

When our allies are not like us

BY ROBIN HAHNEL
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

In the recent fight against Stop Online Piracy Act and the Protect IP Act, avid believers in the right of free speech who view the Internet as an antidote to the corporate-owned media found themselves in an alliance with some of the largest and most powerful corporations in the world. Moreover, it was apparent that Google, Facebook, Twitter, et al, provided the critical

clout needed to turn the tide of battle and deliver a remarkable victory.

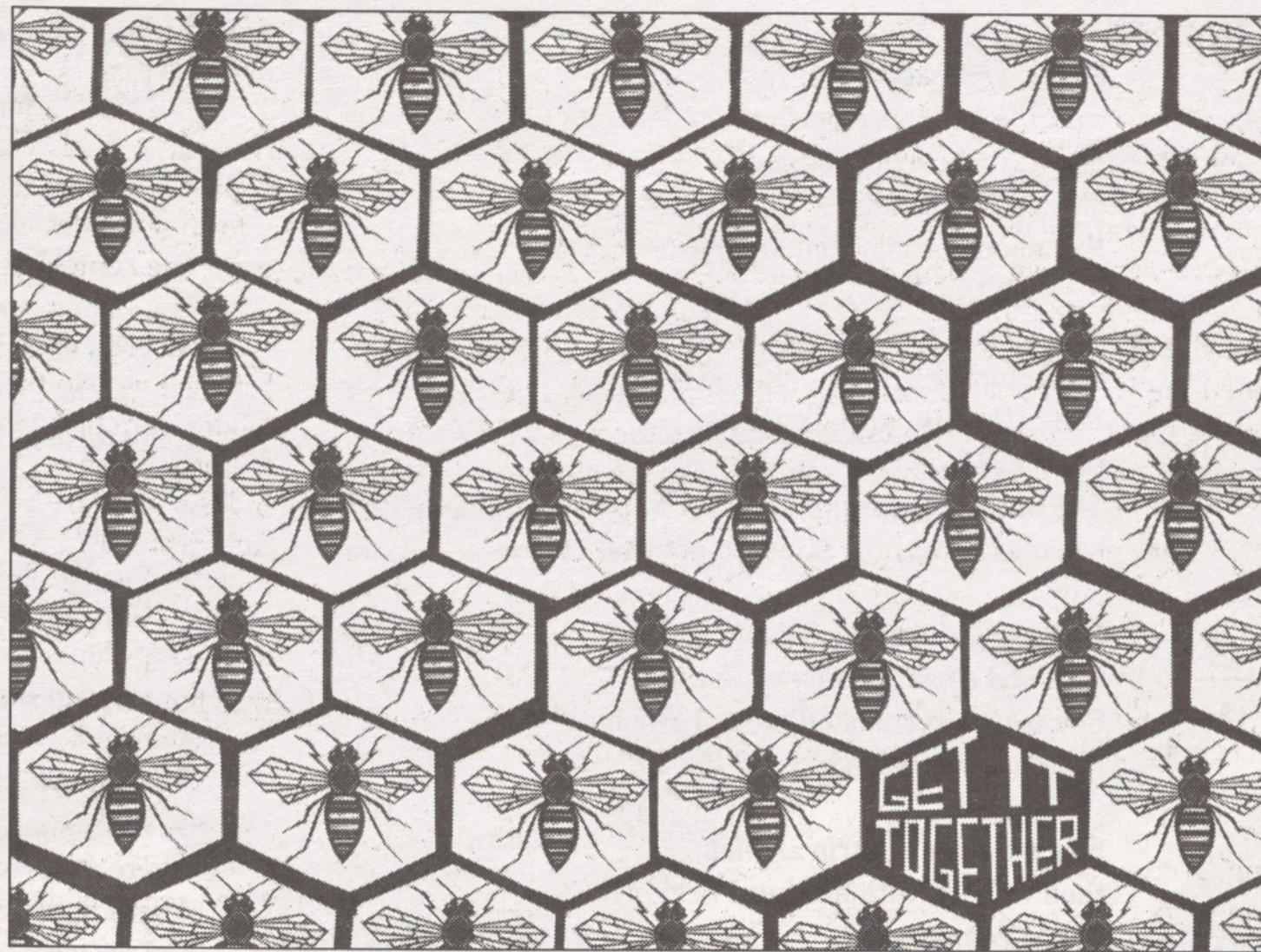
Robin Hahnel is a political activist and visiting professor of economics at Portland State University. He is a co-creator of the post-capitalist economic model known as participatory economics, along with Z Magazine editor Michael Albert. He is also Professor Emeritus at American University in Washington, D.C.

Last year, leftists participating in occupations in hundreds of cities across the country in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street discovered that many expressing themselves in the General Assemblies had, shall we say, less than perfectly politically correct positions on many issues. Some were not die-hard anti-imperialists. Some

were not committed anti-racists. Some were not fully feminist. Some were unaware how much the Patriot Act threatens cherished freedoms. Some even exhibited a somewhat hostile attitude toward the labor and environmental movements.

What is surprising is how often U.S. leftists seem caught off guard whenever this happens. After all, we on the Left in the U.S. are painfully aware that we are still, unfortunately, a minority — even here in Portlandia! So why should we be surprised to find others who do not think like us when we venture outside our own little world? Moreover, this has been going on from time immemorial. Leftists are almost always in a minority whenever we participate in mass movements and reform struggles.

One counterproductive response is for leftists to denounce allies we dislike, explaining why they are “politically incorrect” and untrustworthy on many issues. In effect, leftists too often feel compelled to denounce all who are not “us.”



By Alec Dunn

This response is no doubt self-soothing since it strokes our own egos. Unfortunately, it is not only sanctimonious, it is guaranteed to perpetuate our isolation.

A second counterproductive response is to assume that all who participate in any struggle we are also involved in do so for the same reasons we do. Leftists who respond in this way assume, in effect, that all our allies in a struggle have miraculously become “us.” This response is not only naïve, it leads people to drop out when they are disillusioned by what they experience as betrayal.

What is needed instead is a more mature — I am almost tempted to say Machiavellian — response:

(1) Welcome allies, and don't look gift horses in the mouth. We need more people and more organizational muscle — both to win battles today and to win the long war ahead. Any behavior on our part that is off putting to those who do not yet agree with us on some issue carries a heavy cost.

(2) Acknowledge differences and seek productive ways to discuss them. A good place to start is to review what has brought us and our allies together. But this is not to say that differences should be ignored. Only

if those engaged can find ways to discuss and overcome differences can reform campaigns turn into transformative movements. We do want to change people's minds. Moreover, the most opportune time to do so is when we are actively engaged as allies. Therefore, we should never hesitate to speak our mind, and insist that others respect our right to do so. In particular, we should never accept gag orders from allies, no matter how important they may be in the campaign of the moment. However, while there will be some who come into movements willing to accept us as “teachers,” most will not. Consequently, treating allies with whom we do not always see eye-to-eye as if they were our students is not only arrogant but counterproductive. We must learn how to discuss and overcome differences treating allies as equals.

(3) Be prepared for inevitable “partings of the way.” When the issue changes from fighting to put a price on carbon emissions and secure government funding for a massive Green New Deal, to fighting for better wages and more worker control, most corporations in the solar power and wind turbine industries will no longer be marching with us. And even while we are

discussing demands, strategies, and tactics to avert climate change, we will often disagree with allies who have different interests and goals, and want to limit and shape the struggle in ways we do not.

Moreover, in broad coalitions we will often not get our way. In coalitions who gets things more their way is usually determined by who brings more to a struggle. When we are out voted we should be prepared to “suck it up” and go along with the majority. Of course when the majority agrees with us and a coalition ally tries to use its greater financial, or even organizational strength to get its way, we should be in the forefront of those screaming bloody murder about how this is not the democratic way we all supposedly believe things should be settled. And sometimes we should be prepared to leave a coalition if the majority insist on some course of action we find unacceptable. But the main point is we should not be surprised when others disagree with us, and we should not waste time and energy getting bitter or grumbling when this happens.

Our road is a long and hard road. We will engage in many struggles along the way. Allies in one struggle at one juncture in the road will not always be allies in later struggles. On the other hand, those who are not with us today may well be with us tomorrow. Over the next few years a great deal depends on how quickly U.S. leftists mature regarding our attitudes and working relations with allies who do not agree with us: Will the Occupy Movement prove capable of attracting new participants who have long been hostile to the Left? Will the environmental and labor movements prove capable not only of working with each other, but also with giant corporations with business interests in clean energy and energy conservation. Just as Internet censorship would not have been beaten back in January without a powerful assist from Google, climate change will not be prevented before it is too late without the active support of major corporations willing to oppose the fossil fuel lobby. Getting ourselves tied up in psychological knots over who we find marching beside us is unproductive and unnecessary. The U.S. Left needs to grow up — and the sooner the better!

We can turn this house of cards into a real home

BY ALISON MCINTOSH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The Housing Alliance brings together advocates, local governments, housing authorities, community development corporations, environmentalists, service providers, business interests and all others dedicated to increasing the resources available to meet our housing needs to support a common statewide legislative and policy agenda. Alison McIntosh is a Policy Manager with Neighborhood Partnerships.

This month has been hard, with the Oregon State Legislature dealing with both a difficult budget and complicated policy issues in an election year. The Legislature has acted in several significant ways to protect our communities and prioritize people's needs, and the end result isn't as bad as we feared it might be.

Many last minute items are still in process in Salem, and unfortunately some critically important work may be left undone. The budget, however, is widely considered as of today to be a done deal and while not as bad as we feared the news is still not good for those Oregonians most affected by the recession. Our safety net in Oregon feels much like a house of cards — it can provide some basic assistance to some people that need it, but it cannot adequately provide safety and meet basic needs for everyone. And for those with ongoing and significant needs, it may fail altogether.

Programs that provide emergency rent assistance and funding for shelters across the state (Emergency Housing Assistance and the State Homeless Assistance Program) experienced additional cuts of 3.5 percent. While this may seem like a small cut, these resources were already inadequate. Too many of our neighbors and

families in need of rent assistance will be turned away from help. Programs to protect children and families continue to erode through additional cuts to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, program. The impact of the cuts will be that those who have left TANF for work but need to return to the program may be asked to wait longer to return, and there were cuts to the portion of the program serving immigrants and refugees. People leaving TANF for work will also no longer receive a small subsidy designed to help them sustain their new employment. In slightly better news, many of the programs protecting seniors and people with disabilities were protected for now from further cuts.

While the state budget has huge impacts on our lives as Oregonians, we also are affected by federal and local budgets. These budgets all help to build, or erode the house that protects us in good times and bad. It seems like this news is getting worse as well — federal cuts proposed to housing assistance; local cuts proposed to transit services; and agencies and churches that seek to help are operating beyond capacity. How much longer can we hold together this house of cards?

While I know the cuts to local, state and federal budgets will continue to deeply and negatively affect Oregonians across the

state, I believe it's safe to hope the state budget will not get worse. It's time to start thinking and working toward rebuilding a better future — one that isn't a house of cards.

It's time to see our state as a place of opportunity for everyone, one with strong communities where we pull together to overcome hardship and protect those most vulnerable among us. It's time to commit to the idea that we live in a society where we are all in it together, where our fates are linked and we rise and fall as one.

If we believe these things, then we can begin to rebuild our house of cards into one with real walls, doors and a roof. One with strong supports for people who need it, one with a roof over everyone's heads, and one with clear pathways to opportunity.

How do we get there from here? First, let's remember that the representatives and senators who make these decisions in the state legislature are our elected officials. We ask them to do the hard work of balancing the budget and making choices — so let's get involved. Let's thank them for their hard work and sit down to talk about what we would like our state to look like in the future. Let's start a dialogue about how we transform the house of cards we have into the real house that we want.