



BY HARSHA WALIA

Young, Brown and Proud

Personal purpose and political activism

When Brigitte approached me to write a piece for this collection I hesitated for weeks. Despite technically being a youth, I have never identified as being a ‘youth activist’ and for weeks I pondered why that was. I realized that even I had internalized the association between youth and apathy. Or at best, I assumed that youth within social movements were experimenting with counter-cultural politics. I have often imagined myself or other young people around me as being particularly ‘mature’, when in reality it is obvious that young people, as young people, are deeply committed to struggles for liberation and freedom. We should be celebrated and honoured as integral participants in the collective movements that we desire and are inspired by. I decided it was an apt moment to reflect on more than 10 years of engaging and mobilizing in grassroots multiracial feminist communities for social change as a young person.

No one is illegal, Canada is illegal

I have been involved in a myriad of inter-related movements, but most recently have focused on anti-colonial migrant justice organizing and Indigenous solidarity through No One Is Illegal and feminist anti-poverty work in the Downtown Eastside of

Vancouver, Unceded Coast Salish Territories. The local consequences of the global forces of militarization and corporate globalization are most evident in the displacement, migration, and impoverishment of immigrant and Indigenous communities, which disproportionately impact women.

Many of the reasons that people are displaced and migrate are a result of the plundering of large corporations and the foreign policy of imperialist world powers. While exploiting the land and lives of people in the Global South, for example through Canadian mining operations and the military occupation of Afghanistan, Canada

is increasingly shutting its doors to migrants — especially refugees and elderly family members. Instead, the Canadian government is ensuring that migrants are recruited primarily as indentured labour for big business. Today Canada accepts more temporary migrant workers than permanent residents. The economy of Canada is increasingly reliant on the cheap labour of migrants in construction, farm work, garment industry, and service sector.

The economy of Canada is increasingly reliant on the cheap labour of migrants in construction, farm work, garment industry, and service sector. Women of colour are particularly over-represented in work characterized by low wages, irregular hours, and lack of unionization.

Women of colour are particularly over-represented in work characterized by low wages, irregular hours, and lack of unionization.

This two-tier level of citizenship is justified in the media and our own consciousness because in the post-9/11 climate migrants are racially stereotyped and scapegoated as ‘criminals’ and ‘terrorists’. In the current era of economic austerity, I can’t even begin to count how many times I hear comments on the bus about ‘these immigrants and illegals stealing Canadian jobs’. Divisive, racist, and false ideas of migrants lets the government off the hook for prioritizing the slashing of critical public services, bailing out banks and subsidizing corporations, destroying Indigenous lands and the environment, and sinking billions into prisons and the military. The work of No One Is Illegal has been focused on shattering the dehumanizing myths of migrants, exposing the racism of historic and current Canadian immigra-

tion and deportation policies, linking global injustices to the violence of the border industrial complex, popularizing the demand ‘no one is illegal, status for all people’, and articulating a basic premise for self determination: the right to remain, the freedom to move, and the right to return.

As a recent immigrant whose grandfather fought in the independence struggle in India, I have prioritized learning about the history and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Conquest in Canada was designed to ensure forced displacement of Indigenous peoples from their territories to amass state and corporate wealth, the destruction of autonomy and self-determination in Indigenous self-governance, and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples’ cultures and traditions. Given the devastating cultural, spiritual, economic, linguistic, and political impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people in Canada, I firmly believe that all social and environmental justice movements must entail non-Native solidarity in the fight against colonization.

A horrific effect of the pillage of Indigenous lands is the urban Indigenous experience — disproportionate poverty and homelessness, tragic numbers of missing and murdered women, and repressive policing and prosecutions in the criminal injustice system. In the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, the poorest postal code in Canada where much of

my work and activism is located, this grinding and painful reality is stark. Every day I bear witness to unjust police beatings, children being apprehended because their mothers are forced into substandard housing, slumlords arbitrarily extracting guest fees and illegally raising rents, welfare workers denying people \$20

food crisis grants, the humiliation of elderly people lining up at food banks, tourists jeering and gawking at the homeless, media scavengers hunting for a shot of someone shooting up in the back alley, the stories of women being raped and burnt but having no escape. Every day I walk through the Downtown Eastside and am shocked at our society’s complacency and apathy.

Given the devastating cultural, spiritual, economic, linguistic, and political impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people in Canada, I firmly believe that all social and environmental justice movements must entail non-Native solidarity in the fight against colonization.

**Philosophers have sought to understand the world.
The point, however, is to change it.**

So what do we do and how do we do it? When you try to explain to someone that you ‘organize’, they assume you are a party planner or a professional home organizer. The inability to even communicate what it is that we do often creates a barrier between activists and the people we claim to represent. Which is why I think it is critical to self-define what it means to be committed to social movements and to reinvent social relations beyond the ruminations of political rhetoric.

Community organizing is a continuous process by which a group of people aims to collectively transform political and economic policies or social and cultural dynamics around them. Community organizing is based on a shared sense of social and environmental justice values, and is inclusive and participatory in creating a movement that confronts systemic injustice. Community organizing also aims to be prefigurative, meaning that the methods being practiced and relationships being facilitated should align with our overall ideals and visions.

None of us is free until all of us are free

Given the urgency of confronting state and corporate power, the challenges of meaningfully addressing hetero-patriarchy, racism, and classism within community organizing persist. Oppression is based on systems of unequal power relations that give men, whites, heterosexuals, able-bodied, and middle-class people a set of unearned socio-economic privileges. Anti-oppression is not about ‘hating straight white men’; it is about undoing these constructed — often unintentional and invisible — hierarchical ideologies that pervade our society and movements. A commitment to challenging the toxic impact of oppression is foundational to building movements where all people are equally valued.

In my experience, there are two general ways in which oppression manifests itself in our social movements. First, there is an uphill battle that recent immigrants, Indigenous communities, poor and low-income people, and queer folks of colour face in proving their intelligence and commitment to political issues. The leadership, especially of the older generations, in many of our movements has marginalized these experiences, trivializing

our issues as ‘fringe’ or ‘divisive’. As articulated by Black feminist Audre Lorde “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”

The second way in which oppression is reproduced is through the token representation of oppressed voices, which provides a superficial veneer of diversity without actually changing the foundation or framework of our activism. A common example of this is inviting people from impacted communities to speak on panels as the ‘authentic community voice’ without reflecting on why or how one’s own organization is lacking in diverse representation. Mobilizing on the basis on anti-oppression has unfortunately often led to cycles of guilt, blame-and-shame, and paralysis in our movements. While guilt is often representative of a much-needed shift in consciousness, it does nothing to dismantle entrenched systems of oppression.

What ‘oppression olympics’ has obscured is that anti-oppression cannot simply be reduced to a politics of identity. Rather, a thorough and meaningful anti-oppression praxis is also critical to strengthening our analysis of capitalism. We should foster and cultivate an ethic of responsibility which begins with privileged people understanding ourselves as the unjust beneficiaries of the appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ land and resources, the stolen labour of migrants in the formal economy, and the reproductive and gendered division of labour within our private spheres.

All power to the people

Race, class, and gender are not secondary issues to politics or economics; they are foundational to understanding how these injustices are structured and maintained. It is no coincidence that Indigenous women and women of colour are most impacted by poverty, inequality, militarization, violence, and environmental degradation.

And it is no coincidence that these women are at the forefront of some of the most critical and vibrant movements across these lands — Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, Downtown Eastside Power of Women Group, Homelessness Marathon, Howl Arts Collective, Immigrant Workers Centre, Indigenous Defenders of the Land, Indigenous Environmental Network, Justice for Migrant Workers, Native Youth Movement, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, No Bill 94 Coalition, No One Is Illegal, Stop the

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Cuts, Women's Memorial Marches for Missing and Murdered Women, Workers Action Centre, and more.

While many argue that a radical analysis will alienate the mainstream, the success of these movements is a testament to the yearning for systemic change that goes beyond simple reforms. While strategic reforms are often critical, the collective vision that these groups represents is of a world based on self-determination and self-governance over our own bodies, lives, lands, and labour; economic equality; anti-oppressive communities; environmental, gender, disability, and reproductive justice; and freedom for oppressed peoples from empire and imperialism.

As a participant in and supporter of these campaigns, I have noticed that they also share three key features at an organizational level.

1. MANDAR OBEDECIENDO (LEAD BY OBEYING)

The first key feature is the organization and leadership of these movements. On the one hand, many organizations tend to mistakenly replicate the hierarchical structures of the Right. As Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas has said “We have come to realize that the problem is not that of taking power, but rather who exercises it... Our work is going to end, if it ends, in the construction of this space for new political relationships. What follows is going to be a product of the efforts of people with another way of thinking and acting.” On the other hand, many movements tend to erroneously believe that any form of organization is coercive and produces oppressive power structures.

Between these dichotomous positions rests the potentiality of group-centered leadership, where the lived experience and voice of those most impacted is honoured and where pro-active steps are taken to equalize skills and knowledge in building our collective power. A group-centered approach is based on the notion of abundance — an abundance of space for voice, empowerment, and ownership within our movements. Many African peace activists use the Zulu concept *Ubuntu* (“I am what I am because of who we all are”).

Group-centered leadership also fosters greater communication and accountability. This form of organization disrupts the traditional division of leader/follower; rather it recognizes that

we are all leaders in different ways, and are all responsible for serving our communities. Some of us are public speakers, others are media producers; some create banners and art, others spend time growing gardens.

What binds us together within a successful social movement, however, is the ability to coordinate and network across these skills towards a common goal. A life-long reminder of this for me will be the experience organizing the Anti-Olympic Tent Village with the Downtown Eastside Power of Women Group and allies. With leadership primarily from women and elder residents of the Downtown Eastside, the Tent Village brought together hundreds of people from across the city to defend an 'illegal' tent city occupation during the Olympics. Major decisions were made in nightly assemblies, and committees coordinated tenting, clothing, food, safety, workshops, and media in a relatively decentralized manner. Many who had homes decided to move into the self-determined Tent Village to engage in the kitchen, hosting workshops, and drumming every night around the sacred fire. As a result of the month-long grassroots campaign and the popular support for the Tent Village, the government was pressured to house over 80 homeless Tent Village residents.

2. MOVING FROM TACTICS TO STRATEGY

A second defining feature of effective social movements is that they have adopted a wide array of creative strategies to build effective and winning campaigns. Not limiting themselves to regurgitating dogma or writing petitions, movements have utilized sit-ins, flash mobs, smart memes, spiritual ceremonies, murals, storytelling, lobbying, social media, press conferences, blockades, film-making, coalition-building, hip hop, wild-cat strikes, street theatre, healing walks, speaking tours, marches and occupations to raise awareness and affect concrete change. Many activists struggle to break out of our bubbles and move beyond solely a politics of antagonism. While we are most marginalized by society, we have to acknowledge that we also tend to constrain ourselves. Vijay Prashad says that we "must breathe in the many currents of dissatisfaction, and breathe out a new radical imagination." Narrative power and experiential storytelling should be centered in our pedagogy as it connects us to one another and is pivotal in moving people to action.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

A critical lesson in strategic thinking has been the realization that we need a range and diversity of tactics; no tactic is immune from criticism, and no tactic works in every context. Tactics are tools, and as such should be based on overall strategy. Given that we what we seek is systemic revolutionary change it is often easy for activists to avoid the question of defining our goals and identifying what tangible impacts we can have. It is also important to think about language and language accessibility in our popular education — both in terms of ensuring multilingualism and avoiding rhetorical activist-speak. Finally, revolutionary social movements prioritize a multiplicity of alliances. More than simply building coalitions across single-issues or lowest-common-denominator politics, what has been inspiring and encouraging is the deepening of an interconnected and intersectional analysis across communities. David Harvey's words remain etched in my mind: "Unities emerging around different vectors of struggle are vital to nurture, within them are lineaments of an entirely different globalization."

The most intense learning experience I had on thinking through strategy was in leading the anti-deportation campaign of Laibar Singh, a paralyzed refugee from India. For over a year No One Is Illegal organized intensely — daily Punjabi-language radio shows, writing op-eds in multilingual newspapers, building alliances at campus and union meetings, leafleting at the gurudwaras (temples) to connect to immigrants with similar experiences, and having to share stages with opportunistic politicians at multicultural events. All of it was draining — a tremendous feat for all volunteer organizers, the emotional toll of constantly debating the illegitimacy of the deportation, and dealing with heightened levels of racist backlash and numerous death threats in the midst of a very public campaign. We had to navigate complicated dynamics of gender, caste, class, and community protocols and adapt our strategies accordingly. Not knowing the efficacy of any of it and with the odds stacked against us (sadly, few people were supportive of an irregularly-arrived refugee with a permanent disability), we were amazed when over 2,000 people, predominantly Punjabi elders, showed up in December 2007 at the Vancouver International Airport to create a historic blockade and prevent the deportation of Laibar Singh. This is the only documented time in recent North American history that the vio-

lence of deportation has been forcibly prevented through the power of a mass direct action.

3. TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER SO YOU CAN BE DANGEROUS TOGETHER

Third, and the most important feature of powerful social movements, is an affirmation of community. One of the contradictions of capitalism is that while we are increasingly dependent on global production processes for our basic clothing and food, we are increasingly isolated from each other. Each of us plays such an atomized role in the global economy — we are cogs in the wheel — that our social relations come to mimic that atomization. This social isolation justifies our addiction to consumer culture which feeds endless capitalist production and our fears of one another which is necessary for the ever-expanding technologies of surveillance.

I have been moved by the power of movements which centre interdependent communities of care. I have been humbled by intergenerational kinship networks which nurture egalitarian and regenerative forms of social relations. These transformations are subversive to the logic of capitalism, while fulfilling our desires for spiritual commitment to one another and connection to the Earth. As famed historian Howard Zinn reminded us “The reward for participating in a movement for social justice is not the prospect of future victory. It is the exhilaration of standing together with other people, taking risks together, enjoying small triumphs and enduring disheartening setbacks together.”

We cannot fall into the trap of replicating the political methods of the Right. Instead, we have to commit ourselves to over-growing the material and psychological hierarchies of the state itself. One of the most potent manifestations of horizontality in our movements is consensus decision making. Consensus, meaning “to experience or feel together”, is an inclusive method of reaching agreement based on the active participation and consent of group members to collectively reach a decision. Consensus decision-making focuses as much on the underlying processes and values as the decision itself. Rooted in many traditional Indigenous and peasant forms of self-governance, it is a testament of our ability to organize ourselves in accordance with the principles of direct democracy.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Gustav Landauer wrote almost a hundred years ago that “the State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships.” Decolonization is the process whereby we intend the conditions we want to live and are accountable for the social relations we wish to have. Decolonization requires us to exercise our sovereignties differently and to reconfigure our communities based on shared experiences, ideals, and visions. Through my own decolonizing process, I have learnt that almost all Indigenous formulations of sovereignty on Turtle Island — such as the Two Row Wampum agreement of peace, friendship, and respect between the Haudenosaunee nations and settlers — are premised on revolutionary notions of respectful coexistence and stewardship of the land.

In order for our activism to be purposeful, we have to engage with our own activism with a sense of personal purpose. In thinking about community organizing that keeps us inspired, energized, and nourished, I want to close with these words from Robin Kelley “Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to re-live horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society.”

* * *

Harsha Walia is a South Asian activist, writer, and popular educator trained in the law. Based in Vancouver Unceded Coast Salish Territories, she is a board member of the South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy and a co-founder of No One Is Illegal, Radical Desis, Olympic Resistance Network, and the Northwest Anti-Authoritarian People of Colour Network. She currently works at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre and is a member of the February 14th Women’s Memorial March Committee. Her writings have appeared in over 30 magazines, journals, books, and newspapers, and she is the co-creator of a short film. Harsha has been named one of the most influential South Asians in BC by the Vancouver Sun and one of the ten most popular left-wing journalists by the Georgia Straight. You can reach her at harsha@resist.ca or <http://twitter.com/HarshaWalia>.