

Learning activity

Historical Alliances and Ruptures

TIME: 90 mins

LEARNING AIMS:

- Identifying examples of historical movement alliances relevant to participants' context
- Analysing examples of historical movement alliances
- Identifying whose accounts of historical movement alliances are accessible and reliable.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 3-30 working individually or in groups of 3-5

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS: Print the handout with examples of historical movement alliances and the guiding questions. Provide access to the internet for the analysis exercise.

FRAMING:

This session focuses on identifying and analysing historical movement alliances / coalitions/ networks to find out how they worked in their context, what made them possible, what types and levels of diversities were part of the alliance, what were the limitations, what were the benefits in influencing power relations? This will be done through an analysis of real examples.

FACILITATION:

Step 1. Introduction

Big movements are always themselves alliances of different kinds. They bring together lots of “individuals, informal groups and formal organisations”, they make connections across different geographies, they bring in people from many different social groups, they involve alliances across different political traditions, they mobilise people who weren't previously active... Because of the many different interests and ideas involved, movements also often involve ruptures. Sometimes organisations compete with one another within movements; different interests collide; different political traditions involve making choices in different directions; strategies and tactics that work for one group don't work for another; and in moments of defeat it becomes hard to keep any alliance together. Often too we have to choose between different possible alliances – we can't have it all.

Step 2. Exercise: Selecting an examples of historical movement alliances / coalition / network

This exercise can be done as a solo activity, but we recommend working in a group of 3-5. Select one of the examples of historical movement alliances in the handout below (1. Popular fronts against fascism, 2. Feminist and LGBTQIA+ struggles, 3. Anti-nuclear power struggles) . Alternatively select a different example of historical movement alliances /coalition / network or another one that you can find out about). It is generally a good idea to look at an alliance that you have some historical connection to yourselves – it happened in your country, this is part of the past of your own movement, it was important for your political tradition, it is something people in your community

still talk about etc. If you only know something as an image from mainstream sources it can be hard to get beyond this.

Step 2. Exercise: Analysing examples of historical movement alliances

Once you have selected an example, analyse the historical movement alliance and find out about how it worked in your own local context using the questions below. Discuss what you want to look at beforehand, divide up the work, then come back and try to make sense of it together around the questions.

- What do you know / what can you find out about the alliance / coalition / networks that made it possible?
- Did different organisations come together?
- Did people make alliances across different movements?
- Were there alliances across different social positionalities (class, gender, race/ethnicity, dis/ability, age...?)
- Did people make alliances across different political traditions?
- Were there alliances between activists in different cities, regions, countries, parts of the world?
- What were the limits of transversal organising as far as you can tell? How did this affect the alliance's capacity to bring about the kinds of change it wanted?
- Despite these, how did the alliance as it actually happened reshape power relations? (If your answer is "not at all" you may want to choose a different example!)
- Can you think of a question you'd like to ask people involved that might be useful for your organising work today?

The analysis typically involves quite a bit of reading (or watching, or listening) different people's stories of their own experience of involvement, or what they made of it afterwards. Choosing whose accounts to listen to (or noting what accounts you have access to) is an important part of this exercise. Major movement alliances are always contested – most obviously by mainstream media which tend to fit them into their own, conservative stories (saintly leaders! Young people acting out their psychological issues! Defeat by the forces of grim adult reality! Etc.) – but also by later activists who want to mark out their own position by dismissing the relevance or effect of previous movements. Similarly, beware of journalists, writers etc. who don't seem to have any real involvement. See if you can find some voices from activists at the time, analyses from different radical points of view, examples from different places or different parts of society. Often the story will seem quite mixed and confusing because such alliances are always about very large numbers of different kinds of people coming together – this is their strength at the time, but it means that there is often a wide range of different views afterwards.

Conclusion and takeaways

In plenary, each group/individual shares their analysis and what they found out about their example and what the questions that require further analysis. The facilitator gathers ideas of what worked and did not work in building alliances and what were the limitations and benefits in influencing power relations. The facilitator concludes by summarising the key points and gathering the key take aways from participants.

SOURCE: Laurence Cox

Handout

Three possible examples of historical alliances:

(1) Popular fronts against fascism

After the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, communists and socialists in several European countries agreed to work together against the rise of fascism, despite their split over the First World War and the Russian Revolution. In France the alliance included other progressives and saw a large-scale general strike winning important gains (paid holidays, the 40-hour week etc.) In Spain the popular front was even broader and also included Catalan and Galician nationalists, anarchists and Trotskyists – this was the Republican government that Franco attacked and eventually defeated.

Elsewhere too, alliances of left/working-class parties, trade unions, middle-class progressives and other radical groups were significant in resistance to fascism up to 1945 and these alliances made it possible to mobilise very large parts of the population in many different ways – migrant workers, Jewish organisations, women, peasants, factory workers, middle-class intellectuals and others. These anti-fascist alliances are remembered very differently in different places, partly because of “Great Power politics” – the impact of the US, USSR and UK on different resistance groups and governments in exile, the struggle to control newly-liberated countries after the Yalta agreement and state-backed violence against one-time allies (in many different directions). These alliances would certainly not have been possible without the common enemy – and murderous threat – of fascist and Nazi power, but these alliances under the extremely difficult conditions of dictatorship, military occupation and world war were very significant, including for the direction of politics after the end of fascism.

(2) Feminist and LGBTQIA+ struggles

There have been several waves of movements against patriarchy. One of the most effective grew in the midst of the global uprising we now call “1968” and won major changes around issues such as divorce, contraception, abortion, gay rights and women’s access to the workplace. These movements worked differently in different parts of Europe – in “liberal” western countries, in state-socialist eastern countries, in post- colonial Ireland or post-fascist Iberia and Greece – and gender politics was not the same in these different contexts. In many cases the rebirth of feminism and queer movements came out of movements for liberation in everyday life (in education, in the workplace, in the family) along with countercultural and sexual liberation movements and in many countries secular and liberal resistance to religious power. Often new movements developed as splits from older ones: feminism out of anti-war movements, lesbian struggles out of feminist or gay ones and so on. Working-class, Black and Muslim women and gay people also had to create their own organisations. These were also processes of partial refusal of solidarity: men who started from a critique of conservative families or gender roles often opposed feminism; straight feminists often resisted lesbian organising, working-class activists were often excluded by others. Patriarchy, race and class reproduced themselves within these processes as groups tried to win liberation for themselves but not for others – but at the

same time powerful majorities in most cases did support one another. L,G,B,T,Q,I,A and others did learn not just how to form alliances but why it was worthwhile. Majorities of feminists became LGBTQIA+ allies in most countries and vice versa. Both processes – solidarity and the attempt to fit into patriarchy at other people's expense – still carry on today.

(3) Anti-nuclear power struggles

From the 1970s and 1980s on, opposition to nuclear power plants, processing and waste storage became central to ecological activism in much of western Europe and (later in many cases) east and central Europe. The sites of planned installations became the location for major struggles often lasting over many years and bringing together very broad coalitions in opposition. Given the rural (and often border) locations of nuclear plants, farmers and local rural groups played an important part, whether motivated by concerns about health and tourism or regional nationalisms. Radical left, counter-cultural and eco-feminist activists resisted both the military applications and the techno-consumerist vision of society driven by ever-increasing energy production. Urban middle-class groups, concerned scientists and medics raised the issue of radiation from waste and accidents. Trade unionists concerned about meaningful production, anti-war activists concerned about the military applications and anti-authoritarians concerned about the concentration of police power around protests also joined the coalitions. In different forms in different countries, these alliances often form the back-story to contemporary ecological and climate movements. In several countries nuclear power was defeated at a national level; elsewhere individual plants were forced through but the political costs were such that others were drastically slowed.

Other possibilities:

If these alliances don't sound easy to work on you could look at:

- The struggles that gave rise to the welfare state in the 1930s and 1940s
- The uprisings of the "long 1968"
- The uprisings of 1989-90 in East and Central Europe
- The alter-globalisation struggles of the early 21st century
- The indignad@s or "Arab Spring" uprisings of 2010-11 in Southern Europe or the Middle East and North Africa

Questions

- What do you know / what can you find out about the alliance / coalition / networks that made it possible?
- Did different organisations come together?
- Did people make alliances across different movements?
- Were there alliances across different social positionalities (class, gender, race/ethnicity, dis/ability, age...?)
- Did people make alliances across different political traditions?
- Were there alliances between activists in different cities, regions, countries, parts of the world?

- What were the limits of transversal organising as far as you can tell? How did this affect the alliance's capacity to bring about the kinds of change it wanted?
- Despite these, how did the alliance as it actually happened reshape power relations? (If your answer is "not at all" you may want to choose a different example!)
- Can you think of a question you'd like to ask people involved that might be useful for your organising work today?