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May Day: A Strike Is a Blow

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Contents

<i>Saturday, April 28, Oakland</i>	3
<i>Sunday, April 29, Albany</i>	4
<i>Monday, April 30, San Francisco</i>	5
<i>Tuesday, May 1, Oakland</i>	6

As the momentum that originated with Occupy Wall Street tapers off, May Day 2012 saw anarchists on the West Coast consolidate their gains in the street with actions from Los Angeles to Vancouver. In a series of first-person vignettes from the Bay Area, supplemented by a photoessay from Seattle set to a song by Underground Reverie, we evoke the atmosphere of May Day 2012 and plumb the questions it poses.

Saturday, April 28, Oakland

I'm back in the Bay for May Day, loitering outside the top-secret anarchist hideout. The streets of Oakland record sedimentary layers of resistance and defeat: "OCCUPY EVERYTHING" is painted across a canvas of faded tags, the slogan itself obscured beneath syringes and garbage. Deeper beneath that concrete canvas lies the pavement that the Black Panthers once patrolled, and below that the streets blockaded in 1946, during the last General Strike in the US. We stand above, upon the syringes and garbage, aspiring protagonists of the next chapter of the story.

Two by two, my friends are showing up from all around the country. We thought we'd finally superseded the summit model of anarchist action, taking up the diffuse model of social unrest already spreading around the rest of the world. But here we are again, converging.

This converging confirms that the window of possibility that opened with last fall's surge of activity has closed; momentum has plateaued in the small towns, leaving the diehards to flow into the metropolises. Like Vietnam, Oakland is the site of a proxy war, patrolled by police who live in other towns and thronged by anarchists who move here from other states. This is where rulers and ruled contend to produce different visions of the future, which will presumably filter out through news stories and youtube videos to the periphery. Yet what happens here is determined elsewhere;

Oakland wouldn't be an anarchist hub without a steady flow of recruits from the Midwestern suburbs, nor could the Oakland Police keep the upper hand without funding and arms from outside. Both sides ignore the hinterlands at their peril.

Across the street, a half dozen rough characters pass lugging massive improvised shields, irregulars in a revolutionary army yet to exist. They look haggard; none of us recognize them. This could be Muenster in 1534, vagabonds trickling in from failed peasant wars for another showdown with the powers that be.

Sunday, April 29, Albany

North of Berkeley, hundreds of people have occupied a wide tract of prime farmland owned by UC Berkeley. The University is considering selling the land to Whole Foods, among others; why not use it to produce the food locals need, rather than destroying it so a corporation can cash in on their consequent dependence? Back in my hometown, we're doing the same on a site proposed for an unpopular drugstore, cultivating a guerrilla garden of medicinal herbs. Compared to this vast expanse, the scale of our little plot—a few plants at the foot of a fence—emphasizes the relationship between hinterland and epicenter.

The police circulate freely, filming us. Were it not for public support, they'd clear us out immediately; but the conditional nature of liberal backing ties our hands so we can't force the cops out, either—and their filming puts us all at risk, amassing evidence for databases and court cases.

While everyone else is juggling, playing with fabric at the art station, and listening to poorly amplified speeches—the rituals of liberal California—I join a Rastafarian my age shoveling soil and breaking ground. It feels good to wield a shovel in the hot sun, to do something with my body. I want to create commons, but I want to do it for keeps, not for show.

lobbing a paint bomb at it, and a masked figure smashes one of its windows; when someone chases the vandal, the pursuer is immediately surrounded and neutralized by the crowd, the way white blood cells respond to bacteria.

Rumors are pouring in from other corners of the country: police have raided and arrested comrades in New York City, LAX has been shut down, a state of emergency has been declared in Seattle after anarchists wrecked Niketown for the first time since 1999. It's not clear how seriously we should take these, but it's easy to believe just about anything in this environment; the fantasy persists that unrest will spread from the epicenter to the periphery, that riots will break out everywhere this coming autumn the way occupations did last fall.

After dark, when our numbers finally drop, the police swoop in en masse. We see lines of their vans zipping up the side streets to cut us off from the rear, so we fall back, orange columns of flame rising from the trashcans into the colossal night. Explosions echo in the distance behind us, screams and sirens mingle around us, and no one knows what to expect ahead. Maybe this is just the final act of the play, when all but the extremists have withdrawn from the field, leaving the impression of escalation; or maybe this really is a harbinger of things to come. It's probably both.

On the way out, I meet one of the organizers. We talk about the importance of secrecy in planning this occupation, and about the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra, which does this on a scale in Brazil that makes Berkeley look like my hometown. I never saw brighter stars than the night I stayed on several miles of occupied farmland outside Belo Horizonte.

I also pass some comrades not yet wearing their black sweat-shirts. It's not just community support and public legitimacy that make the authorities hesitate to evict this place; if that were all, they would go ahead, knowing the consequences would be limited to the field of civil discussion. It's also the threat posed by people like us.

Monday, April 30, San Francisco

We've been in the street for two minutes, hoods up and flags out, when the first police car rolls up. Even the most hardened of us flinch: here we are, caught red-handed. This moment is inscribed on each of us in shame and fear: the siren behind us on the highway, the loss prevention agent blocking our path at the grocery store, the officers evicting us from our encampment or home. The moment when it becomes clear that we are weaker, that we have to give in regardless of our needs or ideals.

A masked figure coolly steps to the car and spray-paints a circle A on the passenger-side window. The officer halts the car and jumps out; his body says, *I'm going to assert order*. Without breaking stride, the masked figure pitches the empty spray-paint can directly at the officer's face; it bounces off with an audible smack. The officer gets back in the car. Its windows are bashed in with a garbage can as he retreats.

One more block and the police station looms into view ahead. Normally this would mean we'd made a costly wrong turn, but tonight we march right to it. The police run for cover beneath a

hail of paint bombs and projectiles; more masked figures spring forward to drive their flagpoles into its doors and windows. The sound of shattering glass and hissing tires fills the night continuously for fifteen minutes.

Here it is, finally, the power to defend a space beyond their control; inside it, all the rage suppressed beneath the veneer of imposed order erupts to the surface. Activists and poor people humiliated by police exact vengeance; renters gentrified out of their homes wreck a neighborhood they could never afford; service workers taunted all their lives with luxury goods give the rich a taste of fear. The calculations—the *debts* and *payments*—of capitalist “justice” give way to the *excess* of rebellion. It’s chaotic, terrifying, exhilarating.

Walking around the Mission district afterwards, there’s a lot of confusion and anger, and not only from the fabulously wealthy. Indeed, it’s stupid that ordinary cars have been damaged alongside expensive restaurants; the lines should be drawn between the ruling class and everyone else, not each against all. But after so many years of bottling up the consequences of injustice and inequality, things are bound to be messy when the floodgates open. This is the flip side of the docility of career activists, the shadow of the self-congratulatory moralism of non-profit employees: what is shut out returns tenfold. And how many riots like this would it take for San Francisco rent to drop within my price range?

Tuesday, May 1, Oakland

The sweet scent of distant tear gas greets us as we arrive in downtown Oakland for the noon rally at Oscar Grant Plaza; concussion grenades are already exploding ahead. The bullies in blue are making snatch-and-grab arrests to intimidate the crowd. But the crowd doesn’t fall back; everyone rushes forward, yelling and shoving. The police issue a dispersal order through a megaphone.

There’s some back and forth—everything is confusing—but then they’ve retreated and we hold not only the plaza but the streets around it.

The crew around the sound system rolls their cart into the middle of the intersection and a raucous dance party ensues. Another hard-won space outside the logic of control and profit: dancing without a cover charge, lunch without a checkout line, politics without politicians. There are hundreds of people here, maybe thousands, and contrary to the allegations that Occupy Oakland is a bunch of outside agitators, many are longtime locals of color. It’s a mistake to credit recent arrivals with Oakland’s street militance—if anything, they’ve learned it here.

Originally, the plan for May Day had been to shut down the Golden Gate bridge, but that collapsed in acrimony as the unions that had originally sought social movement participation backed out. This has happened over and over all around the country: formal and longstanding organizations have only coopted and obstructed popular outrage, even when their own existence is at stake. It has been challenging to find new forms of organization that enable people to coordinate confrontational action. During the summit era, groups like the RNC Welcoming Committee and the Pittsburgh G20 Resistance Project offered a provisional solution, although they also gave the state a target for conspiracy charges. The general assemblies of the Occupy movement offered another model, often supplemented behind the scenes by informal networks; it remains to be seen how secure these are against state repression—the full force of which will not be felt until this wave of momentum has passed entirely.

After a couple hours circling Oscar Grant plaza, we begin marching to meet the permitted march for immigrants’ rights. The police are still nowhere to be seen. We cross the city, confident in our strength; participants drag the occasional barricade into the street, but for the most part our uncontested presence is enough. Still, when we pass a McDonald’s, somebody can’t resist