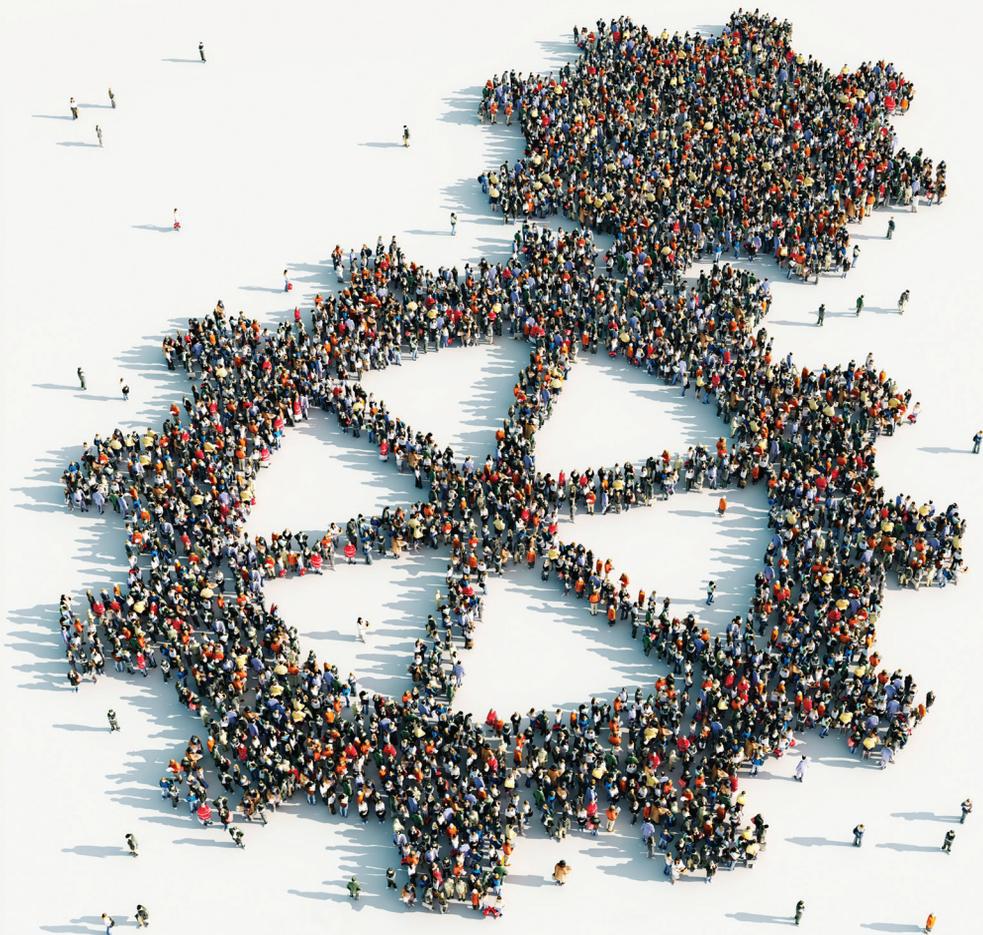


# TOWARDS COLLECTIVE LIBERATION



ANTI-RACIST ORGANIZING, FEMINIST PRAXIS,  
AND MOVEMENT BUILDING STRATEGY



**CHRIS CRASS**

FOREWORD BY ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

INTRODUCTION BY CHRIS DIXON

"These are words from the heart, overflowing onto the streets."

**VIJAY PRASHAD**

# “BUT WE DON’T HAVE LEADERS”

## Leadership Development and Anarchist Organizing

Leadership and leadership development can play important roles in moving forward our commitment to equality in organizations, movements, and society. Leadership development, as defined by Jewish organizer Dara Silverman, is working with others to build skills, analysis, and confidence. Anti-authoritarian organizing, as it relates to this essay, is building the capacity of people and their organizations to challenge illegitimate authority—which includes capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and the state. Anti-authoritarian organizing, like other forms of radical organizing, uses principles of solidarity, cooperation, and participatory democracy to build movements for social change. Over the past century, this kind of organizing has helped advance a politics that challenges the idea that the ends justify the means. The emphasis on empowerment, democratic participation, and transparent decision-making are based in the strategy that our organizing prefigures the society we’re working to build. The goal of this essay is to help us as anti-authoritarian Left organizers move beyond the belief that we have “leaderless movements” towards an analysis and practice of developing “leaderful movements” in which millions of everyday people are bringing their leadership to building democratic movements and creating democratic organizations, institutions, communities, and cultures that can win and create systemic liberatory change.

The concept of leadership is complicated and the struggle for a more complex understanding of leadership is ongoing. Movement veteran Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martínez says:

As organizers, we need to reject the definition of leadership as domination, but without denying the existence and need for leadership. Denial can lead to a failure to demand accountability from our leaders. That demand must be embraced, along with anti-authoritarian methods, in leadership development. Accountability takes the measure of a person’s responsibility; it means being accountable to one’s fellow organizers, to the goals of one’s collectivity and ultimately to the people one claims to serve!

In thinking about leadership development, I have been guided by the following questions: How can leadership development help us build mass-based, multiracial, anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist movements with visible leadership from women, queer and

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1 From a conversation with Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martínez in preparation for writing this essay.

transgendered people, and working-class people of all colors? How can we talk about leadership without creating the image of two or three people leading us, but the millions of people, in their communities, who are right now leading progressive social change around the world? As a white man from a middle-class background, I grapple with what an anti-racist, feminist, class-conscious leadership development process look like for people of a similar background who are working for collective liberation. In writing this essay, I think of those who have supported me in thinking about leadership development and the lessons they have taught me through their own practice: people like Ingrid Chapman, David Rojas, Molly McClure, Sharon Martinas, Clare Bayard, Maria Poblet, Marc Mascarenhas-Swan, and Elizabeth 'Betita' Martínez.

In arguing against the commonly held opinion that revolution was both spontaneous and right around the corner, nineteenth-century Italian revolutionary Errico Malatesta said, "It must be admitted that we anarchists, in outlining what we would like the future society to be, have, in general, made everything look a bit too easy." We have a critique of existing society and a vision for the future, but no plan to move forward, he said. He went on to say that we must meet people where they are, win concrete improvements in people's lives through collective action and, together, expand both our desire and capacity for liberation. Leadership development is about expanding that capacity and recognizing that social change doesn't just happen, it is made. It's about the long, slow, patient process of building power with people rather than power over people.

### *Food Not Bombs and the Struggle over Leadership*

In the winter of 1994, San Francisco Food Not Bombs (FNB) activists were facing repeated arrests for sharing free food at the Civic Center across from city hall. Keith McHenry, a long-time FNB organizer was going to court, facing felonies, and over a hundred people protested at the Hall of Justice to drop all charges and end police harassment of low/no-income people. I had just moved to San Francisco and wanted to get involved. I had been involved with FNB in Whittier, a suburb of Los Angeles, but I didn't know any of the SF FNB people. The long line of police in riot gear at the protest was intimidating. I tried to introduce myself to some folks, but people were caught up in the moment. I stood by myself trying to figure out what was going on, wearing my FNB button, hoping someone would talk to me.

Someone did talk to me—Keith McHenry. He was thanking people for coming out and introducing himself to people. When I said I had been doing FNB for the past two years, he immediately started introducing me to other FNBers and invited me back to his house for dinner. He asked me question after question about how I got involved and what we did in Whittier. He gave me literature, told me about the meetings, and asked me what I was interested in doing. He told great stories and had a healthy laugh. Over the next year, he would call me regularly and ask if I could help him with all kinds of projects.

Keith did an excellent job of bringing me in and supporting me to thrive as a new member. I wanted to join, and he opened the door and welcomed me into the group. He didn't just tell me what needed to be done, he asked me questions and wanted to know

what I was all about. He asked me what I was interested in and followed up with me. He mentored me in direct action organizing while consistently encouraging me to bring up my own ideas, and I was heavily involved in FNB for the next six years.

Keith is a good organizer, but dynamics around privilege were also at play here. Keith is a white man from a working-class background who in connecting with me connected with a younger white man from a middle-class background. Our connecting and working together wasn't problematic in and of itself, but it was part of a pattern of white men bonding with another and the impact it had on who had power in the group. The problem was the ways that white men—working-class and middle-class—dominated the leadership positions in FNB, and how our ostensible rejection of having leaders prevented meaningful discussion about sharing power, challenging privilege, and supporting leadership development of a broader base of people, in particular those who are often marginalized from leadership roles. For example, it was not uncommon between 1995 and 1998 to have organizing committees of five men and one woman, all white and of mixed-class backgrounds. While the majority of those who attended general meetings were men, women made up at least half of those who did the day-to-day work. By rejecting leadership, we were also rejecting processes by which we could appreciate leadership skills, like those that Keith had, and train a wider range of people to have them as well.

In FNB, the concept of leadership was fiercely debated. For years, many of us said, "There are no leaders." Often people like myself who were playing obvious leadership roles were the ones most vehement about the group "not having leaders." Our refusal of leadership was, in many ways, an attempt to share power, but it also made it extremely difficult to talk about the real power dynamics in our work and how they related to institutional forms of privilege and oppression. If we have no leaders, it was argued, then anyone can participate just as much as anyone else. If we believe in power-sharing and collective organizing, then work in the group is generated by personal initiative driven by a neutral "do it yourself" ethic. Power dynamics in the group were frequently discussed as personality conflicts and attributed to the shortcomings of individuals. As Malatesta warned, we had a critique of inequality and a vision of equality, but no plan to get from here to there.

When we talked about why the same people did all the work, we rarely put forward concrete steps about how to change the situation. There was often anger from all sides about the situation: those doing the majority of the work would say they needed help and ask why people weren't participating; those making many of the decisions would often say they wanted more people to be involved, that they didn't want to have all this power. The latter often felt guilty and defensive about the situation. Those who were marginalized in the group talked about how others were monopolizing power and that things needed to change. Inequalities and their negative consequences continued to hurt individuals and undermine the group's efforts.

For twenty-three years, FNB groups have been an important point of entry for thousands of people coming into movements for liberation around the world. FNB—like other

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2 Food Not Bombs was twenty-three years old when this essay was written in 2003. Food Not Bombs,

groups that are gateways into social change work such as MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), Gay-Straight Alliances, anti-corporate student groups, Earth First! and others—create opportunities for people to learn, practice, and develop skills, analysis, and confidence. While working for a just society, these groups can also help people understand the connection between personal and social transformation.

Leadership development is primarily about doing day-to-day work—door-knocking, political education, recruitment, cooking for a hundred people at a rally—and having a space to reflect and learn from the experience. For me, making leadership development a more formal and intentional process has been about taking responsibility for my actions and trying to be accountable to the people with whom I work. In rejecting leadership, I was in many ways rejecting responsibility and accountability to others and continuing the tradition of capitalist individualism. In learning to respect the leadership of others and in myself, I have struggled to reclaim trust in and respect for myself, both of which I was taught to achieve only through dominating others. In working to heal myself and fight back, I have needed the leadership of others who have nurtured and developed communities of resistance and cultures of liberation.

### *Developing Leadership and Building Organization*

In FNB, the most successful change happened through identifying positions of leadership in the group and open discussions about power and strategies of how to share it. This was an ideological shift from “no leaders” to “working to all be leaders.” We already had rotating facilitators at our weekly meetings and someone who served as the treasurer. People began to identify other responsibilities in the group: writing up literature, developing and sending press releases, representing the group in coalitions, and so on. We had begun to identify leadership, but we did not yet have a leadership development process, and so the same people generally stayed doing the work they were doing.

An important piece of leadership development is recognizing the skills and analysis people already have and providing each other encouragement and opportunities to develop further. It’s helpful to look at the many ways that leadership manifests—strategic, tactical, theoretical, programmatic, or operational, to name a few—and then break those down into tasks and concrete steps people can take. We become more confident in our abilities through practice and accomplishing concrete projects.

One step is to identify the many things that need to get done in an organization and have coordinators delegate the work. There should be things new people as well as people who have been around can take on. This doesn’t mean just announcing tasks at a meeting, but asking people to do certain things. Something like facilitating a meeting for the first time, speaking to the media, performing before a large number of people, or confronting the mayor requires giving people extra encouragement and support. Asking people about

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founded in 1980, continues to exist, with hundreds of chapters around the world, and it continues to be an important point of entry for thousands of people.

their experiences and opening up space for evaluating past experiences is a big part of leadership development.

In my experience, asking someone directly to do something is far more effective than asking for volunteers in a meeting in terms of building the collective power of the organization as well as promoting the leadership of a broader base of people. I volunteered for so many things in FNB meetings, wishing other people would do the same, resenting other people for not stepping up, and knowing that people resented me for my position. Anti-authoritarian leadership development is about looking at our organizations, looking at how power operates, and taking small but concrete steps to share power.

When people take on work, they should be acknowledged for doing so, and not just for embodying highly visible roles or for doing the speaking and writing. This is crucial for movement building. Leadership development treats different levels of responsibility as stepping stones to help people get concrete things done, to build their involvement, to increase their sense of capacity, and to develop the skills necessary for the job. Leadership development is far more than just rotating work; it is based on the belief that analysis, strategic planning, and critical consciousness develop through action and reflection. Without space for reflection—"What did you learn from that experience?" "What was good and what could have been better about that protest?" "What could you have done differently?"—our abilities to plan and organize can stagnate. Without this space in FNB, for example, we were generally more reactive than proactive, and long-term planning meant thinking two months down the line. In rejecting leadership, we also undermined our ability to plan and be strategic.

Leadership development is also about encouragement, recognizing that people frequently carry enormous insecurities about being good enough, having enough experience, having anything worthwhile to say, and doubting that anyone thinks they're capable enough. Simply saying, "Hey, you should go to the next organizing meeting" can be a form of leadership development. It's a reminder that the meeting is happening and indicates that you want that person's involvement. Asking someone face-to-face is the best way to get them to go somewhere or do something, because you can provide encouragement if they say, "No, I don't have enough experience" or "But I haven't been in the group long enough." Working through our own and others' insecurities and fears is a huge part of organizing.

San Francisco FNB's largest event, our twentieth anniversary free festival Soupstock that turned out over fifteen thousand people, was a majority-women organizing crew that coordinated over three hundred volunteers. The first majority-women meetings were the result of intentional outreach and recruitment to experienced and skilled women who likely would not have volunteered on their own, and furthermore would have been alienated being in majority-male meeting spaces based on their past experiences. The recruitment included answering questions about involvement, trying to get folks excited about the project, and most importantly, responding to comments like, "There are others who would be better at this than me," or "I'm not an organizer," with detailed lists of why they, specifically, would be great in this role, followed by encouragement. But it wasn't just that suddenly more women were asked to participate and there was feminist transformation. Rather, it was the result of a decade of work by women, many of whom were working-class,

like Johnna Bossuot, Alice Nuccio, Julia Golden, Tai Miller, Lynn Harrington, Catherine Marsh, Rahula Janowski, Iolanda Carbone, Genevieve McGowan, Yael Grauer, Camisha Ann Reidt, Lauren Rosa, Catrina Roallos, and Clare Bayard, who organized Women's Autonomous Cookhouses, distributed feminist literature, put on anti-sexism workshops, and initiated a women's discussion group to support each other's leadership. In SF FNB, becoming more conscious of whose leadership was supported and how it was supported, and how race, class, and gender privileges operate, helped lay the foundation for change.

A consciously radical leadership development process needs to have a strong anti-oppression analysis of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. Who already feels entitled to volunteer for responsibilities? Who already has certain skills and resources? Whose participation goes unrecognized? I've been in countless FNB meetings in which mostly white men would come for the first time and talk like they knew it all and volunteer for high levels of responsibility that many other people who had been in the group for years had never taken on. I've also talked with dozens of people who were in groups for long periods of time and said they didn't take on responsibility because "other people would be able to do a better job" or "I didn't think other people would think I was capable enough."

An anti-oppression analysis is key to leadership development. The majority of leadership in liberation struggles comes from people of color, working-class and low-income people, Jewish people, transgender people, queers, and women. For me, leadership development has been working to challenge the ways that race, class, and gender privilege have been obstacles to seeing and learning from this leadership in oppressed communities. A leadership development process for people with race, class, and gender privilege that has a focus on learning from leadership in oppressed communities is critical to successful movement building.

Looking to leadership in oppressed communities is recognizing that those most negatively impacted by oppression hold keys to dismantling those systems. It has meant looking for that leadership and listening harder, knowing my socialization trains me to ignore those voices. It's not about agreeing uncritically with everything but about engaging respectfully because leadership from oppressed communities has been the heart of liberation struggle and is key to my own liberation. It's also about understanding complexity, knowing that there's a vast diversity of voices in oppressed communities, knowing that looking to leadership is about liberation struggle not guilt, and acknowledging that I must make political choices and be accountable for those choices. Systemic inequality and injustice are built on the backs of oppressed communities and radical leadership from those communities is core to the radical struggle to free us all. My training as a white, middle-class, mostly heterosexual male was to only see people who looked like me as leaders. When I rejected the idea of leaders, I was revolting against that training. Later, however, it became clear that leadership from oppressed peoples was key to my own struggle against internalized white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and capitalism. In universalizing my understanding of leadership as loyalty to oppression, I was marginalizing leadership for liberation both in oppressed communities and in myself. Anti-authoritarian leadership development grounded in anti-oppression politics is about critically looking at how power, privilege, and oppression operate and taking concrete steps to build our movements and move us towards collective liberation.