Starting a radical political organization? Two mistakes to avoid

by David Camfield
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The radicalization in the US that's led to the growth of left political groups (especially but not only the Democratic Socialists of America) hasn't been replicated in Canada. But we could see more efforts to form radical political organizations here. My experience in Winnipeg in the last two and a half years has reminded me of two important things about launching such groups that I knew but failed to take seriously when they mattered most, at the beginning. First, clarity about what the group's project is really matters. Second, it's vital to assemble a committed core of people before launching a group. Both of these often matter in launching other kinds of groups too (and when relaunching an existing group), but they're crucial for people trying to create new radical left political organizations.

In November 2015, Matthew Brett and I invited a number of people we knew to launch a project to mobilize against the Progressive Conservatives "without cheerleading for the NDP" in the run-up to the April 2016 provincial election. Our letter of invitation said "If the PCs are elected, we will aim to build a broad coalition, network or group that will push for the mass mobilization to stop PC attacks instead of waiting for the next election. If the NDP are re-elected, we will aim to build a group that will start to challenge the NDP from the left."

To my surprise, at the first meeting there was a sentiment for a group that would do more than organize against austerity, for some kind of radical left political organization. I was excited about the prospect that we might be able to build such a badly-needed group here. That's how Solidarity Winnipeg (SW) was born.

What I think of as SW 1.0 was a very loose group with little clarity about its politics, purpose or how to carry out its work. Members didn't have to commit to do anything. There was no way to democratically decide if someone should be allowed to join or not. It was a frustrating experience for many people who were involved in it (me included). In December 2016 a number of members successfully argued for SW to raise the bar and become a "group of radical organizers that values and fosters clear politics and effective ways of working," one whose members would be expected to participate actively in the group's work and pay dues. SW 2.0, through until the end of the summer of 2017, tried to be a political organization of anti-capitalists active in community and union organizing. In September 2017, recognizing that we weren't that kind of group, we scaled back and decided that the purpose of what I think of as SW 3.0 was to lay the basis for such a political organization.

With hindsight, I made two important mistakes at the very start [1]. First, I embraced the idea of building a left political organization instead of the anti-austerity community organizing group that the initial meeting was called to discuss. Second, I helped to launch the group very quickly, before a core of people with a shared understanding of the politics and purpose of the group who were willing and able to work together collectively to move it forward had been assembled (I remember Krystal Payne pointing out to me in May 2016 the difference between SW and the process leading up to the launch of Solidarity Halifax, described here .

Why was it a mistake to take on building a radical political organization with the people who came together in Winnipeg in November 2015? Almost no one there other than me had been part of one, and few people understood the difference between 1) a radical political organization committed to social transformation that was choosing to make anti-austerity work its priority and 2) a broader anti-austerity community organizing effort. There wasn't much political agreement to unite people. This led to a lot of confusion. I didn't understand that the initial sentiment to form something other than an anti-austerity group came more from radicals wanting to have a home with like-minded people than it did from any understanding of what a very small radical political organization should do (including why its members should do community organizing with other people within broader coalitions or action-oriented groups, rather than on their own).

I knew it was risky to launch a group so quickly and with so little clarity. But it seemed like the need to pull something together before the PCs won the provincial election (as they did) made the risk worthwhile. I figured it'd be messy but that after the PCs won we'd be thrown into anti-austerity organizing and that experience would help the group sort itself out. The PCs won, but they didn't immediately go on the offensive and SW didn't start to sort itself out until the end of 2016. Not having a coherent core contributed to the confusion of SW 1.0 and made SW 2.0 unviable. It made the experience especially difficult for the most committed members.

The big lesson here is that taking short cuts leads to long delays. Forming what in some left traditions is called an organizing committee, with the objective of clarifying the political project and assembling a core of people committed to working together on it, might have gotten us further than rushing into launching an organization with little shared politics, an unclear project, and no core group [2].

[1]. Why did I make these mistakes? My desire to be part of a broader radical left political organization rather than a tiny socialist collective trumped my understanding that launching one would take clarity about some basic things that most leftists in Canada today lack. I also wrongly assumed that the initial enthusiasm meant that a core group would come together fairly easily over time.

[2]. There's more to forming a core group than understanding a common politics and project and being able to work collectively with some consistency. Who's in the core (for example, what experiences are represented), and what political relationships they have with other people, also matter.