obviously the government beyond them and take down capitalism. But we can't do this before we practise a bit.

Because the whole world tells us that there's a manager at this end and there's a landlord or the council at the other end, and we just struggle, we just manage, in between. None of it is about doing stuff together. We're always in competition. Going to see rental properties and having to compete with other poor people over the scraps, the terrible housing that's on offer. That's what we're told, this is how we live. But imagine if there wasn't competition. Imagine if we could find the ways to collaborate, to cooperate. And to learn from each other to do that.

For I love you, say fuck the police

It comes down to something really simple, which is that it doesn't have to be this way. And then the question is, what do we want in this place? It is at once a utopian imaginary, but also something that we practise in our daily lives. When you see harm and you don't immediately call the cops on it, that is practising abolition. When you don't just distribute care in your community in relation to blood relatives, that is also practising family abolition. It's at once a daily practice, and also a utopian political horizon that we prefigure in the ways that we organise.

The poet Sean Bonney says: For 'I love you', say fuck the police. All other words are buried there.