Writings on

Mass Struggle

By the

First of May Anarchist Alliance
The following is a collection of the various articles and fliers from the First of May Anarchist Alliance (M1). Included, and where indicated, are personal positions made by members of M1. We have reproduced these documents in the hopes of furthering debate and discussion as well as simply making our views known to a broader audience.

M1’s affinity is built around four principles:
1) a commitment to revolution
2) a working class orientation
3) a non-doctrinaire anarchism
4) a non-sectarian and multi-layered approach to organization

Mass Struggle

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Jan. 28, 2011

Thank you Tunisia, Thank you Egypt

by KDog

U.S. media/politics/culture does its best to portray Arab people as gloomy, authoritarian, repressed/repressive, fundamentalist, etc. This racist brainwashing has its effects even on good people.

So leave it to my favorite species, humanity, to decide to undermine all that. Last week the people of Tunisia erupted in revolt against poverty and dictatorship chasing the pro-US President from the country. This week the tidal wave swept to Egypt, a country about 8x the size of Tunisia, and the most populous country in the Arab world.

Egypt is the major Arab ally in Mideast receiving billions of dollars in "aide" to prop up the repressive Egyptian state. Egypt recognizes Israel and criminally participates in the blockade of Gaza.

Demonstrations all over Egypt have paralyzed the country and the cabal of gangsters that run the world are shitting their pants:

BBC: "German Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg expresses concern about the risk of "infectious momentum" of unrest in the Middle East, during a meeting at the World Economic Forum."

Like in Tunisia, the Islamicists have been completely by-passed by largely secular youth and their facebook accounts.
Libcom and Angry Arab are two good sites to follow developments. The BBC and Al-Jazeera for mainstream accounts.

Because of the spontaneous nature of this "contageous" revolt, there are not strong revolutionary organizations that could act to replace old order with an egalitarian democracy from below. It is therefore likely that the rulers (with new faces) will regain control.

But nothing will be the same. The youth of Tunisia now have the experience of ousting a dictator. The people of Egypt are feeling their power. The movement is gaining an insurrectionary quality - all bets are off. Who is next? Algeria? The Palestinian territories? France?

Thank you kids, workers, women (those who choose to wear scarves, those that dont) in the streets of Tunisia and Egypt! Spring is coming.

*KDog is a union member holding dual membership in the Communication Workers of America and the Industrial Workers of the World.*

Feb 15, 2011

**Egypt: Seize the Moment, Keep Up the Struggle**

by Ron Tabor

In my last set of comments on the Egyptian scene, I laid out several possible scenarios, as tens of thousands of anti-Mubarak protesters marched on the state-owned TV station, the parliament building, and the presidential palace, where Hosni Mubarak then resided. One of the possibilities was a preemptive coup carried out by the military. The aim would be to kick out Mubarak, then try to convince the protesters to call of their demonstration.

This is precisely what happened, except that the coup had already occurred by the time I wrote. The meeting of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but without vice-president Omar Suleiman and president Mubarak, who traditionally chaired those meetings, present, was in fact the coup, although only a few people realized it at the time.
With Mubarak gone, the top brass, led by Defense Minister Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, has suspended the constitution, dissolved the rump parliament elected by the last (and phony) elections, and promised to hold new elections in six months, or whenever they deem the country ready. They have also declared that they will lift the emergency decree at some indefinite point in the future and will select a commission to amend the constitution, while promising that any proposed amendments will be submitted to the country within 10 days for a national referendum to be held within two months. With these acts, the military has, without explicitly saying so, put the country under martial law, under which it can, if it wishes and feels able to do so, arrest (and torture) anyone they want, break up opposition meetings, and smash opposition demonstrations (although I expect it will not resort to these heavy-handed measures right away). As a fig leaf, the military has announced that current prime minister Ahmed Shafiq, who was appointed on January 29, will stay in office, while he has indicated that he will reshuffle his cabinet and perhaps offer some positions to members of the opposition. In short, aside from the departure of Mubarak and possibly a few crumbs in the way of posts in a powerless cabinet, the only thing the protesters have won are promises.

For its part, the military, whoever was orchestrating its maneuvers (I now believe it was Tantawi, seconded by Sami Anan, the army chief of staff), played its hand brilliantly. Ordering the troops not to fire on the people, the generals managed to station their forces so that they controlled access to Tahrir Square and much of the rest of Cairo. In doing so, they turned what had begun as a militant struggle, including storming police stations, seizing control of neighborhood streets, and an attempt to break into the Ministry of the Interior, into a peaceful protest bottled up in a confined space, all the while continuing to enjoy the confidence of the people. When the huge crowd did march out of the square, the army remained firmly in control, and when it became clear that there was no way to save Mubarak, they nudged him out. The military leadership apparently decided that this was the best option, rather than risk a bloodbath that would have set the entire country, and perhaps the entire region, ablaze. Meanwhile, although some of the protesters have vowed to stay in the square and there has been some talk of holding another demonstration in a week, most of the demonstrators have headed home, under the watchful eyes of the soldiers.

Despite the fact that little concrete has been won and that the fate of the country remains firmly in the hands of the top brass, most of the Egyptian people still have tremendous illusions in the military, believing it to be the "friend of the people."

The Military and the United States

As we have stressed during the past three weeks, the military's goal throughout the struggle has been to cede as little to the people as possible, in order to protect its power, as the real power in the state, and its privileges, particularly its vast empire of commercial and industrial enterprises and its tax-exempt status. This continues to be the case. It is this that explains the generals' desire to keep tight control over the process of amending the constitution, the speed with which they intend, if they can, to force through their proposed amendments (thus short-circuiting any serious discussion), and their refusal to lift the state of emergency.

Through its deft maneuver, the military has also managed to pull the United States' chestnuts out of the fire. Caught waffling between the legitimate demands of the protesters and its desire to defend its long-standing "friend" in the Middle East, Hosni Mubarak, President Barack Obama and the US general risked emerging from the crisis with egg on its face. Lucky for the US, the recent events have eased its dilemma. Now, all the administration has to do is support the junta while urging it to take slow and careful but definite steps toward establishing a civilian government and a more democratic regime. As this happens, they can claim that this is what they wanted all along.

The Genie and the Lamp

Fortunately for the people of Egypt (and for the rest of us), the brass have not yet succeeded in putting the genie back into the lamp. Like soda in a bottle of soda that's been shaken and then had the cap removed, workers throughout Egypt have
erupted in a wave of strikes and demonstrations to address their long-standing grievances, particularly low wages and shabby working conditions. What has most alarmed the generals is the fact that the militant actions involve not only workers at private enterprises but also those at state-owned (and presumably army-owned) businesses. These have included ambulance drivers, journalists, workers at banks and insurance companies, and transport workers. In Cairo, even the police are out, demonstrating for higher salaries, claiming, somewhat pathetically, that their superiors had ordered them to steal from the people. Hopefully, the nation-wide strike wave will signal the beginning of a new stage of the Egyptian Revolution rather than its death throes.

Class Differences

For its part, the opposition is starting to differentiate itself along political and class lines. On Sunday, seven of the young (and middle class) organizers of the protest, including Google executive, Wael Ghonim, and Amr Salama, met privately with two representatives of the ruling junta, Major Generals Mahmoud Hijazi and Abdel Fattah, coming away supposedly impressed with the generals' sincerity. Meanwhile, Ghonim has been using the internet to communicate with workers throughout the country, urging them to call off their strikes and roll up their sleeves to start working for the "new Egypt." As this suggests, many of these individuals are prepared to sell out the needs of the workers, the unemployed, and the rural poor in return for a US-style bourgeois democracy in which they can expect to play leading roles.

Seize the Moment, Keep Up the Struggle

Ghonim's advice should be ignored. Now is not the time to give up the struggle. Now, more than ever, the workers, the unemployed, the rural poor, and all those oppressed by Egypt's rotten social structure need to step up the struggle. In addition to striking and demonstrating for their immediate needs, they need to organize for another mass demonstration to be held as soon as possible. The demands of this demonstration should include:

- Lift the state of emergency and release all political prisoners immediately!
- For full rights to speak, assemble, and organize without the threat of arrest now!
- No to the military's maneuver to monopolize the process of amending of the constitution! The opposition should assert its right to rewrite the constitution. For a nation-wide Constituent Assembly elected by all the people in open and fair elections!
- Former president Hosni Mubarak must be arrested! He, former Vice President Omar Suleiman, and all those (including members of the current ruling junta) implicated in the torture and killing of Egyptians must be put on trial for their crimes!
- Seize the financial assets of the entire Mubarak family! For a full and open financial investigation of the means by which the Mubaraks and all the members of the Egyptian ruling class have enriched themselves at the people's expense!

As they organize for another mass mobilization, the opposition should begin to organize for a nation-wide Peoples Congress to meet in Cairo. The aims of this congress should be two: one, to draw up a further list of demands and proposals to reorganize Egyptian society that address the needs of all the oppressed people of Egypt; the other, to organize for a nation-wide general strike.

Meanwhile, anarchists and libertarian socialists should seize the political space that has been created, however temporary it might be, to form their own groups and establish working relations among them, with the idea of eventually federating on the national level.
Meanwhile, just as the revolution in Tunisia inspired the Egyptians, the revolution in Egypt is inspiring people throughout the Middle East. Protests and struggles, many of them involving fights with the police and mass arrests, have erupted in Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, and even Iran, while governments throughout the area have been falling over themselves in a rush to announce concessions, including outright gifts of cash, in order to head off revolutions in their own countries.

The struggle is not over! Victory has not been won! The only way the people can win their demands is by struggle, by stepping up the pressure, not by returning to their homes! The only guarantee against continued military rule is mass mobilization! Don't leave your fate in the hands of the generals!


February 21, 2011

On Wisconsin! For Mass Actions, Occupations & a General Strike!

Spread the Struggle! Power to the People!

For over a week now, in response to the draconian anti-labor proposals of the Republican Governor, the people of Wisconsin have rose up in the hundreds of thousands in militant and creative fashion in defense of public workers and the unions. The Capitol in Madison has been occupied. The surrounding area has seen a sea of demonstrators. Teachers across the state have gone on unofficial strike and high school students have walk-out in support. Rallies of hundreds and thousands have occurred all over the state. This week support rallies will happen all over the country.

This movement - directly inspired, it must be said, by the heroic people of Egypt and the Middle East - with its contagious energy, determination, humor, and optimism has taken everyone by surprise. The politicians, bosses, unions, and media were all unprepared for the wave that has crashed ashore. But this upsurge is at a crossroads and must push forward defiantly or risk being co-opted or crushed leaving us with yet another heroic defeat or false “victory” to lament for years to come.

Instead of defeat, we can move forward. We support the popular call promoted by the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) revolutionary union and others for a state-wide General Strike. This should include public and private sectors, union and non-unionized sectors, students and unemployed. As other communities and sectors of the working-class step forward to join the struggle they must be free to raise their own specific concerns and demands. The movement must be open to “speakers from the floor”. We must resist any pressure to reduce the movement to a small number of lowest
common-denominator demands that favor relatively privileged layers and that the system finds acceptable. This movement must not be satisfied with a return to the status quo but formulate demands of our own for what the people actually need.

Build General Strike Committees in the unions and workplaces, in the schools, on the Reservations, in the prisons, and in every local urban and rural community!

The Governor has the votes he needs in the state Legislature to pass the measures that will strip collective bargaining rights from most public employees, ban strikes, and implement deep cuts to workers’ pay, benefits and pensions. The Democrats move to leave the state and prevent quorum can be seen as a clever political ploy – or more realistically - as a means to give the ruling class (the corporate and political elite) time to reassess and regroup in the wake of this social explosion. In any case the Democratic Party is in no way an ally of working people and oppressed communities. The Democrats are participating in social cuts in states all across the county and at the Federal level. Next door in Minnesota, even the very liberal Governor there is proposing severe cuts to Health and Human services.

Similarly we cannot expect an effective way forward from the bureaucracy of the unions. Their entire strategy revolves around having “friends” in high places, only seriously mobilizing their membership to mark ballots every several years. They could not lead a militant movement if they wanted to - they have not led a serious struggle for generations. Yet all their political capital rests on their ability to channel workers dissatisfaction. Already they have begun trying to assert their control over the spontaneous movement at the Capitol, by taking down signs deemed inappropriate (for instance “Walk like an Egyptian”) and stepping up the “marshalling” of the crowds.

There is a real risk that the union bureaucracy and the Democrats will try and present a “compromise” of severe cuts minus the collective bargaining roll-back. “Don’t take away our right to negotiate how deep we let you cut our pay and benefits” is pathetic but they are already starting to sound out this approach. We must be prepared to defy this and explain the danger to the bulk of the movement who so far see the Democrats and union tops only in a positive light.

If, in the likelihood that the efforts toward mass strikes become bottled up inside the union structures, we must push ahead with whatever means of mass direct action we can muster. Mass demonstrations: more unofficial strikes and high school walk-outs; occupations of campuses and State facilities, Republican and Democratic Party headquarters, corporate supporters of the Governor, etc. We must come out of this struggle with a network of working-class activists willing to organize/participate in mass direct action.

Finally since in many ways the wave that started this whole thing came from the Middle East, lets end there as well: The United States spends billions and billions of tax dollars on military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, huge military presence in Kuwait, Bahrain and in the surrounding seas, support for the apartheid Israeli state, and dictatorships and monarchies across the region. The National Guard that the Governor has threatened to deploy against the workers of Wisconsin has spent many months guarding the Empire over there. All this to control the people and resources of the Middle East for the same global capitalist system that is attacking us here in Wisconsin and killing our planet.

We cannot have an honest discussion about budgets, deficits, or resources without addressing the costs of Empire – both financially and morally. Our movement must defend the self-determination of the working people across the Middle East and help them dissolve the Empire of Capital that benefits no one but the rich elite.

Solidarity!

First of May Anarchist Alliance
October 10th, 2011

FROM OCCUPATION TO EXPROPRIATION!
Build on the Anarchist and Revolutionary Potentialities of the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

Build on the Anarchist and Revolutionary Potentialities of the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

The following is a joint statement from the First of May Anarchist Alliance and The Utopian: A Journal of Anarchist and Libertarian Socialism.

Photo: The movement spreads. The General Assembly from Occupy Atlanta

1. The ongoing Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, encampment, and related actions around the country are a significant development. These events may well be the beginning of a 1960s style movement of great potential. Because of its focus on the economic crisis, the financial/corporate shenanigans that contributed to it, and, most important, jobs, the movement has the potential to strike a resonant chord in the hearts of millions of people who have been slammed by the events of the last few years and who are aching to do something about them. This is particularly true of those who have lost their homes and/or their jobs, as well as those who have little prospect of finding work.

2. The Occupy Wall St. movement, like the movement of the 60s in its early stages, is anarchistic, that is, unconsciously anarchist in how it is structured and what its underlying goals are, in spite of the liberal populism of its rhetoric and explicit demands. The key question is: Will the movement be corralled by liberal, reformist, or authoritarian forces or will it develop in a self-consciously revolutionary and anarchist direction? The
example of the 60s, in which the radical wing of the movement abandoned its original libertarian principles and embraced an array of authoritarian Marxist-Leninist politics, is instructive here. We must do our best to make sure something like that does not happen again.

3. Consequently, we believe it is crucial for all anarchists to participate in this movement and work to build it. We also think it is essential that we explicitly propagandize and organize for both anarchist methods of struggle and for an anti-authoritarian social vision/program. We urge all of our groupings, formal and informal, while remaining free to experiment in these matters, to recognize the need for some degree of ongoing coordination and, at critical moments, the effective concentration of our forces. Weakness and disorganization in this respect will allow important events and possibilities to pass us by as well as allow attacks on the autonomy of the movement to go unanswered.

4. We should defend the movement’s aim to be as broad and as deep as possible, to reach out to individuals of all classes, while we concentrate on drawing in workers and poor people. We want to educate everybody about the strategic importance of building a movement concentrated in the working class. Toward this end, we welcome the participation of several major unions in the protests. Their presence helps to legitimize the occupation among wider layers of people and brings unionized workers into direct contact with others in the fight for justice and an alternative society. We support bringing those unions of which we are members into the struggle as one way of getting our co-workers involved. But we also need to highlight the danger that labor’s bureaucratic/reformist apparatuses will attempt to chain the movement to their political purposes, which are contrary to the spirit and aims of the Occupy Wall Street movement. We must be both creative and energetic in our efforts to foment a subversive consciousness among participants in the movement, and to generate independent organization and radical action by the workers themselves, both inside and outside the union structures.

5. One of the strengths of the movement at present is its concentration on direct action. We should work to ensure that the movement retains this focus: demonstrations, occupations, and strikes, up to and including city-wide, state-wide, and national general strikes. These must remain the movement’s tactics of choice. We also need to struggle to turn the general distrust of and disgust with capitalist politics and politicians into a full-blown recognition that both the Democratic and Republican parties are controlled by, and beholden to, corporate interests, and are therefore our enemies.

6. Finally, we should strive to convince the movement that the problem in the US today is not just Wall Street or the corporations or the fact that the economic system is somehow being “gamed” or “rigged” by tricky selfish individuals. We need to explain that the cause of the crisis is the capitalist system itself, a system in which production is carried on only when it results in profits, the vast majority of which go to the tiny elite that runs the country. Correspondingly, we should work to persuade the movement that its ultimate aim should be the radical democratization of our entire society, in other words, a revolution in which the vast majority of people seize control of the economy and the country as a whole from the rich and disperse power and direct control of all aspects of social life as widely as possible. As a result, we should propose and support radical demands that both point in this direction and unite the broadest sectors of the population.

This statement issued by the following groups:

First of May Anarchist Alliance, m1aa@org;

BUILD A GENERAL STRIKE OF ALL WORKERS AND THE COMMUNITY

CANCEL THE DEBT; STOP ALL DEBT SERVICE PAYMENTS
TAX THE RICH: MAKE THE BANKS AND CORPORATIONS PAY
NO SERVICE CUTS; NO LAYOFFS; NO WAGE AND BENEFIT CUTS

Bing and the banks have decided on a new round of cuts in jobs, benefits and services to the people of Detroit. They claim the city is bankrupt so union contracts must be thrown aside and the people must endure still greater cuts in basic services. Why should the working class and poor continue to pay for a crisis made by the banks, the giant corporations and the politicians who serve them.

We have to stop transferring tax dollars and public resources to the banks which caused this economic crisis. The city budget provides for more than $433 million in payments to the banks for debt service this year. That’s where the money is going. We must demand cancellation of the debts and stop all payments of public funds for service on the debt. The banks made billions by selling impossible and predatory loans to working people in our community and throughout the country. When the bubble burst and millions faced foreclosure, the government took our tax dollars and bailed out the banks to protect their profits. Now, when housing prices have fallen off the cliff and thousands of vacant, foreclosed homes fill the city, the banks demand that still more tax dollars be paid to them. We say no more.

Bing, Ficano and company tell us that the public funds must be paid to the banks, and that the rest of us must pay for the crisis. This is a government of the banks and for the banks. What resources we have from property taxes, income taxes and other sources must be directed to meeting the needs of our people. Tax dollars from casinos and revenue sharing are to go only to education; that’s what we were promised. But 87% of those tax dollars are going instead to the banks for payment on the debt. Of the $590 million in state per pupil aid for Detroit, more than $512 million is paid directly to the banks for service on the debt. Not one more penny to the banks.

The fight against “austerity” is nationwide and international. From Egypt to Greece to Wall Street to Oakland, people are rising up against the banks and
governments. We cannot succeed in this struggle if we are isolated or separated. All workers and all unions must join together and act together against these cuts. Bus drivers, bus mechanics and bus riders must stand together. The people of the community who rely on city services must join the fight. Our allies are the Wayne County workers and residents who face similar cuts. The workers and people of Hamtramck, Highland Park, Flint, Pontiac and Benton Harbor who already are suffering under the boot of emergency managers must join together. The workers and people of Taylor, Plymouth, Hazel Park and Warren face the same attacks.

Occupy Oakland organized a general strike in that city in response to police attacks on demonstrators and the life threatening attack on Iraq war veteran active in the protests. The workers of Greece have carried out several general strikes against austerity cuts in that country and caused a government to fall. We stand with them all.

Our response must be unified and direct. We must organize and mobilize for a general strike. And we must build a movement that includes workplace and neighborhood organizations for defense and to meet the basic needs of our people. No one is coming to save us. We must rely on ourselves and our allies to end the domination of the banks and corporations. Our goal must be direct control of public resources and the economy by the workers and the people. We can build the new society, together.

Contact us for information, meetings, and updates:

Committee for a General Strike - P.O. Box 15455, Detroit, MI 48215 – cmte.gs@gmail.com

January 25th, 2012

One Year On The Revolution Remains Incomplete!

From Cairo to Oakland to Detroit: Build popular resistance of the working classes and poor!

Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria. Across North Africa and the Middle East we are witness to a great rising up of the popular classes: the working classes, poor, marginalized and oppressed! Young and old, women and men!

When Mohamed Al Bouazzizia, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire in an act of anger and frustration in protest of the abuse and extortion by police and agents of the Ben Ali dictatorship, his act became one of martyrdom that set in to motion a worldwide revolutionary movement. These movements are ones of mass radical action whose struggles have confronted, challenged and toppled ruling autocrats.

As the Egyptians were influenced by the events in Tunisia, the Egyptian revolution inspired events here in United States. The occupation of the state capitol building in Madison by public workers, students, and an assemblage of supporters came literally on the heels of the occupation and heroic defense of Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Banners and chants of "Fight like an Egyptian" were commonplace. The Wall St. occupation and the now ongoing Occupy movement are a direct offspring, strongly identifying with the uprisings in Tahrir.

This global struggle is dynamic and evolving. It has potential to undermine the authority, power and monopoly the system has over us all. On a popular scale it has redefined the terms of debate by calling out the inequality, austerity, and the practices of the privileged ruling classes and their proxies. It is an absolute necessity that we continue to build on this moment through education, coordination, and action.

However, there are real dangers. There exists a web of ruling class forces that oppose both the revolutionary movements in Egypt as well as the developing independent radical movements here. Whether through outright force or through manipulation and co-optation, the radical democratic movements from below are in precarious situations. To extend this global radical opening it is essential that we argue for and promote ideas and activity based on anti-authoritarianism, direct action, democracy from below, anti-capitalism, and an anti-racist internationalist solidarity.

This solidarity is in direct opposition to the interests of the US and global ruling classes. Every day, the US sends millions of dollars in aid and equipment to the Egyptian military to ensure that even if the new government in Egypt takes on the appearance of democracy, it remains bought and sold by US interests. This means continuing Egypt's alliance with Israel in keeping the Palestinian people under the boot of apartheid, and attempting to destabilize countries like Iran, while at the same time propping up authoritarian regimes in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and elsewhere.
Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions calling for general strike. Tahrir Square.

The movements in North Africa and the Middle East have spread across the world. It resonates with Black youth in Tottenham, England who are facing mass unemployment, police abuse and few life opportunities. It resonates with Greek anarchists and Spanish indignados facing another round of cutbacks to basic services and the selling off of national resources to private corporations. It resonates with the Nigerian working class who have carried out mass strikes against government austerity, inflation and cutting of fuel subsidies. And it resonates in Detroit, where the threat of an emergency financial manager allows the mayor and union officials to cut services to a bone already long exposed.

Yet despite this global impact, this movement is incomplete. The Egyptian revolution has stalled and offers us important lessons. The Tahrir Square occupation movement initiated and kept the revolution alive in its critical first days, but it was the massive strike wave in many sectors of the economy followed by the rebellions that swept the many working class cities outside of Cairo that brought about Mubarak's resignation in February. In Egypt, the easing of pressure in the wake of Mubarak's resignation, the unclear attitudes towards the army and a too narrow view of democratic revolution has allowed the generals, the elites and their US allies to reassert control. A new revolutionary wave is needed, a second revolution focused on both extending and securing democracy but also committed to egalitarian demands for workers' control and to building widespread, lasting organizations in workplaces and neighborhoods aimed at breaking apart the army and dissolving the state. The movement must build to take direct control of the economy and to expropriate and overthrow the wealth, power and control of ruling class in Egypt and internationally.

These revolutionary lessons hold true for both the struggles of the Arab Spring and our own Occupy movement in the US. So today let us not forget the unfinished struggles in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere. Let us not forget those martyred in Bahrain and the many falling daily in Syria. Ultimately to practice revolution at home is the most powerful act of solidarity. TOWARD A WORLDWIDE SPRING OF ALL PEOPLES!

Flier produced by: The Committee for a General Strike
PO Box 15455, Detroit, MI 48215 – cmte.gs@gmail.com

September 10th, 2012

On the Chicago Teachers Union Strike

The following is from a Chicago member of First of May Anarchist Alliance. It is an overview of the situation and was drafted over the weekend in the lead up to the strike that has started today.

It is looking increasingly likely that the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers will go on strike on Monday, for the first time in 25 years. I’m biased, as my wife is an active member of the union, but I will try to offer some perspective as an anarchist, as well as a parent of two CPS students and the spouse of a potential strike captain.

The Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) is currently run by a classic reform caucus known as the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), which features a number of people with left (especially ISO and Solidarity) backgrounds. The leadership has generally been perceived as “activist” or “militant,” apart from the predictable
gripping of other Trotskyists who complain of the usual ISO conservatism and loyalty to the Democratic Party. (More on that in a minute.)

The conflict between the CTU and CPS is really happening on two levels. At this point, with a strike immanent, the CTU is legally obligated to limit its strike demands (though not its full slate of negotiating positions) to questions of wages and benefits. Of course this makes it easy for the Chicago corporate media to portray them like the greedy and privileged public sector unions in Wisconsin last year. (Again, more on that soon.) But even here, the teachers are on pretty solid ground: with CPS imposing a greater than 25% expansion of work time for the average teacher (an extra hour of instruction every day, plus an additional ten days of instruction over the course of the year), the initial offer from the city was a one-time 2% raise. It was pretty obvious to everyone this side of the solidly-pro-austerity Chicago Tribune that this would be unacceptable to anyone who has a job in any line of work.

At the same time, the folks from CORE really built their base in the union around a fairly progressive (though by no means revolutionary) vision of shifting education “reform” away from the No Child Left Behind emphasis on high stakes testing and the casualization of the work force via merit-pay, etc.

If folks are familiar with the journal Rethinking Schools, that’s the politics of CORE, and thus of the current CTU leadership. On this level, then, the union is able to tell parents that they are sincerely fighting for a change in educational philosophy, which has helped build parent support for the union to a level that I don’t think anyone expected a year ago.

(I don’t have a sense of the level of student support for the teachers at this point. I imagine there is a mixed sentiment, with some viewing the teachers as abandoning them, while others blame CPS and support their teachers. Not surprisingly, there has been almost no coverage of student attitudes toward the strike in the mainstream media here.)

Obviously, an enormous amount has changed since the last CTU strike in 1987, much less since the emergence of big-city teacher strikes in the 1960s. One major change has been in the demographic composition of the union membership. In stark contrast to the classic story of the New York teachers’ strike of 1968, which pitted an overwhelmingly white teaching force against communities of color fighting for local control over the schools, Chicago now features a broadly multi-racial teaching force lined up against a largely white-led and corporate-identified school board and Mayor Rahm Emmanuel.

Partly as a result of this, Emmanuel and Jean-Claude Brizard (the head of CPS) have largely failed in their predictable attempt to drive a wedge between the CTU and the black community. Last fall there were several public forums on the south side, clearly targeting African-Americans to support the mayor’s drive for a longer school day. These collapsed in a minor scandal when it was revealed that many attendees had been paid to show up and pack the hall. Black anger at CPS has increased over the past several years as dozens of schools have been shut down, forcing thousands of kids to move around between schools. At the same time, CPS has deliberately targeted older (and thus higher-salaried) teachers for layoffs as part of the school closings, and a disproportionately high percentage of those newly displaced teachers have been black women.

There is also significant support for the CTU among more affluent and largely white parents on the north and northwest sides of town. I think this emerges from a combination of factors. First, no one, least of all Emmanuel and Brizard, predicted the level of resistance they’ve received to the idea of a longer school day, which was Emmanuel’s signature “reform” of the school system. (Notably, Emmanuel’s kids go to the University of Chicago Lab School, a private school that has substantially shorter hours than those advocated by their father for other people’s children.) A lot of affluent parents have resisted the longer school day because they prefer to have their kids in extracurricular after school activities that they can select according to their own preferences. The other factor here has to do with the aftermath of the Madison events of last year. Lots of well-off liberal white folks in Chicago now associate attacks on public sector unions with evil Republicans like Scott Walker. This has allowed them to sympathize with the CTU when their natural habit would be to support Emmanuel. (This demographic voted overwhelmingly for Emmanuel in the mayoral race just 18 months ago.)

Which brings us back to the Democratic Party. Whether despite or because of the election year, there has been near-total radio silence from the Obama camp on their preferred outcome to the CPS-CTU conflict. Rumors abound, but without real evidence to support them: some say Obama is furious at Rahm for driving away a previously loyal union constituency in a election year, in his home town no less, while others think Obama has given Emmanuel the green light to crush the union because it will look good to independent voters in swing states.
Whichever, it is notable that no one from Obama’s campaign showed at the CTU Labor Day Rally this past Monday. At the same time, the tenacity of the CTU leadership in the face of CPS intransigence does not match the usual tendency of reformist (and especially ISO-influenced) union leaderships to tail the Democratic Party. I’m sure most CTU members will vote for Obama in November (not that it will matter in Illinois!), but in the mean time there is real anger aimed at him by a lot of teachers for his failure to step in and personally demand that Emmanuel agree to a pro-teacher settlement.

None of this indicates to me that there is much chance of this struggle breaking out of the confines of strictly reformist union activity. In fact, precisely the opposite seems more likely to me: because the union leadership has been BOTH responsive to its rank and file in ways not seen in Chicago in over a quarter-century AND attentive to real questions of educational quality that matter to parents, it is generating real loyalty from both teachers and parents. Unfortunately, that loyalty will almost certainly mean that any compromise agreement, no matter how bad it might be for teachers or for kids, will be solidly backed by both groups.

While that might be depressing, it’s not the whole story. Things are moving incredibly fast here, and both teachers and parents across the city are getting a rapid-fire education in organizing and coalition-building that could potentially prove useful if a social struggle with more radical potential emerges within the education sector in the months or years to come. (Something like the Whittier struggle, for instance, or the currently ongoing battle over the future of a “Social Justice High School” in another predominantly Latino community, which has featured student walkouts and more than just pro forma solidarity from the CTU.)

It will be interesting to see what happens if the strike lasts longer than a day or two: will the parents turn against the teachers? Will Emmanuel dig in his heals or cave on key issues? Will the union scrap its high-minded educational reform ideas and settle for a decent pay raise? At this point, I don’t feel any ability to predict what will happen. Mostly, I’m just getting myself ready to be out on the picket line at 6:30AM on Monday with my wife and the kids.

Wish us luck!

December 11, 2012

Report from Right to Work Less Protest

Report From Right To Work for Less Protest in Michigan 12-11-12 by David, First of May Anarchist Alliance member

Background

Brief explanation of how ridiculously inaccurate it is to call this a right to work bill here

The bill is a lot more than just making Michigan the 24th right to work state, it has a number of things included that no one yet knows what there effects will be. This may have had something to do with it never making it out of committee but was added as an amendment to an appropriations bill and voted on the same day it was proposed. Since it is part of an appropriations bill, it cannot be overturned by referendum.
This is one of several things happening in the Michigan Legislature this week. There is also a bill designed to prevent access to abortion by changing the rules about a range of things including the square footage requirements of reproductive health clinics.

The emergency manager law implemented two years ago by Rick Snyder, was partially overturned by a ballot proposal in November where people voted to strike down the law. Barely a month later, the legislature approved a new law that does the same thing as the old one, but offers “choices” on how it will be implemented. Don’t worry though since every choice is not really a choice at all.

Tuesday’s Events

Based on what had happened in the week preceding the protest, I was very worried that the mainstream unions will simply show up, yell all day and then calmly leave. Had that been the extent of their mobilization along with promising to “punish” the republicans in the 2014, then everyone, union or not, needs to make it clear that those are pitiful responses to this clear attack on working people, and that we demand more from those who say they act in our interest while giving only lip service to actually doing anything about it that matters. If the unions are going to fight, great. But we need to understand that there must also be a fight back that comes from regular people, union or not, that have ideas for ways forward beyond waiting for crumbs from politicians and union bureaucrats alike.

This flyer sums up what we should be expecting from anything calling itself a union or an organization fighting in workers’ interests. I handed out about 300 of these at the protest and had decent response.

Unions that Fight

In trying to connect the attack on workers with the attacks on women’s reproductive rights, the backside of the flyer had this to say.

I started the day feeling pessimistic about what would happen and even though on the whole, people came, yelled and then went home, I was a lot more encouraged by the days events than I thought I’d be.

That said, let me be clear that this is an accounting of the days events and not any sort of feeling of victory or satisfaction with the business unions’ approach or their marriage to the democratic party. This is an attempt to describe what I was seeing glimpses of, piece that are present, just below the surface in spite of the unions’ backwards ways.

This bill is only possible because most of the unions have not been organizing, have been acting in the interests of the bosses as much as in the interests of workers and have wed themselves almost completely to the democratic party, who hasn’t really given them a thing in several decades. I don’t dispute any of that and have had my share of experiences with unions that make me sick to my stomach. That said, I think it is incorrect to write them off as obsolete, having run their course or irrelevant. The hundreds of thousands of people who participate in their unions, despite their problems don’t think so and I think it is a mistake to dismiss those sentiments and commitments. That was demonstrated pretty well in what I saw on Tuesday.

What I Saw

The sheer number of people who were very clearly working class and pissed off was surprising. That doesn’t mean it will translate into meaningful action but the variation of people there willing to act beyond just showing up was worth noting. There was a mood to the protest that went beyond passively pleading for things and more of a tone of, we know you are going to do this and fuck you. From the start they were setting the tone that it was not a day to push people around, be it police or the 20 or so people from Americans for Prosperity, the Koch brothers backed organization pushing the right to work legislation. There were two massive event tents set up by Americans for Prosperity on the lawn of the capitol, both of which were ripped down within 20 minutes. A fox news reporter attempting to provoke some union folks didn’t have to wait long before getting punched in the face. Attempts by the police to move the crowd early on, with either lines of riot police or police on horses, were simply out flanked and out numbered and they would try for a while but then retreat. I don’t want to over do this point but it wasn’t just a couple of groups going through the crowd having confrontations with
police. A broad range of people, most of the time being different groupings altogether sat down en mass in the capitol mezzanine against police orders and stayed for several hours; Several attempts to break through police lines were met with pepper spray and baton jabs; 200-300 folks locked down in the Romney office building where the governors office is, 50 or so of which were drug out one at a time; while not overt street fights, there were multiple clashes with police lines with people charging their lines lines; The only exit for the governors car was blocked and was only cleared by 60-80 police marching in formation down the streets 4 lines deep. This push took place at dusk, long after the union leadership and police had told everyone to go home, and there were still several thousand people in the street.

-There was still the idle threats to “punish” the republicans in the 2014 elections. While in the week leading up to tuesday, that had been stated a lot, it was mostly being said by union staffer types who were a tiny minority on tuesday as compared to earlier in the week. So with a much more rank-n-file character to the crowd, I heard that argument much less than I thought I would.

-The police presence and attitude was way over the top with lines of riot police and openly admitting to there being under cover officers in the crowd. Its a good time to mention that the right to work for less bill applies to public and private employees in michigan EXCEPT for police and fire fighters.

Excellent photo slideshow of to demonstrate how aggressive the cops were

Several times throughout the day, the police marched through the crowd in highly militarized formations with riot cops in front and then some sort of tactical team at the rear carrying tear gas launchers and 2 ft long super sized pepper spray canisters. Intimidation or justifying the cost are the only possible reasons for sending these formations into the crowd.

While there was the occasional plea to the police to stand in solidarity with us, by and large the crowd was angry and screaming at the cops. An anti-cop sentiment was largely embraced with, “Get the Fuck out of here” and “Scab” being pretty common things to hear. A line had been drawn for many that attended, a line that placed the police firmly on the wrong side of things and as little more than thugs of the government. Considering the crowd, I was surprised to hear people berating the cops and in actions of a similar groupings of people, I was expecting a much more lenient attitude toward the police.

-Though the protest was focused on the right to work legislation, a healthy portion of the crowd sported “i stand with planned parenthood” stickers that were being handed out. There seemed to be a pretty broad understanding that these two fights should be linked and that they were both part of a broader attack on regular people. This was a surprise.

It could have been a lot better

-No real attempt was made to hold the capitol in the style of the Wisconsin occupation, which was disappointing and could have been done if the people there wanted to take it. This was a missed opportunity.

-There was not much in the conversations that I had that demonstrated people were thinking beyond the union members and about the broader mass of people struggling right now.

-The union approved speakers were not generally getting much support or attention, but were not being openly disagreed with. The ones I heard sounded pretty out of touch, and reinforced my feeling that they don’t have much of a plan to fight back beyond the 2014 elections, which is disgusting to say the least.

-Information flowed only one way, union leadership to the rank-n-file and not the other way around.

I do not have a good sense of what is going to come next. It was clear to me that a range of people attending the protest felt like the right to work attack was a game changer for unions and that they needed to change their response. What that looks like and whether it will have the potential to actually fight back in a meaningful way remains to be seen. While the mainstream union’s next steps are up to them, here are some ideas that can be up to us.

********text from right to work protest flyer***************
We Need Unions that Fight!

The Republican attempts to weaken and restrict Unions in Michigan are an attack on the entire working-class and must be resisted. The best way to fight is through mass direct action with rank & file workers (unionized and not) in the driver’s seat. This is how the Unions were built and many victories won.

We need:

Unions that are democratic with horizontal structures controlled by the rank & file workers

Independence from the political parties, the bosses, and the police

Solidarity with the entire working-class, including those most marginalized and excluded:

single moms; immigrants; prisoners; minimum wage workers; our people in the ghettos, barrios, trailer parks and reservations

Methods of struggle that make us stronger and can get the goods: direct action, occupations, mass picketing, and the General Strike

An understanding that we are not up against just a few bad bosses or politicians, but an entire system– capitalism – built on the exploitation of working-class people and the Earth

While the GOP is brazenly open in their hostility and hatred for working people, they are not alone in seeking to control the Labor Movement. The Democratic Party also seeks to render the Unions harmless by co-opting them as an arm of their electoral machine, or giving the Unions a “seat at the table” only to take more cuts and concessions.

This 1-2 punch has left the Unions weak and on the defensive. It has promoted a ruling bureaucracy within the Unions that sees its interests as bound up closer with the bosses and politicians than with us rank & file workers. For the most part we workers and union members have been too complacent in allowing the Labor leaders to pursue this failed course. Where we have stood up, the undemocratic structures within the unions have stifled resistance.

But things are beginning to change. The 2011 mass movement in Wisconsin included mass sick-outs by the teachers, an occupation of the Capitol, and popular sentiment for a General Strike. The Occupy movement a year later popularized the anger we all feel toward the capitalist elite, brought hundreds of thousands out into the streets, and with port workers shut down the West Coast ports.

Let’s start building where we are – in our workplaces, communities and Unions – and make connections with those who feel the same need for a new kind of labor movement – or you could say, an old kind of labor movement – a revolutionary movement.

We need a revolutionary labor movement!

RtW Poem by Miriam of M1 12-12-12

Michigan now
RTW (for less) state
Right to Work
Right to Weasel
Right to War
On the Working Class

Workers!
Stand up!
Vote with your feet.
You already voted
Waited in long lines
to vote for

one or the other

spender of billions

while we children

hungry

no toilet paper

in the fire stations

or schools.

Time to strike

Time to organize

Time to go to meetings
Time to talk with your neighbor
your friend your family your peeps
Time to stand up

What do we need
And how can we
go about getting it

Time to
Vote with your feet.
April 2012

Justice for Trayvon Martin: Reports from Baltimore, Detroit and Minneapolis-St. Paul

The following reports are from organizers in First of May Anarchist Alliance. The Minneapolis report has contributions from IWW Fellow Worker, B.

Baltimore Report

Report by M.B.

A member of M1 attended a Trayvon Martin Rally and March in Baltimore Maryland. The route was a half mile, originating at the Baltimore Harbor/Former Occupy Baltimore Encampment and ended at 7pm at city hall. The estimated attendance was 1,200 – 1,500. The city and most of the activist community anticipated a few hundred people at most. The event was publicized by the local All People’s Congress/Workers World Party and progressive African American Religious Leaders rather than the traditional leftist milieu, the crowd was made up almost entirely of first time activists, families and youth.

Baltimore is approximately 78% African American and has a history of influential civil rights actions coupled with a history of race violence and oppression and profiling. Currently, they have coupled with raising awareness and the march for Trayvon Martin with the saving of Reed’s Drug Store. Reed’s was to location of an important civil rights era lunch counter occupation by Morgan State University Students; the location is slated for demolition for creation of a “superblock” gentrified development. Their strategy and organizing efforts exceeded my expectations as getting more than a few hundred to turn out to anything in Baltimore is virtually unheard of.

The outpouring of nontraditional activists and the growing awareness of such inexcusable crime and victimization creates a defined radical shift in an ever-shrinking, economically strangled city. Coupled with the staggering foreclosure rates, decline to employment and rising uncertainty; the spontaneous outpouring of unrest in response to Trayvon Martin’s
murder creates a momentum that will not be ignored. It is essential that the anger and outcry of racist murder not turn back to complacency. Anarchists should work in support of their community’s momentum and encourage dialogue rather than splintering off to themselves. Trayvon’s cries for help shook the world and we as Anarchists should be making sure no one forgets it.

Detroit Report

Report by C.R.

I went to the Trayvon Martin Rally on Monday. When I got there, around 6:20pm, there were already about 80% of the estimated 1000-1500 present. The majority were black with some speckles of white supporters. From what I could tell, there wasn’t an organized Occupy presence. I was somewhat disappointed there weren’t more people there, but large nonetheless.

Speakers talked about voting, god, police protecting citizens, and that we should all join together to fight injustice regardless of color. The only thing that struck me was that a Latina woman, Jane Garcia spoke at the rally. Couldn’t hear what she said exactly but I think I heard: voting and god. It was a diverse crowd in terms of age, women, men, and children. The crowd in general were in support of the speakers (who were politicos, police, and from the religious community). I saw MECAWI (Michigan Emergency Coalition Against War and Injustice) and BAMN with their flags.

Report by M.P.

My neighbor who is a nurse at the city jail called and asked if I wanted to go with her. Yes, and so we rode down together. She brought 2 posterboards and a green marker. She asked me to buy some Skittles and Arizona iced tea. We got there about 5:15, as people were beginning to arrive and setting up. We made our posters — hers said “I Am Trayvon Martin” and mine said “Justice for Trayvon, Fight Racism Now”.

The leadership of the rally was extremely conservative — pledge of allegiance, the Lords Prayer, Police Chief Ralph Godby (who said, “it could have been my son”), NAACP chair Wendell Anthony, Detroit 300, City Councilwoman Joann Watson, Rev. Ed Rowe, UAW, Jane Garcia as a speaker from the Latino community.

Jessica Care Moore performed an excellent poem that tied this murder to all the Black murders through time, lynching, etc. A student from Cass Tech high school read a poem he wrote (“It could have been me”) that moved us all.

The crowd — about 1000 — filled Hart Plaza. Families and children, junior high and high school students, groups of teenagers. I saw people from all races — mostly Black, some white, Latino, Arabic (women wearing habibs). Moratorium Now had an organized presence, as did BAMN (By Any Means Necessary) and UAW Local 600, also the Melanics (“If you don’t hate us, why are you killing us?”) and members of Occupy but with no banner or any other indicator of who they are. Occupy had called and held a meeting the previous Thursday with the Coalition Against Police Brutality, Moratorium and LRNA (League for a Revolutionary New America) people with the outcome to have a rally that broadened the issue, but there was no indication at this rally of that meeting. I saw 2 people from my union (UAW local 909), one of whom had a pack of condoms along with his pack of Skittles (referencing the death of Michael Haynes, killed over an argument about the price of a pack of condoms at a local BP gas station).

Many people had pictures of murdered children, tying this violence to Trayvon’s case. Some had signs referencing Michael Haynes. There were mostly hand made signs. The crowd was pretty calm — cheering the speakers, going with
the flow, leaving quietly at the end of 2 hours. That said, the mood was upbeat, as if something is stirring. People were proud they came out and proud Detroit made this showing of respect. They were responding to the increasing scapegoating of Black youth and the devaluation of Black life. I believe Occupy has opened a public discussion that includes the ideas of rallying and marching to get justice and the Black community is utilizing this space. The angriest people in the crowd were mothers — women with children who appeared ready to take this whole thing further.

Minneapolis Report

Report by K.

Thursday, March 29th 5,500 people (police estimates) gathered on a plaza at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis to stand in solidarity with Trayvon Martin and against profiling, police brutality and racism in general – as part of the national call for “Million hoodie marches”.

The crowd was more than half Black, with lots of whites, Asians, Latinos, and other nationalities as well. This was the largest mainly Black protest in the Twin Cities since the Rodney King verdict and Rebellion in 1992. There were lots of Black students, but also many youth and families that were clearly not students. Most attending wore hooded sweatshirts. Some brought their own signs. The energy was amazing as people felt their power.

Many different people spoke and it wasn’t always easy to hear who each person was. An African-American woman wearing an “Occupy the Hood” sweatshirt was the main MC. There were speeches by Black faculty, Black fraternities, an Asian poet who mentioned the case of Fong Lee a Hmong teen killed by the police, Occupy our Homes campaign, and many others. The main message was “No More!” “We must stand up against these injustices”.

No politicians spoke that I saw (I could be wrong). Brother Ali, a popular local rapper who is Muslim and white (albino in fact) spoke. It was one of those speeches that was a pretty eloquent call for white folks in the audience to acknowledge racism and take action against it.

SEIU staff and their “Workers Center” spin-offs (who were mostly white) provided the identifiable security, which was kind of weird. The Nation of Islam was thanked from the stage for providing Medics. Socialist Alternative and the SWP each had literature tables. The IWW had one of our big banners and about a dozen-person contingent. I saw several other friends, anarchists, Wobblies and members of FRSO(Freedom Road Socialist Organization).

I attended with J—, a co-worker and Wobbly. We saw but could not get to the IWW contingent flying red & black flags on the other side of the plaza. It was too packed. One of J—’s close co-workers was planning to attend with her family.

At one point I thought I heard folks from the front (The IWW, I think but not just) chanting “We wanna march!”. The organizers let the huge crowd march, and many groups of marches including folks around the IWW were chanting militantly, but the mach was circled harmlessly back to the rally plaza without getting out on to the streets and off of campus. J— and I left after that to catch the bus.

I had got a feeling that this rally was going to be huge, when some of my non-activist friends started buzzing about it on Facebook. From what I can tell Facebook was the main organizing tool of the rally, although there may have been some leaflets on campus or some promotion on Black radio that I missed.

Earlier in the day I had asked my union Local (I am in an oppositional relationship with much of the union executive) to endorse the rally and allow the Local’s Solidarity Committee to bring the Union’s banner to the event. The Local President tried to rule my motion dead. As a result the motion lost with a close vote but it was good that it happened and got on the record.

I was very encouraged by this rally. It was a great show of force for Black solidarity and an expression of the growing desire for the Black community to put its stamp on the emerging movements.

After I left a break-away march was initiated that got out into the streets. Here is a report (with permission) by Fellow Worker B. of the Twin Cities IWW:
A group of about twenty IWWs, Occupiers and assorted radicals who all gathered around the IWW banner found ourselves towards the back of the march around the plaza that K. mentioned. As we got towards the far end of the plaza away from the speakers stand, some folks decided we were going to break off and continue into the streets. We walked past a marshal and stopped to make our next move, encouraging folks to come with us. The break-off group was initially about 20 folks, mostly white youth. Very quickly though, a couple of black folks responded to the calls to march elsewhere and joined us, and encouraged other folks to come with them.

Before long, we had about 300 people and marched through the University for a few blocks. We then swung back towards the rally, which was just about ending, and headed northeast passed very edge of the rally and onto University Ave. We picked up more people at this point, despite marshals from the rally screaming at people not to join us.

By the time we hit the streets for real, I would estimate we had at least 500 people, about 75% black youth, 15% families with kids and the rest mostly-white radicals. We took all three lanes of 4th St SE and then after doubling back, all three lanes of University. It was a ton of fun, shouting militant chants about Trayvon Martin and racism as well as explicitly revolutionary slogans which were quickly taken up by much of the crowd.

Initially, the radicals who proposed the breakaway march had talked about marching downtown, but before long the IWW banner and most of the radical contingent were scattered throughout the march and decisions were being made by the younger black folks who were running the march. Instead we went up the length of Dinkytown, raising hell on Frat Row and generally having a blast.

There were a few minor incidents during the march. A few of the marshals from the main rally, mostly Occupiers, took off their vests and joined us.

One, a person who I don’t know, got into an altercation with an Occupier and UAW grad student organizer that ended up with the grad student getting attacked and put into a headlock by the marshal’s friend. They were quickly separated (I didn’t see this, just heard about it afterwards) by others and things continued on. A few drivers were not interested in letting us take all three lanes of a one way street and tried to push through the crowd but were stopped by persistent marchers and in at least one instance, had ice tea cans tossed at them (appropriately enough).

The march was a really great experience and for me was an awesome way of taking issues like racism and responses to racist violence away from the “professional organizers” and towards average working people of color.

While initiated by mostly (but not exclusively) white radicals, the march quickly took a turn towards being organized and run by black youth, many of whom it was clear had never participated in a march or rally before. I personally have gotten a bit of flack from folks I know who were either marshals or speakers, and am continuing to hear from them. . . . Some apparently want to have a meeting with me and other folks who were involved in the march to get a sense of why we did the breakaway. To be blunt, whatever. The meeting will probably happen but we made the right call and I would do it again in a heartbeat, it’s the most fun I’ve had since marching in Madison last spring. I think the professionals on the left are mostly pissed because a group of radicals worked with a large mass of politicized people of color in ways that outflanked their preplanned (and frankly rather long) rally. I guarantee you that if you polled the people who attended the rally last Thursday, everyone who went on that march would tell you it was the highlight of the event.

Respectfully,

B.
Toward an Anarchist Policy on Syria

Syrian banner, “I am truly free when all human beings, men and women, are equally free.”
– Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin. Man, Society, and Freedom (1871)

I. Introduction

At the moment, the Middle East (taken broadly, that is, the area from North Africa to Pakistan) is the part of the world experiencing the greatest political instability and undergoing the most rapid change. At the center of the turmoil is Syria, now in its third year of civil war with no sign of any resolution in sight. Given the centrality of Syria to global politics, it is essential that anarchists understand what is going on there and develop a critical attitude toward the events that are unfolding. Unfortunately, we are not experts on the history and current dynamics of Syria and of the Middle East as a whole. The following theses are therefore presented with humility. We would greatly appreciate input from others, particularly those with greater background in the area, especially anarchists living in the region, in the development of our position.

II. International and Historic Context

It is impossible to understand what is going on in Syria today without some knowledge of the international and historical context in which the events are taking place. In very broad strokes, it is worth mentioning:

A. The ebbing of the power of US imperialism.

The United States became the hegemonic power in the Middle East during the 1950s, taking the place of British imperialism, whose weakness had been revealed by the events of World War II and the immediate post-war period. This hegemony (which included the colonial powers of Western Europe as junior partners) was occasionally challenged by the Russians (then in the form of the Soviet Union), who sought to intervene in the area by supporting nationalist, anti-imperialist forces.

These forces often took power through “national revolutions,” usually military coups led by junior officers, who, once in power, tilted toward, and received aid from, the Soviet Union. Such regimes included Nasser’s in Egypt, a similar one in Syria (which from 1958 to 1961 was united with Egypt in the so-called “United Arab Republic”), and one in Iraq.
Nasser died, he was replaced by Anwar al-Sadat, who eventually (in 1979) signed a peace treaty with Israel and aligned Egypt firmly with the United States. In Iraq and Syria, a series of military coups brought to power strongmen, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hafez al-Assad in Syria, respectively, who sought to play off the USSR and the United States, while generally leaning toward the Russians. In Iran, a secular nationalist, Mossadeq, was overthrown by US-backed coup in 1953, which brought to power the very pro-West Shah. He was overthrown in 1979 and replaced by a Shi'ite theocratic government (still in power) which has generally opposed both the US and the Russians. Despite all this, the overall power of US imperialism, based firmly on Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and after 1979, Egypt, was never seriously threatened.

Today, however, US imperialism is in retreat, as the economic crisis of 2008 has exposed the underlying economic and social problems of US society. Meanwhile, there is no country which, at least as of yet, has the power to take its place. Although Chinese imperialism, the international extension of the state capitalist system in China, is increasing its penetration of many areas of the globe (including the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Africa, and Latin America), it is not yet capable of taking the United States’ place as the hegemonic power in any one region, and certainly not in the Middle East. This weakening of overall imperialist domination, combined with the effects of globalization on the countries in the area, has inspired political and social forces among the middle classes to seek political power for themselves. These groups, including militant Islamic organizations and pro-Western liberals, have managed to assume the leadership of much broader social layers who have been plagued by rampant unemployment (particularly among young people), decrepit housing and urban infrastructures, inflation, and the other results of uneven economic growth. The results of this complex social process have included the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the revolution, now taking the form of a civil war, in Syria.

B. The decline of the West.

The longer range historical context in which the events in Syria and the Middle East as a whole are taking place is the global decline of the West, that is, the waning of the international hegemony of the European nations and their offshoots. This hegemony was rooted in the explosive economic expansion that began in Western Europe in (roughly) 1500, based on the development, first, of mercantile capitalism, and then, 300 years later, of industrial capitalism. This dynamic growth was an international phenomenon, resulting in the emergence and spread of what became known as Western imperialism. While this imperialism met with comparatively little resistance from the indigenous populations of the Western hemisphere, who succumbed rather quickly to military conquest and, even more so, to diseases for which they had no immunity, it was not so fortunate elsewhere in the world. This was especially the case in the Middle East, where highly cultured, technologically advanced civilizations had existed for many centuries. Here, European penetration was only partial; entire countries, including Afghanistan, Persia/Iran, and Turkey, were never fully conquered by Europeans/Euro-Americans. The result, for several hundred years, was an unstable stalemate between the ruling (landlord and capitalist) classes of the West, on the one hand, and the ruling elites of the Middle East (however we might define them, e.g. semi-feudal, bureaucratic, Asiatic-despotic) on the other.

In fact, the conflict between the two regions goes back even further. Specifically:

1. The explosive growth of Islam and Islamic civilization throughout the Middle East, into south and southeast Asia, across north Africa, and into Europe (Spain and southern France) in the late 7th and early 8th centuries; and

2. The counter-attack by the Europeans, in the form of the Reconquista in Spain and, later, the Crusades.

When looked at from this long-term perspective, what we see is a trans-epochal conflict between two regions/cultures/civilizations, in which, at the moment, the European/Euro-American, after centuries of aggressive expansion, has moved onto the defensive. This “war of civilizations” remains, however vaguely, in the historic memories of the peoples of the Middle East to this day and fuels much of the nationalism and religious fanaticism that is now so prevalent throughout the region.

C. The problem of imperialist imposed national identities.

It is important to remember that one important outcome of this centuries-old conflict, and particularly its more recent developments, is that many of the existing nation-states of the Middle East are artificial constructions. When it became clear that the multi-ethnic (Turkish-dominated) Ottoman Empire would collapse after World War I, the British and the
French, in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, drew largely arbitrary lines on the map to demarcate modern national states (where before there had been only historical/geographical regions or administrative divisions). They then parceled out these states to themselves, (e.g., Lebanon and Syria to the French; Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq to the British). The result was that, in contrast to Europe, where nation states (and corresponding nationalities) had centuries to take shape and be consolidated, in the Middle East (and in the Balkan Peninsula, which was under Turkish/Islamic rule for centuries), the process of nation-building had to take place very rapidly, in a haphazard fashion. It is largely because of this that, aside from the conflicts among the states in the area, many of the states comprise what should be seen as “imperialist imposed national identities.” In these countries (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine), people define themselves as much, or even more, by sectarian considerations (e.g., whether a person is a member of a Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Druze, Christian, or Jewish community) than by nationalistic commitments to the nations of which they are a part.

III. The Syrian Revolution

A. The Syrian revolution broke out in March of 2011, as a largely spontaneous movement among the middle and lower classes of Syria, primarily young, and primarily, although not exclusively, urban. It began in Dar’a, in southern Syria, and for many months grew in militancy, size, and scope on a non-violent basis: sit-ins, mass demonstrations, and land occupations. Its main demands centered on the immediate needs of the people, primarily for jobs, and the need to set the stage for a transition to a more democratic political system after three decades of a brutal dictatorship under the Assads.

B. The Assad dynasty was established by Hafez al-Assad, who rose to power through the Syrian Air Force, the Syrian wing of the Arab Socialist Ba’athist Party, and the government. Involved in several coups, through which the Ba’ath party (in 1963) and he himself (in 1971) gained full power, Assad served as Minister of Defense, Prime Minister, and, ultimately, President. (Although, under the constitution promulgated by Assad in 1973, the president is elected by the Syrian population every seven years, there has usually been only one candidate on the ballot.) Upon the elder Assad’s death in 2000, his son, Bashar, stood for election, won, and was reelected in 2007.

Although the Syrian government is technically a republic, it is actually despotically ruled by the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, which heads an alliance of six other parties in the Progressive National Front and dominates the country’s rubberstamp unicameral legislature. (“Ba’ath” means “resurrection” or “renaissance” in Arabic.) The party, with branches in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, was founded in 1947 by secular members of the middle classes as an expression of Arab nationalism and was embraced by junior military officers, including the elder Assad, in the 50s and 60s. Among the central aspects of the Ba’athist program were: anti-Zionism/anti-imperialism, secularism, socialism (meaning state ownership of much of the economy, central planning, and essentially one-party rule), and a commitment to a vaguely-defined “pan-Arabism.” Despite this program, the Assad regime bases itself internally on the members of the Alawite sect of Islam (an offshoot of the Shi’a), to which the Assads belong. Most members of the government inner circle, as well as occupants of leadership posts in the Ba’ath party and the economy, are members of this sect, which has thus been elevated into a privileged stratum that rules over a majority (76%) Sunni population.

C. Domestically, Assad sought to secularize and modernize the country by, for example, granting more rights to women, expanding education, and building Syria’s infrastructure through public works projects financed by the Russians, other Arab governments, and international lending agencies. He also ruthlessly suppressed opposition by imprisoning, torturing, and killing dissidents, and, in 1980, by crushing a Muslim Brotherhood-organized uprising and slaughtering up to 25,000 people.

D. Internationally, Assad, as mentioned above, aligned himself with the Russians and sought to present himself as anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian, and a leader of the Arab world. As defense minister under a civilian Ba’athist government, he presided over a war with Israel (the so-called “Six Day War”) in 1967, and after seizing full power in 1971, another conflict (known as the “Yom Kippur War” in Israel and the “Ramadan War” in the Arab world) in 1973. Both of these resulted in substantial victories for Israel and a significant expansion of Israeli-occupied territory, including the Golan Heights (which had previously been under Syrian control), the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula (which was eventually given back to the Egyptians). In the face of the Israelis’ overwhelming military superiority, Assad shifted his attention to Lebanon, intervening in that country to defend Palestinian guerrillas and non-combatant refugees from periodic Israeli invasions and to maintain Syrian hegemony over the sect-divided nation. Ultimately (in 1982), Syria occupied the entire country, an occupation that ended only in 2005. Assad’s involvement in Lebanon (both directly and
through its sponsorship of the Shia-based Hezbollah militia) thus served as a kind of proxy war with Israel, while he accepted a de facto military truce with that country.

In fact, for Assad, Syrian national, and even narrowly Shi’a, interests always trumped pan-Arabism. Thus, when he perceived those interests to be threatened by the Iraqi regime of fellow-Ba’athist (but Sunni), Saddam Hussein, Assad supported (Shi-ite, non-Arab) Iran in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-89), and in 1990, the US war against Iraq. Later, Bashar Assad opposed the US invasion of Iraq, which led to the imposition of sanctions by the United States and its allies. Domestically, Bashar attempted to continue the modernization of the country by, for example, loosening up government control and allowing private enterprise in banking and other sectors of the economy. More recently, he tried to achieve a rapprochement with US imperialism, by, among other things, withdrawing from Lebanon. Two results of these policies were a drastic increase in corruption and an intensification of the desire of the Syrian population for greater political freedom.

E. While the struggle in Syria began on a non-violent basis and eventually mobilized significant sectors of the Syrian people, the aggressive, extremely brutal response of the government forced the opposition to arm itself. One result of this has been the militarization of the struggle. This has forced the unarmed masses of people to the sidelines (and into refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon) and turned what had been a popular revolution into a civil war between the Syrian government, backed by the Alawite minority, on the one hand, and opposition militias, supported by the Sunni majority, on the other. Despite great odds, including brutal aerial bombardment and the likely use of chemical weapons on the part of the regime, the rebel forces, eventually and for the most part organized under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, put the regime onto the defensive and forced it into ever-smaller pieces of territory.

F. Unfortunately, the militarization of the struggle and its protracted nature have increasingly internationalized the conflict. At first, this was largely a question of outside commando forces, such as the Sunni fundamentalist militia, Al Qaeda in Iraq, joining the fighting on the side of the rebels. Somewhat later, the conflict on the border with Turkey wound up drawing a response from the Turkish military. Meanwhile, as the Russians have stepped up their military aid to the Assad regime, the Israelis, concerned that missiles being sent to the government might wind up being used against itself, launched missile strikes into Syria. Most recently, Hezbollah, worried about the eventual defeat of its Syrian patron and a victory for the Sunni majority, has sent its own well-trained military forces into the fray. Their presence, it seems, was crucial to the recent government victory in retaking the border town of al-Qusayr from the rebels.

G. Although from early on, the United States has verbally and diplomatically indicated its support of the struggle against the Assad regime, it is not clear how much this policy has been motivated by a serious commitment to the rebels and how much by the need to protect its image as the promoter of bourgeois democracy, both in the region and internationally. The US ruling class has always been extremely wary of mass struggle, large numbers of lower class people mobilizing to fight for their needs. Such masses can easily “get out of control,” that is, fall under the influence of “irresponsible” forces, abandon non-violent struggle, and threaten political overturns that are inimical to the US’s imperialist interests. For this reason, the US almost always prefers to see very slow, very moderate, and very peaceful political change, preferably under the tutelage of one or more outside (read “imperialist”) country. This is the case even when, all other things being equal, the US imperialists would prefer to see a pro-Western, democratic regime in power in Syria in place of the unpredictable, and often anti-US, Assad dictatorship. Along with the war-weariness of the US population and the fiscal need to cut the US military budget, it is this that explains the tepid, vacillating nature of the United States’ response to the Syrian struggle. Probably most important in hindsight, the US, fearing the escalation of violence (and worried about weapons getting into the hands of fundamentalist militias), hesitated to supply arms to the rebels, let alone take stronger measures, such as establishing a no-fly zone to protect the rebel forces from Assad’s aerial bombardment. Meanwhile, the Russian, the Iranian, and the Chinese governments have had fewer scruples, using their diplomatic leverage to support the Assad regime and, at least in the case of the Russians and Iranians, supplying armed forces and weapons to the Syrian military. The result is that the United States now finds itself behind the 8-ball. As we write this, the Obama administration, citing the Assad government’s use of chemical weapons as its rationale, has decided to send some weapons (mostly small arms and perhaps some anti-tank guns) to the rebels. This is not likely to make much of a difference to the outcome of the struggle.

H. To make matters worse, the struggle in Syria now seems to be spilling over into Lebanon, as Shia militias there (perhaps under directive from Assad) have begun firing into Sunni communities, with Sunni militias returning fire. There have also been exchanges of gunfire across the Syrian-Israeli border. One possible result of all this is that the Syrian struggle, which began as a popular rebellion against a brutal dictatorship, may escalate into a region-wide conflict, a proxy
war in which the major powers line up behind the opposing (sectarian) forces. Such an escalation, if left unchecked, could threaten an even bigger conflagration.

IV. Our Position

In light of this complex and rapidly developing situation, what position should anarchists take?

A. Our own view is that we should see the conflict in Syria as still being predominantly a popular revolution in which the majority of the Syrian people are fighting against an arbitrary dictatorship. The overthrow of that regime would be a victory for the Syrian people. It would also create a situation which, however temporary it might be, would give the Syrian workers and peasants, as well as consciously libertarian forces, the opportunity to pursue the struggle for real freedom. We advocate this position in spite of the fact that the United States and its allies in Western Europe and elsewhere have given diplomatic support, humanitarian aid, and now arms, to the rebels. While we never feel comfortable being on the same side as the United States, we do not see the rebels as mere proxies for the imperialists, under their control and dependent on them financially. Particularly because of the hesitancy of the US to get involved and despite the presence in their ranks of Syrian and foreign Islamic fundamentalist militias, the rebel armies still appear to be independent, popular forces and therefore worthy of support.

B. Yet, in supporting the Syrian rebels, it is important to clarify what kind of support we are talking about. As far as we can tell, the leadership of the struggle in Syria is made up of a combination of pro-Western liberals, moderate Islamic organizations, and fundamentalist Islamic militias. (And as the fighting continues, it is likely that the fundamentalists will increasingly dominate the rebel coalition. Some of these forces are fiercely authoritarian and would be even worse than the Assad regime in whatever area they could establish power) None of these forces in any serious sense represents the people. In other words, rather than aiming at a revolution that overturns hierarchical power relations and establishes the democratic, egalitarian rule of the lower classes, they aim simply to set up some kind of traditional, class-based government — a US-style bourgeois democracy, a moderate Islamic regime, or a fundamentalist theocracy — while maintaining the existing class structure of Syria intact. Thus, while we favor the overthrow of the Assad regime, we do not wish to spread illusions about what the opposition leaders’ goals are, what kind of societies they wish to establish, and whom they really represent. The tactics we advocate of independent intervention and tactical blocs enables us do this.

If anarchists had a significant presence in Syria today we should simultaneously attempt to coordinate our activity (including military actions, if we had fighting forces) with the political organizations and armed forces of the other anti-Assad organizations, while carrying out our own independent propaganda and agitation among the lower classes. This propaganda and agitation would explain that, while they, too, should be fighting alongside the bourgeois forces that are currently leading the struggle, they should have no illusions in what those forces represent. Instead, they should utilize the struggle to organize to take power for themselves, that is, to set up popular councils and other mass democratic structures to run their communities, the enterprises in which they work, and Syrian society as a whole. Thus, assuming that the rebel forces are victorious against Assad, we and the popular classes would be in a strong position to continue the fight for a true social revolution under whatever transitional government is set up in the aftermath of the armed conflict.

C. In sum, what we are proposing amounts to seeking to establish a tactical bloc with the other forces involved in the struggle against the Assad regime while maintaining our own independent organizations and carrying out independent activity to foment anarchist revolution. This includes exposing the bourgeois, non-popular nature of the groups with whom we are in a temporary alliance.

If we do not advocate this approach, or something like it, we are left to choose (and perhaps to vacillate) between two other policies, neither of which is satisfactory. One would be to give full (military and political) support to the rebel forces, which runs the danger of spreading illusions about them, thus disorienting the popular classes in the aftermath of the military struggle. The other would be to adopt a “plague on both your houses” approach, which would mean attempting to remain neutral between the pro- and anti-Assad forces and allowing the military struggle to play out without anarchist intervention. At least at this juncture, we should prefer a policy that would enable us to intervene in the struggle on the side of the anti-Assad forces, while continuing to advocate and organize for an anarchist revolution.

D. For those of us far away from the frontlines, the same general approach applies.
First, we should attempt to alert our friends, family, co-workers, and comrades to the important struggle underway in Syria. We should promote and circulate anti-authoritarian news coverage, analysis, and requests for solidarity, especially from anarchists and anti-authoritarians in Syria and the Middle East. We should argue against those activists who uphold the Assad regime as some sort of principled anti-imperialist force or unselfish friend of the Palestinians.

Where possible (and feasible, given our small numbers and competing priorities) we should join protest movements and solidarity campaigns in support of the revolution in Syria. Anarchists should be constructive participants in these movements while also advocating our specific concerns and vision. While defending the rebels right to obtain weapons by any means necessary, we should expose the motives of, and argue against any reliance on the U.S., other Western powers, or the rich Gulf states. We should oppose authoritarian fundamentalism, particularly the reactionary sexist and sectarian politics, while also defending the rights of religious Muslims to organize themselves and participate in the movement.

As in all the movements we participate in we should advocate for grassroots democracy, direct action, and solidarity with other struggles and oppose hierarchal control, legalistic strategy, and protective isolation. In all our work we should seek to make anti-authoritarian revolution a pole of discussion, action and interest.

E. Increasingly, what is missing is the independent, self-organization of popular resistance. This is what made the Arab Spring and had an effect all over the world. Without an independent expression of this popular resistance, we fear the energy of the past 3 years will be channeled into military or fundamentalist approaches. Across the region, from Syria to Egypt, the radical and democratic currents from below have not been able to sustain themselves because of the inability to articulate and gain wide support organizationally and politically.

If the Syrian rebels become dominated by authoritarian fundamentalist forces or if the struggle does, in fact, turn into a region-wide conflict between forces backed by the United States, the European nations, and Israel, and those supported by Russia, China, and Iran, we might have to consider adopting an alternate position. But, for the moment, and based on the information we have, this is the position we should advocate.

F. At the moment we publish, there has been a dramatic urging for attack on the Assad government after recent chemical weapons use in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. All sides are in dispute over responsibility for the attack, with the Assad government blaming the rebels and the rebels and the US blaming Assad. With the limited information we have, we think it quite likely that Assad was responsible. Nonetheless, we think it is a mistake to call for or support military intervention—either limited or broad—by the US or its allies. Any air strike by the US or its allies will only serve to disorient the popular Syrian revolution, shifting the centrality of the uprising from domestic opposition to that of a Western imperial effort. The US/Western aim, obviously, is to control and limit the revolution, make sure any new government follows pro-Western policies, and that power will be in the hands of pro-Western elites and not the people. In place of calling for or relying on Western intervention, the rebels should be demanding arms with no strings attached, should militantly oppose intervention in Syria under whatever pretext, and should resolutely resist efforts by outside forces to exert any kind of control over their revolution.

This document was drafted, discussed and collectively approved by the members of First of May Anarchist Alliance. September 6th, 2013.

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