Where have I heard this before?

August 5, 2009 By Paul Dalton

In addition to being an AIDS activist, I am an anarchist. I have been mixed up in radical and revolutionary activism since I was a teenager, attending anti-nuclear demonstrations at the Seneca Army Depot in upstate New York.

The worlds of AIDS activism and anarchist activism don't overlap much (Liz, this is me winking at you, if you read this), but they do act a lot alike.

Recently there was a dust up between two groups of anarchists in Pittsburgh. It happened at this meeting called by a group called Crimethinc- who I really have no love for. The short version of the story is a small group of anarchist people of color disrupted the larger gathering and used intimidation and petty thuggery to force the attendees to leave the space.

I wasn't at the meeting, so I can't speak in any real detail about what went down. I have read pages upon pages of accounts from people on both sides of the controversy- and I think it is fair to say the whole thing is an embarrassment.

It is also highly evocative of the AIDS activist movement. Specifically it speaks to a tendency to attack each other while simultaneously wondering why there aren't more of us.

Every activist strain I have been involved in has struggled with the impact that racial, sexual and other forms of inequality have on the internal dynamics of the movement. AIDS activism in the US is disproportionately white, educated and male- something we are aware of, we talk all the time about, we seriously grapple with how to change, and ultimately fail to overcome.

Social conditioning is tough to overcome. What doesn't help matters I think is our tendency to attack those who we feel are not as right as us. In the anarchist world this often translates to people being called out for not behaving in ways entirely consistent with their politics (e.g. feminist men dominating meetings). In AIDS it takes on a more personal aspect, possibly because there are so few of us.

In both cases the net affect is a movement that can't grow. AIDS activists struggle to find ways of nurturing and helping to develop young, or just new cadre. It is complicated stuff. Years ago at the now-defunct NATAF (North American Treatment Action Forum), I overheard a woman say, "Treatment activist eat their young," What she meant was we are viscous and harsh with each other. At the same conference I heard and participated in many conversations lamenting the lack of new activists in our mix.

Activists are often playing from a sever deficit. We are usually outmanned, outgunned, outflanked and out-funded. This is as true of AIDS activism as it is for anarchists. Our adversaries hold most of the cards. We would do well to better recognize the value of imperfect bodies on our side.

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