

A model for organising ma



● Viv Sharples

This basic organising structure was used for both the WTO protests in Seattle last November (N30), and the IMF/World Bank demonstrations in Washington DC on April 16 and 17 (A16). It aims to be empowering, democratic, flexible and inclusive.

Organising Collective

In the months leading up to the demonstrations, an Organising Collective made up of rotating spokespeople representing each Working Group made decisions by consensus about the structure, budget and logistics of the events, and ensured that Working Groups were co-ordinating effectively and not duplicating each other's work. The meetings were open to all, but decision-making was limited to Working Group spokespeople. At the beginning of each meeting, the facilitator outlined the decision-making process for people unfamiliar with the idea of consensus. For the A16 action,

minutes from general and working group meetings were posted the next day to list serves, and the web site (www.A16.org) was kept well updated as plans progressed. (In this regard it was way better organised and more efficient than the preparations for N30.)

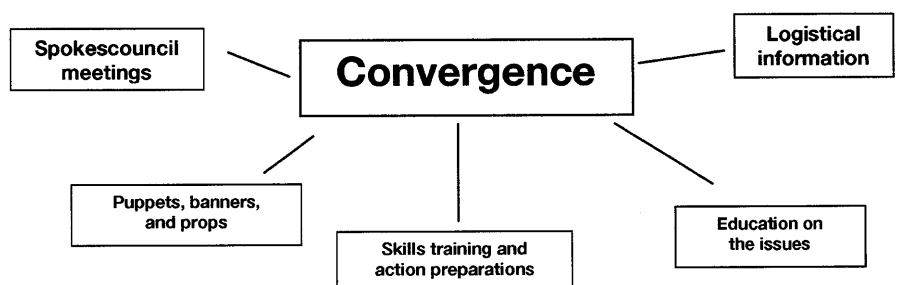
Convergence

Over a week before the actions, a Convergence/Skills Intensive/Festival of Resistance took place: 8 to 10 days of training, workshops, educational forums, construction of props, spokescouncils, and land actions, leading up to the days of mass direct action.

Colourful, chaotic and crowded, the Convergence played a vital role in allowing people from near and far to converge and connect with each

other, register, find out about what was going on and how to hook in, get housing, form affinity groups, shape the action co-ordination, prepare for the actions, learn and practice new skills, eat together, and create beautiful flags, banners, giant puppets and other props.

We learned that we need many spaces big enough to hold huge meetings and lots of large training exercises, and also not to store all the props, medical supplies, etc, in one place, as it makes us more vulnerable to police raids and closures such as the one that took place in DC the day before the big A16 actions.

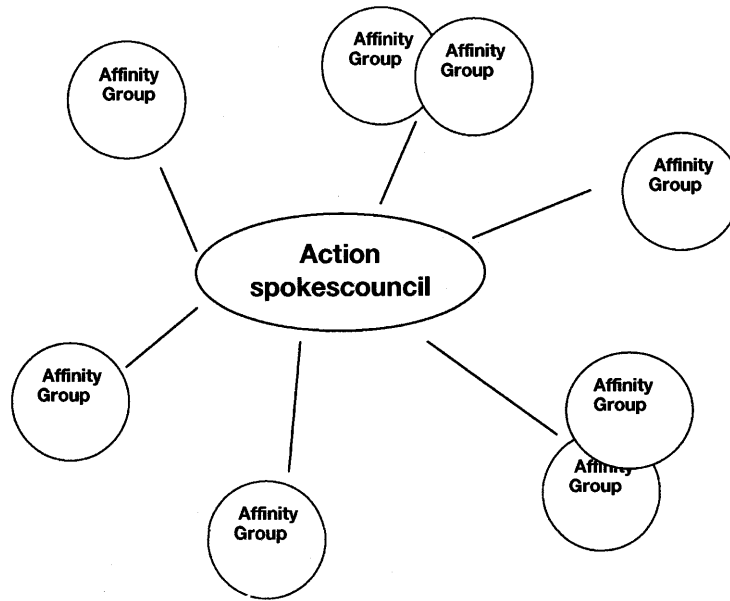


Mass nonviolent direct action

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Action Spokescouncil

The Action Spokescouncil co-ordinated action tactics and scenarios and used consensus to make all decisions. The Spokescouncil met each night of the Convergence. As with Organising Collective Spokescouncil meetings, it was an open meeting, with decision-making limited to spokespeople. The latter sat toward the centre of the room, with others sitting on the outside. People could only speak through their representative.



Affinity Groups

Direct actions were based on self-sufficient, autonomous affinity groups (AGs): small groups of 3-20 people who take part in the actions and support each other. People often form affinity groups with friends, co-workers, or others with whom they share a common identity or interest. These small groups provide emotional support, flexibility in reacting to changing conditions during the action, create a space where each person's voice can be heard and taken into account, make it harder to infiltrate, and enable group self-sufficiency with regard to logistical and support needs before, during and after the actions.

Roles within affinity groups usually included people prepared for arrest, support co-ordinator, legal observer, medic/first aid, meeting facilitator, and spokesperson for "Action Spokescouncil meetings". Some affinity groups also had a police liaison person, videographers/photographer, media spokesperson, tactical team, and communication person with radio/cell phone.

Each affinity group empowered a spokesperson to represent them at the Action Spokescouncil meetings. Many affinity groups also joined with other groups from the same region/organisation/ideological leanings to form a "cluster" that co-ordinated and took part in the mass actions together.

In both Seattle and Washington DC, the area around the meeting sites was divided into pie slices, and clusters of AG's took responsibility for blockading a particular slice of the pie in whatever ways they chose, be it locking down to each other or to objects, sitting down and linking arms, having a street party, creating barricades, etc.

Action guidelines*

All participants in this particular action are asked to agree to these Action Guidelines. Having this basic agreement allows people from many backgrounds, movements, and beliefs to work together.

They are not philosophical or political requirements or judgments about the validity of some tactics over others. These guidelines are basic agreements that create a basis for trust so that we can work together for this action and know what to expect from each other.

We will use no violence, physical or verbal, toward any person.

We will carry no weapons.

We will not bring or use any alcohol or illegal drugs.

We will not destroy property.

*From the Mobilisation for Global Justice Action Guide

Training

All participants were strongly encouraged to take nonviolent direct action and legal/jail solidarity training, which took place three times a day at the Convergence and in many cities before both the actions. Other training was also offered, including low tech blockades, medical, consensus/facilitation, grassroots organising, magic for activists, climbing, scouting, etc.

Sample NVDA Training Agenda

Introductions
Agenda Review
Nonviolence
What does nonviolence mean to me? (pairs)
Violence/Nonviolence Spectrum
History and Principles of Nonviolent Action
Hassle Lines (practice in staying calm, de-escalation)

Affinity Groups
Consensus Decision-Making
Quick Decisions, practising consensus tools
Direct Action Scenario, Questions
Preparation, Safety Tips, De-escalation Tactics

What to bring
What not to bring
Hoses, dogs, hoses
Tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets
Blockade tactics
If attacked or see an attack: Point and Sweep with Ohm, Puppy Pile, Self-Defence Posture.

Guided Mediation to help with staying calm and grounded during the action, create a symbol
Action Role Play
Hopes and Fears
Evaluation and Close

Inclusion and Empowerment

Overall, the model has worked well so far. It attempts to allow several thousand people from different geographical areas, backgrounds, and philosophies take nonviolent direct action together in a way that is empowering, respects differences in philosophy and tactics, and is non-hierarchical.

The principle of affinity group autonomy is key to the model's inclusiveness. Within the action guidelines, affinity groups made their own decisions about what risks to take; how to respond to police violence; what tactics they would use during blockades; what kind of chants and songs to voice; whether to be mobile or fixed; calm or passionate; standing or sitting; using technology or just their bodies; and what primary message they wanted to convey. In this way, a wide range of people were able to act powerfully together and send a coherent message which nevertheless included multiple and complex truths. We also gained maximum flexibility with minimum top-down hierarchy: as Starhawk says, writing about the WTO protests, "No centralised leader could have co-ordinated the scene in the midst of the chaos, and none was needed – the organic, autonomous organisation we had proved far more powerful and effective. No authoritarian figure could have compelled people to hold a blockade line while being tear gassed – but empowered people free to make their own decisions did choose to do that."

While some people felt that the Action Guidelines were imposed on them, others welcomed them as a way of enabling many people to take part and feel safe during the action without having to ascribe to any particular philosophies or definitions of nonviolence. Clearly the

issue of property destruction is a loaded one, with a wide range of opinions, but A16 showed that it was possible to work together in a solid and respectful way. The issue will no doubt continue to be debated and is clearly not yet completely resolved, but some positive steps have been taken.

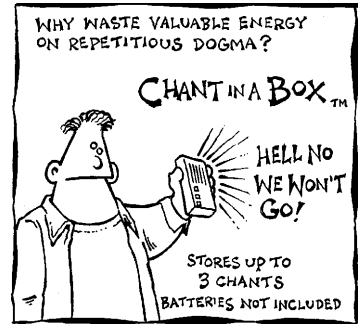
Making decisions

The model is not perfect, of course. It's difficult not to develop an informal hierarchy, especially when some people have worked on planning an action for six months, have a lot of information, and are playing key roles, while others are arriving the day before the action.

It's hard for an affinity group spokesperson to truly represent her/his group if they haven't had a chance to discuss issues in advance, which was often the case. Most of the time, due to huge numbers in spokemeetings, our AG spokes were inaccessible anyway, so many ideas were not voiced, and the decision-making was far from totally inclusive. And if we want to get bigger and have even more people joining such actions, we would have to adapt again because the meetings were already very unwieldy with 800-1000 people present.

During the actions the reliance on communications people who had radios and cell phones and were getting information from other sites, often felt disempowering. So did some of the decisions that were announced by loudspeaker, with no apparent group decision-making, although sometimes there had been such a process but it wasn't very obvious (and therefore wasn't very open) to everyone present.

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Sidewalk Bubblegum ©1996 Clay Butler

Reaching out

The relative lack of participation by people of colour in the actions is also a factor that clearly indicates the lack of true inclusiveness. In an incisive article in ColorLines, Elizabeth Martinez wrote after the WTO actions that only 5% of participants were people of colour — citing lack of funds, unfamiliarity with the issues and how they relate to the daily lives of people of colour struggling in the US, lack of access to the internet; alienation from the mostly young white anarchist-dominated subculture at the Convergence site; and assumptions (accurate) that the organisers were mostly white/Anglo — as factors that impeded the participation of activists of colour.

While some of these problems were addressed in the organising for the A16 actions, including specific outreach and alliance-building efforts, and education around the impact on the poor in the US of structural adjustment policies, there is clearly a long way to go.

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ColorLines can be contacted via <http://www.colorlines.com>.

A16 direct action roles*

The following groups of people will work closely together to facilitate the smooth flow of the actions and processions.

Traffic: During the Processions, traffic people will keep cars away from the Procession, help the flow of the Procession, let people know the route, and communicate necessary information, like route changes.

Tactical Teams: Two or more tactical teams of 3-5 people will accompany each Procession to make decisions about necessary route changes, etc. They may be paired with Communication people, and/or carry phones/radios.

Communications: We will have a communications network of phones and radios in place to facilitate safety and co-ordination. Affinity groups and clusters may want to have their own phones or walkie-talkie radios. Be sure to exchange cell phone numbers with the communications centre if you want to be a contact for an affinity group. We may have a micro-radio station broadcast.

Action Elves. Designated by their affinity groups, Elves will be tactical, related to people, not site. They will be watching out for the wellbeing of everyone within their group, facilitating access to water, first aid, and emotional/de-escalative support.

Police Liaisons: Designated by their affinity group, police liaisons are encouraged to buy time by stalling the police... They do not have negotiating authority unless explicitly empowered to by their own affinity group, only on behalf of their affinity group.

→ The above roles, and the commitment of all participants, eliminate any need for individuals to police one another.

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