Writings on

Movement Discussion

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

Movement Discussion/Debate

Contents:

- END: CIV—Against Jensen and for a Real Ecological and Working Class Revolution…..Pg. 3
- Alternative Libertaire: États-Unis M1 au pays des capitaux, des libertaires chez l’oncle Sam…..Pg. 5
- M1 letter of Resignation and a Critique of Rapprochement Process…..Pg. 9
- Joint Statement on Affiliation of First of May Anarchist Alliance and The Utopian…..Pg. 12
- Power to the People, Not Politicians! A Critique of Socialist Electoralism with John O’ Reily on Elections and Kdog's rejoinder…..Pg. 13
Derrick Jensen represents the current peak synthesis of primitivist and insurrectionist thought. And while both trends are declining within anarchism thanks to the global upswing of mass struggle against austerity, like in Egypt, Wisconsin, Spain, and so on, such trends are still able to get a good event together in Minneapolis, like the hundred or so people who attended the showing of END: CIV, a movie inspired by Jensen’s writing, and like it, a dead end for any relevant conversation on the present moment.

There are deep, insolvable failures in Jensen’s work with regard to revolution, collapse, and militancy, but let us begin with the strengths of Jensen’s approach so we can demolish his politics without losing what value they contain.

Strengths of Jensen’s thought

First, they correctly tie the atrocities committed to the earth to the atrocities committed to human beings and note the connection between capitalism, colonialism, and the destruction of the earth.

Second, they notice the major human crisis and transition in which we find ourselves in, a capitalist transition as US power declines, a transition from the energy staple of the whole economy—oil—and the real possibility of significant climate change.

Third, they point out the inadequacy of current responses, green capitalism, change through consumption, and so on, and the craziness of projects like ethanol, the tar sands, fracking, and so on.

Fourth, and finally, they emphasize that a militant, and indeed, revolutionary response is crucial to making necessary changes, and that nonprofit, corporate, and nonviolent approaches are not sufficient.

Jensen’s is not a revolutionary theory
That said, they have no fucking idea what revolution means, or how it could come about. Capitalism and the state are massively powerful and adaptive human systems, and they can only be destroyed through the coordinated action of the great majority of people in this society, and world.

Assuming from the get go that a majority of people are insane and therefore not worth thinking about prevents Jensen and Co from being revolutionary at all, which is why there is so much reliance on collapse as a solution in his work.

Collapse does not equal revolution

But anyone with a thought in their head can see that even if the perfect storm of capitalist transition, peak oil, and climate change comes about, the resulting devastation will not eliminate either capitalism or the state.

The police and military forces of the world will still have the guns and money, and indeed, crisis is almost always used as an excuse for greater violence and oppression than otherwise. This is well demonstrated in Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* which shows how present day capitalism thrives precisely on collapses, by using them to justify mass theft, privatization and so on...whether that be after the Tsunami, New Orleans, Iraq, or the entire post-collapse Soviet Union.

And while we should certainly see this crisis as an opportunity for organizing, capitalism and the state must be organized away, they will not disappear by themselves, and indeed are likely to become even more brutal.

Collapse then is a childishly utopian take on revolution—capitalism and the state will magically disappear!

Again, this utopianism is a direct consequence of assuming the insanity of the majority of people and the failure to see that most of these people are deeply oppressed by state capitalism and therefore have a strong stake in a liberated world. These people are what anarchists call the working class.

Collapse then, is no substitute for revolution because collapse without revolution just means a harsher form of domination then we have currently.

Moreover, this also reveals the deep pessimism of Jensen’s worldview. The rejection of the majority of people as worth thinking about lends strong support to the plethora of possible state capitalist genocidal projects. After all, without civilization the earth could hardly support 7 billion human beings, so who cares if...

Empty Militancy

This pessimism too, defines the ultimately empty or even reactionary show of more-militant-than-thou posturing put forward by Jensen and his followers.

Indeed, every other approach or critique is pushed aside as reactionary for failing to want to “end civilization,” something that is poorly defined and mixed in with intense and false idealization of indigenous cultures. This idealization also ignores the fact that indigenous cultures were conquered precisely because of their insufficient power to defeat the capitalist state, in short, the same problem of revolution that they try to exit themselves from with their utopian collapse-ism.

Without a potentially revolutionary base to convince of a liberatory path, the push for the necessary of violent militancy can accomplish almost nothing good and in fact could create serious reactionary potentials.
On the one hand, despite calls for significant violent ‘resistance’—blowing up dams, and so on—neither Jensen or the Jensen-ites are doing so, revealing either that they don’t actually believe these things or that they are full of shit.

On the other hand, doing these types of action without any desire to convince the public falls right into the hands of the capitalist state which thrives on using the so called violence or terrorism of the left (or otherwise) to justify an ever more repressive state apparatus. The state will often go as far as to create such enemies itself, like the “Strategy of Tension” in Italy, where the State paid fascists to set off bombs in public places and blamed those actions on leftist groups.

We say then that the militancy put forward by Jensen is empty because either it is 1) non-existent or 2) reactionary in that it actually supports, rather than attacks, state capitalism.

To be clear—we are not attacking militancy nor advocating pacifism.

However, if action is not tied to growing mass struggle or building revolution it is hard to see value in it besides pumping up the egos of isolated individuals, hardly a militant goal! The core failure of Jensen’s thought is the rejection of the majority of people as insane, therefore irrelevant, and as such, tossing aside any chance of a liberated society.

Conclusion

We see then, that Jensen’s thought fails miserably in its concepts of revolution, collapse, and militancy even as we embrace the ways that Jensen synthesizes other anarchist thinkers to highlight the importance of ecological issues in bringing about liberation, including understanding the pressing conditions of the present.

It is on us as anarchists who 1) believe in revolution—which cannot happen without insurrection, and 2) in a liberated society—which cannot happen without a sustainable economy and true relationship with the earth—to organize useful projects and campaigns and to continue to put forward ideas, analysis, and critiques that push aside the exhausted pessimism of sub-cultural activism for the critical, serious, and optimistic struggle of the global working class on the brink of an even deeper crisis.

And with a world to win.

**Alternative Libertaire: États-Unis M1 au pays des capitaux, des libertaires chez l’oncle Sam**

February 16th, 2012

The following is an article from M1 to the February edition of the newspaper of the French organization, Alternative Libertaire (AL). AL contacted us asking for a review of who we are, our activity, and further thoughts on anarchist strategies. AL also asked for some outlines of the participation of anarchist revolutionaries in the U.S. Occupy movement.

We appreciate AL for giving us the opportunity to communicate to the broader anarchist and libertarian movements globally. The AL article was translated from English to French and suffers from some small mistakes. First, M1 is not a member of the international Anarkismo network. We encourage greater collaboration with Anarkismo, contribute documents to their website, and when and where possible demonstrate solidarity with their project and member groups. But we have not endorsed the Anarkismo statement.

Second, in outlining the type of activity that M1 see’s as important, we mentioned a few different formations including the Ontario based Steel City Solidarity project. We support Steel City’s work, their victories, and would like to promote their activity as models for “class
intervention” by the broad anti-authoritarian and anarchist movements. However, M1 does not have any members in Steel City Solidarity. Our mention was a nod of support to our friends in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

We have provided the full English version below.

“You got to get up right now/ You got to turn this system upside down/ Your supposed to be fed up right now/ Turn the system upside down/ Get Up!”. – Get Up by The Coup

Radical Hip Hop MC Boots Riley of The Coup lends his support and music to recent organizing video# for a December 12th, 2011 General Strike and shipping port shutdown in the United States. The attempts at strikes and disruptions are the latest in an escalation of resistance to the functioning of the system and is directly emboldened by the emergence of the Occupy movements. While the mass social protests in some U.S. cities don’t necessarily reflect the politics and practice of the Occupy movements as a whole these movements do contain and express real potentials for the development of a broad and evolving critique of class society and the State. Anti-capitalism, anti-authoritarianism, creative and experimental forms of collective action are all a part of these new movements. From the beginning radical anti-authoritarians, anarchist revolutionaries and anti-capitalist and left libertarian union militants such as those within the Industrial Workers of the World[1] have been involved in the organizing and activity of the general assemblies, working groups and subcommittees, and active resistance.

In a joint communiqué First of May Anarchist Alliance (M1) and the anarchist and libertarian socialist journal, The Utopian[2], commented,

“…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 propagate 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”.

While this excerpt is particular to the Occupy movement it nonetheless indicates the general orientation of M1 to activity within the working class and social struggles. M1 is a specific anarchist organization launched Mayday 2010. Previously we had existed as an informal anarchist affinity group. M1 members had collaborated over many years through an array of radical projects including antifascist, immigrant solidarity, labor, and anti-war/anti-militarist.

We founded M1 on 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. These principles are elaborated in our initial political document, Our Anarchism[3]. It is with this document that we highlight the commonalities we have with other social revolutionary trends within the anarchist tradition as well as our differences and points or departure.

Through M1 we attempt to develop collective estimates and analysis of 1) our immediate activity and organizing, and 2) the broader social-political terrain. This analysis helps in the determination of strategic considerations and approaches for intervention. M1 is based on a solid activist and interventionist model. It is the emphasis on strategy and action that differentiates M1 from many other North American anarchist groupings.

We consider that strides towards more theoretical and tactical unity would tend to flow from practice and analysis rather than proceed from a necessarily more abstract and less tested programmatic/theoretical unity that could conceal actual differences.

This said we are not content with creating loose networks. We are for the creation of an organized and effective anarchist/anti-authoritarian Federation. Revolutionary organization and strengthening anarchism presently would best be served in our view by collaborating through joint-work in ways that both expand already existing initiatives and struggles or through creating new formations that could heighten the profile of radical and revolutionary anti-authoritarian approaches to social questions.
We consider this process a type of tendency building rather than the creation of a unitary organization. Within this revolutionary anarchist tendency our respective organizations would continue to test their own approaches and ideas while contributing to these collaborative projects.

It is this approach that we define as “non sectarian and multi-layered”. In some respects this mirrors the dual organizationalism of many Platformist and Especifist groupings.

However, we are not convinced that the binary concept of dual organizationalism is adequately representative of our activity. While we have created M1 as a specific organization we emphasize the need for a multiplicity of formations collaborating in constructive and creative processes; a diversity of revolutionary organizations collaborating on determined initiatives as well as undertaking autonomous projects. Between these organizations is ongoing dialogue and debate on strategy and method.

Some of these initiatives are of a popular, semi-mass character and are autonomous from the long-term and specific anarchist and anti-authoritarian organizations. The role of revolutionary anarchists is to assist in the building and organization of these popular movements, helping to maintain the participatory and directly democratic nature, while simultaneously identifying, drawing out and promoting the radical anti-system currents and potentialities of these movements. The revolutionary union movements (Industrial Workers of the World); radical anti-racist/anti-fa (Anti-Racist Action and Antifascist Action); and independent class struggle direct action networks (SeaSol and Steel City Solidarity) are examples that represent the movements revolutionary anarchists must continue to participate in and build.

It is our experience that individuals, unconnected or not necessarily partisans of any one political sect, find it compelling to join broader initiatives which thereby they would be affiliating with our movements while gaining access to varied anarchist takes and viewpoints. This aids in enhancing their personal education in both radical politics and anarchism. The revolutionary anarchist movement gains in its methods being studied, tested, supported and advanced through practice.
The wave of global protest is opening up real space for class struggle and social revolutionary anarchists. M.A.S., W.S.A., Common Struggle / Common Struggle / Lucha Común, Common Cause, and Union Communiste Libertaire[4] are all directly involved with Occupy and anti-austerity resistance. M1 has attempted to coordinate with these organizations as well as with revolutionary anti-capitalist forces of the broader libertarian left[5]. Returning to the issue of the general strikes and port shutdows there is a growing sense of political and social possibility outside of and independent of the domination of the system. While we would not consider that these protest movements exist as either a counter-hegemonic bloc or a dual power against the system, they do contain elements that may prefigure a developing radical alternative.

However there are risks and challenges ahead. The anarchist and radical left are a minority and still evolving. We lack resources, infrastructure and numbers. While our movements are expanding and developing a wider base of support, the emerging fight will demand much more from us.

It is clear that the initial stages of the popular Occupy experiments were a mixed bag. Numerous tensions, political factions, and some anti-social elements contributed to a lack of political and organizational cohesion, if not for outright disarray, in varying degrees from locality to locality. Yet the protest movements have remained a popular and generally dynamic concept. It is clear that the Occupy movements can sustain themselves in some form or the other. This makes Occupy attractive to factions of the ruling class (notably the Democratic Party) and their quasi-independent proxies (the union bureaucracies).

We saw on the Nov 17th National Day of Action Against Austerity and in Solidarity with Occupy concerted coordination and action by the Service Employee International Union (SEIU) in many cities. In NYC SEIU President Mary Kay Henderson was arrested. The SEIU is one of the largest U.S. business unions mixing a top-down staff-driven, corporatist organizing approach with an aggressive rightwing social-democratic lobbying/electoral strategy. While the SEIU is but one of the many business unions in the United States (and U.S. colonized territories such as Puerto Rico) this has made the SEIU a formidable force in the realm of U.S. labor relations.

In Detroit the SEIU working through their campaign, Good Jobs Now, lead an attempted occupation and shut down of a main road leading to the International Detroit-Windsor Bridge crossing. This was promoted as an “Occupy Detroit” event, even though there was no coordination between the various local occupy groups and it has come to light that SEIU organizers told Occupy organizers to stay away. In Chicago, SEIU attempted a shut down of a major downtown bridge. And so on and so forth across the country. None of this is coincidence. We should be assuming that the SEIU and other union bureaucracies are attempting to define an alternate strategy for the “99%”.

Seemingly to appear from below, this strategy will materialize as a militant form of social democracy. The road and bridge blockades and occupations; anti-eviction campaigns and the re-housing people in foreclosed homes; civil disobedience with actual arrests; etc., all of this is intended to present what would appear to be a radical activist agenda capable of attracting in a popular way any and all peoples who have become politicized in the current climate and want to act. To many people, on a tactical level, these actions may very well be indiscernible from the revolutionary anarchists and radical left. What is different is that the union beauracracies are for system reform via a quasi-direct action, where we are for an anti-capitalist, anti-system revolutionary politic expressed through mass direct action. The business unions want to capture, contain, and ultimately channel this movement into some
form of electoral strategy for the re-election of President Barak Obama and his Democratic Party. We are for organizing in ways that aid in the development of an independent, creative and confrontational set of politics that undermines the legitimacy of the system.

For more information on our activities including current campaigns we would direct readers to our website: m1aa.org


[4] Many of these anarchist and libertarian organizations are collaborating in a new network, http://anewworldinourhearts.net/


**M1 Letter of Resignation from Rapprochement Process**

July 7th, 2012

*(The Rapprochement Process was between the various anarchist and libertarian socialist/communist groups in the United states. It grew out of the Class Struggle Anarchist Conferences that were held from 2008 to 2012. This letter was from M1’s delegate, R.X. It reflects the concerns of M1. The Rapprochement Process ended with the formation of a new anarchist project, Black Rose Anarchist Federation. M1 supports Black Rose and looks to collaborate with this new federation when and where possible.)*

Friends,

This response comes much later than promised. And though I write this as an M1 delegate to the Rapprochement Process it does represent the general attitude of M1.

First let me say that M1 is in a state of transition. Over the past 6 months we have grown from a very small grouping to a slightly less small group.

This growth came about directly from the development of political attitudes and questions relating to various local work our members were engaged in, notably around "Occupy". Consistent organizing with an emphasis on expanding the potentials for anarchism and anti-authoritarianism attracted others to M1. The Arab Spring, occupations, general strikes and class resistance, all have created a global moment that is dynamic and unlike much that has emerged in the last few decades.
While M1’s growth has been positive it itself has expanded the groups discussions and emphases. Work and discussions that had been a focus early on have changed because of this growth. In large part we have sunk into local work which is quite demanding. Unfortunately it has led to a bit of parochialism on our part.

As relating to Rapprochement, our local work and the real demands it has put on us has contributed to us moving further to the periphery of the discussions around the Rapprochement Process. Many of these discussions, to us, have tended towards,

1) abstractionness regarding the building of an active multi-organizational revolutionary anarchist movement and a tendency towards (always present and at times ever more indistinguishable from) "regroupment" into a unitary organization, which M1 has always raised questions of and has solidly articulated disagreements on any rapid movement towards. As early as CSAC 1 and in particular CSAC 2 in Detroit, M1 took the position that what is necessary for the development of a revolutionary and anarchist movement is greater coordination and collaboration between existing groups. Ongoing collaboration through projects would both build familiarity with as well as clarify positions and approaches between our already existing groups. This was argued in contrast to the idea of liquidating organizations into a singular entity.

2) M1 considering that there has been an attempt to minimize differences between the various organizations in the attempt to lay the theoretical basis for the construction of a unitary organization. Two specific examples would be, one, the "Role of the Revolutionary Organization" discussion that never really happened. M1 submitted a small but substantially different outline of what we envision as revolutionary organization compared to most other submissions. We expected more discussion of all the papers which we never saw.

Two, as the Rapprochement Process moved quickly forward towards drafts of constitutions and theoretical points of unity what we see as the "minimizing" of substantial differences was clear in the sections dealing with National Liberation and Imperialism. M1 has a distinct attitude that is at odds to many orthodox class struggle anarchist and libertarian communist groups.

The wording being presented in the PoU is at odds with the position by M1, although in the drafting of the PoU it was argued (initially by G.) that the wording did indeed reflect the core meanings of all the Rapprochement groups. The wording as we see it is exactly the position we argue against.

We have been quite clear that we oppose simplistic reductions of national liberation struggles that equate them to the same status as colonialist, imperialist, or settlerist regimes. Movements that are involved in active resistance to imperialism and Empire, and that may or may not be part of a broader national liberation struggle, have a much more nuanced character. The PoU wording is sectarian and fatally counter-productive in its abstractness.

Included below are both the PoU wording as well as M1’s position in full.

a) Excerpt from Points of Unity, Capitalism and the State

...We are against all expressions of nationalism, including "national liberation" movements whether openly conservative or supposedly progressive and "anti-imperialist" in nature as both are based on the unity of workers with their rulers!

And,

Imperialism

We never take sides in wars between states or would-be states, instead always supporting mutiny, fraternization and the working class fighting in its own interest. Our class is global so should be our solidarity.
b) M1AA. Our Anarchism. Sections, Anarchism, Empire and National Liberation

Two approaches have dominated the modern anarchist approach to national liberation movements. Both are inadequate and have helped ensure anarchism usually remained on the sidelines of the major struggles against imperialism and for self-determination.

The first approach condemns all national liberation movements – from top to bottom and across all tendencies – as inherently capitalist and statist and therefore as equal an enemy as Empire. This then justifies abstention from solidarity with those people under the gun of imperialism. Besides being entirely immoral, this practice leaves anarchist ideas and methods off the playing field of the imperialized world.

The second failed approach also removes anarchism as an independent political pole, by uncritically backing whatever force or leader is fighting against (or posing against) US or other imperialism. The traditional anarchist critique of hierarchy, the State, and patriarchy are pushed to the side in order to support the “leadership” of the resistance.

Against all this we promote anarchist participation within movements against Empire and for self-determination, advocating anti-authoritarian, internationalist, decentralized and cooperative societies as an alternative to social democratic, state-capitalist or religious fundamentalist opposition projects. We see this as in keeping with the best traditions from the anarchist movement.

For those of us living and working in North America we have a particular responsibility to oppose the ongoing wars of occupation in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine and other countries around the world. We must help build anti-war consciousness, movements and actions, as well as stand firm against the racist hysteria directed against Muslim, Arab, and East African communities here.

The criminalization of supporters of the main movements in Palestine, Lebanon, Somalia and other countries prevents anti-war movements and those immigrant communities from fully expressing themselves and engaging in dialogue and debate about the course of struggle. We must oppose this criminalization even as we clarify our critique of the dominant or other specific resistance organizations.

We believe it is vital that the costs of Empire be raised in our mass work in the Labor movement and other social movements. The wars in the Middle East are directly tied to the massive cutbacks being demanded by the bosses and politicians in education, social services and retirement. It will not be possible to resist these cuts or make demands for our communities needs without confronting the costs of the war machine. Any base built on narrow trade-union demands will not be sufficient to develop the revolutionary nuclei needed to help create the challenge needed.

Our understanding of Empire includes not only the outward projection of economic, cultural, and military domination but also that the US and Canadian states themselves are built on the colonization of Native land in North America. Our consistent opposition to Empire must mean an opposition to the US state. Our vision is of the Empire dismantled, not some red flag raised at the White House.

We also understand that the organization of Empire is not static and that the continuing globalization of capital and the rise of international economic and supra-state institutions will mean that both imperialism and the struggles against it will look and feel different than previous eras. We will continue to study and discuss the implications of these changes and what it means for our work.
3) early on there existing a culture of internet organizing (multiple lists, emails, etc) that most of us could not realistically keep up with. We wanted to be better at keeping up with all the emails, calls, and lists, but it became overwhelming and we soon went from being behind to just plain being lost.

We remain committed to collaboration with revolutionaries. We remain committed to building a social revolutionary anarchist tendency within the broader movements and struggles. However, we at this time don't have a clear idea of how we fit into what has become of the Rapprochement Process. We see the MAS letter speaking of greater unity between themselves, Common Struggle and Amancer. What does this mean? The MAS letter would seem to indicate that the Rapprochement Process has reached its conclusion. Is this a fair reading? Meanwhile discussions continue around the Rapprochement Process in a way that seems to suggest that the process is still underway despite the MAS position? Is this too the case?

We offer the above with the spirit of an open, honest, but critical perspective. If groups intend to move forward with a regroupment we wish you the best and will seek to coordinate and work with you all in ways that are possible. If we are wrong, and assume too much then we ask for clarification.

We have our M1 conference coming up in early August and will be re-developing our take on all of this. Regardless of where the “Rapprochement” groups are at we plan to propose specific joint work (like the formerly proposed Labor newsletter/webpage) and welcome continued collaboration within the IWW, ARA & anti-fascist work, and the Occupy and foreclosure/eviction defense work. And all with improved communication (including on our part).

In solidarity and struggle,

R.X.


**Joint Statement on Affiliation of M1 and The Utopian**

by First of May Anarchist Alliance and The Utopian

Sep 3, 2012

Joint Statement

We are excited to announce a formal relationship between the First of May Anarchist Alliance (M1) and The Utopian.

We have been in ongoing communication about our politics and projects for several years and have decided, because of strong political affinity, to establish a formal relationship. This relationship will deepen our collaboration and mutual promotion while maintaining autonomy for each group. It will also provide forums for dialog, debate, and critique, trusting each other to move forward as is best for each group and the growing anarchist movement as a whole.

We see this as the first step in building stronger relationships with other anarchist and anti-authoritarian groups with similar goals, approaches,
and commitments, building what M1 calls a "multi-layered approach" to organizing with a commitment to revolution, a working class orientation, and a specific anarchism without hyphens (read M1’s “Our Anarchism” and the Utopian’s “Who We Are” to learn more).

Another world is possible, we need revolution to bring it about!

For freedom and liberation,
M1 and The Utopian

**Power to the People, Not Politicians! A Critique of Socialist Electoralism**

by First of May Anarchist Alliance – Minnesota Collective

November 2013

Socialist and Democrat campaign signs compliment each other in Minneapolis

I.

All across the Central, Corcoran, Phillips, and Powderhorn neighborhoods of Minneapolis you can see the red & white “Ty Moore for City Council” yard signs, symbolic of the impressive effort the campaign is mounting. The Campaign literature emphasizes social justice, in particular the ongoing movement to defend homeowners from foreclosure and
eviction. The Green Party (Minneapolis’ 2nd party) and, significantly, the SEIU union leadership have endorsed Ty’s campaign – signaling an apparent challenge to Democratic-Farmer-Labor rule in Minneapolis. What could be wrong with all of this?

Plenty, actually. Electoral campaigns, including this one, have as their aim to get “our guy” into a place of power – the government – and to “educate” the public on issues of importance. But what kind of power is this? And what are people being taught?

II.

The government is not a democratic institution. It is bureaucracy in the shape of a pyramid with more power and fewer people the higher you climb. “The State”, as anarchists call the government – including City Hall – is a system imposed over the people and land in which self-determination is “taken from the people and confided to certain individuals, and these, whether by usurpation or delegation, are invested with the right to make laws over and for all, and to constrain the public to respect them, making use of the collective force of the community to this end.” (Malatesta, an old-school Italian anarchist)

The State overlaps with and is usually subordinate to the economic hierarchy of the super-rich, their corporations and banks – what the Occupy movement called “the 1%” and what anarchists refer to as “the ruling class”. Together, the ruling class and the State control the system of exploitation, oppression, and alienation – and the resultant wars, low pay, police brutality, sexual harassment, gentrification, environmental destruction, boredom and depression – that dominate our lives.

Prioritizing a campaign for City Council can be seen as akin to saying that workers should focus their energies around getting the right person to be their CEO or on the board of directors.

III.

Historically there have been two ways people have organized to confront this system:

Reform or Revolution.

Reform is the idea that the system can be successfully modified and improved through legal means and especially through participation in its official channels like lobbying and elections. Reformists argue that this is the realistic and peaceful approach to change.

The problem is that the system, while very adept at incorporating and co-opting reform efforts, has been incredibly resistant to any fundamental structural change from within. It is built to administer class division, racism, sexism and homophobia – not to end it. Those that accept the logic of helping run the system are rewarded. Many more reformists have been changed by working within the system than vice versa.

The biggest reforms under capitalism have actually been the product of struggle from outside the system, not from friendly politicians within. From the union sit-down strikes, Black Liberation movement, and anti-war resistance, to ACT-UP, and the May 1st immigrant strikes – militant mass movements of people using direct action outside the system have forced governments of the left and right to concede to popular demands.

Revolutionaries want to help take these independent movements from just defending past gains or making limited demands on to the offensive by challenging all of the authoritarian social relationships and the system that administers and defends them. This will require a social revolution that expropriates the rich, dissolves the State apparatus, overthrows
structural and cultural patriarchy (sexism) and white supremacy (racism) and builds decentralized, directly democratic, ecological self-governance from below. Campaigns for City Council are a detour from our tasks.

IV.

But isn’t Ty’s campaign at least raising issues? Won’t his campaign teach people about Socialism?

First, movements across the city were already raising the issues of low-paid service work, the foreclosure crisis, and immigrant rights. We don’t need a politician to legitimate those movements. More troubling is the inference that this campaign is taking these demands to a higher level. It will not be City Council resolutions that prevent foreclosures or raise minimum wages, but a mobilized community willing to physically block sheriff’s evictions, and organized workers willing to strike.

Second, Ty Moore’s campaign isn’t saying much about Socialism (however understood). The campaign does not mention capitalism, socialism, workers control, or revolution. This is an important choice. Ty Moore is campaigning for reforms of capitalism not its abolition.

But campaigns teach by more than what is in their written programs. Even if the campaign was more explicitly radical, functionally it is teaching people that social change comes about through electing better politicians. The campaign has all the features of a mainstream election effort – adoration of a single personality, exaggeration of his “leadership”, meaningless pledges to “get results for you”. This is an elitist approach that reinforces the passivity of people by making someone else the “leader” who gets things done, instead of arguing for all of us to take control over our own lives. The activists and community members who have dived into the Ty Moore campaign are not prioritizing organizing one-on-one to plan direct actions at work, at school, or in their neighborhoods, or discussing and debating how to replace the racist police with community militias or how narrow gender-roles stifle our humanity or how to build rank & file power against the union bureaucracy. They are rallying around “our guy” and training people to fundraise and to get out the vote.

This is the main lesson that participants in the campaign are gaining: How to participate in this unjust system.

V.

Socialist Alternative has organized an impressive united front around its candidate. The campaign describes it as a breakthrough: “A big-tent coalition is emerging as an alternative anti-corporate base of political power in Minneapolis, uniting union leaders with socialists, Greens with disillusioned Democrats, block club leaders with urban farmers, immigrant rights advocates with LGBTQ organizers, and Somali business owners with Occupy Homes”.

What we notice is that at the core of this coalition are organizations influenced and funded by SEIU leadership, and sharing their top-down, staff driven, reformism with a militant veneer. It seems that SEIU leadership recognizes in Ty’s campaign a similar approach and made the calculation that a break with the DFL here would help solidify the hegemony of this kind of politics over community, labor and social activists in Minneapolis. It is not just that reformism is inadequate for fighting capitalism and the State, but that in order to maintain its place within the system the reformists have to be able to police the radicals and grassroots. Nationally SEIU has played hardball with its internal dissidents (such as placing militant locals under trusteeship) and Occupy Homes pushed out its solid anarchist activists. A major leader of Socialist Alternative’s sister organization in Britain threatened to “name names” of the hundreds of militants who fought the police during the Poll-Tax riot against Margaret Thatcher’s policies. We should not automatically assume that a Socialist on the city council would be an ally of radical social movements.

VI.

The Ty Moore campaign has succeeded in making a splash, and whether he wins or loses, by challenging the DFL, the campaign may have opened up some space for alternative politics in Minneapolis. These potential positives are
undermined by the nature of the project: a radical reformist campaign to enter the government. All of our experience tells us it will lose its radicalism and will gain no significant reforms.

While we certainly also oppose Ty’s main opponent Alondra Cano (the DFL candidate supported by the City establishment as well as some activists), and are not trying to sabotage Socialist Alternative’s efforts, we cannot support any politician including Ty Moore’s campaign.

We are enthusiastic about the growing possibilities for radical change and the increasingly complex web of organizations and people out there struggling and experimenting with different approaches – but it is crucial that movements also find ways of reflecting and evaluating our experiences and history. We understand that some friends and allies will look at the situation differently. Discussion and debate is good for the movement. We see this is a contribution toward that ongoing conversation, and look forward to fighting alongside each other wherever possible.

We will continue to put our efforts into building radical autonomous movements of workers, students, prisoners, and the poor. Our goal is revolution not just reforms. Our strength is in the neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools – not the voting booth.

For a socialism without politicians

Power to the People, Not Politicians!

Socialism in Minneapolis: thinking about elections

November 19, 2013

An analyses of socialist electoralism in Minneapolis,
by John O'Reilly.

Having just survived an election season in Minneapolis's 9th Ward, the various arguments about Socialist Alternative's candidate for City Council are fresh in my mind. Here I'm going to weave (or more accurately, stick together) together two separate pieces of thinking about what this stuff represents. The first is more an analysis of what's going on in Minneapolis right now on the left, posing some questions to think about going forward. The second, more wandering bit is about why I think electoralism in America is a false problem radicals to worry about.

The “MK Dialectics” of Ty Moore for City Council

I’ve spent the past few months sitting on the sidelines of the emergent campaign for Ty Moore, a candidate from the Trotskyist political party Socialist Alternative (SA), for City Council of Minneapolis.
Socialist Alternative, which has a reasonable base of mostly students and a minority of worker militants, has a good track record of participating in various social struggles in the Twin Cities, moving from their work in the youth anti-war movement of the early 2000s to a variety of causes including school closures, GLBT activism, and most recently, a serious orientation towards working inside Occupy Homes Minnesota (OHMN). I’ve always had good relationships with members of SA and they have supported the IWW in various struggles we have been involved with and we have in turn attempted to turn out to their events. While there are obvious political differences between the two groups, SA has, up to this point, not emphasized electoral politics as part of their practice, outside of “getting out the vote” for Greens or Nader-types come election time. Socialist Alternative is also notable locally for being a party that identifies with the Trotskyist tradition formally, but downplays their revolutionary socialist politics in their publicity, unlike other Trotskyist groups. Since their Seattle section ran an unsuccessful but exciting campaign for a candidate for Washington State Senate, turning out 14,000 votes, SA has around the country started to look more towards electoral possibilities, and this has culminated locally with Moore’s candidate for City Council.

We have a comrade who goes by the name MK. He’s a smart and savvy organizer, and at some point identified a way of analyzing situations that have since been colloquially and partially-jokingly termed “MK dialectics.” MK dialectics consider the political situation by noting that there are often three layers of reality, each a level deeper than the last. Or, to put it differently, each level of analysis sees a more obscure reality hidden behind it, and uncovers it by interrogating the relevant information about the level that is currently visible. It’s also just an amusing way of simplifying political analysis into a pithy refrain. In MK dialectics we ask the questions “what’s going on?” then “what’s really going on?” and then finish with “what’s really, really going on?”

Having tried to keep in touch with what’s happening locally with the Moore campaign, and in discussion with some comrades, I’d like to offer what I think is a way of looking at what’s happened with this campaign, using the framing of MK’s dialectics to understand the situation.

What’s going on: Socialist Alternative ran a campaign for City Council, pushing demands like $15 an hour minimum wage and an end to foreclosures as educational demands that it hopes will inspire people to both vote for Moore and come around the politics of SA.

What’s really going on: A group of “militant reformist” organizations, led by Occupy Homes, came together to support Moore’s campaign. SA has played an important role within Occupy Homes and in supporting these other organizations and there are strong links between SA and the militant reformists.

What’s really, really going on: The left-wing of the NGO-labor-community organization scene in Minneapolis, having struggled with the DFL establishment in the past few years, are attempting to consolidate their organizing successes and political power in a figure in City Hall, using SA as a front group with broad and vague enough politics to fulfill this desire.

I think this analysis effectively flips the appearance of what’s going on its head and I’m fairly confident that I’m correct in what I’m saying here. I don’t say it to be a jerk or to put people down, but I think it’s important to analyze what’s going on in my city, even if I know and have worked with many of the people involved. I think the entire Moore campaign is actually the result of the success of organizations, most clearly Occupy Homes, but also SEIU and the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (CTUL), which is SEIU and (I believe) non-profit-funded, and the post-ACORN organization Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC) becoming a New Left, primarily centered around staff organizers within these and allied organizations. SA serves as a useful vehicle for the campaign because they’re excited about running electoral campaigns, excited about what it could do for their party, and have a public face that can accommodate both reformist and revolutionary supporters. But it’s also important to analyze the material forces that represent the biggest backers and most powerful players in this situation. What’s really, really happening is this campaign is the manifestation on a formal political level of the work that the left wing of the non-profit/labor complex has been able to accomplish with Occupy and beyond it.
I do think it’s important to be cogent about what’s happening below the surface because of what it means going forward. I attended part of a post-election wrap-up of the campaign where multiple shot-callers pushed people towards working together on social movement projects and the short term, and returning to run candidates in the long term. In what ways would a representative of the “militant reformists” in the Twin Cities sitting on the Minneapolis City Council mean for the way that struggles, both reformist and revolutionary, move forward? What are the limits that taking political power (even if that power is only one seat and a seat replacing a liberal Democrat) puts these organizations vis-à-vis the repressive apparatus of the state and what openings does it create? Will the organizations which constitute this base push for radical demands or will they be content with merely calling for them for educational purposes? How will radicals who see themselves as outside the electoral arena relate to a formally-constituted Left which finds itself for the first time with political representation by both moderates (SEIU-backed candidates all around the state) and radicals and how will these two different forces relate internally? These are questions for us to return to going forward, assuming this current wave of electoralism continues.

Electoralism: A False Dilemma

Just a few days before the City Council election in Minneapolis, a group of comrades from the 1st of May Anarchist Organization put out a statement condemning electoralism and attempting to identify the weaknesses of an approach to politics that includes running candidates for office. A good statement, it sums up the general anarchist approach to the electoral issue. The one place where it is weak is when it tries to show the specific political problems raised in SA's campaign:

“First, movements across the city were already raising the issues of low-paid service work, the foreclosure crisis, and immigrant rights… It will not be City Council resolutions that prevent foreclosures or raise minimum wages, but a mobilized community willing to physically block sheriff’s evictions, and organized workers willing to strike.”

Later M1 says:

“What we notice is that at the core of this coalition are organizations influenced and funded by SEIU leadership, and sharing their top-down, staff driven, reformism with a militant veneer. It seems that SEIU leadership recognizes in Ty’s campaign a similar approach and made the calculation that a break with the DFL here would help solidify the hegemony of this kind of politics over community, labor and social activists in Minneapolis.”

As my analysis above lays out, the people identified in the first paragraph are the same people maligned in the second. It's not that there are malicious reformists attempting to subvert radical movements from above through electioneering, it's that most of the movements in the city in the current moment are reformist movements interested in electioneering and the veneer of militancy that they wear brings radicals to believe they're something that they're not. The specifics of the polemic aside, the critique is shared all around the far left by comrades who see electoral campaigns as distractions from the real work, what M1 calls the “main lesson” of the SA campaign being “[h]ow to participate in this unjust system.”

I think though that this traditional anarchist and ultraleft position on elections has the bad fortune of being simultaneously right and wrong. That is to say, the position is correct analytically but incorrect strategically. Yes, running elections is a distraction from radical organizing amongst the working class and teaches people that politicians can save them from their problems. That's true. The first part of the critique has maybe more to it, but arguing that the idea of left electoralism will teach people to be dependent on left politicians serves no purpose.

In a country where we have never had an electoral socialist movement which came anywhere near the reigns of the state, and in which the rules of electioneering have been set by two major capitalist parties for its entire existence, the “threat” that electoralism poses is a false one. There's simply no way, under the current system of gerrymandering, machine politics, and campaign finance rules, for socialists to constitute a serious threat to the capitalist political parties on a wide scale. Ward 9 in Minneapolis is probably the most left ward in the city and certainly the one with the highest density of
left activists and organizers per capita. The whole country, indeed the whole city, is not Ward 9. And even there, the campaign lost.

We're living in a fantastically interesting moment of capitalist political power in this country, where the Republican Party, besieged by demographic changes, is rewriting laws in states and in Washington to make sure that they hold their grip on power after they have become truly unrepresentative of the people they claim to govern. The Democratic Party, ascendent demographically if not politically, has its opponent on the ropes but cannot figure out how to land the knockout blow. In this moment, with the capitalist political parties figuring out how to continue their game in a situation that is rapidly changing, there is definitely going to be a left flank that opens on the Democrats side and which allows for people, some socialists and others "progressives" to exist and even to win elections. Indeed SA's campaign in Seattle is achieving a lot of press because of their success in a city-wide race.

But this attention remains, on the long term, insignificant. The realignment of the capitalist political class and its current internal crises, will not lead to a reconfiguring of how electoral politics works at a fundamental level because these dynamics are centuries-old juridical frameworks of U.S. politics. The only thing that could possibly open up electoralism as a viable, widely-spread avenue for the far left in the U.S. would be a revolution of some mixed-class type. 300 years of capitalist legal control with no widespread electoral opposition have solidified a system under which left electoralism cannot win. The only thing that has terrified the capitalist class and their lackies in government in this country's history has been mass, widespread uprisings of working people, and before them, slaves. Left electoralism has never challenged U.S. capitalism in a meaningful way even when millions of people self-consciously saw themselves as anti-capitalist radicals, why would it suddenly do so now, over a hundred years since socialism's highest electoral turn out of 6% for Eugene Debs in 1912's presidential election? (And one hundred years through which the two major parties have used even more sophisticated maneuvers to disenfranchise working people.)

Urging people to fear and oppose the specter of an electoral turn of the left in this country is simply not worth one's time. Furthermore, it invites reformist forces to marginalize and dismiss anti-electoral radicals as out of touch with reality. Of course, it is those selfsame reformist forces who delude themselves by thinking that despite the international failure of the Second International, Eurocommunism, and more recently Bolivarianism (in its varied forms) to bring about anything resembling a cooperative commonwealth of labor, they will somehow do things differently. The far left should heed the lessons of the Socialist Party, forerunners of SA and various political party's sojourns into electoralism. The party never again regained the strength it had after it forced the IWW and other syndicalist and direct actionist forces out of the party and lost much of its electoral strength as a result. The lesson for radicals should be clear: the choice between electoralist utopianism and actionist puritanism is a false one and obscures more than it clarifies. In a moment where some of the most militant forces are the most conservative and bureaucratic on the left, the idea that who our allies and opponents are can be seen clearly through which field of action they mythologize most is difficult to maintain. The question should be what tactics, strategies, and organizational methods move our class closer to a communist future and how can we work towards those ends? It's not that electoralism is wrong, though it is, it's that its unimportant.

Reply to Socialism in Minneapolis

By Kdog
Dec 8 2013 06:57

Thanks for this, John. I think that it is good for comrades to grapple with these developments (SA's electoral success) and for conversation and debate to continue. I support the First of May statement from early November that is quoted (and criticized) here but not linked to. It can be found here: http://m1aa.org/?p=797

As for the particulars of your piece - while I disagreed with several of the ancillary arguments (and some of the tone), I want to concentrate on the central argument as I understand it (in a strictly personal capacity).

"Thinking about elections" asserts:
- Electoralism is "a False Dilemma"
- "arguing that the idea of left electoralism will teach people to be dependent on left politicians serves no purpose."
- the anarchist position is "incorrect strategically"
- "Urging people to fear and oppose . . . an electoral turn . . . is simply not worth one's time. Furthermore, it invites reformist forces to marginalize and dismiss anti-electoral radicals as out of touch with reality."
- The lesson for radicals should be clear: the choice between electoralist utopianism and actionist puritanism is a false one and obscures more than it clarifies."
- "the idea that . . . allies and opponents . . . can be seen clearly through which field of action they mythologize most is difficult to maintain."

The thrust of all this seems clear enough, even with the head scratching punchline: "It's not that electoralism is wrong, though it is, it's that its unimportant."

Unimportant enough to craft a couple thousand word blog post on!

This argument is full of contradictions and reversals but mainly it is saying don't criticize Left electoralism, that to do so is purist and will be used to marginalize us, instead we should continue to discuss how to relate to these electoral projects assuming they will continue (while striking an unimpressed pose).

To the extent that this is a coherent argument, it is that anarchists, wobblies, direct actionists should stand aside and say nothing (even if we are correct) about this strategy.

This is very bad advice, I'm afraid. Lets leave aside the "traditional anarchist and ultraleft position" around elections, and concentrate on our actual lived experience over the last few years.

First there was the Obama electoral phenomonon which managed to corral millions of oppressed people into "hope" and "change we can believe in" through a new face on the U.S Empire. This included many folks who are likely to be the base for any possible revolutionary movement in the U.S. Is it really possible that revolutionary militants could simultaneously also have hope in change coming from/thru the regime?

Second was the really illustrative example of Wisconsin, where the momentum of events, the apparent lack of an "official" solution, and the efforts of a small group of revolutionary activists and trade-union militants put the call/concept of a General Strike on the agenda for the first time in decades. Eventually this was swamped and diverted into the Recall Walker campaign. What is so important about this example is that the IWW mainly responded to the Recall in the way that you advocate - by doing nothing. We sort of hoped the question of recall vs general strike could be finessed - that they weren't necessarily opposed.

But in fact it was the Recall that the Business Unions and Democrats used to rally working people back into avenues that they controlled and that were within the framework (if out of the ordinary) of capitalist "democracy". In retrospect what was needed was an opposite attitude of the one you advocate. We needed to sharply counterpose the General Strike to the Recall effort, and in doing so point out the ways in which each represented the kind of society being fought over. This wasn't all that was needed in order to pull off a General Strike - far from it. But to even keep the General Strike concept alive as living proposal for agit-prop - we needed to take on the Recall - not treat it as unimportant.

Finally, lets look at the way that Occupy Homes and the Ty Moore campaign treated a police raid on one of the key defended homes on the morning of the election. Frantic texts, emails, and facebook posts went out from organizers and campaigners that this raid represented an attack on . . . the TY MOORE CAMPAIGN! Electoralism obscured reality, so that a foreclosed home in a working-class community - supposedly the center-piece of Ty's campaign, became secondary
to that campaign itself. In fact, the far more likely scenario is that police timed the raid in order to take advantage of the diversion of time and energy towards the get-out-the-vote efforts.

My Closing argument:
- Electoralism presents a real problem that we cannot wish away.
- Opposing Electoral strategies is not being "purist", but practical. - In order to defend anti-sytem strategies of direct action and direct democracy it will be necessary to take on other strategies being presented by the authoritarians and reformists.
- While our arguments will be criticized as unrealistic (as will our anti-capitalism), they are necessary to defend and clarify our decision to prioritize organizing along revolutionary, direct action and directly democratic lines.

Solidarity,

K.
First of May Anarchist Alliance
m1aa@riseup.net
P.O. Box 15455 Detroit MI 48215
Facebook: First of May Anarchist Alliance -
https://www.facebook.com/1MayAA