

The Value of a Broad Radical Approach for Social Movement Groups

This is the text of a handout written for members of the Winnipeg group provisionally named the Trans Solidarity Working Group, aka the “Tuesday Night Group” to suggest the value of organizing against the far right and oppression on a political basis that’s neither liberal nor far left.

I’d like to explain why I think a “broad radical” group is possible and desirable.

One of my formative political experiences was the movement for abortion rights. In Toronto, the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics (OCAC) was the key movement organization. It organized mass action for the decriminalization of abortion, the defence of freestanding abortion clinics, and against the federal government’s move to re-criminalize abortion after the Criminal Code restrictions were struck down by the Supreme Court – key immediate issues at the time. The tactics OCAC used included mass demonstrations and mass direct action to defend the clinics against blockades by bigots (rather than relying on cops).

OCAC was guided by a different politics than the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL). CARAL relied on lobbying and legal challenges to try to decriminalize abortion. In Toronto, CARAL was a small group of mostly middle-class women that did lobbying and fundraising. In contrast, OCAC was mostly working-class women, many of whom were lesbian or bisexual, and was an organization of organizers. OCAC would work with CARAL when this was felt to be useful but was always independent.

OCAC demanded “not simply the legal right to abortion but the wide range of public resources and services — from birthing centres to multilingual contraceptive and sexuality counselling — with which women really can exercise the right to control their reproduction.” As they wrote, “Most fundamentally, we fight to win not merely the right to choose, but to transform the social and material conditions under which choices are made. That is why we see the fight for abortion as part of other struggles for equal pay, universal daycare, and an end to sexual harassment and violence.” It actively opposed heterosexism and racism too. It worked with AIDS Action Now! and other groups. OCAC’s politics were radical: they didn’t see ending the legal restrictions on abortion access as anywhere close to enough to achieve bodily autonomy, and aimed for deep-rooted, far-ranging changes in society. In contrast, CARAL’s politics, whose goal was eliminating legal restrictions on abortion access within the existing social order, were liberal.

OCAC aimed to organize a wide range of people to participate in its actions to win the immediate demands it was fighting for, regardless of where they stood on other issues. OCAC welcomed people who agreed with its political approach to join regardless of how they identified politically, how well they understood its politics, or how much experience they had. This made it a broad group, which was essential for its success.

Many of the leading members of OCAC were socialists (members of Toronto Socialist Feminist Action were central). Fortunately, they understood what OCAC was and wasn’t. Their politics

informed their work with OCAC but they didn't try to get OCAC to adopt explicitly socialist politics or positions that only socialists or other people with far left politics would support. That would have narrowed OCAC and weakened its ability to do what it did so well.

Obviously our group is very different than OCAC, but I think that whatever we become we would benefit from adopting its broad radical approach.

David

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