Episode 2: Abolish the organiser!

**Shiri:** [00:00:00] I had no idea what to do at that moment, you know, it was an experiment, the whole thing is an experiment, community organising is an experiment, like we don't know what we're doing, we're trying things out.

**Amar:** If you can clip that and put it at the beginning...

[Music: Aum by King Monday]

**Anna:** Welcome back to episode two of this Seeds for Change podcast, in conversation with community organisers Amar, Mea and Shiri. Amar is involved in migrant solidarity, anti police work and anti fascist organising. Mea is part of an anti racist youth organisation called Kids of Colour and Manchester's No Police in Schools campaign. And Shiri organizes with Cooperation Town, a network of community food co-ops.

In episode one we talked about what community organising is; the argument for how it makes change; the context in which more people in Britain are taking it up as an approach; [00:01:00] the concept of political education and whether it's useful; and the infrastructure we need for a community to exist.

In this episode, we talk more about the role of the organiser; the politics of being an outsider; how to share power and organise in a lasting way; accountability and dealing with conflict and harm; the new wave of British abolitionism; and what it means to have an abolitionist approach in community organising.

Thanks for listening.

We're back! I'm Anna.

**Shaz:** I'm Shaz.

**Becks:** I'm Becks.

**Anna:** And we're from Seeds for Change. So, yeah, in this episode we're going to talk a bit more about, like, how to do community organising well and some of the kind of political questions that come up for people . So we were saying in the last episode, like, there are a lot of new groups that are kind of using this term or, um, aspiring to do this kind of organising. And we want to kind of explore some of the things that people are finding challenging.

And I guess, yeah, a lot of people that we've [00:02:00] spoken to, and probably anyone you talk to who's doing community organising, feels ambivalent about the extent to which they are actually doing it, and the extent to which they're doing it well. And I think there's a lot to be gained from people talking about that and talking about how they're navigating different problems. So I think it would be really cool to hear, like, from each of you, like, what you think the kind of main challenge that you're facing is at the moment. Or a kind of question that you think is important.

**Shiri:** Um, I think in the previous episode we talked a lot about what is the community, and then there was a question of like what is organising? So maybe, if that's useful, before we kind of reflect on how we organise and, you know, are we doing it well, maybe it's useful to kind of just unpick what's organising? Because that has been, like, yeah, over the last few years, like everyone's an organiser and everything is organising. And. Not everything is organising.

[00:03:00] So I don't know, I mean, I could say maybe what it's not. You know, organising is not campaigning. It's not advocacy. It's not doing stuff on social media. Um, it is not calling an action. This is organising an action, but it's definitely not community organising. Uh, you know, the whole kind of spectacle is not community organising, in my view. Um, things that, that happen where, you know, a lot of people coalesce and then kind of disperse again, I wouldn't call that community organising. I don't know. What else isn't community organising?

**Amar:** I think I almost agree with you. I think maybe where I disagree slightly is... I think there is space for people to like, kind of coalesce for things and then kind of go away again, if that is part of, even if it's informal, a network or a pattern that can develop into something that we might understand as a community or part of a community.

Um, but I think you're right about the things you [00:04:00] listed not necessarily being organizing. And I think a useful way that I find to think of that distinction that I was reflecting on recently, actually, is... A lot of what Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants does, for example, like, is calling actions and is doing provision work or is fundraising, political education... But there is, I think, in the migrant solidarity movement more broadly, there is a bit of a big tension between whether we are organizing with migrants and asylum seekers, or if we are acting in solidarity with, but not necessarily, like, in conjunction with, the organization that is always happening from asylum seekers in Britain who are constantly resisting their own oppression and the violences that they're faced with.

An example is that I think, like, earlier this year after the death of Frank Ospina in Colnbrook Detention Centre, Action Against Detention and Deportations, which is a national abolitionist coalition working around, like, yeah, migrant solidarity stuff, organized, like, a [00:05:00] small action outside Colnbrook Detention Centre and also a vigil outside the Home Office. And I think both of those are really important. The action outside Colnbrook Detention Centre was done in communication with our friends on the inside. So, I think for me that is something about organising. The vigil that was done outside the Home Office was really important, but there was no one there who personally knew Frank Ospina. That doesn't mean it's not important, but it isn't organizing. Whereas a few months later, we organized a vigil with some friends of ours who had lost a friend of theirs who was an asylum seeker, a queer asylum seeker, from Oman, who had died by suicide. And that, I think it makes sense to think of in terms of organizing, partly because we basically just facilitated the friends of Rima to organize that.

And through doing so, we also then started to work in a different way. Not on behalf of asylum seekers, but doing something with our friends and the people we actually had come to be in community with. And it's a difficult thing to talk about because I'm [00:06:00] not saying that like, you know, the other stuff isn't important cos it actually is vital and sometimes can be life saving. But I think it is a really important distinction.

**Shaz:** I was gonna say for people listening, there was lots of nodding happening in the room.

**Mea:** Yeah, I think especially what you're saying about like campaigning. I definitely think there's a massive - or, like, people think there's a massive gray area. Yeah, it can feel, for want of a better word, like a bit icky, some campaigning that goes on that's like... feels so disconnected from, from the community. Um, I think like organising is about like lived experience, and, and being... what we were saying like previously about being on a more equal footing rather than being like, I as the leader, am doing all of this stuff. Like it's about sort of dispelling those ideas about what coming together looks like.

Um, [00:07:00] like community organising for me, yeah, it's about feeding people, it's about caring for people, in the ways that are genuinely helping them be cared for. Like, it's not about sitting and thinking of a method to, like, push forward a campaign like that. There's, there's, like... there can be crossover, but there's definitely just a difference in like the way in which it's approached and I guess the sort of intention behind them as well.

**Amar:** Yeah. That's really true, there's kind of so much in there as well. There's... I think, often like, as people who kind of do a mix of like activism and campaigning and mobilizing and organizing, the martyr syndrome that can become so predominant is kind of like at heart antithetical to good community organizing.

Like, there is so much work to do and like, when you're committed to trying to fight the things that you're seeing, like, with your comrades. Obviously, like, you can take that on and, like, [00:08:00] individualize it and be like, oh, 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 organizing spaces. Which then makes it harder for them to actually become community organizing spaces, because of, like, how entrenched those things are.

And, like, I think what you said about, like, there always being hierarchies, but there having to be a commitment to constantly trying to like mitigate against that is really really important. Because I think there have been quite a few examples that I've been a part of and also that I've witnessed where it's like... we're running an amazing campaign, we're in contact with people who are going to be affected by whatever it is that we're fighting, people are down for getting involved, people want to organize around this. And then we manage to bring people into the space. But it's still so activisty and not open for people who don't have that language and don't have that training and aren't capital C community organizers. Um, and who can't just give [00:09:00] 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. Like, yeah, I think there's a real tension there sometimes between, like, what it means to be, like, a community organizer, and sometimes the spaces we create in order to do that work not actually really being fit for purpose.

**Shiri:** But those things, you know, the, the, the amount of time or the kind of language or the kind of spaces where people feel comfortable being in... I'm not saying, you know, they just magically appear when the community comes together. I mean, we know, we know this is... it's not true. Or it's not that easy.

Um, but where the role of the sort of external organiser is very, very light touch and you know, it's kind of more like you said, a facilitator or like providing some tips or maybe the framework for people to organise within, then those concerns are no longer an issue because the [00:10:00] language spoken in the room is the language of the people who are, who are organising. It's not the language of the organiser.

Um, and the... the amount of time that this activity, you know, demands, would be the amount of time that the people who are in it are able to put in. So maybe like the trick is, is kind of, you know, how to make the organiser actually obsolete. Like, you know, creating the framework, creating the you know, the infrastructure. Shit costs money. You know, I can get money. I'm really good at getting money from funders where, you know, people in the community are not, it's not their job... 'In the community'! As if I'm not in the community, right! But like, you know, I'm paid to do this. Whereas somebody else is paid to work at a supermarket, so they're not going to do fundraising.

Um, yeah, so creating that kind of, the space, the infrastructure. We pay for child care, right? We pay for people to attend stuff if that's available, all that kind of stuff. We pay for their laundry to be done. Kind of creating [00:11:00] that system and then, yeah, the language and the time, it's on people, they'll decide. I don't know. Again, it's not that easy.

**Amar:** Yeah, no, I think, I think you're right. I think maybe what I was thinking there was like, when you said, like, obviously I'm also part of the community, I think that alluded to a binary that like, I think... I think I've been reproducing over the point of this conversation. Which is the, the community organizers and the community, which is what we've been talking about trying to change.

And I guess it's like, I'm trying to tease out in my head, whether there is a point at which the distinction between being an organizer and being part of the community is able to kind of like dissipate. Or whether that is just something that we constantly strive for but probably can't reach.

**Anna:** I feel like this ties into like a kind of question that a lot of groups that we work with have about like, feeling like the, the people most affected by the thing that we're organising against aren't involved or leading in, in our organising. And, or, and, or even just like not feeling like they have connections with those people hardly at [00:12:00] all. And I think partly that's like a, a material thing. Like, the people who have the least political power are the least able to kind of take political action. Like if you're a migrant in an anti raids group, like there's so many more reasons why that's difficult, there's more risk involved. Um, but I think it's also to do with like a lack of political confidence about how to organise with people and build relationships with them. And maybe like an anxiety around having power over people, or being an outsider.

And I feel like, yeah, like in a lot of groups that we work with, I almost feel like that is like an impediment to people being organised. Like I think that comes from a good political motivation of like, thinking about those things and being reflective about that, but I think that, like, sometimes people have so much fear about that that it actually stops us from organising at all. And just getting out there and meeting people and making relationships. Like, people being scared to think, well, if I go and, like, speak to those people, [00:13:00] how will I come across? Or, like, will they want to engage with me? Will they want to engage with this group? What will their politics be? Like I think that can actually be a real barrier. And I just think there's like a, a core question about, like, solidarity. Like, how to actually make solidarity, like, meaningful and real.

**Amar:** I think, like, in particular around, like, whiteness is where like I've come across what you were just talking about. Like during the pandemic or, like, the height of the pandemic was also when we had, like, the resurgence of BLM. 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 color in this group? We need to get more people of color in this group. And in a way that wasn't, wasn't intended to be tokenistic, it was intended to be like, we'll deliver food, you know. We can like pick up your prescriptions and stuff. But what [00:14:00] hadn't actually been ascertained was like, are people not in this group because it's racist? Or is there, are there actually quite big and well established diaspora communities in Peckham who couldn't have survived unless they had some structures and, you know, unnamed, probably, mutual aid in place in any case? Right?

And, and so, yeah. And so it kind of became this like, self flagellating, like, 'oh god, we're so white'. And I was like I know, and I love you, can you calm down?! Like we are, we are serving, like, the needs of the local community, you know, and each other. I was also surviving off those food packages at the time, do you know what I mean? But like, yeah, 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?

**Mea:** I think, like, a big thing for me is, like, accountability. Like, we [00:15:00] all have egos, right, but like trying to come away from that as much as possible. Like when someone... If you are from outside a community, but you're really looking to sort of like support, or, 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 like, don't feel this need to like, rush and have all the answers because that's when things go like, really wrong. And where you end up sort of like, yeah, acting for yourself, or for this like, for maybe an agenda that actually isn't informed by people that it should be informed by.

So, yeah, I think like, just being able to sit in those awkward moments where, like, you might not get things right. Um, and that is so much easier said than done, right? Like, it feels uncomfortable when we, we... when basically we get told about ourselves. Um, but I think that's, that's a big thing in [00:16:00] terms of just, like, creating spaces where, like, we're all growing and reflecting.

And, and, yeah, I guess as much as possible trying to come away from those hierarchies that mean that, like, if you sort of come in and are like, well, you know, I'm a sort of almost higher being, like, you can't come and question me because I know, I'm educated, I have all this knowledge, then that's... it's never going to build and it's just going to end up sort of like imploding in on itself.

So yeah, that for me is a big thing.

**Becks:** Yeah, totally. And I think, like, taking that back to Anna's question, I wonder if, like, pushing ourselves to engage is, like, just realising from the get go we're gonna fuck up if we're coming from outside and that's, like, part of the package. And what matters is, like, how we deal with it rather than, like, Oh no, I'm gonna fuck up so I'd just better not.

Um. But yeah, apart from that thing of like, how to manage being an outsider if you are one, like, what else feels important to people?[00:17:00]

**Amar:** Um. So like. I just feel like talking about how to do community organizing well, um, I would love to know. Uh, I keep trying! Um, I think the thing that has come up time after time after time since I started organizing is care and harm. And like, not just in organizing spaces, like everything from the trade union movement to anti fascism, like sexual harm in particular, but not just that.

And I think every time that, like, I get involved in like a different part of the movement or a different campaign or kind of space, everyone goes in with the best of intentions around like - and this is maybe quite instructive about the limitations of community, but also it's South London so people are solid - but it's like we're all abolitionists. And you know, you know, we're anti carceral, and we're committed to other ways of dealing with harm. And I don't see that much of it in practice.

And I'm, I'm, I think this is one thing that I find curious about the fact that, like, I think this kind of massive [00:18:00] surge in community organizing that has happened, following people's frustrations with electoral politics after Corbyn lost, and also then the kind of need that was there in the pandemic and people kind of clumsily reaching for something around, like, mutual aid and community organizing... That resurgence kind of coincided with the development or like a massive burst of like British abolitionism. And you know, a kind of like abolitionist organizing movement that was taking as its reference point historical examples of abolitionist organizing in Britain rather than just in like the US for example.

But as those things went hand in hand even in abolitionist spaces sometimes I can always find everyone expressing a commitment to dealing with harm in a particular way and dealing with the distribution of labour or workload or burnout in a particular way and I so rarely see it. And every time I do see it, people try to deal with harm through, like, a process, and the process can go [00:19:00] badly. And it can, you know, compound the initial harm that was caused. And then there is also no holding space for the fact that we are clumsily trying to deal with harm and also might fuck up, right?

And I guess I'm curious, like. It's something that I think about all the time, it's like, if we are going to do this well, we need to actually be able to develop those and practice those. I'm curious about, like, what you guys think and where you've seen that practice, if you have, or like, what's stopping us from actually trying to develop those seriously?

It's like a small question.

**Mea:** Yeah, such a small question. Um. I think talking about, like, harm, I think is a lot harder than talking about care. In some ways. Like, I think people... Like, which they're the same thing, right? But I think it's a really important thing because harm is always going to happen in any space that exists. Like on a small scale or a big scale and it needs to be dealt with. And by dealt with that doesn't mean like kicking someone to the curb necessarily, that means like [00:20:00] putting things in place so that the person affected by the harm is the priority whilst also like, yeah, building space for accountability. Um.

Yeah, care feels a lot easier because it's like, you know, I know that we have practices like in our work, like we have money towards like, getting therapy and things like that and having unlimited leave and like those care practices seem very like clear in my head. And I feel like I know, for example, like if a young person does something that harms someone else. I feel like I have a somewhat clear idea in my mind about how I'd want to deal with that. In terms of like, not being like, well, how dare you, never do this again. But making space to like, make sure that the person who's been harmed is acknowledged and like, they have what they need from everyone in that space. But also sitting down with the person that's caused harm and be like, look, do you understand why this is a harmful thing? How can we build from this?[00:21:00]

**Shiri:** Yeah, you have to have tactics of like dealing with harm. And I mean, I can, you know, from, from my experience, because the way, again, talking about Cooperation Town, like, the way we organise is so hands off, that, you know, we kind of, we do check ins with, with the different co ops. So the co ops are completely autonomous to organise however they want on their terms.

But we know that co ops like find different strategies to deal with, I'm going to call it conflict. And you know, harm can be like an outcome of that. But like, you know, some co ops, some groups decided that at the point of conflict, when somebody was feeling very upset or there was like some kind of argument or whatever, they had to sit down and write like a really rigid constitution that really kind of defines what you can and can't do, who's, whatever, like some kind of structure that is, that they can refer to. Sort of like, well, you said something that I don't agree and the constitution says that. Um, other groups don't have that at all. Like if, I think if I came to the co op that I'm in and [00:22:00] proposed that three, four pages constitution with like sub clauses, they'll be like laughing at me. And to be fair, I would be laughing at me because it's like, I don't, you know, that doesn't work for me. And again, like, you know, and at the co op that I'm in, we had a conversation about like what to do when, again, it's more about care, what to do when people literally cannot afford the five quid that it takes, you know, how much scope is in the, the tiny community of the co op to contain somebody's needs and for how long, so we kind of agreed, you know, somebody can not pay for two weeks and basically, there is enough surplus and enough food, whatever.

Um, yeah, what do we do when, when there is harm? You know, I kind of suggested somebody who was bringing up a very, very super divisive, kind of issue that you can only be, you know, for or against. And it was about trans issues, you know. In this point of the conversation, you can only be anti trans or pro trans. And I was like, let's take this conversation out of the co op. We came here to organise around food. [00:23:00] This is literally going to break us. And, and there will be harm. So let's, let's just remove it from here. I don't know. But also acknowledging that I had no idea what to do at that moment, you know, it was an experiment, the whole thing is an experiment, community organising is an experiment, like we don't know what we're doing, we're trying things out.

**Amar:** If you can clip that and put it at the beginning...

**Shiri:** So I learned like this expression that - members in Cooperation Town love it - and I learned it from another co operator from workers co ops that we do things that are safe to try and good for now. And, and it works like magic. When you're like, okay, this big decision, like, is it safe to try? Like, what is the risk? Is it good for now? You know, we might change our mind, but for now let's try it. So it's this kind of approach of, like, saying yes to things. Let's try it. And yeah, I mean, use it. It's really useful. It's like. You know, magic in the room. That's my tip [00:24:00] for organisers.

**Anna:** I think this is like, maybe interesting to think about, like abolitionist politics and community organising. I mean, I don't think that that's like, necessarily implicit in all community organising, but I think yeah, like you were saying, Amar, about, like, how there's been quite a big growth of like, British abolitionist groups, maybe since, like, 2020 and Black Lives Matter and Sarah Everard and all of these kind of catalysts. It feels like, yeah, that that's been quite a big um, shift in British politics.

And yeah, I guess, what do we mean by abolition? Maybe like, we mean literally an end to prisons, police, borders, capitalism. But we also are, like, talking about creating a society where people have relationships of care and accountability and commitment to each other, beyond like the family or beyond these other kind of harmful institutions. Like if we actually want to live in a community. And I think that's why like, yes, often in like [00:25:00] organising or doing political work, we're like, why are we always coming up against this problem of harm? And I think it's because we're building communities. Like that's where if we're trying to be in a community, then we're going to hurt each other, it's going to be messy. It's going to be inconvenient. So I think that question of like, how do we deal with that is really important.

But I think also like, that is, like, an existential question. And I think that, like, yeah, that I don't think it's, like, necessarily that it's happening more to us that are organising. I think it's just that we are just living in an absence of community so much, and it's not that the harm isn't there all the time, it's just that we have outsourced it to these systems of like, the police and stuff, who obviously don't do anything to, like, stop that from happening.

So I think when we actually, like, come face to face with people in a community and trying to, like, deal with how we hurt each other, the problem is so much more evident. But we're actually engaging with it then. We're actually at the point of engaging and trying to deal with it and take it seriously. Which I think feels really like it's difficult and like it's a struggle, but it [00:26:00] feels good to be in that struggle. Like, I feel like when I've been in those situations, I've been like, Oh, this is actually like, we're being serious about this now.

**Amar:** Yeah, I think that is true. And I think, like, implicitly in abolition is construction. It's like, what, what do we build in its place? Like, how do we lay the foundations for that? And so like with We Keep Us Safe Lewisham, which like, I'll be honest, we haven't done loads with it yet. We launched it at one of the anti fascist demos at the Honor Oak pub, which, you know, did a really good job of actually bringing in loads of people who normally might not necessarily be in, like, my particular social circle, for example.

But it became, like, really apparent, like, when we were talking to people about the campaign, that, like, people felt, you know, in the consultation, people had written, as a trans person, as a lesbian, as a woman walking home at night, you know, it doesn't feel very safe. And that was then used to justify increasing police powers and the criminalization of antisocial behavior, right? And so like, when we were talking to people, like, what people would say is, well, well, okay, if it's not the police, then what is it? How do we make this [00:27:00] neighborhood feel like it's kind of safe to walk through?

And so I think we're kind of moving to a place where, like, some of those kind of, like, ideas and, like, almost, like, imaginative projects are going to have to kind of start materially manifesting a bit more within the community. In a way that's going to have to accept that it is quite risky to do that. But in a way that says, you know, if we're serious about, like, abolition becoming a framework that, you know... The people in, like, New Cross and Deptford, like, already don't fuck with the police, like, for very good reason. You know, like, have, like, a history of what it means for that to be the way in which we're kept safe. But, like, I think probably the role of those of us who do hold to abolition as like a framework is to start kind of trying to build towards those things.

**Shiri:** I think if I used the term abolitionism in any of the spaces I'm in, people would be like, I don't know what you're talking about. No idea. It doesn't, it doesn't even sound familiar. Like, I can't even like try to hook it onto something that, [00:28:00] that makes sense to me. But if we say, we don't let cops here, which we do, like the cops are not allowed in Cooperation Town. Don't, don't listen council! Um. Yeah. People are like, yeah, I get it. Yeah. Totally get it. Having said that, you know, like again, there's a kind of a class dimension to it, of course. Some people will be like, no, but the cops are here to protect us. I mean, obviously not the people who suffer from them. Um. And, you know, genuinely feel that being on the Safer Neighbourhood Forum or whatever it's called - which is kind of VCS organisations and the council and the police, whatever, sit together and talk about like, where, I don't know, people hide drugs or where they find knives and whatever - is a useful way. And I'm like, yeah, you, you do you, but cops are not to come into this building.

**Mea:** It's interesting, just something you said there about, like, the people who are like harmed not wanting it. Cause actually something that I've found at times that, like, can be a really difficult thing to navigate is people who [00:29:00] have lived experience of state harm, still wanting and relying on those institutions.

And it's like, when someone's, like, standing in front of you and saying that, it's like, it's like a hard conversation to have sometimes because you don't, well, I certainly don't ever want to, like, invalidate that lived experience. And I can understand, like, especially like parents, they're sort of- How deep that feeling of protection must run. But sometimes the methods of protection are actually like, lead to more harm. So like, you know, say invalidating a person's identity or yeah, relying on the police to sort a conflict or a harm.

I guess it just has me thinking about like how to have conversations about abolition, which I feel so strongly about, whilst also like navigating people who might actually understand what it means, but don't want it. Even if... yeah, I mean, obviously I'm biased, right? But like, even if like, it would logically benefit them to [00:30:00] not have the police. Um, so yeah, that's something that has just been fresh in my mind at the moment.

**Anna:** Um, Mea I was wondering if you could say a bit more about No Police in Schools. On this question of like abolitionist politics and how you put that across to people that you're organising with or like, yeah, the kids and the parents and the teachers that you're organising with in your campaigning, like, yeah, what does that look like? What's the kind of explicit politics of what you're doing, like, how do you think people see that?

**Mea:** I think what we've seen actually is like, the, young people and the parents and the community members that we work with that have had experience of like police being in schools, don't want them there. And then it's kind of like headteachers, more senior members of staff in schools that are maybe more pro police in schools. So I think like, generally when people... [00:31:00] although like I know I was saying before, like, there are instances where people do experience state harm and still... but still sort of feel like they have to rely on the institutions that harm them. In this case, I think people are so taken aback by, like, why, why are there police in schools? I don't understand.

**Shaz:** What, what does it look like when there's police, like, what is, what is police in schools?

**Mea:** Well, I mean, that's kind of what feels like is the constant... like, we're all trying to constantly understand that. So that can look like a police officer literally having an office in a school, teaching, is it PHSE lessons?

**Shaz:** As if! Oh my god.

**Mea:** Yeah, like, but, and this is the thing, it's like so deeply unclear and I think they do that intentionally to like confuse people. Um, so if you ask a school or do like a freedom of information request, you, might find out that there's not a police officer in school. However, there is a police officer that just likes to have a [00:32:00] gander around the corridors every now and then. Like, so there is a police officer.

So it can look really different. It can look like someone standing at the school gates. It can look like an officer, basically jumping out of the bushes and being like, I'm watching you to the young people, you know. Like it really, honestly, like the way that they... They just find new, I don't even want to say creative because that sounds way too positive, but like new ways of policing these young people constantly.

And I think a shift that we're sort of maybe thinking about more is, like, also looking at how it's not just about police but also about like policing as the word more generally. Like the things that are put into place in schools that, that mean that young people are being policed. But, um...

**Shaz:** And it, and it makes me think... I don't know if it's like, care experienced young people, that are often so forgotten about. That I know in, like, crisis intervention care homes, the, the local one I know in North Wales, the local police [00:33:00] officer comes to the care home to introduce themselves to new young people. And you're like, oof. And that's been happening. I mean, that was 12 years ago. So, yeah.

**Mea:** And yeah, it keeps continuously happening. And I think maybe there's a bit of a shift now where like, because of how, how peddled this idea is about like youth violence and like... Maybe when we started the campaign, people were more shocked, whereas now it's like, oh yeah, well, because kids are doing this, that's why we need police in schools. So, like I said, we're, we're in the process of sort of thinking about how to move, move forward in the campaign. Like we've been, we established the campaign in like 2019. And it's gone on many... it like, feels like it's gone on a few ebbs and flows. Um...

**Anna:** And you're totally downplaying the fact that you stopped 20 new cops getting employed in Greater Manchester schools.

**Mea:** Oh yeah sorry forgot to say about that. [Laughter]

**Anna:** That massive campaign victory.

**Mea:** Yeah, [00:34:00] sorry, that's a discredit to also the other people that I've campaigned with!

Um, yeah, and it has been like, I think. It's like, sometimes it can be really hard to like, really celebrate those wins because you know that they are finding different ways to like, be like, oh yeah, no, we've stopped this because we actually decided that. Like, they'll never... They never gave the campaign credit, for example, for those 20 officers not being put into Manchester schools. But we like know that they are finding different ways to police young people. So it feels like, yeah, we want to, like, sit in this and be like, that was because we came together and we listened to people who had experienced this and then those... It was like a whole word of mouth thing. So then, you know, 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. Whereas before it was like very underhand, very sneaky.

Um, [00:35:00] so yeah, but it can be hard saying it because it just feels like the battle's a bit never ending. And that was like when, when we spoke like before, like one of my questions was about sort of how we, how we take on the ebbs and flows of community organising, like, you know, lived experience, lived experience of harm. And just existing in the world and being seen as your identity is political. You know, like, that means that you do burn out and you do need to take a step back and that can... You know, it just makes me think about how, how we, like, keep things going without, like, pushing ourselves beyond this point. You know, I've not been doing this for very long and I sometimes sit in like, complete exhaustion, like, wow. Like, how do we, do I, keep doing this? Both as a collective and also [00:36:00] as an individual?

And like, moments like the win make me think of that more. Which maybe sounds a bit depressing, but because it's like, it's often after those wins, which I've heard quite a few organisations reflect on, that you actually end up having quite a big dip. Um.

**Anna:** Yeah, I think this is like a... yeah, super big question that like a lot of us face around just any kind of political organising, is like, it's so knackering. And like you're saying, like, there's so many ways in which like the state or the forces of capital respond to the things that we're doing and like, co opt them, or kind of claim things that actually we've won as like, 'oh, we were going to do that all along'. Like, it makes you feel like what you're doing isn't significant or powerful, but actually like, a lot of the time we like lose sight of actually how much change we are making and how much... Just by resisting. Like imagine if we weren't doing that, imagine if we weren't doing all the little millions of things that we're doing to try and, like, fight this shit. Like it's massive.

And I [00:37:00] think like maybe a big part of, like, being in this for the long haul is like thinking about how we can lose well, as well? Like, how we can lose something and like still be in a position where we can keep fighting. And I think we can also win badly, like I think we can win something and then think, like, oh, it's over or like... Yeah, like, how can we put ourselves in a position that we're able to keep fighting, if we win, if we lose this thing, like what are we going to do next? And, like, having enough still in us to, like, do the next thing.

**Amar:** And I do also think it's important to say that, like, I think we can mitigate against, you know, those kind of like, massive highs of activity and then the kind of drop. And I think we can put structures in place that mean maybe it's not the case that we only see each other when we're doing really hard emotionally difficult work. It's also maybe sometimes we're socializing.

But just at the end of the day, like most of us are like necessarily having to be loyal to the need to make rent first and foremost. And that does just inhibit [00:38:00] the care that we're able to actually integrate, the time that we're able to actually put aside. And I think it's like, a kind of like really hard thing to grapple with is like... the fact that, like, there are always things that we have to do better to encode care into the ways in which we organize. And I think we're just... I think 'the movement' insofar as it exists is quite shit at it generally, but there also is like a reality which is that like, 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, you know, ideally dealt with, and in which, you know, we all were able to fulfill the needs of each other and stuff, then, well, we would have abolished wage labour. So, like, there's also that kind of, like, difficult reality is that, like, what people deserve in terms of how they're organizing and stuff, it's that knowledge that actually, that is still what we're fighting for.

I think there's also something as well, though, about the fact that, like, the... The ways in which we organize do determine the political horizons that are available to us as well. [00:39:00] And so like, I think what often happens in like emotional and high stress situations in response to crisis, which is often when need becomes apparent... Like a need to stop council homes being sold up, a need to stop 20 policemen being stationed in schools, a need for like, there to be like, washing machines or whatever it is, right? Like whenever that need arises, often it can be in a time of crisis.

And so you have simultaneously a hive of activity, the desire to build an infrastructure beyond that... To do some community construction, so it's not just an action, so it *is* kind of community organizing and community construction... As that is happening, I often find there's also a centralizing drive that kind of naturally starts to happen. Which is that the people who at the beginning have, like, committed so much... And I do think that when we talk about community organizing, like, it still is like, normally like a small set of people who get things going, right? And when that happens, power starts to centralize because the amount that people are giving in terms of their time or in terms of [00:40:00] resources - not necessarily because they can, like often people can't and that's part of the problem, right?! - but like, it then has the effect of foreclosing the political possibility of the work that's being done.

And so, like, probably one of the most important things in terms of doing community organizing well is, like, from the start, we have to constantly be thinking about how to, like, delegate at first, like, tasks out. And like, pretty quickly, decision making 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 like a particular area, or who are like, fighting like... rallying tenants in a particular tower block, for example. Like, as soon as possible, like, 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, like, the political possibility, that community you're trying to construct in response to crisis, necessarily has, like, written in its beginning, its end.

And that's also part of the burnout, is that every time we build a new network or a new [00:41:00] community that is in response to crisis, at some point it kind of falls apart and another one is built, right? And it's also that constant process is also what's wearing us.

**Shiri:** Yeah, to kind of avoid that, what you described, like the emergence of, like, the group of people in position of power. The Vanguard. You know, that's why, you know, I felt really strongly that there, there has to be a structure that is - you know, if it's not there, we need to invent it - but that from the beginning sets out the kind of, the relationships in the group. And I felt that the co op structure, you know, based on the seven cooperative principles - which were invented 150 years ago, or whatever, by some people up in Rochdale - um, and they still hold. You know, I, I personally go back to them, which is probably the nearest I have to, like, uh, kind of a founding tech, you know, like a religion.

Yeah, and that, that structure kind of allows for the most participation, the most [00:42:00] democratic kind of decision making, the most, kind of, containing the loudest voices and amplifying the quieter voices that... That's the best, the best I could think of. Or that was available, you know, when I was looking for a structure. So, so that exactly like you said, so as soon as we start the action, whatever it is, it already is aiming to, you know, build a new world in the shell of the old, from, from the get go. Um, there's no point building a new leader. If we don't want there to be leaders.

**Anna:** Oh, you guys are so ace. I feel like we could just carry on sitting here and talking for like four days about community organizing. Um, but we're probably about to run out of time. So, has anyone got any last thoughts?

**Shaz:** So you mentioned abolition, so I wondered if you could give us like a 30 second...

**Amar:** 30 second?

**Anna:** Abolition in 30 seconds.

**Amar:** Abolition in 30 [00:43:00] seconds. Um. So like, abolition as a term has its origins in, like, the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Um, and has since been the language that has been used to describe the ways that people already are, every day, resisting carceral institutions like prisons, like borders, and like the police. There are others. I'm a big fan of abolishing the family too. Um. Also, like, to think about, like, anti capitalism through that lens, you know, the abolition of wage labour as well, the abolition of, like, the rentier class, the abolition of landlordism as well.

Um, and I think that actually one of the reasons that the language of abolition has become dominant is because the language of Marxism hasn't exactly necessarily been that accessible to a lot of people as well. Um, and there is a tradition of Eurocentrism and whiteness that has been attached to, like, Marxist traditions in Britain. And there is [00:44:00] conversely a tradition of, like, migrant, sex work, black, POC, like, often women led, you know, working class movements who could kind of come to identify the most with abolition. Like, for various very obvious reasons.

When we talk about abolition, 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 practice in our daily lives. When you see harm and you don't immediately call the cops on it, that is also practicing abolition. When you don't just distribute care in your community in relation to blood relatives, that is also practicing family abolition. Like all of those kinds of things. So yeah, it's a once kind of a daily practice and also like a utopian political horizon that we prefigure in the ways that we organize.

**Mea:** That was great. [Laughter]

**Anna:** Sean Bonney says: fuck the police, all other words are contained there. [Laughter].[00:45:00]

 Okay. Thank you so much to Amar and Mea and Shiri for coming to talk to us today. It's been great. And yeah, fuck the police. Free Palestine. [Laughter]

[Music: Aum by King Monday]

**Shaz:** Ah, thanks for listening. Another interesting chat, for me certainly, I hope for you as well. And just to say again, we're Seeds for Change, a little small organisation up north. Check out our website, we've got loads of useful resources. Get in touch if you want workshops, if you're a campaigner, activist or organiser working for social or environmental justice, it would be, yeah, great to hear from you. And thanks again to Rosa Luxemburg Foundation for funding this podcast. [00:46:00]