

Five Guidelines for Our Organizing

by Cynthia Peters

March 31, 2003

Five Guidelines for Our Organizing

There is a very positive development happening in the anti-war movement. That is, people are actively trying to connect the war abroad with the struggles for power, resources, and freedom right here in our own neighborhoods. In the Boston area, members of United for Justice with Peace, local activists working to stop the state budget cuts, and progressive city councilors are holding informal meetings to develop strategies for how we can work together in order to mutually benefit and enlarge each other's efforts. Neighborhood-based peace groups are forging institutional links with grassroots tenant and immigrant organizations. Our most recent major peace rally featured labor, youth, and representatives from organizations doing a range of peace and justice work.

The relationships and institutional ties that grow out of these efforts are nothing less than the beginnings of a broad-based movement for social change. These efforts are critical to our ability to end not just this war but to dismantle the institutions that give rise to wars, and that simultaneously work on multiple levels to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few.

Speaking from my experience working on the neighborhood and regional levels to connect the many different pockets of activism, I offer the following five proposals that I think could usefully guide our activism at this moment.

1. Build neighborhood based groups.

In the Boston area, United for Justice with Peace (www.justicewithpeace.org) has put considerable energy into starting and supporting neighborhood-based peace and justice groups. These groups have been critical to UJP's growth. They are the entry point for many newly mobilized activists who might be less likely to venture into a big downtown meeting of seasoned activists. Meetings are local and include familiar faces. Events, vigils, and forums present opportunities to communicate with people you know, people you live next to, people whose kids go to school with your kids.

After 9-11, when UJP first took shape, there were maybe a dozen community based groups working in Boston-area neighborhoods. Representatives from these groups have been meeting once a month for the past year and a half. We have sponsored skills-building conferences, organized workshops, and visited each others' meetings to share resources and organizing strategies. There are now over 50 groups -- each of which is actively engaged in building their ranks, disseminating information, and forging coalitions -- all on a grassroots level. Because of the war, the number of groups is increasing dramatically and the number of people in each group is doing the same. Because of the early efforts on the part of UJP to support the development of community

groups, the infrastructure is in place for more and more groups to form and to have a larger network to link with. I think it is a fair guess that such work would be impossible if it were attempted by a centralized Boston-based organization.

Working on a local level, each group has the opportunity to explore relationships with other neighborhood-based organizations. A few examples: In Jamaica Plain, the peace and justice group has worked with City Life (a grassroots tenant and immigrant organization) on their fundraising/neighborhood-clean-up campaign and on their youth march against militarism. In Somerville, peace activists have set up dialogs with the immigrant community in order to better understand how the "war on terrorism" is affecting their civil liberties. In Dorchester, peace activists have initiated a survey of community agencies to find out how they are being affected by budget cuts.

Rather than recruiting people engaged in domestic struggles away from their work and into the peace movement, these peace groups have instead found ways to support those working on the domestic front. In the process, they have learned a thing or two about the challenges their neighbors face.

Not only that, they have found passionate anti-war sentiment among working people and people of color -- an eye-opener for those who may have thought that the anti-war demographic is disproportionately white and privileged. Contrary to what you often hear, people fighting evictions would also like to be mobilizing to fight the war. But they can't add that organizational work to their already over-taxed agendas. A neighborhood group that is organizing against the war and that has built a relationship with the eviction-fighters is a welcome addition to the community. It helps capture the growing anti-war energy; it provides channels for the community to express its anti-war sentiments. And it does all this by contributing to the mix of available activist outlets.

Supporting decentralized, neighborhood-based organizing helps give people a political "home," a way for their voice to be heard, a comfortable way for them to have an impact, important lessons in organizing, and a chance to create alliances with and build understanding among diverse neighborhood-based groups.

2. Avoid economic arguments.

In an effort to create a more diverse movement for peace and justice, we often hear activists argue that we need to talk to people about "what matters" to them. In order to reach African Americans, we need to condemn racism. In order to reach union members, we need to talk about wage cuts. In order to reach poor people, we need to talk about welfare reform. In order to reach "middle America," we need to talk about health care, public schools, and affordable housing. But this sort of mechanistic thinking is at best paternalistic; at worst, it damages our chances of building a broad-based movement.

Of course, we should be talking about racism, wage cuts, and welfare reform, but the reason for doing so is not to seduce people into joining us, but simply because it is the right thing to do. Racism, wage cuts, and welfare reform are tools used by the empire to

keep the domestic population docile and divided. They are tools that actively hurt people, cause fear, and stymie human potential. By all means, let's organize to get rid of them. And in our organizing, let's be sure to show how these domestic tools help make it possible for the United States to carry out its foreign exploits. But let's not assume that people are moved only by what affects them directly.

In my job, I spend a lot of time talking to low-wage workers, and in my organizing, I spend a lot of time talking to random people on the street. I don't think I've ever heard a single person say they questioned the war because of how much it costs in dollars. Sure, people question the administration's priorities: "Why does Bush have so much to spend on war, while my kids go to dilapidated schools?" But if they oppose the war, it's because -- to put it quite simply -- war kills people. As one worker in my union said, "Wars benefit people who are already rich and powerful, and they hurt everyone else."

My guess is that most anti-war activists would say they are motivated to stop the war because of the human costs that will surely result. We are against the war because it is immoral and unjust. We also believe that it is an insane use of resources -- but that's because the war is wrong. (If we didn't think the war was wrong...we wouldn't think expenditures on it were wrong. And the same holds for everyone else.)

Why should we expect that others -- even those living on the razor edge of survival -- would not oppose it for similar reasons? Let's not assume that others think with their stomachs, while we are guided by a highly developed consciousness. Let's not assume that we have access to moral reasoning while others only respond to bread-and-butter issues.

3. Listen. (Don't just talk.)

Don't take my word for it. Get out there and hear from people yourself. Take the organizer's mandate to "talk to people" and turn it on its head. Try listening for a while. You can't go to web sites or read the literature generated by the peace and justice movement -- much of which replicates economic arguments. You must actually engage in conversation with people and listen to what they say.

The three police officers I talked to today, who were on the street corner doing traffic detail, came across at first as full of pro-war bravado. But by the end of the conversation, we found some common ground. Interestingly, they complained that the city is not giving them overtime to deal with all the anti-war protests. Instead, the mayor is just reducing the number of officers available to do regular police work. These officers could have connected budget cuts with the war effort, and argued that money for war should be redirected to their wallets, but they didn't make that argument because they think the war is just. Their pro-war position is a moral one -- based on misinformation in my opinion, but that doesn't make it any less of a moral stance. According to the newspapers they read and the information they have access to, the U.S. is right to get rid of the demonic dictator Saddam Hussein who apparently has the ability to wipe out the planet with his weapons of mass destruction and his nefarious harboring of anti-American terrorists.

One officer told me about being hit by friendly fire in Vietnam. He was well acquainted with the human costs of war, and by the time he had finished his own recitation of the horrors he faced in Vietnam, he seemed to be considering the possibility that we had not fully exhausted every alternative to an invasion.

Listening helps create a miniature public space that is not so constrained by the filters of the mainstream media. It gives people a chance to hear themselves think -- a radical proposition in a culture dominated by corporate values. But perhaps more importantly, listening gives you, the anti-war activist, a chance to shed some of the stereotypes you might hold. If you are willing, that is. Regrettably some aren't. Or so it appears. We hold on to classist, racist, and sexist notions that the "objects" of our organizing work are not as highly evolved in their thinking. They need us to do the principled thinking, and we need them to be the foot soldiers who must be enticed into the struggle with promises of personal material gain. In doing so, we pose ourselves as the elite shapers-of-the-message, and we make our movement extremely uninviting to the vast majority of people who already have enough bosses and drill sergeants in their lives, thanks very much.

4. Reconsider civil disobedience.

I don't know about activists in other parts of the country, but here in Boston we have spent numerous hours debating the target of our activism. Should we occupy the federal building downtown? The weapons manufacturer in Lynn? The military food supply place in Natick? The military recruitment centers in every neighborhood? Should we "die in" on bridges, sit down in intersections, or lock down the state house?

That's not a bad list of questions, but it's missing something significant. And that is: what are we doing to mobilize people, to provide alternative points of view, and to bring people into our networks and organizations?

People are thinking about war. Most people have decent values and hopes and dreams for themselves and their communities. Most people want fair and decent outcomes when it comes to domestic and foreign policy. We should be out finding ways to engage with as many of these people as possible. Let's get all the newly trained affinity groups to take turns riding the subways during every rush hour with creative and informative leaflets about what is happening in Iraq. Let's ask the public library to host a speak-out on the war. Let's set up literature tables in front of the post office. Let's ask local churches and synagogues if we could use part of their social hour after services to make alternative information about the war available. Let's find out how other grassroots groups are planning to fight the budget cuts, and let's ask if we can help. Let's show up at their rallies and learn about their struggles.

Not that we should never target the Federal building, or put our bodies in the way of "business as usual" in our cities. These actions are important because they pave the way for larger, less militant confrontations. But if you are willing to spend hours getting civil disobedience training, and then many more hours laying in the streets, getting arrested,

sitting around in the local jail, and then showing up for court appearances, you should also be willing to spend a similar number of hours knocking on doors and doing the nitty gritty work of growing a movement.

5. Deal with the tension.

Every day I struggle to hold the following two pieces of information in my head: 1) the U.S. and its "willing" (or coerced?) allies are unleashing death and destruction on innocent civilians in an unjust and illegal war, and 2) the best, indeed the only, thing I can do about it is go to a meeting.

It will be a more or less productive meeting. We will plan local and national actions. We will spend hours haggling over differences, working out details, and asking already overworked volunteers to take on more. We will hope that the collective wisdom of those in the room will lead to effective organizing, and good long- and short-term strategy.

And we will deal with the tension of witnessing a crisis unfold, and having no choice but to do the slow and plodding work of building a mass movement that is powerful enough to stop it.

We may feel overwhelmed at times, and filled with despair. Maybe the tension will seem unbearable. How can we feel this level of rage, and somehow manage to channel it into updating the data base, lugging the literature table up to Main St., and organizing yet another meeting? But we should keep perspective. What we are going through doesn't compare to the tension of having a cruise missile pointed at our homes. The tension we have to deal with is manageable.

We can do what we need to do. Keep organizing!

Cynthia Peters (cyn.peters@verizon.net) is an activist and a writer. She works at SEIU Local 285.