**Dealing with disagreements**

Beyond the basic groundwork established by constitutions and/or conditions of membership, the most common approach revolutionary groups have taken to establishing and maintaining political unity is through the development of ‘political lines’ and organisational discipline. The term ‘political line’ has pretty depressing associations (alternative suggestions would be welcome) but it basically just refers to implicit or explicit points of theoretical or strategic unity within a group. Different organisational forms relate to different methods for establishing and/or maintaining this kind of unity. Overviewing these forms isn’t necessarily the most direct way to deal with our differences, but it does give some useful reference points and is relevant to other longstanding conversations about organisation.

What follows gives a brief overview of common organisational forms starting from the least centralised to the most, beginning with affinity groups at one extreme and Stalinist bureaucracy on the other. I’ve tried to give a pretty impartial presentation of these models; we could discuss the pros and cons when we meet. It’d be worth bearing Giles’ questions in mind while thinking about these forms:

* Are we trying to come to a decision about adopting a group ‘structure’ formally, or just define tasks and remit a bit more clearly? Can we continue to manage things that come up informally/through meetings and emails etc. like we do now? Or something else?
* How much do we have to agree on things that fall outside our daily activities, if they don’t actually impact what we do together practically?
* How much as a group should we try to come to agreement on topics like Palestine, Ukraine, etc. where we might have big and possibly unresolvable disagreements?
* Do we have any ‘absolutes’ about what political positions we will and won’t be OK with people having in the group?
* What are the limits of what we can/can’t do as ‘Angry Workers’ and how do we manage something when it falls outside those limits politically?
* If people are going to external meetings as being from ‘Angry Workers’ how do we manage that and the things they say/decisions they can make on behalf of the group? Same with things like Twitter and the website

**Affinity groups and informalism**

Affinity groups are small, informal groups that come together on the basis of existing affinity to carry out discrete tasks, with limited accountability beyond the bounds of the group itself. Generally affinity groups form for some specific activity or event and then dissolve again, although some do have more a long-term existence. As a form it’s commonly associated with critiques of large-scale permanent organisations (e.g. they’re too slow and inflexible, they become an end in themselves, their need to maintain unity results in moderation and compromise, etc.). They’re advocated by insurrectionary anarchists and certain parts of the communist ultra-left, who see tactical escalation or innovation using easily replicable means as the best alternative to formal mass organisation. Affinity groups are generally opaque and lack explicit political lines, and tend to be regulated by interpersonal dynamics rather than transparent guidelines.

**Federalism**

Federalist organisations are composed of an association of member groups (e.g. local groups or industrial networks). The federation provides a structure for conversation and exchange but has only very limited authority over the member groups. To remain associated the member groups must abide by the organisation’s constitution and principles, and any special decisions by federal conferences, but are otherwise basically autonomous. Federalist organisations (e.g. SolFed) tend to make decisions by consensus at member group level and by majority vote at federal conference. Delegates are provided with explicit mandates to undertake organisational functions (e.g. represent member groups and vote at conferences or occupy federal roles like secretary, communications officer, etc.), and must provide reports accounting for how these mandates have been fulfilled. Among revolutionaries federalism is most commonly associated with anarcho-syndicalists and anarchist communists. A federalist organisation’s political line is basically defined by its constitution, with extensive space for disagreement beyond this. Angry Workers current form feels closest to this, a kind of extremely informal federation of local groups, workplace and industry groups, and isolated individuals.

**Democratic centralism**

Democratic centralism is often summarised with the expression “freedom of discussion, unity of action”, but in practice this is subject to pretty widely diverging interpretations. The democratic elements of democratic centralism are supposed to ensure a space for critical reflection and efficient decision making, while the centralist elements are supposed to ensure unity and efficiency of action. In theory, the relative weight of the democratic and centralist elements should be adjusted according to the circumstances (e.g. in severe crises the need for unity, flexibility and efficiency would justify increased centralisation, in less dangerous times more democracy should be preferred). Political lines can be determined either by the leadership or democratically by the membership (e.g. via diktat or conference resolution), depending on how relatively centralised or democratic the organisation is at that point. According to the principle of collective responsibility, when an organisation has reached a decision, all members then have a responsibility to help carry that decision out.

Minority positions tend to be referred to as tendencies (when loose and informal) or factions (when more coherently organised, sometimes with independent political lines and group discipline). How different organisations have related to their minorities has varied quite a lot, from granting them full freedom of expression and mandatory representation in leadership bodies through to purges and suppression. A few examples of different perspectives:

* **Bordigist view**

Bordiga rejected the idea that a democratic majority would always know the best way ahead, and preferred the term 'organic centralism'. In his view though, the aim should be to actively address and overcome disunity through political means, rather than just banning factions. Factions and splits are further both seen as justified if required to oppose opportunist tendencies, and unconditional discipline can just as easily used for counterrevolutionary ends (e.g. the SPD vote for war credits).

* **Maoist view**

Disagreements within an organisation are viewed as an inevitable and legitimate reflection of objective contradictions. Distinct tendencies pursuing changes in political line, practice, or leadership can be beneficial. Permanent groups with independent lines and discipline however can undermine an organisation's decision-making processes and unity of action. The leadership should attempt to resolve issues through debate and criticism/self-criticism, or if that fails force a split and expel the independent faction.

* **Stalinist view**

Differences of opinion lead to tendencies, tendencies lead to factions, factions lead to disunity of will and action. Disunity is viewed as an expression of the opportunist influence of petit-bourgeois elements. Ideological struggle within the party is rejected as leading to "paralysis and chronic infirmity". Mechanical unity via purge is preferred, justified by a need for 'iron discipline'.

**Political unity and us**

Some options:

* See each other more often socially and in person. Friendship doesn’t entail political agreement but trust and warm feelings can help with the patience, good faith and commitment needed to navigate disagreements.
* Formalise a ‘constitution’ (aims, principles, conditions of membership, etc.). This would establish the group’s acceptable boundaries. It could be as simple as redrafting the AW or LGR ‘about us’. Some examples of more detailed constitutions:
	+ SolFed: <http://www.solfed.org.uk/solfed/solfed-constitution>
	+ Big Flame: <https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/const.pdf>
* Actively identify points of disagreement as focus areas for collective activity (writing, research, intervention, etc.). This could include:
	+ Organising well facilitated internal and external discussions on contentious topics
	+ Organising workshops or exercises to identify points of agreement and disagreement on certain topics, and relevant areas of research or intervention
	+ Publishing differing views on topics, ideally developing into public exchanges
		- With Ukraine we have more or less attempted these messages with varied success. It’d be worth reflecting together on the limits we’ve encountered e.g. very few people have responded to requests for written contributions to the debate
* Organise inductions and day schools for new groups and members to share important perspectives and experiences. The reading groups, discussions and Class Power book are all good for this purpose, but slower and less personal.