

We must win; we can't win; how we will win

By Nick Durie, published on October 22nd, 2009

Understanding motive forces and the motors of change

In almost any training session on how to organise, the concept of whether to pick a campaign (for organising purposes), and the merits of different campaigns, and what criteria to choose the most important campaign for organising purposes is examined. Almost every activists knows (well, almost every activist *SHOULD* know), whether they are active in a trade union or workplace organisation, or residents association or community organisation, or whether they are trying to kickstart such organisation, that a successful campaign must be **winnable**. That is an interesting concept and one that the more impressionistic left will argue contradicts 'anarchism's' or 'socialism's' need to demand the impossible. While of course this particular objection is mere rhetorical moralising and impressionistic, it is an interesting question in that it posits the conflict between our need as a class seeking our own emancipation, and the possibility of pathways to victory which require us to take steps that at present are not winnable. We would do well then to examine what we know about ladders of engagement, critical mass, conformity and leadership dynamics, as it is important for revolutionaries to frame our actions not solely in the here and now of campaigning necessity, but also to visualise how this work moves our class forward towards revolution, and how best to optimise for this outcome in the here and now.

Hip marketing guru Seth Godin outlined in a recent best-selling book the concept of project dip. The idea is a simple one: there comes a time in the life of a project where enthusiasm begins to fade, challenges are reached, and the possibility of success begins to seem like a more uphill struggle. It's a dynamic anyone involved in a long term campaign has faced, and it's one that can bedevil many people. Godin argues that successful leaders are able to assess whether it is worth staying the course, and toughing out the tough times to win big rewards by getting to the end. He thinks leaders need to take hard-headed assessments about whether this dip that they are experiencing is the dip to tough out, or whether the rewards would be greater for those who quit and toughed out some other dip. This is a useful concept and one that dovetails neatly into discussions of critical mass. The tipping point, a book which sought to codify what caused exponential critical mass to develop in the life of campaigns, sales drives and projects and initiatives by means of outlining the type of people who helped generate this critical mass, is worth bearing in mind when discussing these ideas. Author, Gladwell, argues that three principles underlie this; three types of people are critical to a successful spike in critical mass, Gladwell argues: connectors (people who bring people together), mavens (people with expert knowledge in abundance), and salespeople (who sell the idea to others); the context or environment in which this happens is important. So too, how sticky the message is, is seen as vital. These two concepts, project dip and 'the tipping point' (where critical mass can crescendo into exponential success), are actually unitary, insofar as they remain a helpful metaphor rather than just buzz; they are helpful because we must come to understand what it is that motivates people, and how we can motivate people to make things happen. The barriers to victory are more psychological than they are empirical. In truth our class holds all the weapons. The ruling class only

commands the ability to issue orders. When it comes down to it, with anything in the world, our class makes it happen. And that includes our own oppression. That is not to make some existentialist etienne-de-la-boete-esque rant; subjective factors create objective manifestations. But mass psychology is the crucial factor in determining whether something is winnable or not.

In the organiser model, the organiser is encouraged to view individuals not as personalities and pals, but as a dynamic within the struggle. Organisers are taught that they should analyse the social interactions of groups, and look at people's personalities. Leaders in social groups may be vital to get inside in an organising campaign. And it is vital that the campaign is led from the inside. So it is vital that skills, commitment and capacity are audited, and that, as far as possible, those involved are pushed and facilitated to take on responsibility. What is also understood is that those who take on some responsibility, will be apt to take on some more. More apt than those who have yet to take on responsibility. There is a truism: if you want something done ask a busy person. As socialists that truism seems to cut against the heart of what we are about. Mass democracy requires mass participation. How can we seem to rely then on only those who have become reliable. This is where the concept of a ladder of engagement becomes absolutely critical. The organiser in this model maintains a spreadsheet of all of their contacts. On this spreadsheet is a map of personal development, broken up into stages. Individual contacts have been assigned stages in their progress towards autonomy and autarkic campaigning. This sounds mechanistic to the usual ad hoc methods of socialists today, but if we think about it, it is just a codification for what we already understand. In general we recognise that someone who signs a petition for the first time, will not tomorrow be D-locking themselves to the ministry of defence buildings. There may be some exceptions, but it is generally understood that for people to commit to a project, and take personal risk, and personally involve themselves, they need to attend some meetings, get into the swing of things, meet people, form relationships, take some personal sacrifices which encourage those people to get more bought into the goals of the movement before they are willing to take some more (and bigger) ones.

The class struggle as a whole, despite the recent upturn due to the changed circumstances of the market and state balance sheets, is at a low ebb. What this means is that if we are to visualise the dynamics at play, the majority of people of our class are very low down the rungs of that ladder of engagement. There is 27% union density in the UK, and collective bargaining agreements in place at 52% of public sector workplaces, and 17% of private sector workplaces, so in principle we may be down, but we are not out. However in the vast majority of these workplaces this amounts to a membership of trade unions that approaches something like taking out contents insurance. It bears little resemblance to our activist base, and certainly were you to ask a trade union member to go leafleting for their branch (let alone take further action), you'd receive few positive outcomes in many union workplaces. Such strike capacity as we maintain as a class is generally in the passive, 'it's a day off' variety, than having many willing volunteers for pickets. In our communities it is common to hear the retort, when action is asked for, that 'we don't do that.' So when we ask for an assessment that something is winnable, it's in this context. Most of the time it probably just isn't.

A comprehensive programme of reorganisation based on the organiser model, and an understanding of project dip

So the role of an organiser in the organiser model is to map a target constituency for organisation, find out the natural leaders and social dynamics, map the skill-set and ladder of engagement of individuals, and commence a generalised push to develop skills, capacity and buy-in, amongst constituents, adopting campaigns which are chosen to do this. We all know the checklist by now for choosing these campaigns, or if we don't we should and our organisations ought to have already taught us.

Winnable?

Collective or individual issue?

Constituency willing to take some form of action?

SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-specific)

It's important to understand then that certain campaigns cannot be won, as much as they might need to be won. For example in Glasgow recently the council has embarked on a school closures policy. In 2006 most of the ad hoc resistance to school closures petered out and the council won its closures. This process was repeated this year with the next wave. Next year yet more schools will be closed. In principle we need to stop schools closures. But in reality we don't have the weapons in our arsenal of collective organisation. So when we fight a necessary, yet rearguard campaign against closures, it's in the knowledge that most communities are not organised. Campaign skills are few and far between. We face a psychological barrier to organisation in that for most people campaigning is something other people do, not them. All this, and in tandem the fact that the council will save real money on these closures, and will get re-elected anyway.

In this context we might be forgiven for thinking that 'winnable' criteria has not been satisfied. But at the same time the issue is a collective one, and one where ordinary people are willing to take action. So our involvement in this campaign (because few campaigns spontaneously motivate to the extent that 'hot button' issues can) is a given, but the outcome that we are seeking has also be tempered with hard headed realism. If we are to succeed in a revolutionary struggle, our workplaces and communities must be collectively organised, and the grassroots experience of democracy must be tempered with a grassroots ambition and drive for something better.

An example from the life and times of famous community organiser Saul Alinsky is often used to illustrate this particular point. Alinsky had been organising a block of flats where the landlord meant to put the rent up, and where repairs were not being carried out and tenants faced a variety of problems and difficulties. Initially tenants were sceptical that anything could be done to resolve their plight. Everyone was brought together and started to meet to find areas of common concern; no rent rises was seen as the point to focus on. As organisation began tenants came to see small victories which led to other small victories. As this process took off tenants went from being resigned to rent rises and cockroaches, to wanting to shoulder the landlord out of the picture and run the block for themselves. As one Glasgow comrade explained this example from me, tenants went from asking for hamburgers, to demanding

steak. It's just an example to illustrate but the point is clear. We become subjectively aware of our own power when we begin to exercise it.

There are two ways to learn a concept. You can learn the thing in principle, the theory. And then you can learn the thing experientially, in practice. Some people are capable of rationalising theory into their own practice. But many aren't. Leftists expect working people to hold internally consistent ideas, and for the logic of one argument not to contradict the logic of another argument. Time and again however, when this perception is tested, people prove that they can hold onto competing theories which directly contradict each other at the same time. Knowledge which is derived experientially is a powerful motor of future action. We see this played out in addictive behaviours, in people doing things which are not rational but have always been done (eg in Zapatista communities nutritionalists have been elucidating the idea that soya beans contain around 50% protein, but traditional black beans hold only around 7% protein; without major price differentials most peasants continue to eat black beans, because that's what they know). Tied to knowledge acquired experientially, as the example also illustrates is that people are creatures of habit. Those who have eaten white bread and have positive associations with white bread, may be reluctant to suddenly start eating wholemeal rye bread with sunflower seeds. Likewise in the 1970s, one out, all out was not just a theoretical idea, it was a working class cultural principle and something that was understood, and inculcated in practice, experientially. Further, it also illustrates another principle. Marx observed that people are creatures of habit, but in the 20th century psychologists further observed that people have a desire to conform socially. The Milgram experiments demonstrated that people would literally kill each other to avoid breaking with their emotional need to socially conform. Far from being a depressing series of observations, these three general principles are actually the deadliest weapon in the hands of the organiser.

Seth Godin advises us that what distinguishes change-making leaders from the rest of us is their ability to sense when it is a good time to battle thru the project dip we see in most initiatives, and when it's a good idea to quit. Now if we understand that at the moment many of our goals are just not winnable with the personnel we have, but we also know that in order to get people more bought-in to a campaign or initiative we must take them along a ladder of engagement. We know that this is best effected with collective grievances and collective responses to collective issues. We also know that people learn, grow, understand more thru experiential knowledge than purely theoretical knowledge. Further we know that the desire to conform is a big social pressure, and that social groups have individuals who can define their direction and are listened to more than others. Further too, we also know that people are creatures of habit. They will do what they have done in the past before. We know too that maintaining an audit of current skills, competencies and actions undertaken by individuals across a constituency can allow us to manage all of this process.

Now if we are to connect this to the context of critical mass, we also know that we can short-circuit some of this process (if we get lucky and the conditions are right, or we focus hard on development), when there are people who connect people to people, bring important information to bear, and sell ideas well. These people are the leading

dynamic elements. Because we know this we should be on the lookout for those sorts of people, and we should be trying to develop these skills and capacities.

Critical mass then, is a question of levers. Generating it, and motivating people, is a question of taking people along a journey. Critical mass in itself is not the motor of change, but obviously it can be helpful for sweeping people up along a ladder of engagement. The anti-war protests of 2003 created a large number of political activists for example. A new workers movement, and a new labour movement needs to apply these lessons developmentally. If project dip is to be overcome, we need consistent mapping, data analysis, and a focus on human resources, that understands that people will do what they have done already to some extent (in Alinsky's rules for radicals the author argues vociferously that introducing news ideas works best when they are couched in easily understood old ideas; this is the same principle), and they will do it best when the social motor of conformism is propelling them to take this action. This is the best way to move people along a ladder of engagement.

Against Impressionism: Towards Science.

If we are to understand the strength of our class as the strength of institutional motors, conformism, and our experiential knowledge base, aside from issues of finance and strategy, we will be moving further and further towards a generalised understanding and appreciation of 'operations' and a revolution in political activism which might actually move us forward. There is no more powerful drive for social animals, than the power of our social conditioning mobilised to encourage others to take steps along a personal journey. Once those steps have been taken, they will be remembered, and the next time they are taken, they will be less uncharted and those workers taking them will do so in greater confidence. If we want to repair the power of our class and begin the process of facing the enemy and tearing lumps from that fatty capitalist edifice, we have to understand these social motors, and we have to be serious, hard-headed and empirically driven in our quest to turn the struggle around. Presenting ideas is never as motive a force as living those ideas and seeing their validity written in the personal schema of one's lived experience. Ideas shift, but old habits die hard.

Isn't it time we abandoned impressionism and focussed on the motive forces of our class? We need comprehensive re-organisation and re-orientation. If socialists aren't going to lead that process from the front, no-one will and we **will** be defeated, and defeated more comprehensively than in the bloodiest defeats of social partnership. There is no option left to us now than to focus on the hard science of marketing and mass psychology, and anything less hard-headed is not optimised for victory. As such it is optimised for defeat. We must be optimised for victory; we need no more failure to evidence the abject impressionism of our weakness. We face the annihilation of a century of gains in a decade of austerity. There is no more time for messing around, and no more time for careworn romantic nonsense.

That is why we must focus on the organiser model, remembering that people are creatures of habit, conformity is a social force, and that people are driven not by the many, but by the law of the few, and that we need to inculcate those leadership characteristics into the whole of our class thru experiential development with a managerial focus that

puts the capitalists to shame. It is time we stamped a generalised theory of organisational operations onto the mind of every socialist, experientially, and ridiculed the ideas that have gotten us nowhere, for the ossified 19th century communications strategies that they are. Suchlike 'strategies' (such as they are) are more than ever are a source of our failure, and a barrier to progress. Let's stamp our movement with the mantle of hard science, and start winning hard victories, that move us forward to hard power. That's how we will forge a workers movement stuffed with hard-headed socialists. This is no time for dalliance or defeatism. It's time for tangible popular victories. It's time for the hard science of class struggle.