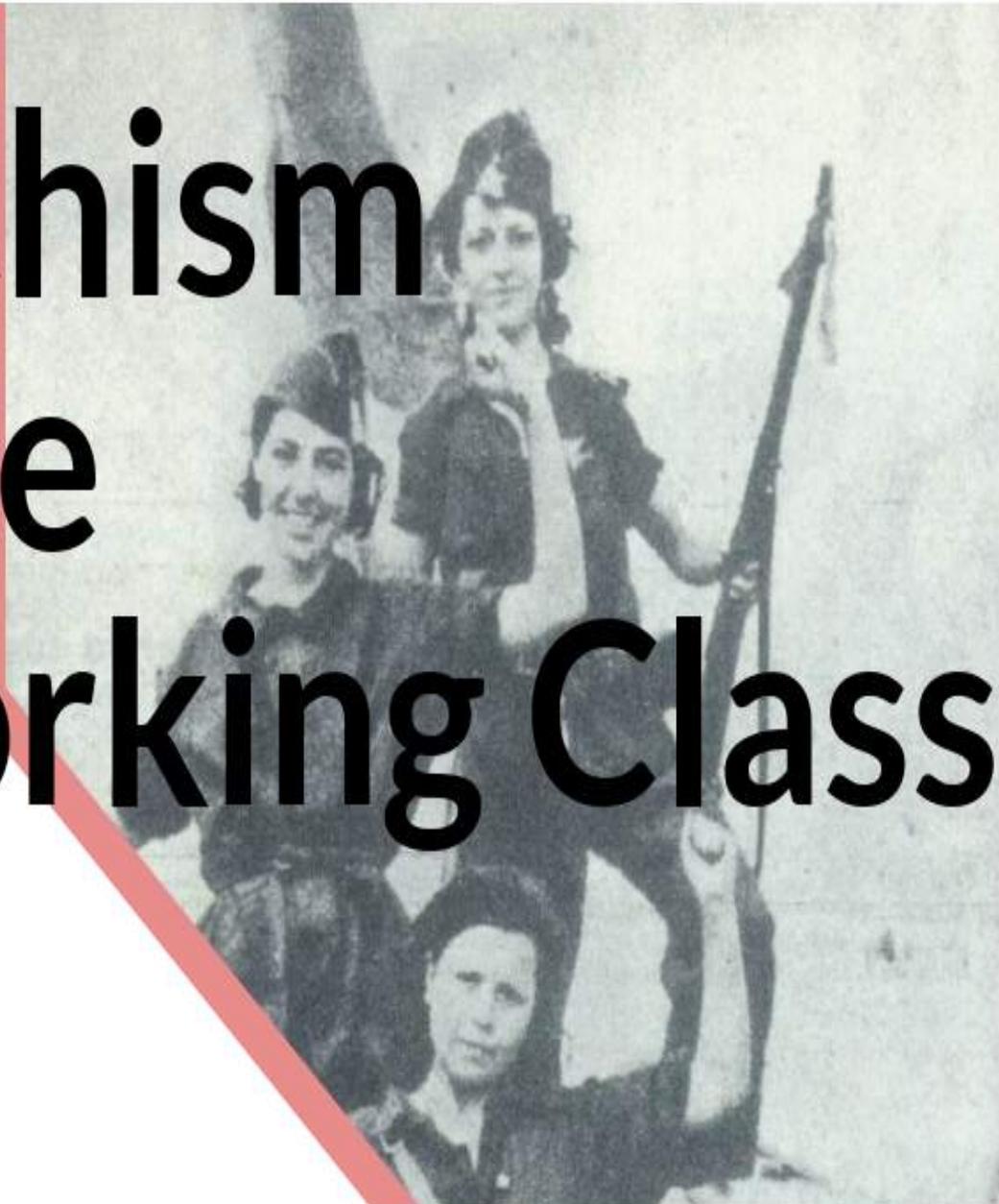


*Dispatches from the
First of May Anarchist Alliance*

Anarchism of the Working Class



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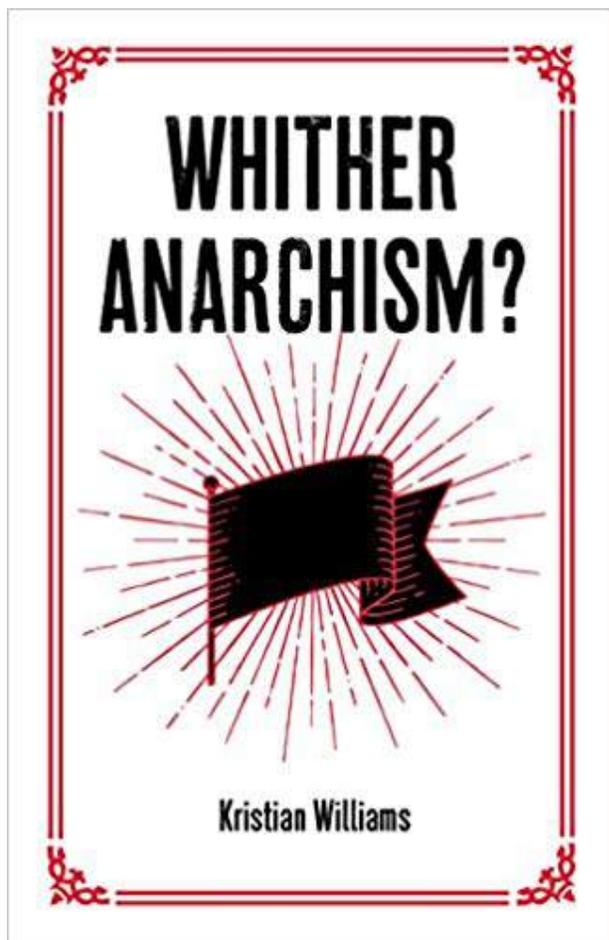
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An Anarchism of the Working-Class: A Review of 'Whither Anarchism?'

by Miriam Pickens, M1 Detroit



I appreciate Kristian Williams' pamphlet, both the thought put into it and the challenge it represents. I learned a lot from its history, and in particular gained insight into the behavior of anarchists I meet today. Williams traces some practices of contemporary US anarchism back to pacifism, looking at how contemporary anarchists unthinkingly accept much of that philosophy. In my view, that influence led to the movement prioritizing providing comfort to its participants, rather than organizing to change the circumstances that led to the discomfort they feel with society in the first place. This emphasis accepts the inevitability of capitalism and is therefore a strategy to live within its parameters. But I don't think capitalism will allow us these spaces. Instead, it has to be overthrown and not allowed to come back.

Williams' pamphlet is made up of three essays: "My Anarchism," "Whither Anarchism?" and "Conclusion: Revolutions, Scientific and Otherwise."

In Williams' first essay, "My Anarchism," he shares his belief that *"the core of anarchism [is] to be captured in the proposition that decisions must be made by those most affected by them."* He further states that *"that belief, in turn, relies on a pair of values, those of freedom and equality."* He develops his understanding of these values by defining equality as meaning *"that we are all equally human, and equally entitled to the respect and consideration worthy of a human being."* (3-4)

He stresses that “[B]y freedom I mean simply that people can live their lives without interference, arranging their affairs according to their own best judgment – and . . . enjoy practical opportunities to widen the scope of their possible activities.” (4-5)

These are the values Williams cites as the basis of the society he wants. I agree with these values. I understand that there has never been a society that embodies these ideals, so I see them as something to strive and to fight for. I see them as values that our current system, world capitalism, gives lip-service to, but defines in a way that does not value people as equals and that limits our freedoms so that we cannot even conceive of freedom in the same way we would if we were free. That is, our understandings and consciousness are also determined and limited by the system we live within, something Williams understands. We should know that we can grow and develop beyond our current understanding of what is possible.

The attainment of these ideals is also collective. We not only cannot gain them as individuals, we cannot experience them individually. The denial of these rights is systemic and collective. Therefore, our fight for them must also be system-wide and collective.

Williams centers the relationship that control of resources has to power by stating that

“The accumulation of resources brings with it a large measure of power, and to the degree that this power is accepted as legitimate, authority as well. Likewise, the accumulation of power grants one the ability to acquire and control additional resources. Sometimes this power is used to directly coerce individual people, but more routinely its application is impersonal, establishing policies and making choices which shape the conditions under which we all must live.” He develops the impersonal and structural nature of capitalism by showing that *“even those at the very top often feel their decisions to be dictated by the internal logic of the system itself.”* (5)

Williams ties power and authority, the ability to give/take away freedom and equality, to the control of resources. I agree with this. It is why I think our fight has to center around the fight for material resources and to be centered within those who need the resources and are fighting for them. I call this the working class in its most inclusive definition. That is, not just people who have jobs, but also including the families and communities that are also without power, without capital, and who have resources withheld from them.

I do not think we have to limit our fights to these issues, however. In fact, I think we need to take on the entire social complexity that limits or diminishes us. But our basic struggle is for resources: land, food, shelter, clean air and water, public space, time, along with the respect and dignity due us as human beings. Williams breaks down the arguments of the inevitability of the way things are by

separating organization from hierarchy. “[I]f society is to survive there must be some means of organization, but our organizations need not be hierarchical and need not be driven by the profit motive.” (6)

Williams spends quite a bit of time laying out his vision of how a new society might be organized: “as a decentralized network of democratically-run institutions and voluntary associations.” He sees the need for flexibility by stating that “there may yet be some sorts of activities most effectively or efficiently pursued by creating a single central clearing house, or adopting a level of standardization, or appointing a steering committee. Leadership, supervision, and even coercive authority may sometimes still be necessary. The important thing is that any such position, or the exercise of such power, would need to be understood as requiring at every stage a kind of justification.” His vision clearly states that “the democratization of both power and resources would spell an end to capitalism and class society. So too would it mean an end to the state . . . and also demand of us all that we eliminate any stratification based on race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, ancestry, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, or any other prejudicial or extraneous consideration.”(6-7)

What Williams does not say is that **the active fight for revolution, for a violent overthrow of the capitalist system, is what would provide the basis for the type of society he outlines. A new society does not just result, nor does democratization happen, without a fight. It is in the course of this struggle that change occurs, both in the minds of the people doing the struggling and in the concrete circumstances of their lives.**

Reading *Whither Anarchism?*, I appreciate the way Williams unmasks the subtleties of how we are impacted by the society we live in. For instance, I came of age politically in the 1960s and 70s, when a mass movement was alive in our cities and streets, everyday working-class people were reading, discussing, and thinking about the big issues of the state, revolution, and the role of organization. My early development as a Jewish-Communist child in 1950s Compton, California led me to value the organization and collective activity of working-class people. I saw multiracial groups challenging both the large and small expressions of oppression and power. I was a part of picket lines, demonstrations large and small, and cultural gatherings that were multiracial, of all ages, and from all parts of the world. We were united in our opposition to “the system,” although my childish understanding was far from complex or nuanced.

My activity inside Marxist organizations (Independent Socialist Clubs, International Socialists, Revolutionary Socialist League) and my thirty years inside a Detroit auto factory put me in the middle of a movement that sought to understand and challenge power.

We incorporated insights gained from the Black freedom struggle, feminism, the emerging gay movements, and the intersectionality of the Black women's movement, and used them to broaden and deepen our ideas of "the working class," so that we spoke of the working class as specifically not only white men, but of all races, all genders, and all orientations. We began to develop understandings of how skilled workers and their families were given more middle-class opportunities, better housing and education, than those workers on the bottom. We saw how demands for "respectability" were used to control and contain our movements and to divide our class. We focused our attention on the lowest paid workers, with the idea that if they get their needs met, all the rest would too.

Williams says that *"our habits of difference and entitlement may rule us more subtly and thus more firmly, and may prove the greater obstacle to our own liberation. Equality, in other words, must be alive in our minds as a positive ideal. It is not merely the absence of inequality or subordination. It requires a new sociability, perhaps a new subjectivity, formed both within and between us as we work together to re-order society and discover new ways of relating – as we, in short, learn both to exercise and to respect freedom."* (7)

This does not happen in a vacuum, nor simply because we want it to though. These power relations are understood and overturned in the course of struggling together for common goals, where the exercise of power between people gets in the way and limits our struggles. **We are forced to break out of old habits, because they hold us back. It is this understanding that girds us to fight for everyone's freedom and equality, not just because it is our values, but because our own freedom and equality, our chance to survive, develop and grow, depends upon it.**

In some ways, Williams recognizes this:

"For as social barriers fall, as the stigma of inequality fades, our ability to relate to one another improves, becomes more natural, less fraught. We all profit from the contact with a wider array of perspectives, experiences, insights. The creation of this sort of society, or anything like it, would require a kind of revolution, and that is true no matter what means are used to bring it about. For revolution denotes the extent of social change, not the method for achieving it. Progress will come erratically, unevenly, and not according to anyone's timetable. Likely it will not even look like a revolution as it unfolds, but as a series of crises, small miracles, wrenching compromises, painful defeats, stupid missteps, heroic sacrifices, frustrating reversals, bold experiments, regrettable excesses, ridiculous half-measures, reckless gambles, and righteous refusals – until finally, slowly, the overall shape of the new society begins to emerge, and the direction of events becomes clear." (10)

Williams' view of revolution here seems unreal to me, as if we live in a vacuum. Where is the ruling class, with all its police and armies, in this scenario? What are they doing while we are building our new society? They are attacking us, dividing us, killing us. They are fighting our revolutionary movement with all the resources available to them! If we are not prepared to meet their violence with all the resources at our command – our organization, unity, our vision, along with a practical material struggle – we will certainly lose. Our revolution is a form of self-defense. We must withhold the labor and resources they take from us. We must organize strategically and tactically to fight them: for resources, including land, territory, food, water, what we need to survive. Do not think this will not be violent. On their part, willful violence, as we have seen our whole lives, taken out on individuals as police murders, on communities as the bombing of the MOVE organization in Philadelphia showed, on the taking of entire countries and land. On our part, an armed defense of ourselves, our families, our communities, our neighborhoods, our land, our revolution. Power is never given away. It must be taken. **This is not a gradual unfolding, this is a wrenching away, a destruction of the state apparatus, a burning of prisons and records of debt. The existing power must be destroyed root and branch before we can gradually build anything.** When we encourage people to join our fight and do not prepare for this, we are being negligent and dishonest. This is an either-or situation. We cannot have a free society as long as capitalism continues to exist.

One of the main lessons of the Russian Revolution of 1917 is that seizing state power is not enough. They ended up with capitalism controlled by the state in the name of “the worker’s state.” Despite its names and propaganda, it remained capitalist, and unfree. Power, hierarchical relations, must be destroyed, not taken over or redirected or given to someone else. Our attempts will be violently resisted, and we must be prepared.

My experience with Marxists is that they were always analyzing capitalism, but that anarchists almost never had discussions about the economy, its direction, and how it affects the ways we need to focus our struggles. Marxists, however, tend to fit what they see into predetermined boxes and that almost always leads them to support the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie. **As anarchists we are trying to promote a view that our enemy is the entire capitalist class, both its reactionary and its reformist elements, including its state capitalist manifestations, like the former Soviet Union.** In fact, it is the reformist element we need to watch out for in particular ways, as it is always trying to rope us in to support of its section of the ruling class. At this point in time, the reactionary section is letting loose and is enabling the organization and development of a mass fascist base. We need a theory that can put us in opposition to both sections and strategies of the capitalist class, reformist and reactionary.

I began to identify as an anarchist after meeting anarchists during the 2011 Occupy movement. I agreed with how their expressions of antiauthoritarianism resonated within me and how they talked about not just seizing state power, but doing away with the state, and with hierarchy and power relations as a whole. I joined First of May Anarchist Alliance (M1) as an intentional revolutionary group and through that, the Direct Action Committee of Occupy. We focused our energies on an ongoing struggle in Detroit to keep people in their homes. We used direct action tactics such as blocking streets with dumpsters and laying down in the doorways of banks. We also used social media and, of most importance, direct democratic forms of organization and participation. We fought hard against elitists and saviors, many nonprofits and Democratic Party representatives, who wanted to take leadership of our movement. We insisted that no one is coming to save us and that it was the people affected who must decide the best ways forward. We argued that direct democratic meetings with open participation was the best way to ensure that people affected could voice their concerns and determine their course of action. It was the homeowners losing their homes, their friends, family and communities who came out to support and defend our fight. Detroit Eviction Defense exists today as a result of that effort. Not just anarchists, of course. Union people, social democrats, Marxists, radicals and liberals, all ages, races, and genders came together to fight for material needs: housing. The neoliberal plan for Detroit has included turning homeowners into tenants. We fight this.

Williams recognizes that his vision of a new society is “*related to how the new society is to be brought about. How can it be defended and sustain itself? How are disputes to be settled? How do we prevent new tyrannies from arising?*” I think we have to say that we don’t have answers to these questions. And I agree with Williams that “*to translate our ideals into reality requires a strategy. It will not be enough to rely on our ethical sense and our desire for freedom.*” (11-12) The need for a strategy to prevent the reemergence of capitalism is precisely why a revolutionary anarchist organization is necessary. To set out from the beginning our commitment to going all the way to defeat capitalism. We must have confidence that in the course of struggle, people will learn and develop skills that will enable them to define a new way of living that promotes a new culture.



In his second essay, “Whither Anarchism?,” Williams focuses on the history of anarchism in the United States in the 20th century, observing that *“once a mass movement based mainly in working-class immigrant communities is now an archipelago of subcultural scenes inhabited largely by disaffected young people from the declining middle class.”* (13) Williams uses Andrew Cornell’s *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* and Spencer Sunshine’s dissertation, “Post-1960 U.S. Anarchism and Social Theory,” as guides to his discussion of how this change occurred.

Williams points out that *“American anarchism . . . saw itself as a movement of the working class, fighting for the liberation of humanity from capitalism and the state, and it presented the labor union as the means by which workers could both overturn capitalism and organize the future society.”* He stresses that the Wobblies, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), were the primary organization pushing this agenda in the early 20th century, *“But the Red Scare of 1917-1920 all but destroyed the IWW, and with it the movement.”* What this resulted in was

“What remained of syndicalism was occupied primarily with legal defense, and other anarchists came to focus more on education and creating counter institutions, rather than mass organizing. Hence, anarchists were on the sidelines during the upheavals of the 1930s. Then, during the Second World War, the remaining movement split over the question of militarism, with pacifism becoming the dominant strain. At the same time, increasingly much of anarchist activity was in the cultural sphere, and the movement became wedded to the emerging counterculture.”

All of this resulted in the type of anarchism all-too-familiar today, with, as Williams quotes Andy Cornell observing *“[R]eadings, performances, and exclusive parties (having) moved to the center of anarchist praxis.”* (14) Williams concludes by lamenting that *“Anarchists deserted the class war at precisely the moment that the largest number of workers were clamoring to enlist in it.”*(15)



This “desertion of the class war” was also the result of immigrants, primarily seeking to be identified as “white,” establishing themselves on the upper levels of the working class as skilled workers and in the lower rungs of the middle class, as educated professionals. This represented an acceptance of capitalism and a value system that put themselves above, and different from, other workers. **The failure to demand that the *whole* class move forward is an acceptance of the capitalist program of divide and rule, giving white workers benefits and securities not allowed people of color who were also working class.** Racism, intertwined with the capitalist system, allowed the ruling class to co-opt sections of the working class without protest by anarchists. The communists also accepted many ruling class divisions and elitist practices, but they fought racism and valued that fight, even while some of their pro-

capitalist policies misled many struggles, primarily by supporting pro-capitalist forces inside the movement (popular front support for politicians) and limiting the struggle of the workers themselves (no strike pledges during WW2).

It was easier for the immigrant communities to fight for assimilation and cultural ease than to maintain a struggle and identification with the entire working class, made up of many different races and ethnicities. They gave up on their “all or none” motto, which led to their defeat.

Unfortunately, Williams keeps his analysis to the US. As a result, he misses out on one of the greatest bodies of anarchist work, the Spanish Civil War. Here, in the crucible of struggle, we can learn from the situations faced by anarchists, what might work again, and what are now obvious failings and mistakes. It is in struggle that we learn. We can and should theorize, discuss, write. But to remove this process from the struggle itself and from the people doing the actual work, is to miss the point of theory as well as to miss the opportunity to test our theories in the real world.

Williams takes issue with the anarchist emphasis on prefiguration, which he identifies originating with the influence of pacifism, which “*locked the anarchist movement in a particular ‘prefigurative’ orientation.*”(15) Williams shows how this orientation has

limited our movement, resulting in an attempt *”to compensate for our underdeveloped politics with an overdeveloped moralism, and anarchists (becoming) preoccupied with the minutiae of individual choice rather than organizing collective action.”*(16)

The heart of prefiguration, in my mind, is that we can act as if we are free and thereby become free. But Williams argues that:

“Freedom cannot simply be chosen, it must be created. Were we capable of behaving as we would in a society without capitalism and the state, then there would be no need to abolish either. Instead, it is only possible to act as free and equal beings under conditions of freedom and equality; we cannot create those conditions simply by pretending they exist.” He therefore argues that an emphasis on prefiguration “turns our attention away from the structural features of our society and toward the moral character of individuals within the movement.” (16)

I agree with Williams. The anarchist scene is very much as he describes it, and *“not on the whole a place where sensible people would want to live.”*(16) There is also almost a fear of reaching out to working class communities – a desire to remain on the other side of the professional desk – a willingness to do service for, but a reluctance to organize with, working class communities, as equals in our common struggle. This is defended as “being allies” or as “letting the ones affected lead” or “whites can only support people of color, not put out counter ideas.” This is an approach that guarantees the separation of the class, because it absolves one section (white) of taking responsibility for the whole class. It also results in tokenizing people of color, and allows for a cult of celebrity, with people being accepted and promoted as “leaders” without a constructive dialogue and debate. We counterpose a leadership of ideas so that leadership and direction become collective endeavors.

Williams describes the movement of the 1970s by highlighting the radical pacifist Movement for a New Society, noting its activity in anti-war, environmental, and anti-nuclear work, brought *“an explicitly anti-racist, feminist, class-conscious perspective.”* But, he observes,

“After a few decades of pacifist-anarchist cross-pollination. . .we are left with the structure and culture of the pacifist movement without its commitment to nonviolence . . . There is an ethos common to all surviving brands of anarchism . . . It consists of a prefigurative insistence on modeling in our lives and our communities the values and practices of the society we wish to create; a ritualized emphasis on ‘direct action’ tactics . . . a strong affinity for . . . a specific subculture or counterculture, and a tendency to view ourselves as outside of and apart from society as a whole.” (17-18)

While this all may be true, this discussion excludes Black anarchists, who cut their teeth in the Black freedom movement, women and gay anarchists who fought for their right to be open and self-defined, Latinx anarchists who fought for their right to stolen land, etc. all within movements of that same period – the 1970s—that are largely ignored by white anarchists. So who gets to call themselves an anarchist and claim traditions?

Williams continues, using Sunshine’s dissertation, to examine the course of anarchist thought, with Sunshine complaining that: *“Anarchist theory has become detached from its foundations in Classical Anarchism and instead has increasingly relied on ideas borrowed from other traditions, re-oriented toward anti-state conclusions. Anarchists fostered cooperation with other radicals, and even liberals, where it was possible to find common ground.”* This ran parallel with the phenomenon of action taking “precedence over ideology.” Williams sees all this resulting in this *“formalist anarchism-as-practice-not-theory approach (reaching) its logical conclusion in the 2011 Occupy movement. There the focus on how activists do things completely eclipsed any consideration of what they were doing or why . . . with no coherent strategy or even agreed-upon aims.”* (20-21)

After a discussion of the larger changes within anarchism and the world, Williams notes that *“Anarchists stopped thinking of themselves as a social force potentially capable of organizing millions of people, destroying the existing power structure, and reconstituting society. The anarchist vision shrank, from the One Big Union and the General Strike, to the affinity group and the poetry reading.”*(23)

Despite all this, Williams looks to the future. He believes *“current attempts to create broad, public, formal anarchist organizations,”* such as the Black Rose Anarchist Federation/Federación Anarquista Rosa Negra, and the May First Anarchist Alliance, are a *“hopeful sign,”* because they *“represent efforts to raise anarchism up from the underground, to break it out of its subcultural confines, and to engage again with the public at large without the mediating filter of the black mask.”* While encouraged by the formation and work of these organizations, he cautions that, *“while new organizations may be needed, they are clearly not all that is needed. For they will inevitably have to answer in practice the exact questions that anarchism has been evading with its peculiarly patchwork approach to theory. Capitalism, the state, social stratification, and the left have all changed – and both our theories and our movements need to address themselves to those changes.”* (24-25)

For this task, Williams thinks the *“place any new anarchist theory should start is with re-centering the old ideals of freedom and equality.”* (25) He recognizes that *“the very attempt at reformulation would demand a fundamental shift in anarchism as it is presently conceived, as essentially a philosophy of refusal. The negative formulation of anarchism is responsible for a lot of our*

present theoretical underdevelopment.” (26) Williams concludes his second essay with the warning that *“Without substantive changes within anarchism, it will never produce another revolution, much less a new society.”*(32)

In his final essay, *“Conclusion: Revolutions, Scientific and Otherwise,”* Williams outlines the scientific method of Thomas Kuhn, which takes account of evidence and incorporates anomalies into a coherent system. In contrast to the method of Kuhn, Williams writes, anarchists are prone to

“simply ignoring the evidence that does not fit.”(33)*He describes our current movement as having “entered a phase that Kuhn did not describe, in which one paradigm has collapsed, but no new paradigm has replaced it. All that remains are propositions and platitudes, lacking any unifying structure, common premises, shared vocabulary, or agreed-upon methodology. What once promised to become a coherent philosophy capable of inspiring individuals, guiding a broad movement, and restructuring society, has become instead a collection of unsorted half-remembered, often borrowed axioms and arcane cultural practices delineating a self-limiting in-group.”*(33-35)*Williams’ main point is “that we must reinvigorate our tradition, beginning with a careful and demanding examination of our own premises.”*(35)

Williams thinks that *“the revolution in anarchist thought will emerge, if at all, from a loose association of politically engaged scholars in sustained dialogue, building on one another’s theories, challenging each other’s ideas, considering questions and addressing problems that sometimes overlap and sometimes dovetail.”* To do this, *“what we need is an intellectual community, joined together not by points of common doctrine, but by a shared commitment to developing and refining our thinking.”*(36) But this is

“almost the opposite of the political culture that we inhabit. The culture that we actually have is one characterized by norms borrowed from fundamentalism: the tendency to assume conclusions at the outset, to disregard contrary evidence, to refuse to consider competing views, to cast all those who disagree as mortal enemies, to transmute every issue into a test of virtue, to ignore all nuance and flatten all complexity and deny even the possibility of doubt. This approach is limiting in innumerable ways. It prevents us from hearing each other, from taking in new information, from challenging ourselves, from learning. We can still cast aspersions, dismissively sneer, talk past one another, or prejudge arguments without considering them. But we have lost the ability to properly disagree. Nearly every political discussion begins and ends as an exercise in cementing or policing group loyalties.”(36)

Williams continues, *“It is not enough to develop the ideas, we need also to develop the thinkers who are ready for the ideas . . . We have to create the structures that will enable us to re-learn the necessary intellectual skills and to circulate, scrutinize, and refine our*

theories about the world . . . such intellectual work is part of how political agency is formed, common interests discovered, and solidarity built.” (37)

Williams ends by asserting that *“if anarchism is to thrive, either as a political force or as a body of thought, we will first need to take on the arduous task of creating the circumstances under which honesty is possible, and decency expected, and critical thinking part of the common work of the movement.” (40)*

I like that Williams is advocating for the opening of discussion, and recentring our primary values, and defining them. We are for freedom; we mean this to be for all people, without exception. We are for equality as human beings. Each of us deserves respect, to be treated fairly. We are against authoritarianism: bosses, masters, supervisors. None of this is possible under capitalism; we can attempt to treat each other rightly, but there are many structural indignities and unfairness, including the ones we have internalized.

But I part with Williams in that I don't think we can leave this intellectual work only to “scholars,” unless we are clearly stating that working-class people can be included in this category of intellectuals and thinkers. Our society has limited this category of thinkers to the middle class and has not allowed working class people the time, energy or support to fully participate. As a result, the people most affected are not the ones whose ideas are accepted. Middle-class scholars are eager to substitute themselves for the working class. I am not against academics and those who make their livelihood within the realm of learning and teaching. However, I do think they need to be clear on the class basis from which they see the world. Theory will be developed by discussion, as Williams outlines, but who is doing this theorizing? If it is not working-class people engaged in working class struggle, it remains the province of an elitist middle class seeking, as always, to control, speak for, represent, and substitute themselves for the working class.

A leadership of ideas, rather than a leadership of cult celebrities, can cut through a lot of the pretension of the current anarchist movement, as described so aptly by Williams. However, **we need people who are committed to organizing for these ideas,**



taking responsibility within the movements of which we are a part.

In fact, this is a part of how we test our ideas against reality, refining our understanding of splits and differences within the capitalist class, evaluating which existing pressure points are to our advantage, etc.

Because of racism and ongoing segregation, white anarchists in the US often don't look at people of color. They talk about themselves and each other as if their experience is universal. People of color, in turn, are themselves tokenized and their experiences discounted. This has led to a segregation of the movement which will doom us to defeat if it is not corrected.

Fascists in the US include the Klan. They have terrorized African Americans through mob action, lynching, rape, murder, stealing businesses and homes, running them out of public space, with calling the police on them only being the current iteration. Yet when anarchists come out against fascists, as Antifa, they don't even talk about this history. They talk about Nazi Germany and Europe. When Mark Bray wrote *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, he didn't say anything about people who fought the Klan. He presented a very Eurocentric view of fascism. Why don't we identify fascism in this country and fight it? Why don't we join with African Americans who are fighting the Klan, and the police, and develop an understanding that this is the same struggle?

A final point of difference I have with Williams is that I don't think revolution is a slow chipping away at power. **I think a revolutionary upsurge must take power away from the bourgeoisie, and smash that power, do away with it: root and branch.** This is violent, and it must go all the way. Any small hesitation will allow the reaction to overpower our forces and turn back our attempts to take power. History shows us, from the days of Versailles, that the streets will run with our blood if we neglect this.

Anarchism needs to be pulled back to its working-class roots, to its involvement in material struggles, to its direct condemnation of all attacks on the entire, international working class and all of its most vulnerable sections. Capitalism must be identified as the systemic cause of the violence, oppression, lack of freedom and equality experienced by all people. When this system is abolished, by the direct action of the working class of the world, we will have begun to lay a basis for true freedom and a possibility of living our lives as we freely choose.

Born in 1950 to a Jewish Communist family, Miriam grew up in Compton, California. She was active in the movements for civil rights, against the Vietnam war, and in support of the Black Panthers and all the various efforts to develop a revolutionary alternative to the system. She started working at General Motors in 1976 in Detroit, and was active inside the plant, as part of the Revolutionary Autoworker caucus and as an active member of UAW Local 909. She retired in 2007, but joined the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, in particular the Direct Action Group, where she first met anarchists, joining the First of May Anarchist Alliance in 2012. Her main activity now, in addition to May First, is with the Detroit Eviction Defense group and with the Solidarity and Defense organization.

What Makes a Work Place?

by Juicy Parsons, M1 Minnesota

Factory committees, shop floors, collective bargaining, contracts. What do those words mean to you? Well, it depends on your life experience, of course. To me and other workers in my industry, those words have been associated with folks who have “real jobs.” You see, even though I work a real job in a real industry, all industries are not treated equally.

I work in service industry. Waitress, server, barmaid, it doesn't matter. In the US, service industry has been set entirely apart from other industries because some of its workers' income is financially propped up by gratuity, which is outside of the scope of payroll income. This has created legislative gaps, exclusion, infighting, and an overall class structure within service industry that is extremely hard to topple. I've been in service industry since I was 15 years old (I'm 31 now, officially half of my life). I've only ever worked in one other industry for one year doing print production, and I've been trying to leave service industry for years now. I'm also like so many other service industry employees, in that I'm relatively uneducated, have little other job experience, and have developed chronic substance abuse and addiction issues.

This industry is seriously precarious because of the way it's been deregulated and separated from traditional workplaces. Sure, there are middle and upper class service industry members that make upwards of \$30/hr, but that is a small minority of workers, who have the social capital and professionalism to propel them that far. A large section of this industry are members of society that have in many ways been declassed- felons, formerly incarcerated, drug addicted, undocumented immigrants, and sex workers all find meaningful work in my industry. I have been working alongside these people my entire life. **What goes**

unchallenged in this work culture is the lack of healthcare and other benefits, and working for cash, often times entirely “under the table”, which is what allows people with felony convictions and without citizenship documents an opportunity to make a living, but still at the hands of bosses' discretion and exploitation.





To be clear, as a revolutionary, I'm proud that all people can find work here. However, not understanding the nature of our work is what keeps us ignored, uninvited, unprepared, or confused about our seat at the “workplace organizing” table.

Servers and bartenders especially are fed by the bosses this belief that we are our *own* bosses. The hierarchy of tipped employees creates a fallacious meritocracy. In service industry, those who stand to make the most money must conform to very rigid and colonial standards of professionalism- an idea of course prevalent in most industries. In service industry this is punctuated by the material conditions that less “professional” workers face. The term “last hired, first fired” is especially valid here with regards to black and poc service industry workers. That phrase doesn't exist in a vacuum, the whole US props itself up on European elite standards of “professionalism”. Those

who haven't mastered the rhetoric, skills, and appearance of a professional face chronic job loss, wage theft, exploitation, and very limited Federal support.

Enter the IWW. I first learned of the IWW when I was a visitor to Occupy (In Minnesota). The encampment was right near where I lived and on my way to and from my job at a downtown Minneapolis bar. I started seeing all the positive changes to society people wanted to make, and started getting more educated about the ruling class and capitalism. These would be my first interactions with serious union members, (despite having been a member of Food and Beverage Local something-or-another at the airport) and the first time I learned about the importance of unions. I still did not entirely understand, as I've only been in a union once before in a lineup of at least 12 different service industry jobs. **What I did learn about was the weapon of solidarity of the working class against the ruling class.** It was this level of solidarity that I started understanding, especially when “Occupy the Hood” popped up to address the concerns of black people living in the US. Seeing a few IWW members being a part of that conversation around our material disadvantages would stick with me.

I'm also an avid follower of hip-hop feminism, which spoke to feminisms necessary for the poorer, non-educated women and non-binary folks from the ghetto. It addressed concerns ignored largely by white and mainstream feminism, specifically around how society treats people who use sex as work, drug users, and incarcerated people. This fell in line with the life experience I had working in bars, where I valued all these people who I came into contact with. If I had a union of all the people I had worked with, it would be

a really colorful one, with lots of immigrants, chronic drug and alcohol users, low-level dealers, lots of women, sex workers of all genders, professional gamblers, students, and a few “working homeless.” (Working homeless is not a “new phenomenon” as some media outlets would have you believe, trust me.) Wouldn't it be amazing if there was one union that could contain us all??

After Occupy died off, I was reintroduced to the IWW while I was doing prison abolition work. It was in 2014 when I found out the IWW was organizing alongside prisoners, that I started reconnecting with old wobblies that I'd met before. I looked into the ideas of the One Big Union, and found that it was a union with an awesome history of “first”s and “only”s. The thought of a servers- and-bartenders-only union thoroughly disgusted me, as someone who grew up poor and black, the server/bartender class often times represented the “professional” face of the bosses and I've come to resent it. I always found more affinity with the back of the house, (cooks, dishwashers, etc) who dealt with similar issues like debt, unstable housing, long public commutes, and living in poorer neighborhoods than those you work in. The only union I'd want would be one that had everyone fighting together. When I learned about the difference between craft unions and the IWW I was interested. Then when someone pointed out to me that there were panhandlers and sex workers encouraged to organize with the IWW, I took out a red card, with the intent of also helping to start an African People's Caucus that could help other Black Wobblies develop their political consciousness. I thought this was the only union that had any chance of speaking to the entire working class.



Since joining, I've found that a LOT of people- most people, don't actually do workplace organizing in the IWW. (Burgerville and Stardust Family being very exciting developments) There are a few reasons for this, some that the union are certainly responsible for, but some external factors come into play. One of those factors is the changing nature of “the workplace.” In the last 15 years I've seen employment agencies turn into helpless computer labs, apprenticeships have disappeared, factories have closed and given way to part-time work. Black and other economically disadvantaged people are incarcerated at extreme rates. Not only through mass incarceration, complex systems of state supervision and post-carceral labor programs are changing the face of the traditional workplace. Unions are legislatively weak. There are large segments of black working class people in mainstream business unions, but this is no way necessarily translates into workers' power. Fight for 15 has been promising in developing black class consciousness, especially in fast

food, even with its wage-based limitations. It has been one of few union movements in a long time to speak to poorer segments of workers. These are people that rely on a multitude of low-wage unskilled part-time jobs to make a living, and that segment of the population is growing. Traditional workplaces are being uprooted by automation and alternative industries.

Historically, people in non-traditional workplaces have been excluded from most of the union movement, even amidst the reality that non-traditional workers and the unemployed are undeniably a part of the “working class”. What impressed me about the “One Big Union” model is that this could be a place for coordinating many special and excluded sectors of the working class. We're staring at a future where the working class, especially women and people of color are working part-time, online, domestic, freelance, and in underground economies. A lot of people who look just like me and come from similar neighborhoods make a living buying and selling goods (often times overstock or stolen) online and at flea markets. My longstanding challenge to the IWW is that they continue their historic legacy of opening up organizing efforts to the entire working class. This will take an exceptional level of understanding and consciousness about folks in the lower/lumpen classes.

A few cohesive organizing strategies will have to be developed to deal with the realities that ALL workers face. General Defense Committee work, for example, should absolutely be included in the IWW “workplace organizing” strategy. The reality of our time is that the working class is dealing with a tremendous amount of political violence and social destruction at work and at home. There are online freelancers, programmers, designers, and administrative workers who have to organize against the alt-right *and* bosses at work every day. I'll always remember my first Organizer Training 101-during the social mapping exercise I chuckled amusingly as I drew red lines connecting workers with managers who have supplied them with cocaine. My (mostly white, early Twenties) co-workers have been way more agitated around police brutality and Philando Castile than “traditional” workplace grievances. When I consider organizing with service industry workers, the most significant factor I think about is whether people's struggles with substance abuse or gambling will hinder their organizing, and how to combat this in a serious way.

As much as I'd like to conclude with a fairy-tale ending, it would be premature and unfounded. Various campaigns to include more segments of the “working class” have definitely been met with hostility. Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee is a huge example of how the IWW was able to overcome narrow “workerist” ideology. In fact, economists and workerists rear their heads every so often, claiming that the IWW should adhere to strict and frankly archaic forms of workplace organizing. My biggest concern with this surrounds who will be included and who will be excluded. Will the anti-capitalist “One Big Union” continue that legacy of serious organizing with “non-traditional” workers, or will these workers simply be tolerated for the sake of preserving radical politics on paper? To me it's up to the membership to decide. However, if we don't strategize and come up with innovative and clever ways to organize alongside the entire working class, the IWW will be stuck trying to organize on closed factory shop floors.

Shut it Down!

by Kdog, M1 Minnesota

Our workplace went out on strike Friday, June 1st. It was the second time in two weeks. Earlier that morning CWA union stewards and mobilizers gathered with (working) union officers in the cafeteria break room. We were anxious to strike again after months of daily workplace actions designed to show our determination to resist the concessions being demanded by the Company in contract negotiations with the Union.

At 12 Noon workers on four separate call center floors stood up and announced we were going on an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) strike for the rest of the day. The vast majority of workers filed out, including for the first time AT&T Technicians and workers in the Teleconference department. A loud and energetic picket line replaced the drudgery of answering calls and emails from AT&T's business customers. We were not the only place to strike. AT&T workers in Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Dayton OH, Muncie IN, Syracuse NY, and several other locations all went out. A week later members of the CWA struck for the day in Georgia. All of these locals are under 2 expired contracts between AT&T and the CWA – one for the old “Legacy T” AT&T (long-distance), and one for the Midwest – the old “Ameritech” area.



These strikes have been for one or two days only – around Local grievances and ULP's and not around the overall terms of a contract. The short strikes allow the Local unions to test their organization and morale without having their members face huge holes in their paychecks. In some areas the strikes are organized exclusively by the Local leadership, in others there is strong pressure from the ranks – in my workplace and probably in most of the other strikes, there was some combination of both. The International and District union leaders have taken a “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” approach to the strikes.

For legal reasons the bureaucracy does not want responsibility for Local grievance strikes, but they are not trying to stop them either.

Despite the blackout in the national and Union media, AT&T workers have been passing news and links to local stories about the strikes around. This ensures widespread knowledge of the strikes popping off and creating momentum around the awareness that we are part of something bigger than our own building or town. The eagerness of workers to go out on strike, and the willingness of the Unions to organize them or at least let them happen shows we are in a new period for the labor movement – that some of the fear and conservatism is starting to fall away. Looking at the Teachers’ strikes this past spring, and the possible UPS Strike this summer lay the basis for a new kind of movement. The widespread one- or two- day CWA grievance strikes lay the basis for a bigger all-out confrontation with AT&T – one of the most powerful corporations in the world.



AT&T made over \$29 billion in profits last year, bought DirectTV for \$67 billion in 2015 and is now paying more than \$85 billion to buy Time-Warner (and apparently another \$600K in an attempt to bribe the Trump administration). But capitalism isn’t sentimental. The AT&T bosses want to squeeze us for more: shifting more of the burden of healthcare costs on its employees; reinforce the separate “tiers” of workers that may work next to each other, but have drastically different benefits; and erase the commitment to solid numbers of good paying jobs under each contract.

But what will it take to win against this Death Star of a corporation? We need a direct action workers movement, directly controlled by its members, willing to spread the struggle beyond the shackles of labor law, and beyond the confines of the contract.



Workers at AT&T should demand & build for:

- **No contract with any concessions or givebacks**
- **A national Assembly of local union officers, stewards, mobilizers and other active union members to plan and run a direct action campaign – including an all-out strike against AT&T**
 - **Occupy the workplaces – call out labor and the community to defend them**
 - **Defeat the “divide & conquer” strategy of the bosses by spreading the struggle across the other 10 (!) CWA-AT&T contracts and their different expiration dates.**
 - **Ask for and build sympathy strikes among workers in other telecom companies like Verizon and CenturyLink and into other sectors of the economy.**
 - **Force AT&T to concede funds and resources to the working-class and the poor to pay for housing, education, health care and fighting climate change**
- **Solidarity NOT competition with call center and telecom workers in other countries. Fight to extend living wages across the borders to all AT&T workers and sub-contractors.**
- **Take a page from the legendary revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) union and refuse to align with either of the bosses political parties – and instead build independent working-class movements and institutions of resistance and mutual aid.**

The author works at AT&T, is a steward and former chief steward in their workplace. They are a member of the IWW and First of May Anarchist Alliance.