

Activist experiences of solidarity work

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In the runup to Mayday 2014 the special issue editors invited activists to comment on a range of questions about their experience of solidarity work and its practical challenges. We've edited the responses together into a single piece which we hope will provoke reflection!

The contributors were:

Mike Aiken, independent researcher, UK.

Gregory Franklin Baremlitt. Doctor in Psychiatry. Founding member of the Felix Guattari Institute of Belo Horizonte. Minas Gerais, Brazil. Specializing in self-analysis and self-management groups, networks and social movements.

Nicola Bullard, activist, day labourer (at my computer). Have worked with trade unions, women's organisations, human rights groups and development agencies for more than 30 years, in Australia, Thailand and Cambodia.

Carine Clément, sociologist, activist in Russian grassroots groups, Assistant Professor at St.Petersburg State university, head of the Russian NGO Institute for Collective Action (IKD).

Ann Deslandes, researcher and writer in Australia. (2009 PhD thesis, 'From fetishism to friendship: Ethics and politics of solidarity in the global justice movement', Gender & Cultural Studies, University of Sydney).

Sara Koopman, activist-academic geographer, Canada.

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What does international solidarity mean to you?

Sara: people working together, across distance and difference, to build peace and justice

Gregorio: It means any support that can be given to any initiatives, groups, organizations and networks in efforts for survival, freedom and equality of all peoples of the world, regardless of their division by nations.

Ann: Multi-identified alliance work for a world that works in our interests!

Nicola: Building relationships of respect and equality to support struggles through concrete actions

Mike: 'Standing with and for'so actions and activities which (a) seek to understand and support progressive causes in other states; (b) develop an understanding of interlinkages of issues with actions closer to home; (c) are characterised by taking those issues on the terms understood by those most affected by them but (d) also engaging creatively on 'domestic' terms to relate those issues to local concerns and understandings.

The actions and activities are therefore two way and entail political education as well as action, at their best would seek to dispute the separation between a 'them' and 'us', they would acknowledge power differentials between economically and politically more powerful countries, they would dispute the notion of nations, they would assert a sense of peoples oppressed and would include positive work to combat oppressions such as sexism, racism, disablism, and discrimination against indigenous people.

Int Solid also needs to contain an understanding of debate and complexity - any particular issue will throw up contradictions across and between countries and peoples - these arise from different economic systems and political regimes. These are an essential part of our navigation not a reason for giving up on international solidarity.

We also need to see Int Solid as a continual 'work in progress' - to achieve all of the above even some of the time would be very hard - so it should point to a direction of travel to aim for rather than an 'qualification boundary' by which to exclude many noble and brave actions because 'they are not really Inter Solid'.

Hope this quick brainstorm helps!!

Carine: Solidarity in acts, more than words

Sander: For me, international solidarity means understanding that a struggle occurring elsewhere has a relationship with your own struggle, this connection marking the difference from charity. Coming from West Europe certainly does not imply carrying out struggle on behalf of people from other world areas, but we can certainly support them by recognising the relationship between our struggles. I support the quotation credited to Lilla Watson: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together"

How do you think international solidarity has changed in recent decades? And / or: what is your personal experience of this change?

Nicola: North-South relationships are changing, slowly. “Solidarity” is (hopefully) becoming more horizontal and is based on a recognition of common sources of oppression and a common desire for justice/alternatives/freedom, etc.

Carine: Solidarity increased as a whole, but limited to 'fashion' themes or countries or places. Very dependant on the trend in 'alternative discourses'

Sander: I am not too old, so I cannot see a lot of changes. One of the things I think I notice is a growing popularity of doing volunteer work abroad among western students/young people. Although with good intentions, this is not always unproblematic, as it exoticises others and once again portrays the well educated westerner as the “do-gooder” for the African/Asian that needs help.

Sara: in the 25 years I've been doing int solidarity (US/Canada with El Salv, Mexico and Colombian justice groups) it has become much easier to share stories and build connections thanks to ICTs. It's amazing how much faster and farther a story or action alert can travel on social media compared to our early faxing and mail outs. but at the same time we used to have a much better sense of the relationships of our members in CISPES when I was an organizer in the early 90s - so for example we knew who went to church with the staff member of the local member of Congress and whose kids were on a team with the kids of a key reporter who would cover our issues, etc. It seems like the groups I'm involved with now just have a list of emails and don't know how to strategically work them.

Gregorio: Global solidarity has gained much in recent decades because of world globalization and advances in communications and transportation. Its limitation is due to globalization being predominantly reduced to economic transactions for profit and agreements/disagreements with hegemonic outcomes. I try to support the ideas and actions that serve a genuine spirit of solidarity.

Ann: Economic globalisation and its re-routing of the nation-state has changed the nature of 'international' to some extent. We've also seen new expressions of nationality and sovereignty that bypass the nation-state - such as congresses of Indigenous people from different countries, transnational feminist activism online and of course Occupy. We've tried different models like the World Social Forum, convergences like the summit protests and Occupy. We've become more anarchistic as Nathan Schneider and others have observed.

There are obvious differences (in funding, power, resources, historical experiences etc) between organisations in the West and those in the global South and post-communist world. Also between and among trade unions / political parties / NGOs and grassroots groups / popular movements. International solidarity commonly has to cross these divides. How do you deal with this, either practically or in your thinking about the subject?

Sara: I spend a lot of time thinking about how paternalism and colonial patterns sneak in to our solidarity relationships, even when we are trying hard to work with care and respect across divides of privilege. I wrote [this article](#)¹ about how it has shaped US solidarity work with Latin America, and it is a regular topic on [my blog](#)².

Carine: Practically I rely less and less on international solidarity, which don't bring much for the increasing of mobilization potential here in Russia and for the resolving of problems, with the exception of very 'political' and most known topics in international activist milieu.

Sander: When I think of international solidarity I like to understand where struggles for liberation intertwine and act on these. I do not think there is a necessity for westerners to go to third world countries to 'help' local struggles, although there might be ways in which this is legitimate. I would prefer to investigate the responsibilities my place/country of residence has in the conflict elsewhere, which companies and what parts of the government in my place are involved and target them in my location. In this way I hope to prevent the idea of the enlightened westerner that travels to faraway places to liberate others, while not falling for a 'it's their struggle, not mine' argument.

Ann: I try to keep in mind this great quote from Nicole Burrowes, Morgan Cousins, Paula X. Rojas, & Ije Ude in their chapter of the book *The revolution will not be funded*, edited by INCITE! Women of Colour Against Violence, in the US:

Truth be told, the relationships between NGOs and the communities in which they work are not always negative; nor do they always work in the same way. Some are strategically linked, and even directed by the revolutionary movements themselves. Others serve as a mechanism through which resources may be funneled to autonomous organisations of tens of thousands... and while many of these NGOs were started at the request of the movements, usually to provide specific skills or resources, ultimately they are not essential. If these NGOs collapsed tomorrow, the movements would remain intact. Their members are connected to each other through participation in the movement, not through NGO trainings. (Burrowes et al. 2006: 227 – 235)

¹ https://www.academia.edu/951916/Imperialism_Within_Can_the_Masters_Tools_Bring_Down_Empire

² <http://decolonizingsolidarity.blogspot.ca/>

That is - power and resource imbalances are part of what we have to work out. And as long as our organising and movement building is effective, then the questions of historical dominance or NGOs or whatever will be worked out.

Nicola: For me, it's the political orientation that counts, rather than the organisational form or geographic provenance.

Gregorio: The objectives stated in Question 2 are valid for all people, the need for their realization must overcome other differences. Seeking alliances with any initiative which partly or fully intends to address the fundamental problems of humanity: exploitation, domination and mystification, taking into account political, cultural and ethical differences. But I try to make sure these are the most important among the various objectives that such initiatives can pursue. I have tried to inform myself extensively about the honesty of these potential allies. I do not claim that I ally myself simply with extremely 'pure' initiatives: this is obviously because they do not exist, but also because a fundamentalist attitude has proven to be neither efficient nor feasible. My international experience is limited to joint movements between Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.

How do you experience or understand the tensions between local / national struggles and the ways in which they are represented or projected in international social movements, Left and / or religious contexts?

Sander: A particular topic of interest to me, where I definitely need to do more research, is the relation between anti-colonial struggles and nationalism. This interest triggered with my move to Ireland, where I wondered how the left related to the issue of Northern Ireland, which easily can fall into nationalism. This made me wonder about national liberation struggles of the 20th century as well. A lot of representation of social movements is done in national contexts, while of course these have an influence, but the root of the problem crosses borders, which is sometimes/often not present in the representations of movements.

Carine: Too weak interest in Russian grassroots initiatives and in workplace struggles on the part of the West, their delegitimation at the eye of Russian establishment. The official Russian 'liberal' opposition ignore them (and it's maybe a good thing).

Sara: As a long time Spanish interpreter for the movement I have often interpreted for speakers on tour in the US and Canada who want to give WAY more local specifics on their struggles than makes sense to or is of interest for their audiences, but don't often know what background context is needed for their local issues to make sense to and matter more to their audience. it's often frustrating for me that tour organizers don't offer more support to speakers to help them find this balance.

At the same time I've struggled to see some US groups in Colombia ignore or whitewash in their publications some pretty serious shit going down in some of the communities they do solidarity with because they didn't want to overwhelm people with the blow by blow dramas of their organizing dynamics - but this can then also lead to some romanticizing and naivete

Ann: I tend to explain it as a kind of fetishism - we seem to need the example of a local, situated movement to project/extrapolate from/build a global movement. I think this fetishism is necessary, but we need to be careful about appropriating movement that is not ours.

Nicola: Not sure I know how to answer this: suffice to say, local/national struggles are always more grounded and concrete and therefore amenable to more grounded and concrete actions and demands and results. It is always difficult to "balance" the immediate and real needs of movements and struggles on the ground with the more abstract and often more general demands of international movements. For example, specific reforms might resolve land/agrarian issues in one locality but that doesn't deal with the global power of agribusiness. The point is to try to make all these small local struggles and victories coherent with a broader strategy.

Gregorio: My opinion is that solidarity movements and actions always have a more or less given conventional, racial, political, religious, etc, orientation. The international solidarity movements rarely ever completely escape the weight of the orientations they represent, embody or sponsor. Some are 'acceptable', others are untenable, even if they have positive results in their explicit propositions.

There are obvious differences between international movement solidarity and other actors who claim to act out of solidarity such as nation-states, the UN, the ILO, Amnesty and even international financial institutions etc. Have you experienced such differences, and if so how do you understand or respond to them?

Sara: ...or, say, the church. lately I've been [fascinated with](#) how frequently even [the popes](#) have used the term solidarity. I think it means such wildly different things to people, so I'm looking forward to reading your report!

Nicola: These institutions have their role and can sometime mobilise and speak to different audiences. The sterling work of the UN rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter, is a case in point: he has done amazing advocacy for food sovereignty in very institutional settings.

Sander: I have no real experiences with this, except the experience that actual migrants in Europe do not seem to like the UNHCR.

Gregorio: I have had little opportunity to work directly with organizations of this size. I've hardly even worked with partial or secondary initiatives of these

entities. I think the solidarity efforts of such institutions have an undeniable value. But they rarely have sufficient autonomy to address the structural causes of the scourges they fight, thus being limited to 'harm reduction'. Note, however, that they often achieve more than purely critical organizations, even if these are more militant.

Ann: Grand narratives of nation or organisation never quite work, which suggests to me that sustainable solidarity comes from somewhere else. Going back to the quote from Burrowes et al. above - as long as we have a strong grassroots movement, the other claimants to solidarity can come and go as we need them!

Are we missing anything out or would you like to add anything?

Gregorio: I believe that, independent of national, institutional, political and economic (and especially religious or racial) frameworks, solidarity initiatives will become more frequent and powerful over time. The capacity of the people for a peaceful, just and fair, fraternal living is much greater than that which has the power to suppress them or control them. However, the future is never assured and all militancy that takes place, is always a gamble ... and often dangerous.

Sara: lately I've been feeling annoyed with how easily and often the Galeano solidarity is horizontal quote gets tossed around. I know it's well intentioned, and yes, my solidarity comes out of a deep belief in our equality, but solidarity in my mind is not about ignoring our differences and pretending we're all on the same plane, but instead recognizing our different positions and strengths and using them strategically together to build justice. I have more access to the US Congress, a campesina in the peace community of San Jose has more experience building nonviolent resistance while surrounded by armed actors - together we can more powerfully build peace.

References

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About the editors

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