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Strategizing for the Austerity Era

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On May 20–21, anarchists and fellow travelers gathered in Milwaukee for a small conference about the ongoing crisis of capitalism. In the final discussion, people from around the US compared notes on recent anti-austerity protests, focusing chiefly on the student movement in California and the recent protests in Wisconsin. We've summarized some of the conclusions here in hopes they can be useful in the next phase of anarchist organizing.

So far, anarchists have not been very successful in contributing to anti-austerity protests in the US. Starting in December 2008, anarchist participation in school occupations was instrumental in kick-starting a student movement, but by March 4, 2010 this movement was dominated by liberal and authoritarian organizing; it subsequently ran out of steam. More recently, anarchists participated in the occupation of the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin in protest against anti-union legislation and occupied a university building in Milwaukee, without substantial impact on the course of events.

It's troubling that we've had such limited success in a context that should be conducive to our efforts. Eleven years ago, during the high point of the anti-globalization movement, anarchist participants were essentially the militant edge of an activist movement addressing issues that were distant from many people's day-to-day needs. Today, the livelihoods of millions like us are on the line; people should be much more likely to join in revolt now than they were a decade ago. If this isn't happening, it indicates that we're failing to organize effectively, or that the models we're offering aren't useful.

European anarchists have had more success, but they benefit from a richer and more continuous lineage of social movements. In the US, the birthplace of the generation gap, our task is not just to intensify ongoing struggles, but to generate new fighting formations—a much greater challenge. We seem to go through one generation of anarchists after another without any gains. Although our predecessors rightly caution us against measuring our efforts in purely quantitative terms, we can't hope to overthrow capitalism by our own isolated heroics, turning the world upside down one newspaper box at a time.

A small fire demands constant tending.

A bonfire can be let alone.

A conflagration spreads.

We have to figure out how to connect with everyone else who is suffering and angry. To that end, here are some observations and proposals derived from the conversations in Milwaukee.

—The anti-austerity protests in Wisconsin are not the last of their kind; on the contrary, they herald the arrival of a new era. It is paramount that we learn from our early failures to develop a more effective strategy for engaging in these conflicts.

—In Madison, anarchists largely focused on establishing infrastructure for the occupation. This is not the first time anarchists have contributed their organizational skills to an essentially liberal protest. At the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City, about 100,000 people participated in demonstrations; this included thousands of anarchists, many of whom limited themselves to logistical roles. Afterwards, this

was recognized as a tremendous missed opportunity—hence the efforts to take the lead in planning actions at the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Our task is not just to facilitate protests of whatever kind, but to ensure that they threaten the flows of capital—that they create a situation in which people abandon their roles in maintaining the current order. *To this end, we have to seize the initiative to organize actions as well as infrastructure.* Clashes with the state will be more controversial than free meals and child-care, but this controversy has to play out if we are ever to get anywhere.

—A wide range of sources concur that the occupation of the capitol building in Madison was undermined one tiny compromise at a time. First the police politely asked people not to be in one room—and they were being so nice about everything that no one could say no. Then they gently asked people to vacate another, and so on until the dumbfounded former occupiers found themselves out on the pavement. This underlines an important lesson: *the first compromise might as well be the last one.* Whenever we concede anything, we set a precedent that will be repeated again and again; we also embolden our enemies. We have to be absolutely uncompromising from the beginning to the end.

In popular struggles, anarchists can be the force that refuses to yield. We can also pass on our hard-won analyses to less experienced protesters—for example, emphasizing that however friendly individual police officers might be, they cannot be trusted as long as they *are police*. To do these things, how-

There is probably some new way of engaging, some “new intelligence” appropriate to this era that we haven’t discovered yet; the formats we retain from the past may not serve us now. There is much experimenting to be done. Dear friends, may you succeed where others have failed.

resources prepared in advance. These resources include food and housing, but also a relationship with the general public and leverage on the authorities, such as the Pittsburgh Organizing Group built up in the years leading up to the successful demonstrations against the 2009 G20.

—Between peaks of protest, we can attempt to connect with social circles that could be politicized. Punks entered the anti-globalization movement with a preexisting anticapitalist critique and antagonism towards authority, thanks to two decades of countercultural development. This enabled them to escalate the situation immediately, shifting the discourse from reform to revolution. The more people enter anti-austerity struggles thus equipped, the less time will be wasted relearning old lessons.

—In addition to exacerbating the contradictions inherent in the financial crisis, we should undertake to make life in upheavals more pleasurable and robust than workaday life. Those who participate in wildcat strikes and occupations should experience these as more exciting and fulfilling than their usual routines, to such an extent that it becomes possible to imagine life after capitalism. As many anarchists live in a permanent state of exclusion, making the best of it despite everything, we should be especially well-equipped to assist here.

In this regard, there is a real need for infrastructures that can provide for the practical needs of those who wrest themselves out of the functioning of the economy. But these infrastructures should not be simply ad hoc protest logistics; they must demonstrate the feasibility of radically different systems of production and distribution.

ever, we have to be in the thick of things, not looking on from the margins.

—A common complaint from the more combative participants in the Madison occupation was that leftist organizations had already gained the initiative and determined the character of the protest. Anarchists were afraid to act, taking the leftist control of the narrative as an indication that there was nothing they could do. Indeed, after the end of the occupation, liberal organizers channeled the remaining momentum into a recall campaign confined to the electoral sphere.

In fact, in circumstances like the capitol occupation, there's nothing to lose. The solutions promoted by authoritarian leftists and liberals don't point beyond the horizon of capitalism; even when they aren't utterly naïve, they're no better than the right-wing agenda, in that they serve to distract and neutralize those who desire real change. Where the field is split between left-wing and right-wing, we may as well disrupt this dichotomy by acting outside of it. Even if we fail, at least we show that something else is possible.

—One Wisconsin anarchist proposed that we should distinguish between two strategic terrains for action. Some events, such as the occupation of the capitol building in Madison, function as tremendous spectacles; the most we can hope to accomplish is to *interrupt* them, forcing a more challenging narrative into the public discourse. Other spaces that are under less pressure, like the occupation of the theater building in Milwaukee, offer an opportunity to develop new social connections and critiques.

In the latter, we can create new channels for discussion and decision-making that will serve us well in subsequent confrontations. We can measure our effectiveness by how well we accomplish this, not just by the material damage inflicted on targets or the numbers of people who show up to demonstrations.

In upheavals such as the one in Wisconsin, we can unmask authoritarian domination of resistance movements and debunk the idea that the democratic system can solve the problems created by capitalism.

—At no point during the buildup to the protests of March 4, 2010 or the occupations in Wisconsin did anarchists establish an autonomous, public organizing body to play a role such as the RNC Welcoming Committee played at the 2008 RNC or the PGRP played at the 2009 G20. This was a strategic error that enabled liberal and authoritarian organizers to monopolize the public discourse around the protests and determine their character and conditions in advance. In the Bay Area, the word on the street was that anarchists had established some sort of back-room deal with public organizers that the latter reneged on. This betrayal should come as no surprise: without the leverage afforded by public organizing of our own, we can *always* expect to be hoodwinked and betrayed by those who don't share our opposition to hierarchical power.

We need public, participatory calls and organizing structures, both to offer points of entry to everyone who might want to fight alongside us and to make it impossible for

authoritarians to stifle revolt by arranging the battlefield to be unfavorable for it. Public organizing can complement other less public approaches; often, it's necessary to render them possible in the first place. Compare the 2008 RNC and 2009 G20 to March 4, 2010.

—As capitalism renders more and more people precarious or redundant, it will be harder and harder to fight from recognized *positions of legitimacy* within the system such as “workers” or “students.” Last year's students fighting tuition hikes are this year's dropouts; last year's workers fighting job cuts are this year's unemployed. We have to legitimize fighting from *outside*, establishing a new narrative of struggle. Who is more entitled to occupy a school than those who cannot afford to attend it? Who is more entitled to occupy a workplace than those who have already lost their jobs?

If we can accomplish this, we will neutralize the allegations of being “outside agitators” that are always raised against those who revolt. Better, we will transform every austerity conflict into an opportunity to connect with everyone else that has been thrown away by capitalism. Our goal should not be to protect the privileges of those who retain their jobs and enrollment, but to channel outrage about everything that capitalism has taken from all of us.

—Anti-austerity protests may offer a new opportunity to resume the practice of *convergence* so important in the anti-globalization era. Anarchists could respond to upheavals like the one in Wisconsin by converging on these “hotspots” to force things to a head. But this would require local communities to be ready to host visitors—to have the necessary