

## **AFFINITY GROUPS AND CLUSTERS**



### **Affinity Groups**

An affinity group is a small group of 5 to 20 people who work together autonomously on direct action or other projects. You can form an affinity group with your

friends, people from your community, workplace, or organization.

Affinity groups challenge top-down decision-making and organizing, and empower those involved to take creative direct action. Affinity groups allow people to "be" the action they want to see by giving complete freedom and decision-making power to the affinity group. Affinity groups by nature are decentralized and non-hierarchical, two important principles of anarchist organizing and action.

The affinity group model was first used by anarchists in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th century, and was re-introduced to radical direct action by anti-nuclear activists during the 1970s, who used decentralized non-violent direct action to blockade roads, occupy spaces and disrupt "business as usual" for the nuclear and war makers of the US. Affinity groups have a long and interesting past, owing much to the anarchists and workers of Spain and the anarchists and radicals today who use affinity groups, non-hierarchical structures, and consensus decision making in direct action and organizing

### **Affinity Group Roles**

There are many roles that one could possibly fill. These roles include:

- Medical - An affinity group may want to have someone who is a trained street medic who can deal with any medical or health issues during the action.

- Legal observer- If there are not already legal observers for an action, it may be important to have people not involved in the action taking notes on police conduct and possible violations of activists rights.
- Media - If you are doing an action which plans to draw media, a person in the affinity group could be empowered to talk to the media and act as a spokesperson.
- Action Elf/Vibes-watcher - This is someone who would help out with the general wellness of the group: water, massages, and encouragement through starting a song or cheer. This is not a role is necessary, but may be particularly helpful in day long actions where people might get tired or irritable as the day wears on.
- Traffic - If it is a moving affinity group, it may be necessary to have people who are empowered to stop cars at intersections and in general watch out for the safety of people on the streets from cars and other vehicles.
- Arrest-able members - This depends on what kind of direct action you are doing. Some actions may require a certain number of people willing to get arrested, or some parts of an action may need a minimum number of arrest-ables. Either way, it is important to know who is doing the action and plans on getting arrested.
- Jail Support - Again, this is only if you have an affinity group who has people getting arrested. This person has all the arrestees contact information and will go to the jail, talk to and work with lawyers, keep track of who got arrested etc.

## **How To Start An Affinity Group**

An affinity group could be a relationship among people that lasts for years among a group of friends and activists, or it could be a week long relationship based around a single action. Either way, it is important to join an affinity group that is best suited to you and your interests.

If you are forming an affinity group in your city or town, find friends or fellow activists who have similar issue interests, and thus would want to go to similar actions. Also, look for people who would be willing to use similar tactics - if you want to do relatively high risk lockdowns, someone who does not want to

be in that situation may not want to be in the affinity group. That person could do media or medic work, but it may not be best if they are completely uncomfortable around certain tactics of direct action.

If you are looking to join an affinity group at a mass action, first find out what affinity groups open to new members and which ones are closed. For many people, affinity groups are based on trusting relationships based around years of friendship and work, thus they might not want people they don't know in their affinity group. Once you find which affinity groups are open, look for ones that have an issue interest or action tactic that you are drawn to, like a Free Tibet affinity group or a blockade affinity group.

### **What Can An Affinity Group Do?**

Anything!!! They can be used for mass or smaller scale actions. Affinity groups can be used to drop a banner, blockade a road, provide back-up for other affinity groups, do street theater, block traffic riding bikes, organize a tree sit, change the message on a massive billboard, play music in a radical marching band or sing in a revolutionary choir, etc... There can even be affinity groups who take on certain tasks in an action. For instance, there could be a roving affinity group made up of street medics, or an affinity group who brings food and water to people on the streets.

What makes affinity groups so effective for actions is that they can remain creative and independent and plan out their own action without an organization or person dictating to them what can and can't be done. Thus, there are an endless amount of possibilities for what affinity groups can do. Be creative and remember: direct action gets the goods!

### **Clusters**

A cluster is a grouping of affinity groups that come together to work on a certain task or part of a larger action. Thus, a cluster might be responsible for blockading an area, organizing one day of a multi-day action, or putting together and performing a mass street theater performance. Clusters could be organized around where affinity groups are from (example: Texas cluster), an issue or identity (examples: student cluster or anti-sweatshop

cluster), or action interest (examples: street theater or lockdown).

## **Consensus Decision Making**

### **What is it?**

Consensus is a decision making process based not on "majority rule," but the greater agreement of the community. Instead of a majority making a decision for the group, all people in the decision making body have equal voice and power. Consensus is reached when all members of a group, committee, or organization agree that a proposal is best for the group; individuals may not agree with everything in the proposal, but a commitment to community building and needs makes consensus work. Why do it? We use consensus for many reasons. It allows people to collectively explore solutions until the best one for the group emerges. Consensus assures that everyone has a voice in the decision making process, synthesizing all ideas into one plan that all participants agree to implement. Since all participants agree to the decision, people are more invested in carrying out what has been decided. The process promotes commitment to carry out decisions.

Consensus is important in allowing minority opinions and concerns to be heard and considered, and encourages cooperation among people with divergent views. It attempts to minimize domination and empowers the community in the process of making a decision.

### **How do we do it?**

First, a group must define the issue: what needs to be decided.

Next, discuss the issue. After the group has had enough time to discuss the item, someone makes a proposal (some proposals may be brought to a meeting beforehand) for a specific plan of action. The facilitator can ask for a proposal if she/he feel that people are repeating the same points.

After a proposal is made, people can offer clarifying questions. This is not the time to speak for or against the proposal.

Then, list out all concerns people may have with the proposal. Attempt to resolve each individual concern through further discussion or amendments to the proposal. If there are no concerns, there is consensus.

The facilitator will ask for any stand asides. People who stand aside have concerns that have not been resolved, but will not block from moving forward.

The facilitator will then ask if there are any blocks. People who block have serious concerns that have not been resolved and cannot allow the decision to be made by the group; blocks are serious decisions, and they must be based on a belief that the proposal being put forward goes against the principles of the group or organization. If a block happens, the group will need to re-evaluate how to proceed. If there are no blocks, there is consensus.

## **History of Affinity Groups**

The idea of affinity groups comes out of the anarchist and workers movement that was created in the late 19th century and fought fascism in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Anarchist movement provides an exhilarating example of a movement, and the actual possibility of a society based on decentralized organization, direct democracy and the principles behind them.

Small circles of good friends, called "tertulias" would meet at cafes to discuss ideas and plan actions. In 1888, a period of intense class conflict in Europe and of local insurrection and struggle in Spain, the Anarchist Organization of the Spanish Region made this traditional form (tertulias) the basis of its organization.

Decades later, the Iberian Anarchist Federation, which contained 50,000 activists, organized into affinity groups and confederated into local, regional, and national councils. Wherever several FAI affinity groups existed, they formed a local federation. Local federations were coordinated by committees were made up of

one mandated delegate from each affinity group. Mandated delegates were sent from local federations to regional committees and finally to the Peninsular Committee. Affinity groups remained autonomous as they carried out education, organized and supported local struggles. The intimacy of the groups made police infiltration difficult.

In July 1936, Francisco Franco, with a group of fascist generals, launched a military revolt to take power from Spain's government. Spanish workers and peasants armed themselves and defeated the military throughout much of the country, particularly in Anarchist strongholds. Millions of Spaniards took action to restructure society along revolutionary lines, not revive the treacherous Spanish government.

Factories, transportation, telephones and even wholesale and retail stores were taken over and run collectively; an estimated 1200-1800 self-managed workers' collectives were formed. Workers' self-management effectively replaced the remnants of government and private institutions, providing the everyday necessities of life - food, clothing, shelter, and public services. The experience of working in non-hierarchical affinity groups created the conditions for 6 million people in Spain to reorganize society along revolutionary principles, organizing workplaces, agriculture, and communities without bosses and government.

The idea of large-scale affinity group based organization was planted in the United States on April 30, 1977 when 2,500 people, organized into affinity groups, occupied the Seabrook, New Hampshire nuclear power plant. The growing anti-nuclear power and disarmament movements adopted this mode, and used it in many successful actions throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Since then, it has been used by the Central America solidarity movement, lesbian/gay liberation movement, Earth First and earth liberation movement, and many others.

Most recently, affinity groups have been used in the mass actions in Seattle for the WTO and Washington DC for the IMF and World Bank, as well as Philadelphia and Los Angeles around the Republican and Democratic National Conventions.

## **The Spokescouncil**

A spokescouncil is the larger planning structure used in the affinity group model to coordinate a mass action.

Each affinity group (or [cluster](#)) empowers a representative, called a "spoke", to go to a spokescouncil meeting where important decisions are made.

For instance, if affinity groups need to decide on a legal/jail strategy, possible tactical issues, meeting places, and many other logistics., these would be discussed at the spokescouncil.

A spokescouncil does not take away an individual affinity group's autonomy within an action; affinity groups make their own decisions about what they want to do on the streets (as long as it fits in with any action guidelines.)

Direct democracy is an essential component to the spokescouncil meetings. All decisions in spokescouncils are made by [consensus](#), so that all affinity groups have agreed and are committed to the mass direct action.

## **1st Affinity Group Meeting Agenda Sample**

### **Pick a Facilitator**

**Intros** –Name and why you think participating in this action is important

**Introduction to the action** – Who, what, when, where, how.  
Any Questions?

**Reportback from Spokescouncil** – what actions are already happening? What intersections/buildings are already taken?

**Tactics go round** – What tactics would you like to employ, is there anything you are not comfortable with?

**Target** – What target would you like to take on, using what tactics?

**Resources** – People, hardware, art, music, media, training. Brainstorm. Break it into things the affinity group can provide and things you might want to ask the working groups for help with, e.i. trainings or blockade tools.

**Decide on some Affinity Group Roles** – The starred roles are more important than the others: \*direct support, \*police liaison, media liaison, \*medic, photographer, videographer, \*comms (communicate with the other groups), \*jail support, props coordinator. For a complete list, see <http://www.actagainstwar.org/article.php?id=16>.<sup>i</sup>

**Affinity Group Status** - Do you want to have an open affinity group (anyone can join), invite only, or do you already have enough people? If its invite only, brainstorm possible invitees.

**Cluster Status** – Open/invite/closed. Any affinity groups you might want to cluster with?

**Spoke** - Pick a spoke for the next spokescouncil meeting

**Next Meeting** - Pick a time, date, and facilitator for your next affinity group meeting and/or cluster meeting

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<sup>i</sup> Direct Action Roles for Affinity Groups (A very abbreviated list...)

BEFORE ACTION

Coordinator, Campaigner or Organizer  
Fundraisers  
Research  
Scouting the site or route  
Outreach and organizing  
Logistics and support  
Meeting facilitator  
Prop, sign and banner making, Painters, Graphic artists, etc.  
Media outreach: Send out media advisory and media release  
Media kits  
Writers

DURING ACTION

People risking arrest (committing civil disobedience)  
Direct Support People  
Police Liaison  
Peacekeepers/monitors:  
Deployment Team/ Diversion  
Media spokesperson  
Media outreach  
Communication team  
Videographer  
Still photographer  
Medic/EMT/Medical Team  
Legal Observer(s)  
Demonstrators/Sign-holders/Chanters/Singers/Hand out literature  
etc.  
Jail Support Contact person

AFTER ACTION

Legal Support  
Lawyer  
Documentarian/Historian/Archivist  
Fundraisers  
Public speakers  
Letter writers to decision-makers and  
newspaper editorial boards