Episode 1: Where are the factory gates?

**Shiri:** [00:00:00] As, you know, the horses and the police and everything kind of beating us up, I was like, this is a terrible way to fight fascism, what we really need is a network of community food co ops.

[Music: Aum by King Monday]

**Anna:** Hello, I'm Anna.

**Shaz:** I'm Shaz.

**Becks:** I'm Becks.

**Anna:** And we're from Seeds for Change. And we make resources and run training and facilitation for grassroots groups that are campaigning and organizing against injustice. So that's our craic, and we are here with three very exciting people, Amar and Mea and Shiri, to talk about community organising.

Um, and we wanted to bring people together for this conversation because community organising feels like a really significant part of, like, political activity in Britain at the moment, and there's kind of a lot of new [00:01:00] groups doing it. Um, there's been a big surge in, in groups like Copwatch and anti raids groups that are organising against state violence in their communities. Um, there are groups like renters unions that are bringing, like, tenants together to fight their landlords and fight for housing justice.

Um, so, yeah, what do we mean by community organising? We're going to talk about that a bit, but I guess we're broadly thinking about working to build long term political power, um, among people in a community through those people taking collective action on issues that affect them.

And yeah, from talking to people in various, like, community organizing groups and from our own experience of, of groups that we're in, like... We feel like there's real power in this thing and like, there are some really inspiring things that people are doing. Um, and there are also some like, really interesting questions around community organizing and how to do it well and how it can play a role in political transformation.

So yeah, we're really excited to have these three guests with us, um, and they're going to introduce themselves and what kind of organizing they're involved in.[00:02:00]

**Amar:** Hi, my name is Amar and I mainly do organising in and around migrant solidarity and anti police work. Although I kind of dabble in other things as well, at the moment, one of the things I'm involved in is relaunching We Keep Us Safe Lewisham, which is a community campaign in Lewisham against the introduction of public space protection orders, which basically is expanded police powers.

**Shiri:** Hey, I'm Shiri. I'm organising with Cooperation Town, which is a network of community food co ops, people organising on streets and estates up and down the country, through a kind of simple model that we developed that is available for everyone. Previously I was involved in trade unions, I'm part of the Anti University, uh, was involved in all forms of sort of anti fascist organising, um, organising around education, labour work, yeah.

**Mea:** Hi, I'm Mea, I use she or they pronouns. I work for an organisation called Kids of Colour and [00:03:00] I'm also part of a campaign called No Police in Schools. Um, my main focus is youth work, anti racist youth work and community work as well.

**Anna:** Thanks. And thanks for coming to talk to us today. I'm mega excited to talk to you all. Um, so maybe a good question to kick off with is like, how do you define or think about community organizing? Like, what is it and what makes it different from other kinds of political activity or campaigning?

**Shiri:** I mean, I suppose maybe the first question to ask yourself is what do we mean when we say community? Because there are lots of different types of community, people intersect in different ways. People like coalesce around different issues. So it could be that, I don't know, the school community is a distinct community with a single interest, or it could be everyone who lives on this estate or everyone who works on the trains. Um, so yeah, I suppose organising in different places would, would look differently.

**Amar:** [00:04:00] Yeah, I think that's really important. I think that like... when we talk about organising, as opposed to other forms of political activity, and I think it is interesting that increasingly, in the same way that all forms of political organising used to be activism, now any kind of political activity is kind of talked about as if it's organising, which I think is really interesting and makes things quite slippery because you meet so many people who are doing community organising, apparently, but working in very different ways and with very different politics.

Um, and I think like, when we're talking about community organising, there's always an element I think of community construction as well. Precisely because people are so alienated that when we talk about community as a thing that all of us, you know, supposedly necessarily have experience of or are fully grounded in, I don't think that's necessarily always accurate, just because of like how atomized we all are.

So I think, yeah, for me, there has to be a strong element of like, community construction in community organising as well.

**Mea:** Yeah, and I think for me it's like, working outside of existing [00:05:00] institutions. Like, I feel like that same thing about where you're kind of using the same language as other organisations, but actually those people are very much working in institutions that are like massively harming the communities that they're supposedly supporting.

So, yeah, for me it's like redefining what caring and uplifting communities is about, outside of the structures that have literally been created to oppress us.

**Anna:** Yeah. And it's interesting, like, what all of you are saying about, like, even these terms are kind of slippery. Like, what is a community? What is organizing? Like, maybe a good way in is, like, hearing a bit more from each of you about, like, what you're doing day to day, and then how you see that as part of, like, a model of organizing towards kind of bigger political change.

**Mea:** So I, I mean, I still feel like I'm learning so much from different people around me, so I don't necessarily have super clear ideas about, like, what models work. [00:06:00] But in terms of the work that we do, like, we try and be very responsive to things that we're hearing from the young people, their communities, their families, or anyone that we sort of come in contact with within our work. Um.

**Shaz:** And what sort of things do you do, like on a, I wanna say like day to day, but I guess it might be like month to month, like what does it look like, what happens?

**Mea:** So we have different projects that we run, so at the moment we're doing a project with two new members of staff who've started working with us called the Boys in Love Project. And it's about sort of encouraging young, young boys of colour to express love and talk about love and in the many forms that it comes about in our lives, right. Like, you know, that could be romantic love, but it could be love in our community, it could be self love, all of that stuff. So that's like a really wholesome and just lovely project to watch develop and unfold. Uh, then we run our youth groups. We do like three youth groups a month but then we also are doing some [00:07:00] youth spaces in North Manchester that run every week at the moment. Then there's like a lot of advocacy work and that just sort of comes up as and when, obviously it's not something that we can predict as much.

**Becks:** And how does that day to day stuff, for each of you, like, build towards the kind of change you're trying to make? Like, what's your theory of change, I guess?

**Amar:** I think it would be probably quite wrong to say that there is, or can be, like, a theory of change when it comes to community organising broadly, without establishing the politics that are necessarily underpinning that. And so I guess that probably the most important thing for me is to understand that like a lot of the organising work that we do is looking to the long term.

So there can be, like, things that we want to achieve in the short term. So for example, with We Keep Us Safe in Lewisham, like, we want to stop public space protection orders from being implemented in Lewisham. And that's quite a short term, like, tangible goal. To that degree, like, a big part of the strategy there is, is mobilizing local people.[00:08:00]

But what we try to keep in mind long term is that this is an opportunity to bring in like other people that live in our local area and talk to them about abolition, to talk to them about what it is that makes them think that maybe the police do keep them safe, even when a lot of their experiences are telling them that's not the case.

And that can then form the basis of like, collectively trying to come up with, not necessarily big structures, but small, localized, like, systems in which we can try to address harm in different ways. Um, even if the actual tangible effects of that don't manifest, like, for years and years and years. It's about kind of having that long term vision about how we can nurture relationships.

And I think because of that, in some ways, that kind of community organising can be, not oppositional, but it can be like a little bit challenging to the word that we used to precede 'organising', which was 'activism', um, back in the day. Which was also at the height of kind of identitarian politics, which was where, like, a lot of the work that was being done at that point, at least, you know, when I kind of [00:09:00] came of age politically, seemed to be talking about the need to make our communities safe spaces and things like that.

And that meant that, like, if you're working with people in your neighborhood who, like, said things that were problematic or, like, had views that were transphobic or racist and stuff, in the kind of activism line of thinking, which is quite an individualized way of like doing the work, that's kind of a bit of a write off in some sense.

I think you don't get the same luxury really when you're doing community organising. Like during the pandemic when we were doing mutual aid, I was working with people who were really lovely to me, we developed deep friendships, they were just a bit transphobic. That changed through doing the work and it wouldn't have been possible to do that if what I was trying to create for myself by trying to do that work was a safe space.

I also don't entirely know what a safe space is because as a queer person of color who like, cross dresses, I haven't really come across one ever. Um, but yeah so I guess it's if I were to think of like a theory or a principle, it would have to be around building relationships that can then go on to themselves autonomously long [00:10:00] after your involvement be the basis for structures to enable people to collectively address their own needs.

**Shaz:** And I also love like the, the practical details of like what it looks like on the ground. Like, what does it look like when you're doing it? Or how does it appear?

**Amar:** I mean, 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? Like, what does that say about how we're organising? Um, I mean, what it looks like is obviously responsive to the needs of people that we're working with and are in community with, right? So like with migrant solidarity work, that work can be everything from organising noise demos outside detention centers, to like organising vigils, to doing clothes donation pickups for people who are asylum seekers who are in like, awful temporary accommodation. Um, it can look like doing political education [00:11:00] work, like with LGSM, we do LGSM Learns.

**Shaz:** What is LGSM?

**Amar:** LGSM is Lesbians and Gay Support the Migrants. That's kind of the group I first came into organising with. Not because at the time I had any politics, but because, like, I needed queer community. It came from self interest, and then it expanded outwards, and I became an abolitionist, right? Um, yeah it can, it can look like all of those things, and then it can look like more direct provision work, like, in the pandemic, when, like, in South London, we were cooking, like, hot meals for like mainly kids at that point through like local community centers because the government stopped doing like the free school meals I think it was.

**Shaz:** Yeah.

**Amar:** So it can look like that as well. It can also look like doing trade union organising with people in your workplace or other workplaces in a way that doesn't center trade unions themselves as institutional sort of structures that have to be deferred to. So I think it can look like a lot of different things depending on what, what the need is that you're responding to. But I think the main distinction between organising and other types of political activity is that you [00:12:00] functionally have to fight quite hard to remain in struggle with the people that you're kind of like fighting with, rather than just advocating for them or just mobilizing them. Like, I think there has to be an element of seeing yourself, like, as equal partners in that struggle. Because otherwise I think you get into quite dodgy territory.

**Shiri:** And, and ideally we should be organising in our communities. Like in a, in a perfect world there is no separation between the organiser and the community. Or, you know, our communities organise for ourselves. Um, yeah. And like answering the question, um, I suppose it's kind of neatly, possibly, building on what you both said about sort of who's got the power, who, who leads, um, the kind of trajectory from activism to organising. Yeah, these are all things that I've been thinking a lot about obviously over the years. And then kind of when Cooperation Town came into being, that was kind of [00:13:00] distilling everything that you said, that you both said, into something that is... that we hoped could be like easily, kind of summarized and then replicated. Again, without us doing the work.

**Shaz:** Can you remind us again what Cooperation Town is?

**Shiri:** I have a story.

**Shaz:** I love a story.

**Shiri:** Um, that is kind of, again, building on from what Amar was, was saying. Um, so Cooperation Town was born one afternoon, fully formed in my head. Like Zeus, you know.

At the end of a kind of mildly unsuccessful anti fascist action in town in London. Uh, we've been building as part of a feminist anti fascist assembly and the women's strike and sort of a big formation of anti fascist organising, um, yeah, organizers led by women and women of colour and sex workers and trans women and migrant women.

Um, and we kind of stopped the fash very successfully in some [00:14:00] point in 2018 and then we stopped them less successfully. And we were being beaten up by police and we were being kind of in this position of like being hurt, but also kind of feeling that we're 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, 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. Like, where were we when, when, you know, 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, and kind of as, you know, the horses and the, you know, the police and everything kind of beating us up, um, I was like, what we really need is a network of community food co ops. I had no idea what it would look like. Never been in a food co op, never been in a co op. Um, like I said, I come from trade unions, which are, you know, more or less [00:15:00] hierarchical. Usually more. And even the ones that kind of organise on members terms still have like clear hierarchy and a clear kind of structure and so on. And I was trying to think what would be an easy access kind of structure that anyone in the community, in this imagined community, that we don't even define, uh, can join and can be fully participating as a member, can own the structure, can really lead on the activity, around something that is very low risk.

Organising in the workplace is high risk. Organising at home, like against a landlord, is pretty high risk. Organising a community food co op is literally zero risk. It's so easy. You, mathematically, you can't lose money. The investment in, you know, in time and in money and in resources is minimal. You have to be committed to the idea, but you learn as you do. Uh, you learn from each other. It's, it doesn't need leaders, you don't need to be educated, you don't need to own [00:16:00] a space, like all those things, all those barriers, are just not there anymore.

And I was like, gosh, it's so easy. Of course it's not easy, to be, you know, to be organising like a national network. But being in a co op is really easy.

**Shaz:** Could you tell me what a food co op does?

**Shiri:** Mm, yes. So, food co ops, you know, have existed before Cooperation Town, like, invented them. We didn't invent them. Um, but Cooperation Town food co ops are basically small buying groups that involve people in one, usually one small area. So it could be, like, one estate or one street or, like, everyone who goes to this primary school or this mosque or church.

And they are, yeah, they're small groups that are usually around 20 households, um, for reasons that are to do with, you know, making sure everyone gets heard, everyone gets to participate and everyone's got like a meaningful role in the co op. So everyone does something.

And what they do is on a sort of weekly cycle, the co ops, uh, [00:17:00] buy food together. So they buy in bulk. Which means that they save, members save a lot of money just because a sack of potatoes is way cheaper per potato than, you know, me going to the shop and buying two potatoes. So that's the kind of logic that, to be fair, everyone who is struggling with costs already know that.

Um, so we're already buying in bulk for our families, but what if we bought in bulk for 20 families? It would be even cheaper. And then because we are already organised, it's not just 20 individuals, co ops also can access surplus food. So there is a ton of food, like endless amount of food in circulation that is considered to be surplus or waste.

So that kind of waste is already built into the system and that's, you know, that's why this is a political project. It's not just about saving money for me and my 19 co members. It is about kind of challenging this entire structure that is built on exploitation and extraction and waste.

But in practice, the co ops access that [00:18:00] surplus food through kind of existing distributors up and down the country. All that food comes into wherever they organise. It might be in a church hall or in a TRA hall or at the community center or library or whatever. And then, you know, the food is shared, the money is collected, and the cycle continues.

**Becks:** And what's your role as Co op Town? Like, I guess, like, what's your role as organizers? What's the thing you did to get from, like, the demo through to being a national network?

**Shiri:** Um, it took a while to develop the model. Obviously it didn't, you know, there wasn't a co op the day after that kind of fateful demo. and then came COVID and whatever there was, it was quite a process, but we have developed a model that we were more or less able to summarize in like a pack, in like a little, a slim volume, a little booklet. And sometimes just in a flyer.

But mostly it's us going and talking to people and then people talk to each other. You know, alongside kind of developing the resource that [00:19:00] explains like, what is a co op? Why we might want to do it? How is it good for you? What actions you might want to take? Some tips about like how to hold a meeting that is, you know, democratic, inclusive, participatory, all those kinds of things. The, the organising idea is that, you know, we speak always to the first two, three people in the community, those community anchors that you know, maybe like generations before would identify, uh, they're still there. You know, the mums on the estates, they're, they're the best in every community. Like, you know, as soon as you tap into the auntie's network, you're there.

**Amar:** Please turn the aunties into a force for good.

**Shiri:**

I'm on it. I have actually turned into an auntie now. Um. Yeah. So it's kind of, identifying those people- they, they often come to us, we don't come to them- who already know everyone in the community, right? It's like 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. Like I [00:20:00] grew up in a community like that where the kids were outside because somebody would watch and somebody would shout at you if your mum didn't shout at you.

So, assuming that, that those people are already doing the work. And if we just, just introduced this kind of idea that we can all save money together and we do a thing together, you know, you, it's just giving a name to the thing that you do already. They would go and speak to their neighbors. We don't need to go and speak to the neighbors because we don't know their neighbors. And that happens in every community. So, you know, I might door knock on an estate. I would knock on a hundred doors. But once I knocked on that one door, where this woman who knows everyone lives, that's... my job is done. She will create a community food co op, uh, and that happens again and again.

**Amar:** I think that's kind of, in some ways, that really mirrors the experiences that I had when I was first getting involved in like trade union organizing. Well, not quite the first, so for context, my background is like, bartending mainly, until like, very recently. And, uh, a [00:21:00] pub in South London that I worked at until a few months ago, in 2018, we ended up unionizing and taking wildcat strike action, which is where we just shut the pub down without having done a legal ballot.

And partly because it's a community pub - again, like that word, and it's able to trade off that - they gave in after like three days of quite tough negotiations, and we got union recognition, fixed contracts, or a promise of fixed contracts, and staff reinstatement. And then after a while realized that the advice that we were getting from unions on how to negotiate for those things wasn't at all suitable for like a small transient workplace where there were like 25 members of staff and quite high staff turnover in that industry.

So I kind of started casting about for like different models, read about like community unionism, what's happening in the States. But it was really when a Baker's union organizer called Tom came to Peckham, and started organizing locally rather than by like chain. So rather than organizing all of the Burger King workers, he would just organize everyone on Rye Lane or everyone in like one part of Wandsworth. [00:22:00] And I'd go with him to McDonald's and to Nando's and to KFC and Burger King to buy so many filter coffees and talk to workers.

And there were two workers in particular at the, I think it was at the Burger King on Rye Lane, um, who like, once we spoke to those particular workers, it kind of spread like wildfire. Suddenly half of the high street was sort of, you know, at least in a WhatsApp group and kind of coming to union meetings.

And I think it's important to note as well that that wasn't just... it wasn't necessarily that we had done anything special in terms of like, looking for the right people. Most of the precarious workers who are working in the fast food industry, at least in South London, like, come from diaspora communities or are themselves migrants. Like these two workers in particular, the reason that they were so keen and the reason that they were able to mobilize people really quickly was that both of them, their fathers had been killed. One in South America, one in West Africa for trade union organizing, which is part of their story of migration.

So there are also these histories and legacies of solidarity, of [00:23:00] organizing and of struggle. And I think that was maybe like, actually like a big turning point for me from seeing my role as a trade union organizer, as someone going to like raise consciousness or someone going to like teach anything. And actually much more being like, there are so many latent traditions and histories of solidarities and struggle. It's as much like linking up and me learning so much as anything else actually. And they did their own organizing, you know.

**Shiri:** And maybe like, yeah, on that, again, this idea that the organiser has the answer, the organiser is educated, trained, probably enjoys all sorts of privileges. And, you know, has the time, is paid for their time. Um, and the community knows nothing. Whereas I think we all probably agree that, yeah, in, in our community, I mean, we're all smart and we're all capable and we're all resourceful and we all already know all those things. And that applies to, you know, workplace organising, housing organising, food organising.

We all already know the reasons for our poverty [00:24:00] and we know the solutions. We know that we're poor because our bosses don't pay us enough money. I mean, this is not, you don't need to go to university for that. And you know, and that our landlords are parasites. That, that's where we are. We're at this bit between those two ends.

 And we know the solution. 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 practice that. You know, we practice in the community at our school PTA, at our TRA halls, at our food co ops, at our, I don't know, the local library, save the library campaign. Those are the places that we practice this kind of, you know, 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, you know, we practice a bit.

Because the [00:25:00] whole world tells us that we, you know, there's a manager this end and there's a landlord or the council the other end, and we just kind of, just, we just struggle, we just manage in between. Uh, none of it is about doing stuff together. We're always in competition. We were talking earlier about like going to see like rental properties and having to compete with other poor people over the, the scraps, the terrible housing there's an offer. Like there's literal competition when you look for housing. That, that's what we're told this, this is how we live. Um, but imagine if there wasn't competition. Imagine if we could, you know, find the ways to collaborate, to cooperate. And if there was like, an easy way to learn from each other to do that.

**Mea:** Um, what I was going to say was about this idea that you've got to be like a very specific person to be able to, like, make any sort of difference. And I think that's when these kind of community organisers come about, [00:26:00] but, like, there's, like, all of this power, and it is just about recreating the same things that we've seen time and time again.

And yeah, like, I don't know... you can spot people like that a mile, a mile off and I find it a very good way to like filter out the people that how, how they respond to different people depending on what they think they can get from them. Um, you know, being like a younger black femme person, seeing the way that people respond to me tells me everything I need to know about their values when it comes down to community organising.

And that's something that I just have to sit with myself, because sometimes you can't say anything about that to people. Um, and it's not about, like... it doesn't necessarily look like calling that person out, but it's just about underst- I guess, it, what I find I try and take away from that is, how I want to contribute to spaces. And how I want to treat other people and how [00:27:00] I want, uh, like the organisations I am in to treat other people. Rather than it being about, like, me having to then call out this person who is overlooking people because they don't think they're smart enough. Or white enough, or rich enough.

That's my contribution. [Laughter].

**Shaz:** Yeah, that, yeah, that are you smart enough, white enough, rich enough, that... we had a little conversation on the train about the word like political education, and how it makes me feel icky inside. Like that it's... like A, that it's a bit patronising. B, that lots of us have very negative connotations of education. I'm doing air quotes. Um, yeah, it's tricky, isn't it?

**Shiri:** And political readiness, which is like the worst bully brother of political education.

**Shaz:** I've never heard that.

**Shiri:** So you know, is this [00:28:00] community politically ready? To, to... This is like kind of, you know, like Leninist, Stalinist kind of vibe of like, you know, once, once the Vanguard have kind of, you know, worked out a plan, we n-... *we* need, us, the organisers, the leaders, we need to bring the community, we need to bring the people to the point where they have achieved, you know, political education to the point that they are politically ready to take on, you know, whatever..

**Amar:** But I think like the dangers of that are precisely why I think it's hard to talk about a coherent theory of change beyond relationship building and linking up people with infrastructure that can enable them to like organize autonomously, right.

But I also do want to a little bit kind of fly the flag for political education. I know, dangerous. But just kind of by insisting that like we have to kind of expand what is traditionally meant by it. Like, I think that maybe this is just semantics, but for example, that like slim volume of [00:29:00] Cooperation Town and how it functions is what I would call political education. Because like it imparts some way of structuring or some way of thinking about, like, a certain way of like doing community work or like addressing needs that people haven't been... that people might not have heard of before, right?

**Shiri:** Yeah. And just to be clear, my point was not against education and not even against political education. I mean, we all learn from each other all the time. That's the kind of, on the anecdotal level, like the conversations that we have, uh, you know, when we dip in and out of, of the co ops that we, that, that are part of our network, we hear conversations that are amazing. People learn from each other. And sometimes, you know, I would walk into a room and I would ask like, Oh, you know, why, why did you decide to share the, whatever, the amount of stuff that you have in this box this way? And people look at me and will say, well, because it's fair. And they didn't have to go to university for that. They just know intuitively and instinctively that there is fairness and that we're doing a thing together and therefore it should be fair.

We can build, I can write an article about it. Can't see why I should, but you [00:30:00] know, I mean like it's, that knowledge is already there. It's just about how to maybe sometimes tease it out and maybe sometimes present it, you know, like in a podcast, for example.

**Anna:** I think this is a really interesting question though, like what you're both saying about feeling ambivalent about political education. I feel like it's a really important assumption within the idea of community organising is that, like, people organising around their material conditions is, like, inherently politicizing without having an analysis being shared with them. Like, yeah, I just wonder about that, like, is that true? Like, I guess, You're kind of saying, Shiri, like, people, like, we know these things, we know that our bosses exploit us, we know that our landlords exploit us, we know what we need to do about it. But then I wonder about, like, I feel like in my life, I've, like, read things or heard things from people that have given me some analysis of like, my life that's like, totally changed how I've seen something and meant that I've been able to, like, understand things and take action in a way that I couldn't before.

**Mea:** Yeah, I think it's a really hard one [00:31:00] because obviously yeah, I think I think I sometimes find when like I hear people who are like very deep in sort of traditional political education talk, I'm like, I'm so disengaged right now. I'm so deeply disengaged and anyone like the young people that I know who are brilliant and like, so intelligent in ways that will not be understood in sort of like mainstream ways necessarily, would be so disengaged in what you're saying right now. So I think it's like finding language that is not so... like... that is more grounded.

And yeah, I, I think sometimes I just find it quite difficult when like I hear this like, politically educated speak, because I'm just like, this doesn't feel like it's helping anybody. It feels... sometimes it feels a bit like an ego thing, and sometimes it just feels like people have gone like with maybe the best intentions have gone down this like deep rabbit hole that isn't necessarily helping [00:32:00] in the way that they would like it to be. So I don't necessarily have like an answer, but I was just thinking when you were saying that, um, it's like getting that balance of like using language that is actually for your community or for a community, rather than it just being about sort of like using overly flowery language to prove how smart you are.

Yeah.

**Becks:** Yeah definitely. And I think often we, like, call something education, like, precisely when it's something we don't learn from at all. Because like, education is a thing that happens in words that you only know if you already know the concepts. But is the thing that you were kind of maybe making the case for a bit there, Anna, not so much, like, talking about politics in a particular language, as, like, talking it at all. Like, do we need to be, like, explicitly political for organizing to have the effect we want it to have?

**Anna:** Yeah. Like... Yeah, I think there is this question of, like, when we organise with people, is it enough for renters to fight [00:33:00] their landlord, like, do they automatically, through that, develop an analysis against landlordism and like, how we should have housing justice? Like, I think there is a question about supporting people to develop a political analysis, and I think sometimes that has, does have to be more explicit.

And I was just thinking about it recently, because we're, u h, so I'm part of a tenants union in Lancaster. And we're at the moment campaigning to save some council housing that's being sold off by the council to a developer. And like, we've, been trying to organise in this union for a couple of years, trying to work with kind of individual people around their specific bad landlords, and I guess we've had this analysis of, like, well, people are motivated by their own, their own life, their own self interest in that way. Like, if their, if their boiler needs to be fixed, that's the point at which we can, like, organise with those people to, like, understand housing injustice. But actually, like... we really struggled to do that for like two years, and then there was this thing about these council houses in our city being sold off and suddenly like we've had like a lot more [00:34:00] engagement from that, from.... around a very explicitly political issue. And I think that's been really interesting to me of like, okay, actually like, yeah is it enough to say, like, people understand their own conditions? Or actually is it like the politics has to already be there in some way, or like has to be shared with people in some way. Do you know what I mean?

**Mea:** Yeah.

**Shaz:** This isn't going to be very succinct, here we go, but there's something about the council house kind of sell off thing that, like, yeah, it is this bigger political thing, if that's what you were saying, but also, it's really, it's familiar to people. It's been like a narrative for a very long time, and people know it. I don't know.

**Shiri:** Yeah, I wanted to say, I mean, this, it is familiar, and like, loads of council properties are being sold to developers and it's not fought over like, and definitely communities don't win. I mean, councils sold a billion properties. Um, and that's maybe back to the kind of the [00:35:00] traditional, you know, the trade union organising, the tenants organising that, that we're familiar with. They both depend on like that point of conflict, like a workplace campaign happens at the point of conflict when somebody is being sacked or there is like redundancies or pay cuts or whatever.

Um, same with housing. You, you start organising at that point, 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 or whatever, the public is like bleeding properties.

And, and the idea of community organising for me is to kind of preempt that. You know, we start practicing on something easy, on something that is low risk, that doesn't involve any kind of big battles, but we already know all our neighbors. And we've already done a thing together and we've already developed like a really simple mechanism for like communicating with each other. You know, making decisions together. We practiced all the kind of minor conflicts of like, well, she [00:36:00] didn't come to my wedding. It's like, well, you know, you can still buy food together. This is an actual conversation that I had.

Um, and once we've practiced those things, you know, 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 like a free space at the church and that, you know, somebody has the urn and the cooking facilities, whatever, all this kind of stuff. We've already done childcare for each other. We practiced all that, the soft organising. Maybe the deeper organising. So yeah, when they close our library or when they close our primary schools, they're closing like every day! You know, when they close our pubs, we're already organised.

**Shaz:** You'll never take our pubs!

**Amar:** I mean, it's happening. I mean, it's..., I think what you were saying about like practicing on something soft, I think that like that doesn't necessarily always have to be the case. Or rather actually, no, that's what I'm trying to say. What I'm trying to say is that like, I think existing structures like the kind of [00:37:00] more traditional trade union stuff and traditional tenants union stuff can also, in times of crisis, like, itself become the kind of like launch pad or the trial for bigger organizing and like, new structures. And as part of that, like, you know, I do really deeply believe - and I know that you also believe - that political education like is necessary.

And one way in which I'm thinking about that at the moment is in how the rank and file ism of the strike wave that we saw last year, which I think sometimes can be overstated, but also is still really, really important. And also how many people who will have got fired up to organize in their trade unions over that period, as many of them will have become like enthused and, you know, reclaim worker as a political subjectivity and start organizing in that way, as will have been like, well, this trade union structure is just as alienating as my boss and I'm paying them.

So like... but off the back of that and off the back of the kind of like actually, some people organizing in and against their union, some people slightly [00:38:00] disengaging, actually. Since the 7th of October, uh, and the bombardment of Gaza , those kind of nascent rank and file networks that hadn't quite really found their way to sustainable organizing, have been pulled on, have been reinvigorated to some degree by the groundswell of support for a ceasefire in Gaza.

One example of this is Workers for a Free Palestine have been running, like, workers assemblies, as well as bringing trade unionists and other workers to arms factories to blockade them and to shut them down. And like. We've been doing like political education, like on the pickets outside the arms factories. You know, we've had Palestinian comrades coming to talk to us about like, you know, a lot of British comrades are here, like, you know, flying the flag for a two state solution. And we have Palestinian comrades being like, so let's talk about the Oslo Accords. So like obviously, you know, that level of education, you know, it's necessary in that level. But the baseline, this is wrong. We need to do something. We know how Britain is complicit. We know what we can do to stop that complicity and stop, or halt, or [00:39:00] slow down, or object to the production of parts for F 35 fighter jets that are being used to bomb Gaza, right?

**Shiri:** Yeah, no, and I agree with you, like sometimes people learn on the picket line. Yeah. Sometimes there's first the action and then the discussion, but again, but to get to the point that you have the confidence to, to be there on that picket line. Yeah. And no, and we know that not many people have that confidence because trade unionism is like in a terrible state in this country, despite the kind of spectacular summer of last year. Yeah.

**Anna:** Um, just thinking more about this question about political education or, or political analysis among the people that we're organising with. I guess I'm wondering what you think, Mea, about that. Like, in your context working with young people, and particularly racialised young people, like, how do you see that? Like, do you see that as part of your organising work to, like, support those people to develop a political analysis, do you think that, like, they just already have one and that... like, yeah, I'm just interested in what you think about that.[00:40:00]

**Mea:** Yeah, I think... I mean, I think there's a real range of young people that we work with. You know, some people, some young people come through our doors and I'm just like, wow, like I'm learning so much from you. And I feel like I learn so much from all the young people that I work with, but some of them have... know all of this language and are like, just like sponges and just know everything.

And I'm like... It's really amazing to like, hear them speak because I think the way in which I see, like, the young people engaged politically is like very different than what I remember from being their age. I don't know whether it's something to do with like, the internet and social media and the way that's allowed people to sort of engage with things that previously they wouldn't have like been invited into. But they can like reclaim it and turn it into their own thing. So I think there's a lot of young people who already know what's up and it's just like interesting chatting to them. And there's other young people who are maybe just like figuring things [00:41:00] out a bit more and in that sense we will sort of speak about our values as an organisation. You know, being abolitionist, being anti racist and the way we view harm and the way we view care. That's how, I guess, what I would consider to be our, how we politically educate our young people. Just to like, show compassion and love towards people, and to also like, be critical about the things that we're hearing and different people's lived experiences and why, why things happen in the way that they do.

**Amar:** I think what you said, what you mentioned there about abolition is such like a good example of that as well, because like, certainly for me, like when I came across, uh... and I am like bookish, like I love reading the theory and shit, you know, but I think what really struck me, like, you know, 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, like, expressing then, like, [00:42:00] ways of thinking about things I wish were possible that I didn't think were possible, right? And I think maybe that is kind of, like... 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, like, in our daily lives as well.

**Anna:** I think- Go on, Shiri.

**Shiri:** Sorry, there's something about, I think you mentioned, and maybe that ties into what you said about infrastructure. Like, where do we have those conversations? Like, in, in what situation, you know, I'm trying to think about my own experience, like me and another mum at school can talk about all those issues.

Like, we don't share anything apart from our kids going to school. Like what are the community situations? What is the infrastructure out there to have? So like the youth clubs. I mean. They were taken away from us, right? Like when my kid was youth, like there was just nowhere for him to go and he wouldn't dream of going because they were like sad council run spaces, like nobody's going.[00:43:00]

**Shaz:** 75 percent cuts to youth services with this Tory government.

**Shiri:** Yeah. Um, so, so the infrastructure isn't there. And, you know, part of reclaiming that infrastructure, the church halls and the, you know, the, the community centres and the TRA halls is actually reanimating them in order to keep them there. Like if we don't use them, they will go, the churches are definitely going, you know, the schools are going for god's sake.

So like, um, yeah, so kind of developing a community infrastructure to have those conversations and then, you know, they, either they emerge or maybe through the, like that kind of point of conflict of like organising to save that school or, or, you know, through one of us, like somebody like us coming in and asking like, Oh, why did you cut the cake this way? And kind of teasing that conversation.

But yeah, but without infrastructure, we can't, we literally can't organise.

**Amar:** I think that's, that's something when thinking about, like, the limitations [00:44:00] of, like, anti fascism in recent times has become, like, so obvious to me. Um, so like in the last like eight months or nine months or so, there's been like literal Nazis coming to South London to protest Drag Queen Story Hour, which was taking place at the Honour Oak pub. Um, which no offense to any Honour Oak pub staffers, not actually even a great pub. Um, but you know, we went down, we protected it from fascists and like every month for like eight months, we like stopped them from getting to the pub. At times, like, at the cost of people's well being and like, you know, people were like beaten up, not just obviously by the fash, but also by the cops.

And I really strongly believe that like, the only reason that that was able to happen was actually because relationships were built with a local church. To such an extent that in June the church was like vandalized by these like evangelical Nazis because it was... the ladies there were so like massively like trans inclusive that like it was [00:45:00] where the protesters would go if they needed the loo. Like, while on the demo, like, faced with like a police line on the other side.

Um. And so it was because of those links partly that people kept coming. It was because of links with like the local national education union branch, um, uh, PCS branches and other like local trade union branches. And also like the, the comedy circuit that the local mums all love putting call outs. Like it was actually through that community organizing we were able to sustain bringing that many people out.

And I think it was a limitation of our view of what anti fascism meant that we forgot that what was really going to stop this happening... If we weren't there, sure, it might get cancelled because they were literally trying to attack the pub. But the pub chain that owns that pub ended up, obviously, cancelling the event, after controversy and pressure from, presumably, the police, and also the pressure of the fascists, right?

And I'm someone who has organized hospitality workers. I've been at every Honor Oak demo until the one that I got [00:46:00] arrested at. And yet at no point did we unionize the workers. Like, we didn't bring them on board. We weren't thinking about what it meant to build counter power when actually it's not the manager of that pub who has the power, it's like the pub chain. Um, and yeah, yeah, just thinking so much about how a group of people who, like, have had a lot of experience doing community organizing stuff and, like, you know, have done the political education stuff, have our analyses of whiteness and theories of change and shit all down, and, like, actually, like, there was a failure, collectively, to bring more people in to, like, actually analyze what was going on at the same time as we were fighting. And so, despite winning every battle, in terms of the Nazis turning up, Drag Queen Story Hour's still cancelled at the pub, right?

**Anna:** Mm.

**Shiri:** But that's because we do, we're pretty good at the spectacle, and we're not that good at the infrastructure building. Yeah, and that, I mean, again, this is exactly what Cooperation Town set out to do. To like, forget [00:47:00] about the spectacle. I don't speak at mass rallies anymore, um, but I speak to loads of aunties.

And, and, you know, and being able to build infrastructure, it's like, it's small things, sort of, you know, members at, at the, the community hub that we run in, in North London, uh, told us that it's too expensive for them to run the washing machine. And it takes too much space, you know, it's, it's a piece of, you know, infrastructure that we all have in our house that we don't really need it. We use it once a week. So we, we started a community laundrette because we can. We have the building. You know, so now there is a community laundrette that is free at Cooperation Town, because that's what our neighbors told us that would be useful to them. Um, how do we make sure that we have access to this kind of level of infrastructure that we can respond so quickly?

Um, on the other hand, you know, members told us that they like singing. I mean. It's great. They organised a [00:48:00] community choir. It's starting like this month. It's like, fine. I mean, you know, this is not like essential infrastructure, but this will, too, bring people together. Um, but without us having the space and a keyboard that we were able to source, like, you know, locally, there would be no community choir. Or community garden. Or, you know, a living room where, where people can come and have lunch every day. That kind of stuff.

So like, yeah, we have to do the really boring work of like the spreadsheets and the emails and, you know, maybe sucking up to councillors or to officers or to funders, uh, or to local people, whatever, you know, kind of people in positions locally to, to hold on to that infrastructure. So that we can have a place where you guys can pee after, you know, um, an action. Or that anti raids, Camden anti raids meet at our building because they can and because we can.

**Anna:** Yeah. And I want, I feel like there's like [00:49:00] a kind of core thing that everybody's talked about a bit, which is like maybe community organising is, is at its core, kind of about trying to re politicize everyday life. And, you know, build communities, basically. I mean, like, can we even claim that they exist?

Um, yeah, I think there's something really interesting about what you were saying, Shiri, about your story about the march and fighting the fascists and thinking, like, the intervention needs to happen, like, way before this point. And I think, maybe, like, community organising is, like, trying to think, what is the thing that we can like, build communities around, establish relationships, politicize people. And, like, trying to pin that around some kind of material need, whether it's housing or food or, you know, being harassed by the cops. Like, these are the things that are happening to us all. How can we, like, make relationships around that and fight against it?

And maybe, like, the ways that people were... had those connections and were politicized collectively in the past [00:50:00] have been destroyed. Like the trade union movement, like a lot of the spaces and infrastructure like you're talking about, all of these things that people had in their communities that, like, offered that, we've kind of lost. And like, all of this like, hard work that you're talking about of like, just actually trying to build communities. That's basically what we're talking about, isn't it?

**Shiri:** It's, it's the question about the factory gates. Where are those factory gates? Well, we could, you know, in previous generations, you'd like stand there and you like distribute, like union literature. And you will like agitate and organise and educate simultaneously because everyone shared the same, you know, the same boss and the same, they lived in the same, like factory neighborhood and you know, we had the same schools and everything. That's, that's gone completely. That's what we were thinking when we started organising the Anti University, like where are those factory gates? What is the entry level point into thinking about all those things together without an institution? And kind of, you know, we came up with the Anti [00:51:00] University structure and then with the Cooperation Town structure.

Um, yeah, we kind of need to engineer them sometimes, like we need to come up with them. You know, when I was thinking, like, where should we be that we're not? As, as, you know, in that transition from activists to organisers. In my mind, it was kind of the youth clubs, the churches and the football stadiums. Like, three places that I do not - I used to be a youth worker, but you know, I don't really... These are, these are not my spaces, you know, and I don't feel comfortable in any of them, but that's where I am now. Um, I have seen the inside of so many churches over the last three years. I have been asked to speak from the pulpit. And I was like, I'm really uncomfortable standing here and preaching to you. And the people at the church said, no, no, we're really comfortable with that. Like, that's where we want to hear from you. And that's where I had to speak from. So, you know, it's about doing the things that are not comfortable for us.[00:52:00]

We've got a Cooperation Town co op at the Arsenal stadium. Like. I don't give a shit about football, but we're there because that's where people want to be. They were really excited about it. We've got another football co op in Plymouth, weirdly. Um, yeah, and then, yeah, and the youth clubs. Like, yeah, let's break in. Let's talk.

[Music: Aum by King Monday]

**Anna:** ​Thanks so much to Amar and Mea and Shiri for a really interesting conversation. And we're going to be back in episode two, talking about some of the political questions involved in community organizing, how we can do it well, um, how we can distribute power in our communities and organize in a way that lasts. Um, and we're going to be talking about abolition and what it means to have an abolitionist approach. So see you for episode two.

**Shaz:** And just to say, again, we are, we're Seeds for Change. We're a small [00:53:00] organization up North. There's just three of us. We want a more fair and just world with solidarity and respect for all living things. And we work towards that by providing a wide range of workshops and resources for campaigners, activists, and organizers who share our vision. And we need to say thanks to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation for funding this podcast.​