

collective, then, is the ultimate form of organization for revolutionary social change.

We need space in which we can self-actualize. Collectives provide this as well as the social power required to change conditions outside the collective. Collectivism is a developing school of revolutionary thought which places the individual in the spotlight and works from that focus to change society from the ground out.

Once you form or join a well-operating collective, you begin to realize the power of collectivism. Besides facilitating self-empowering and preserving autonomy, the collective becomes a living, functioning example of the ideal alternative to life as it is lived in most of the society around us. The collective renews our hope in ourselves as people, and in people generally. Most importantly, by taking control of circumstance, the collective makes the revolution through direct action.

Build Those Collectives!

A workshop pamphlet on how to build a collective, and what to do with it when it's built

by moose and inza, Brooklyn, ny

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How to form a collective

Forming a collective can at first seem like a daunting task, given the nature of the political climate in your area, or considering your own isolation, relationship with other activists, or merely the fact that you don't know what a collective is. Worry not, for there are a number of ways to begin the process of getting a collective organized and organizing. Don't be discouraged by the amount of time it takes to get things rolling. Forming a collective should be a natural process that offers participants a valuable and positive social experience, rather than a hurried project with an attitude that things have to get done right away, or that there is no time and the revolution is right around the corner! Remember, take your time and treat the process with respect and patience. And have fun.

I. What is a collective?

A collective is a group of individuals, ranging from between 2 and 20 (and sometimes larger), who share a particular interest or political outlook, and are working together on a long-term basis. They may not have the extreme trust and intimacy of an affinity group, although it would be highly advantageous if they did. It's important to note that "organization" is a loose term that can be used to describe a collective. However, a collective is unique in that all participants strive to share power equally and have a higher level of respect for hearing all voices, a condition usually not present in a top-down organization.

As Brian Dominic states: *"When a group of people comes face to face to organize in their own interest, and not in the purported interest of others, and to take actions which do not impose upon others, they are acting collectively. A collective is a social organization in which, all actors are on even ground, in which all participate equitably, and in which all members are seen as vital elements of group unity and successful function. A collective is a more or less organic unit. It is not a collection of individuals who see their own interests as more important than*

collective engages its own crisis management function: a system of exposing the problem and getting it into the open so that it can be dealt with rationally. Any internal problem which is not either buried or worked out will form a cancer . which will eventually devour the group as a whole. Crisis management is where we actually see one of the clearest differences between hierarchies and collectives. In the former, problems are dealt with from the top down, usually allowing no influence from the actual party or parties concerned. Meanwhile, collectives provide an environment in which individuals can work on their own problems, personal or interpersonal, without fear of reprimand.

Most collectives fall apart. You may be surprised to see a proponent of collectivism write that. But, in fact, the temporary nature of collectives is also one of their beauties. Collectives serve a purpose. If they either achieve their objectives or fall apart, they need to be willing to accept that the collective no longer serves a purpose and is a useless and wasteful organization. Collectives do not seek profit, monetary or otherwise, so there is no reason to force them to exist when their use-value has run out. For whatever reason that your collective ceases to serve its intended purposes, it needs to be realized that the time has come to move on to other endeavors. Where you have failed, try again. Where you have succeeded, try to repeat that success another way. In either case, the imperfect "science" of collectivism can learn much.

Revolutionary Collectivism

The roots of oppression are in how our society is organized. What society actually does, and what effects those actions have, are only symptoms. Therefore, in order to radically change the way our society functions, we need to objectively change the way it is organized. This means creating alternative organizational forms while tearing down those that predominate now. In the process, we need to subjectively change ourselves, purging characteristics we have internalized from society at large and acquiring new ones from alternative institutions. the

For starters, some form of participatory decision-making is employed. Most collectives prefer consensus process, which requires acceptance by all members for ratification of decisions. Consensus values autonomy by ensuring that no majority can impose its will on any member. Again, this process restricts the size of a collective, and in most cases it demands that members' "political" perspectives be largely consistent, though never identical.

Especially with economic collectives, where decisions are also affected by factors such as finances, markets and material reality, other democratic forms of decision making may be necessary. But in any case, collective process must actually encourage the full participation of every member, offer each power to the degree a given decision affects her or him, and value (not just respect) dissent as a part of the collective's development.

This kind of relationship being anathema to the norms of our society, it's far easier presented in theory than operated in practice. Largely because of the baggage we bring with us when we enter a collective relationship, the day to day functions of the group are often hindered by essentially authoritarian notions. Collectives which work well, whatever their raison d'être, spend a great deal of time dealing with the interpersonal issues and dynamics of and between members. Any collectivist who tells you her or his collective doesn't have internal problems is lying, just the same as is any corporatist who makes such a claim.

But unlike authoritarian organizations, which fear internal "corruption" or "disorder," the well-organized collective actually welcomes it. That's because unrest is an expression of imperfection. Every collective is imperfect, but it only has the opportunity to deal with imperfections if it is aware of them. While the hierarchical organization seeks to suppress or extinguish "insubordination" (read: "expressions of individuality") in its ranks as "efficiently" as possible, the

those of the other members. Collectives see their members by including them all. When you are a member of a well-functioning collective, you know that your interests are the interests of the collective. It is not something which is outside of you; it is an entity of which you are an integral and valued part. Your collective is yours. Collective members are autonomous managers. They run their own lives."

Collectives are sometimes not actually *called* collectives, however it's easy to make the distinction once the functioning and cohesion of the group becomes transparent and egalitarian. Some collectives have organizational principles or principles of unity; some do not. Some collectives strive to be conscious of leadership roles, some merely pay lip service to these issues. Collectives begin many ways; some collectives are working groups that have broken off from other collectives, some may develop out of affinity groups that decide to take on more long term projects, and some are created by a few individuals with just an idea.

II. Why form a collective?

There are many reasons why one would choose to form a collective, or to formalize, into a collective, a group already in existence. Collaborating on common projects for maximum impact, sharing valuable skills among each other, or simple having a place to reflect your grandiose ideas are all valid reasons as are others. Below we list the various "types" of collectives. Please note that many categories below cross over as they would so in reality.

1. **Topical cohesion.** Examples could include:

- Media collective
- Legal collective
- Newspaper publishing

2. **Ideological similarities.** Examples could include:

- Anarcha-feminist
- Communist reading group

3. **Issue/goal oriented.** Examples could include:

- Stop a toxic dump
- Open a free school collective
- End the Iraq war collective

4. Identity. Examples could include:

- Queer support collective
- Womyn of color group
- Vegan cooking collective (like food not bombs)

5. General (whatever comes around). Examples could include:

- Forming a collective in order to exchange and share valuable skills.
- Non-sectarian, “only radicals for miles” collective
- Just for the hell of it collective

III. Ways to Form a Collective

Actually forming the collective can be easy or difficult depending on many factors. Here is a list of ways you could begin the process of forming your collective.

Organizing the collective from scratch

1. Announce it

- Make an announcement at a meeting or a forum, or on a local listserv or internet discussion board, about your desire to start a collective.
- Put up a few flyers in your neighborhood announcing a meeting, with contact information, and time and place. If you would like your collective to be community based, obviously focus on the community locations that offer access, like laundromats, public libraries, bookstores, cafes, barber shops, apartment stoops, community centers, and other spaces where people hang out doing politics and such. Don't forget to utilize your local lefty bookstore or info shop.

somewhat familiar with each other. Depending on the nature of the group, members should at least have some understanding of who they are working with, and there should be a degree of affinity. This doesn't mean that every member needs to be best friends with every other, but it does mean the collective should be small enough so that everyone can have the opportunity to get to know everyone else.

Collectives are also limited in size by the need for full participation by every member. During meetings, for instance, every voice should be heard, and everyone should be able to look everyone else in the eye. Without this kind of dynamic, the personal focus of the collective will be lost. In order to maintain diversity as well as cohesion, most collectives tend to be between 3 and 15 members in size, though there are certainly many examples of exceptions.

You might expect this places severe limits on what a collective can objectively-or externally-accomplish with such a small active membership. But that doesn't need to be the case. Collectives are not isolated units. They can either federate with other like-minded collectives, when they so desire, to work on objective tasks; or they can network with other collectives in order to communicate and provide mutual aid. In neither case do the principles of collectivity become perverted. It is still the case that the individual's interests are primary and the collective's secondary. When a relationship with another collective becomes intrusive to these ends the relationship can be severed and others sought. Federations are an effective force for changing society while networks are an excellent way for collectives to enrich their potential by sharing with others.

Collective Operation

In order to preserve the autonomy of each member, collectives operate via special, indeed customized, processes. While collectives' internal functions vary from group to group, certain principles are consistent throughout.

operate simply because the nature of the mass market contradicts them at every turn. We deal with national and world economies which are strictly authoritarian and hierarchical, and there is no easy escape from them. So economic pressures which are very manipulative and entirely real often play havoc on how an economic collective—especially one with radical social principles—can function. Nevertheless, there are countless examples of successfully functioning economic collectives ‘Wherein workers are paid equitably (based on effort, not seniority or quantitative contribution) and given full participation in the decisions that affect them. In a nonmarket, socialist economy, collectives would be the ideal units of small scale economic organization, with democratic workers’ and consumers’ councils playing the role that market determinants carry out today.

Finally, we need to look at living institutions, such as families, homes, and even entire communities. All of these common organizations can be formatted and run collectively. Looking at the American nuclear family unit, we see a perfect example of how authoritarian organization has been adopted by the institutions in which we spend most of our leisure time. When we come home from work at a traditional business or school, we don’t actually leave oppressive structures behind. There they are awaiting us in our own household. But the principles of autonomy, solidarity and participation can be applied to our living situations, be they a communal household or an intentional housing community, just as they can be applied to other kinds of institutions. The living institution is essentially an AI in which we are more fully immersed, because it is our most basic social arrangement, the one in which we actually live. By ignoring what we come home to, be it after work or school or play or activism, we overlook a huge part of our lives which affects us in ways we often don’t realize.

Since collectives are focused, at least in part, toward fostering the subjective development of their members, they need to be focused on those members. This means all members need to be

- When announcing the formation of a collective, be specific regarding exactly you would like to do. It’s much more advantageous to decide ahead of time what you would like to focus on, as being overly general may find you involved with people that have radically different politics, as well as ideas about what “to do.”
- A reading or study group is one excellent way of beginning the process of collective formation. What better way to get together and come to know those who may have similar political or personal affinities.

2. Agenda

- Have the first meeting “open space” style, meaning, no rigid agenda or structure. Try to make it a safe space for people to talk, discuss, and debate ideas and politics.
- Organize an agenda for the second meeting, based on the first meeting’s flavor. Were people ready to get down to concrete work? Are they committed to a particular project?
- At the second meeting, propose a set of “principle of unity,” or “principles of cohesion.” Come up with criteria for participation in the collective.
- Invite a member of an established collective to your second meeting. Ask them about particular problems that faced or still grapple with, and how they have solved these problems. Put these ideas on the agenda to discuss or debate. Take time “feeling out” people as to what they are looking for in a collective. Meet at a park, bar or cafe (on neutral ground), and informally, to have your initial discussions.

Dividing from other groups

1. Working Group Collective

Working groups or sub-committees of existing organizations (like the myriad of anti-war coalitions that developed right after the attacks on Iraq) are excellent ways in which to form collectives. Sometimes the participants in these working groups find that they have much in common with coparticipants,

and working closely with others on specific tasks is a great way to develop affinities that can easily translate to a collective. One example is a legal working group that formed within an anti-globalization group, and eventually became its own legal collective that outlasted the original network!

2. “Stand and Announce”

Sometimes merely standing up at a large coalition meeting and announcing the formation of a collective (and passing around a sign up sheet) is a good way to find others who may be interested in being in a collective. Caucuses for instance (like a womyn’s caucus) are great opportunities to start the process of forming a collective.

3. Divide from an existing collective

Sometimes a collective, because it has gotten too large to function smoothly, or because of personal or political reasons, breaks apart at the seams. Don’t look at this division as necessarily a bad thing. Use it as an opportunity to divide and grow. Be honest about the differences members may have. Suggest a division, but with close collaboration (consider networking. It only takes two collectives!). Be honest and identify the reasons for a possible division, and utilize this knowledge to form another group.

4. Change your Affinity Group into a collective

There are times when affinity groups, usually organized around actions and protest events, decide to carry on their affiliation after the event or demonstration that originally brought them together. Affinity Groups offer the cohesion and relationships that are great for longer term organizing work.

IV. How to “run” a collective

Actually doing work within the collective can be as difficult as forming the thing in the first place. People tend to have differing, sometimes conflicting opinions about what exactly the collective should do, and how to carry out these tasks.

Collective organizations can be used to serve a plethora of purposes, but I will categorize collective institutions into 4 basic categories. Each type of collective, in adapting to its circumstances, will choose to organize in a manner slightly different from those serving other purposes. But, due to the individualized nature of collective groups, even those within a certain category will be organized differently than others of their kind-by definition, there is no standard.

The first type of collective I’ll mention is the alternative institution (AI). These are groups whose purpose is to provide alternative social space or services. Examples might be everything from an independent homeless shelter to a “free school.” These are anarchic spaces where or by which people can experience a significant degree of autonomy and freedom to grow and develop themselves with the help of resources around them. The primary purpose of the AI is to create and maintain gaps in society which are relatively free from oppressive forces, within which individuals can develop themselves free from authority and coercion. All collectives, as a foundation, need to be AIs, though many have other purposes as well.

Next we have counter-institutions, or XIs. These are activist groups which exist to oppose oppression. Everything from protest groups to direct action collectives fall under the category of counter-institutions. Still, most XIs are not collectives, but rather are run hierarchically. Every such group, from the community “coalition” to the national liberation army sees its role in overwhelmingly objective terms, not recognizing that the subjective development of the activists themselves is as important as acting for external change. For those who want more out of revolution than objective change, the collective is a much more fulfilling choice of XI structure.

A third form of organization which can be collectively structured is the economic institution. Whenever a group is focused on the production and/or provision of material goods, it is economic in nature. Economic collectives are very difficult to

What is a collective?

by Brian Dominic

Imagine a business where everyone is a boss, a laborer, a secretary, a janitor. imagine a family where the children are involved in determining everything from their own bedtimes to where this year's vacation will be. Imagine a grassroots activist organization in which all the activists play a substantial role in organizing: not just as warm bodies to hold mass-produced signs and shout rhetorical slogans at demonstrations, but as actual organizers. Imagine a school in which everyone is a student, a teacher and an administrator.

Not only are these types of social organization possible, they actually exist, to a limited extent, in today's society. They are limited not by the inherent nature of their structure, or even by circumstance, but by our own (un)willingness to create and employ them. For many, their purpose is to actually change circumstance!

When a group of people comes face to face to organize in their own interest, and not in the purported interest of others, and to take actions which do not impose upon others, they are acting collectively. A collective is a social organization in which all actors are on even ground, in which all participate equitably, and in which all members are seen as vital elements of group unity and successful function. A collective is a more or less organic unit. It is not a collection of individuals who see their own interests as more important than those of the other members. Collectives serve their members by including them all. When you are a member of a well-functioning collective, you know that your interests are the interests of the collective. It is not something which is outside of you; it is an entity of which you are an integral and valued part. Your collective is yours. Collective members are autonomous managers. They run their own lives.

Below we'll try to offer some suggestion about how to "do" the inner process of the organization of work that the collective will undertake.

1. Basic process.

How your collective makes its decisions and carries out its tasks is, of course, entirely up to the collective and the collective alone. Generally speaking, all members of the collective should have equal say and power over all decisions and tasks that the collective makes. Usually, but not always, this is done by utilizing "consensus".

- Any decisions that the collective makes should be as close to unanimous as possible. In order to do this, whatever proposals are made should be acceptable to all the members.
- Take the time to discuss and debate proposals so that they meet with the approval of all the members. List concerns and disagreements. Find ways to resolve these differences.
- Be generous and don't be afraid to compromise on minor points.
- Put yourself in other members shoes and try to understand why they would be against the particular action, event, or project.

2. Structure: Formal vs. Informal.

The actual meeting to meeting structure of the collective can have a great deal of impact on not only what kind of work gets done, but who does the work, how it gets done, and the feelings people will have during and after the projects are completed. Participatory and egalitarian, yet accountable structures require a diligent attention to tendencies of oppressions, such as sexism, that will effect the work you do.

Usually small collectives (a handful of people, say 2 to 8) are required to have pretty informal structures, depending on the cohesion of the members. In this case, consensus (unanimity, or

unanimity minus one, two, whatever) will suffice. But sometimes collectives grow large enough that they need more formal structures in place to function well (beyond the simple small group process that a cadre of friends usually use). Don't hesitate to acknowledge the changing nature of the collective (like its growth!) and the need for more formal structural changes to reflect this. Is there a need for a coordinating or organizing committee (accountable to the larger body, of course)? Working Groups dedicated to particular tasks? Be sure that whatever structure is decided upon there are means to hold all decisions accountable and ultimately agreed to by the entire group, not just a small cadre of active members that sit on sub-groups.

3. Size: How big is too big?

The question of how big is too big is one that may pop up when the collective reaches a certain size. This is entirely a subjective issue. Judge the work that is being done, who is doing it, and whether or not there are fractures within the group over issues of project focus, or personal conflicts, etc. Don't treat these divisions as necessarily bad—they can be just the excuse needed to divide up and federate.

4. Leadership: Delegates, Spokespersons and Initiators

Leadership can be a tricky subject to address, and not just for those who don't consider themselves "anti-authoritarians." The lack of structure that renders decisions opaque and those that carry them out un-accountable are structures that will most likely alienate and isolate people.

- Be honest about who are the leadership types, and the roles that they have committed to fill.
- Find ways to address tendencies of certain people to take on all the work (or those that are the ones who usually initiate work).
- If working with other collectives in a network or federation, delegate coordination responsibilities, and rotate these roles monthly, yearly, or whatever.

for instance, but not at the sake of the desire to work with others.

- Create clear lines of communication, like a listserv or "phone tree", open to all in the federation.
- Choose "spokes" or delegates to the federation or network that can communicate and deliberate (but not make decisions) in the name of the collective, but be held accountable for whatever they say or commit to.
- Plan a conference of all the members of collectives involved in the alliance or network. Propose common projects, principles of unity or cohesion, and structures.
- Contact existing federations or networks in your area and find out what their *cohesion principles* are (what they require from other collectives in order to join).

- take time out and seek mediation.
- In a last case scenario, the collective may have to ask the person to leave the collective. Aid this person in organizing another collective, or see if they are able to join another collectives that has similar politics or ideas as their own.

10. More with dealing with inter-personal conflicts

During the process of building your collective, and along the path of actually doing collective work, you may find yourself in personal, sometimes hurtful conflict with other members. Social relations under capitalism demand competition and adversity among people, and these relations are far from absent in most collectives. Warm, generous, and respectful inter-personal relationships are key to the efficient and practical functioning of a collective. Its important to maintain a positive energy.

Inter-personal conflicts will be lessened if one focuses on anti-oppression techniques on a regular basis (as briefly described above). Struggle is the name of the game; struggle against racism, sexism, classism, “more revolutionary than thou” ism, etc, etc. Personality “issues”-ego conflicts, and on the extreme end, vying for power, can contribute to the hostile environment and ultimately break up a collective.

11. Naming your collective

Finally, this one is one of the most crucial, and hair splitting tasks your collective can be faced with. The name of the collective can sometimes lead to vociferous and collective dividing arguments. Be careful. Be *veerrry* careful :-)

V. Working with other collectives:

If your collective decides it wants to do work with another collective then offer to form an alliance or network. If three or more collectives decide to work together, you have a federation (if you decide to call it that)!

- Come up with alliance, federation, or network *principles of unity*, so that your collective ensures it’s autonomy,

- Develop transparent means of communication, like “report backs,” on a regular basis, about what’s being done in the name of the collective.
- Share responsibilities by sharing skills with others in the collective.
- Develop transparent decision making processes that prioritize the voices of womyn.
- If you find yourself being a more active member of the collective, or initiating projects frequently, this may mean that you are a “leader” (by the loosest definition of the term). Follow the Zapatista spirit of *mandar obedeciendo*, (“leading by obeying”), by carrying out all collective decisions as if they were your own, and hold yourself accountable, in an open, humble manner, to the collective, if something goes wrong.

5. What exactly shall you do?

What particular tasks and projects you take on is of course conditioned on the very reason you formed a collective in the first place, but not always. Sometimes collectives form out of no particular reason, and must come to a decision about what it is the collective would like to accomplish.

- Discuss and list the differing skills each member has. Are there skills that are complimentary? Are people interested in sharing these skills? Hold a *skill share*.
- Voice your desires unhindered by constrains. What would you ideally like to accomplish? What are your dream goals?
- Plan out the work required to execute the project, beginning from the ultimate goal, and working backwards. Assign tasks based on skills and abilities.
- Give yourself plenty of time; don’t rush it. Set reasonable deadlines.

6. Work Tasks/Fighting burnout

- Be honest about what work the collective is capable of doing. Are there only two members of our 6 that actually do work? Consider this before deciding on new projects.

- Take time and use respectful prodding to get other members involved in the decisions and the efforts the collective decided to take on.
- Partner up and divide tasks within the collective.
- Hold each other accountable for work volunteered, but in respectful ways.
- Be honest with others if you feel you are doing more work than you feel you can handle. This is one of the leading causes of burn out and resentment. Don't forget to ask for help.
- Positive feedback is key, don't forget to celebrate your wins.

7. Funding

How are you to fund the projects your collective decides to take on?

- Membership dues. Agree on a small membership due, like \$5 for each meeting organized, or \$10 per month. Consider the incomes of the participants before deciding on an amount.
- Fundraising events, like a "battle of the bands", or a potluck, or maybe a spoken work/SLAM competition.
- Some collectives may agree to designate as membership fees a certain percentages, say \$10, of the after tax incomes of its members.
- Discuss and agree on a process for distributing the funds. Require a quorum (more than three quarters attendance at the deciding meeting, for instance) required before funds can be dispersed.
- Designate a treasurer to hold the funds. Require a monthly report on the funds and their dispersal, and require a report of fund at every meeting.

8. Anti-oppression within.

In the greater society we live in and under, oppressions are everywhere and the anarchist collective is NO DIFFERENT. Just because you are vocally against sexism, for instance, doesn't mean that there is no sexism evident in your collective.

Anti-oppression work is an ongoing struggle. You never get over it. Find ways in which your collective can deal with ongoing sexist, racist, and other oppressive tendencies, without creating an environment that punishes or shames those who do bad things, but instead helps them work through their errors and

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- Are the important roles always going to men?
- Do the womyn feel that the meetings are a safe space for them to speak their mind?
- Are trans people feeling threatened with certain languages like "man, that's queer"?
- Are the topics you discuss, or projects you focus on, almost always proposed by the men? Do the womyn end up doing the work?

9. Dealing with disruptive individuals

This can be the most pressing and critical issue for many collectives. Disruption can be from police or *provocateurs* of course, but will usually come from individuals with inflated egos, bad socializations, or one sided ideas about what the collective should be doing. Collectives are defined by their ability to facilitate the inner egalitarian participation of all its members, and if there is a disruptive individual within it, the collective may seem to defy this ground rule.

- Utilize "principles of unity" or ground rules to keep the collective on task.
- Have someone give the collective a facilitation training, in which everyone learns to properly moderate or chair the meetings.
- Organize anti-sexism trainings (for the men, of course) on a regular basis. Encourage, but don't mandate, all male members to attend. Very often male supremacy is the reason for the disruptive dynamics at play.
- Rotate facilitation meeting by meeting.
- Give the disruptive individual the time to explain their concerns. Set aside a time that people can discuss and address these concerns. If the disrupter fails to listen to reason, or obviously (to the majority of the members) fails to address their own tendencies, ask the person to