

What is a Cadre Organization?

by Joel Olson

The purpose of an organization like Bring the Ruckus might be unclear to some observers or readers of our website. This article is intended to explain what the purpose and function of Ruckus is in the struggle to build a free society. I originally wrote it for Ruckus's 2005 national conference.

What is a cadre group?

A cadre organization is a group of committed, active, revolutionary intellectuals who share a common politics and who come together to develop revolutionary thought and practice and test it out in struggle. By “active” I mean one who is involved in political struggle, not merely a book reader. By “intellectual” I don’t mean someone with a college degree but one who makes a serious, ongoing commitment to understanding the world in order to better agitate within it.

A cadre group is not a mass group like Janitors for Justice, Critical Resistance, Copwatch, or Communities United, although its members should be active in such groups. Nor does it presume to be leaders of these groups, although its members may assume leadership roles if they deserve them. It does not seek to co-opt or use these groups for its own ends (that’s called a front group), although it definitely participates democratically in struggles over their purpose and direction. Rather, a cadre group seeks to participate in those mass struggles that have the best chance to blow the lid off this society, and it seeks to make those struggles as radical and democratic as possible.

What is a cadre group for?

The purpose of a cadre group is to encourage the development of a revolutionary working class in the United States. A cadre group seeks to understand the world it lives in, identify the forces in it that are struggling in radical ways, and develop those forces in a way that is consistent with the cadre’s politics.

Marx argues in the Communist Manifesto that the purpose of a cadre group is to radicalize and internationalize working class struggles. That is, a cadre should help the working class in one area connect its struggle to struggles in other areas, as well as overcome religious, ethnic, and other distinctions that prevent working class unity. A cadre group should also help show the working class the inherently radical nature of their actions, which might otherwise seem reformist (such as the struggle to reduce the length of the working day to ten hours).

For C.L.R. James, the purpose of a cadre organization is to “observe and record.” That is, it should observe working-class struggles and record them (via a newspaper) so that

the working class can see for itself what it is doing and the radical nature of its struggle.

I think Marx and James are essentially correct, except I would add that a cadre group should also participate in those struggles that we think have the most revolutionary potential. Thus, the function of a cadre group like BTR is to observe, record, and participate in working class struggles that have the potential to bring about a free world.

What is the role of political analysis in a cadre group?

A cadre exists first and foremost for the benefit of revolutionaries. It seeks to organize the revolutionaries, not the masses. (Organizing mass movements is the job of larger grassroots organizations, of which cadre members should participate in.) Its benefit to ordinary folks and non-revolutionary activists is at best indirect—at least up until the barricades go up and people are actively looking for new ideas and new ways to organize the world. Thus, a cadre group seeks to develop a political line and the politics of its members in the service of revolutionary struggle. The politics of a cadre group today should imply the expansion of democracy to all aspects of a person's life and a radical rejection of capitalism and the state. The state is not a path to a classless society but an obstacle to be smashed. This politics is spelled out, more or less, in our statement, "**Bring the Ruckus.**"

What strategies does a cadre group develop?

A friend of mine, when giving talks, tells people to imagine that capitalism is the death star and we are the rebels. We are hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered, and so we can't take on the death star directly. Given this, what do we do? We have to find the system's weakest point and concentrate our attack there, she argues. This is exactly what a cadre group needs to do. A cadre group, then, seeks to develop a strategy that can best take advantage of a crisis in capitalism.

The cadre group tries to find and exploit cracks in the system, and to fill in those cracks with the seeds of a new society. In other words, a cadre group should try to devise and implement strategies that can build a dual power.

As the "**Bring the Ruckus**" statement puts it, dual power strategies are "those forms of agitation that undermine the rule of official society and that in some way prefigure the new society." Put more simply, dual power is a situation in which two (or more) social forces assert power over the same territory and are capable of fighting for it. Such a situation is obviously unstable and quickly leads to conflict. When this conflict becomes protracted, it leads to civil war—revolution.

Ruckus's Six Criteria guide our dual power strategies. We work to build a dual power by attacking white supremacy and thereby breaking up the cross-class alliance and its "wages of whiteness" that presents the central obstacle to working class unity in the United States.

How does a cadre relate to grassroots movements?

A cadre organization seeks to participate in those grassroots (or “mass”) struggles that it believes has the most revolutionary potential, based on the cadre’s political analysis. At the national level, a cadre organization develops and implements dual power strategies for its members nationwide to participate in. At a local level, the local cadre participates in grassroots struggles that fit within the national strategy, debates their effectiveness in local meetings, reports back to the national organization, and seeks to move the grassroots struggle in a radical direction according to these discussions. Let me give two examples, one at the national level and one at the local.

The Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, which existed from 1992 to 1998, defined three areas of work with revolutionary potential. One of these was anti-fascist political work. L&R created an Anti-Fascist Working Group at the national level to engage in this struggle. This WG determined that the best place to do anti-fascist work was within a grassroots organization called Anti-Racist Action. Thus, the WG called for Love and Rage members to join ARA and do anti-fascist work within it. L&R’s role was to participate in this work and try to lead it in radical directions. L&R members did not assume leadership in ARA unless they had earned it, and they did not seek to “control” ARA. The commitment to doing the work of the grassroots organization and to participating in a democratic manner distinguishes a cadre from a front group.

An example of how a local cadre works can be found in the relationship between Phoenix Ruckus and Phoenix Copwatch. Phoenix BTR started up Copwatch in 1998 but once Copwatch was up and running, BTR relinquished control and Copwatch became an independent organization. BTR members now participate in Copwatch as Copwatch members, and any leadership positions come from that participation, not from being in Ruckus. Phoenix Ruckus frequently discusses Copwatch at its meetings, trying to devise ways to improve Copwatch’s work and revolutionary potential. Phoenix Ruckus also reports back to the national organization. Phoenix Ruckus should also regularly communicate with other anti-cop agitators in Bring the Ruckus nationwide, exchanging ideas on tactics and strategies. Based on these discussions, if Phoenix BTR has an idea for how to move Copwatch in a more effective and radical direction, they take it to a Copwatch meeting and put it up for debate and a vote.

Phoenix BTR participates in Copwatch instead of, say, Food Not Bombs, because it thinks that Copwatch has the best potential to lead to a situation of dual power than any other form of political work in Phoenix. Copwatch challenges the authority of the state, obstructs the function of the police (to maintain color and class lines), and prefigures a society in which ordinary people take responsibility for ensuring the safety of their communities. Phoenix BTR (at its most hopeful moments, at least) believes that given the right confluence of social forces (and a good bit of luck), Copwatch has the potential to develop into the kind of wedge that could create and generalize anti-police rebellions like Los Angeles ’92.

Many members in Love and Rage did not have a clear sense of the purpose of a cadre organization, and therefore the purpose of L&R. This contributed to the collapse of L&R,

particularly in Minneapolis. Given this, it is essential that Ruckus members have a solid grasp of the purpose of our organization.

The cadre and the revolution

A cadre group should not try to “lead the revolution.” Its task is to bring out the revolutionary tendencies that already exist in society. A cadre group will not start a revolution. It will rarely lead one, either. But even if its members never live to see revolutionary times (e.g. Love and Rage) and even if its members labor in relative obscurity (e.g. Sojourner Truth Organization), it can still play an indispensable role in preparing people for protracted struggle against the state.

To steal a metaphor, the role of a group like Ruckus in non-revolutionary times (which I believe we live in today) is to be a crouching tiger, laying in wait for a social crisis (such as a depression or a new civil rights movement) to break out that challenges the legitimacy and stability of the state. If and when an event occurs, the cadre pounces, seeking to exploit this instability for revolutionary ends.

As the “**Bring the Ruckus**” statement puts it, a revolutionary organization “does not seek to control any organization or movement, nor does it pretend that it is the most advanced section of a struggle and thus has the right to act in the interests of the masses. Instead, it assumes that the masses are typically the most advanced section of a struggle and that the cadre perpetually strives to learn from and identify with the masses. At the same time, a cadre organization does not pretend it doesn’t provide leadership for larger movements, nor does it pretend that leadership is inherently authoritarian. A cadre organization does not seek to control any organization or movement, it aims to help lead it by providing it with a radical perspective and committed members dedicated to developing its autonomous revolutionary potential.”

Joel Olson is a member of Bring the Ruckus.