

their individual skills to the community. There is also the conventional learning process. Asia for example is just about to finish her linguistic studies and Clemens is supplementing his practical experience at the SSM for an apprenticeship.

Since the foundation of the SSM in 1979, its concept demonstrates that working without a leader is possible and that self-determined cooperation creates chances for self-development. No one has to do the same thing the whole week long. Everyone can and should change between different fields of work. Everyone can do something that he/she is really interested in. This rule is valid for people of all social backgrounds of all ages and also especially for people who were pushed to the edge of society. On the other hand, this way of working includes a lot of tension between people, especially when agreement between them is not achieved. So a lot of problem solving is being done in the daily meetings. Many issues can be sorted out and this also shows that not only the individual can learn from a situation but that for a group coping strategies for conflicts are developed.

Self-determined and self organized working and living are also possible in other places, although special conditions are required. Next to finding ways of self-sufficiency, it is important to have affordable rents and cheap conditions at the workplace so that a group can survive with less income than usual. The City of Cologne is renting an old factory site with four buildings to the SSM at a low price and we are allowed to live and work on the premises. On the other hand, officials benefit a great deal from us because we help bring people out of dependence on social benefits and unemployment. Who would have guessed that humane working conditions »count« for society?

The SSM is an open and welcoming project. We invite you to immerse yourself in it for a week and experience joining our community.

The »Socialistic Self-Helping Group Mülheim« (SSM) Self-determined living and learning

Heinz Weinhausen

Gunnar is a new member of the »Socialistic Self-Helping Group Mülheim« (SSM) in Cologne. Not long ago he lived in his old Fiat because he could not stand living in his parents' house anymore. As it became too cold outside, he visited one of our daily morning meetings of our self-help group. He had read in »Querkopf« - a magazine of homeless people - that he could live and work with us. Ranne explained to him how the SSM works:

»We are about 20 people who live in this old factory site and every one of us has his or her own room or apartment. We do not have a boss. Everything that matters for the community is discussed and decided in common in our daily meetings. We earn our living with our van by moving people's households and clear up old apartments. If furniture and other discarded goods are still in good condition and are not needed by us any longer, we sell them in our second-hand shop. Self-sufficiency is a very important issue in the SSM.«

»Self-sufficiency, what does it mean?« asks Gunnar and Ranne replies: »The apartments here are all reconstructed, expanded and maintained by us. We saw the wood for our ovens by ourselves and mostly we find our clothing, furniture and equipment for our households amongst donated goods or leftovers. From Monday to Friday we have lunch collectively. The term »work« is used for all matters which are important for the group - not just for moneymaking. That means not just the moving of households or selling of goods is defined as work. Even the care for children is work, as is someone is sweeping the court, planting flowers or being committed to a citizen's initiative. We call our concept »new work«: Every one of us

shouldn't just earn money, they also should show their social commitment by engaging themselves in the borough or in other new projects. We want to be independent, that's why we don't apply for any appropriation of funds.

Every member of the SSM gets the same income. Anyone is allowed to join the group - disregarding his or her level of education. Even handicapped people are welcome. At the moment Freddy and Pit, both mentally disabled, live in the SSM. We don't expect any Olympic performances, but we expect that each member integrates themselves according to his/ her possibilities. Luckily there is a room available. You can come here right now and see if it is the right thing for you.«

Some days later, we have the big Tuesday discussion. Gunnar reports how his work went the day before, in which he collaborated with four other members. Everything went fine. By the next point of discussion, the assignment of work, the discussion gets out of hand and derails. How was it possible that someone made an appointment for Tuesday afternoon, even though it is well known that Detlef always inspects and repairs the van at that time? It has been more than a year since he was hindered from doing his job because the van got booked during those hours. But if one does not regularly check oil, air pressure and the brakes, if the axles are not greased and small repair jobs are not done regularly, the van is going to wear out much faster. It would be too expensive to pay for a mechanic in a garage to do this regularly. Detlef is really fed up this time. Already a year ago, he said that it's time for someone else to take on this work. He urgently needs time for other activities. From now on, he is not going to do the maintenance anymore. At the most he will show someone else how to do it.

Impressum

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Who is going to take the responsibility for the job? No one shows courage. The mood drops. None of the new members has the heart to take on such an important task. The people who have been here longer have made themselves familiar with other areas of work that are equally important for the group as a whole and so they do not want to change their duties.

Reinhard for example started to build and fit new double windows for one of the buildings. Rainer is writing on his PHD Thesis on »New Work«. Gisela and Michael are active

members of the new cooperative society of the borough that is called »WiWAt«. Heinz on the other hand is responsible for the computers and participates in the »Institute for New Work«.

Rainer starts telling the story how he first repaired and serviced the SSM-van. The resources at that time were quite poor and as a student he did not have much practical knowledge. But he was determined and read books about fixing cars and found acquaintances who helped him out. At that time, we were trying to fix almost everything by ourselves. Rainer says nowadays it is better to not to take such an extreme course. Also economically, that is the most effective way. The most important thing is to take the first step. Everything else is being developed and brought to light on the way. The Group is always very understanding and appreciative if something is not working straight away, even when things go really wrong.

On this day, no conclusion was found, even though the problem was touching our existential basis. Without a working van, we can not meet the targets of our business and the money for our living would be missing.

One week later, the theme was on the agenda of the meeting again and actually two new members wanted to take on servicing the van together. Peter came to the SSM after years of being unemployed. He used to work in a dispatch department where he would drive a delivery van but he never had to take care of the vehicle. Even though he is not really confident that he can do the job well, he has realized that it is on him to take the first step. He is ready to jump into the cold water. Sascha approached the whole task impartially because of his youth. A few weeks ago he also learned how to operate a computer.

Learning to develop oneself and to study further arises from various motives and through all kinds of ways in the SSM. When someone creates and cares for a garden or equips a rehearsal room for making music, there is always passion and interest for this work. On the other hand, there are the requirements and self-determined aims of the Group that involve further development of the skills of each member. So the rule is to make a fresh start and to address the obstacles one by one. This is accomplished in many different ways and everyone is free to decide on their own method. Reading books or asking friends for their advice or taking a course on how to do things is left to each individual to decide. Some also have done an apprenticeship or studied before they joined the group, so everyone brings