

Below and Beyond Trump: Power and Counter Power

Black Rose Anarchist Federation

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Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| INTRODUCTION | 3 |
| TENSIONS AT THE TOP | 3 |
| SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: POWER FROM BELOW | 4 |
| STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES MOVING FORWARD | 6 |

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INTRODUCTION

This analysis was developed by ongoing discussions among members of the Black Rose / Rosa Negra (BRRN) Anarchist Federation's Analysis and Strategy Committee and sent as a discussion document to our August 2017 convention, where it generated deep discussion and further feedback. It is organized into four sections: an analysis of ruling class power, an analysis of social movements, a statement of basic organizing principles in light of the current moment, and some suggestions for the federation moving forward.

Its main points are that we see real potential to build popular power and social anarchism in the coming period. The U.S. ruling class is fractured, the political terrain has shifted dramatically, and there is mass discontent with corporate politics as usual. This provides numerous opportunities for pro-organizational revolutionary anarchists to intervene as social movements arise. At present the mass discontent is being channeled by the institutional left – unions, non-profits, and other institutions traditionally aligned with the Democrats – into explicit reformism and electoral politics. We argue for promoting independent social movements outside of the institutional left while putting forward within new and existing social struggles the need to advance class struggle, collective direct action, direct democracy, and a vision of libertarian socialism.

TENSIONS AT THE TOP

The US ruling class is experiencing a political crisis the likes of which it hasn't seen in decades. The basis of the crisis are serious tactical divisions within US ruling class interests around domestic control and stewardship, the decline of US global hegemony, looming structural crisis stemming from the limits of neoliberal policy, the coming climate catastrophe, as well as deep seated and wide-ranging popular discontent. Furthermore, recent challenges to white supremacy have forced ruling elites to respond, making their internal political crisis more difficult to manage. We've reached a point where "the center can't hold." The ideological glue of centrist politics is coming apart and significant segments of the population are polarizing, heading further left and further right for alternatives – reflecting a broader pattern on a global scale.

The Trump presidency is both a symptom and cause of the divisions within ruling sectors, widening existing cracks in the neoliberal edifice and fostering uncertainty. Major sectors of state power, from the so-called "deep state" to established politicians, are in open opposition to Trump and the ideological extremism present in his administration. Elements of Trump's agenda that clash with longstanding liberal ruling class commitments are successfully being challenged from within existing institutional channels, such as the courts initially and temporarily blocking Trump's "Muslim ban." Other aspects have widespread support within segments of the ruling class and a much greater chance of success, including recently proposed austerity budgets, the call for "law and order" policing, roll-backs of the welfare state, and loosening restrictions on fossil fuel extraction and businesses regulation.

Overall, this picture of the Trump presidency is in line with what many on the left argued before and after the 2016 election – that is, the extreme elements of the Trump agenda would

likely be checked by the structural limitations of the state and outside sources of concentrated power. US ruling interests are worried how long those restraints will last, or if broken, if they will break in their favor. Their main concern for the current moment is the uncertainty and unpredictability the Trump administration brings, and Trump's role in eroding US international leadership on economic and military matters. (See for example China's attempts at leadership on issues of global climate change, or fret over Trump's more outrageous rhetorical attacks on NATO).

The controversy surrounding Trump is a reflection of a broader crisis within the US political class. Both the Republican and Democratic Parties are extremely unpopular and unable to point in any clear direction. Nearly the entire GOP institutional leadership opposed Trump during the election but were unable to prevent him from winning the primary. They seem to be aware that Trump is causing major damage to the GOP brand but vacillate between damage control and taking advantage of the chaos to push unpopular legislation. The Democratic Party leadership seems deeply out of touch in the wake of Clinton's loss, unable to present a vision beyond "we're not Trump," nor able to mount effective resistance at this point. On the other hand, it is unclear where this moment of illegitimacy for the two-party system will lead and we should not underestimate the resiliency of capitalist institutions to reconstitute themselves.

Ruling class divisions like those mentioned offer political opportunities, but also serious dangers. Instability plus Trump's authoritarian proclivities mean that the possibility of international conflict or more severe forms of domestic "law and order" repression should not be discounted. But Trump is extremely weak and isolated right now and these developments are less likely barring a major unexpected event. At the same time, leading sectors of US power are vocally and publicly supporting elements of militant reformism, especially around climate change and wealth inequality. These ruling class divisions provide political openings for libertarian socialists to push a revolutionary social program, build its base, and establish itself as a revolutionary pole for liberation.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: POWER FROM BELOW

Social movements are similarly fractured and most seem to be moving toward some type of retrenchment strategy in response to Trump. We see retrenchment as taking the form of scaling back organizing efforts, while channeling grassroots energy into the 2018 and 2020 elections to undermine and oust Trump. Increasingly important is the separation between popular resentment/action and the institutional left. While these forces appear to be recalibrating, we should not underestimate their ability to capture and domesticate popular discontent.

Trump's election and the growing visibility of the far-right have led to a tremendous growth of popular engagement with progressive causes and activity, dwarfing any equivalent gains on the Right. However, the institutional left has failed to build on deepening public outrage, offering little beyond symbolic demonstrations, "get out the vote" efforts and militant reformism. Whether its labor, Black Lives Matter (BLM), immigrant, environmental, queer, or feminist struggles, the established leaders of many institutional left organizations have called for or anticipate a period of retrenchment.

Since the militancy of the Baltimore rebellion, the Movement for Black Lives has put together a "united front" behind a shared platform of demands that range from reparations to community

control. The organizations behind the M4BL Platform represent a broad cross-section of black-led progressive non-profits, a reflection of BLM being increasingly tied to the institutional left orbit, yet it's unclear how the platform is being advanced or if the collective strength of the organizations behind it are being mobilized in any meaningful way. Few seem to be engaged in the kinds of on-the-ground direct action rebellions that initially catalyzed and electrified the struggle against anti-black state violence, despite the endless string of black murders by police, while the Movement for Black Lives Platform points in the direction of a more electoral or legislative strategy.

For the labor movement, union leadership appear to be pursuing two strategies. One group, led by conservative building trades unions, favors "playing ball" with Trump in an effort to promote nationalist and protectionist manufacturing as a way to create jobs. The other, implemented by unions like SEIU, have preemptively laid off staff and shrunk their campaign operations as they prepare for the worst under the new administration. Two pending labor cases, *Yohn v. CTA* and *Janus v. AFSCME*, will likely make automatic dues payment illegal for public sector unions, which represent the bulk of unionized workers, and many in the labor movement see this a death blow. There are perhaps some signs of militancy, such as calls by some SEIU workers to participate in May 1st "general strikes" against the Trump agenda. But little materialized from these calls and this shows that militants have their work cut out for them.

In the face of a union movement on the wane and out of a desire to create a revolutionary pole within the broader labor movement, workers have joined the IWW in increasing numbers since the economic crisis of 2008. In addition to its modest growth, the IWW's recent activity among service workers, prison labor, and anti-fascist organizing points toward the kind of labor movement that is needed in this moment.

The feminist "movement" is currently experiencing a contradiction in its activism and practice, in which a feminist and anti-patriarchal discourse has become more widespread among the population, yet its self-proclaimed political leadership remains closely aligned with the Democratic Party. The "Women's March" in January 2017 was historic and inspiring with an estimated 1% of the population participating. The March 8th "Women's Strike" held more promise as an international call with a progressive set of demands, yet it had a smaller turnout than the Women's March. Unfortunately this orientation will likely fail to protect their number one policy agenda, defending Planned Parenthood and elements of the ACA (Obamacare). These marches highlight two developments: First, a confirmation in the bond between mainstream feminist organizations and the Democratic Party; and secondly, a growing divide between reformist feminism and an increasingly militant anti-patriarchal movement. These marches have opened a broader dialogue around feminism and the possibility for building a feminist/anti-patriarchal movement aligned with the interests of working class women, trans, and queers, as well as inserting a feminist politic within current social movements. However, there is a need for coordinated and organized discussions to propose a plan of action on a local and national scale.

The indigenous and environmental movements have experienced a dramatic growth in activity, centered on militant defense of the land in confrontations with the oil and coal industries. Key on-the-ground campaigns to block pipelines and coal trains, such as the Kinder-Morgan Canadian pipeline, are moving forward. The struggle at Standing Rock, which followed on the heels of Idle No More, galvanized widespread attention and solidarity actions in urban areas. Standing Rock brought together a multi-generational and multi-ethnic indigenous movement whose struggle for

land and autonomy has motivated a new generation of indigenous youth into militant political activism.

In the wake of Trump's election, much of the immigrant rights movement is on the defensive, yet the nakedness of the anti-immigrant agenda coming from the White House, most notably in the form of a renewed round of ICE raids, has begun to politicize a new generation of undocumented youth. We have seen more public expressions of xenophobia targeting immigrants of color. The purpose of this offensive by the state is to intimidate undocumented workers, one of the most exploited and precarious sectors within the working class. The increase in state policing has motivated some immigrants to leave the US, thus reducing the pool of farmworkers, forcing the Trump administration to increase the issue of H-2A (Temporary Agricultural Workers) visas. In addition, the escalation in militarizing the US border is not meant to end immigration, but to traumatize undocumented workers in order to further exploit their labor power.

We see two trends dominating the coming period: the use of militant reformism and electoral efforts in the name of social democracy. While Trump is in office, major segments of the institutional and radical Left (as with Socialist Alternative and their uncritical support for Bernie Sanders) are going to advocate and channel activists into electoral campaigns. While more moderate advocates of electoral struggles continue to fight within the Democratic Party for more progressive candidates, others are clamoring for the elusive independent party of the left. Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose membership has surpassed 30K, are explicitly calling for this "inside-outside" strategy, attempting to push the Democrats from within while building the base for a future third party. Given that the left is experiencing rapid growth, a move towards electoralism is a further shift towards reformism. Instead, we propose an offensive program of building popular power — a distinct form of power exercised through combative, self-managed social movements independent of the institutional left — that can win meaningful reforms while laying the groundwork for pushing beyond them.

One other element needs to be noted here — the ominous presence of the far-right. In response to BLM, diminishing returns on the "wages of whiteness," economic uncertainty, and the perceived threat to US hegemony posed by immigrants/refugees and Islam, a vocal minority of xenophobic, white nationalist, and proto-fascist forces have become increasingly mobilized — emboldened by Trump's presence in the oval office. While the strength of the far-right seems to be geographically uneven, the increasing use of violence by the far right, particularly by lone-wolf actors who kill in the name of the movement, is having a chilling effect for many. Through the alt-right and other forces, what was once largely an internet phenomenon is now entering the public arena, with varying degrees of success.

In response to the alt-right and other fascist forces, Antifa has grown in prominence as a countervailing force, sparking renewed debates on the left over black bloc tactics. While dramatic street confrontations are necessary at times, they can also lead to a fetishization of militant tactics and lead to a dynamic of one marginal wing of the right fighting with another marginal wing of the left. Nonetheless, fascist forces should not be permitted to take root.

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES MOVING FORWARD

Given this picture we argue that several strategic orientations are key in the current moment for the larger left and organized political forces:

- **Build independent social movements from below:** Popular anger is at an all-time high, but there is very little movement being generated. The institutional left is not interested in building power outside of tightly controlled channels. We need to build autonomous social movement power (autogestión) independent of the institutional left in our workplaces, schools and communities. To this end, we need to adopt strategies in specific sectors as guideposts for social movement activity. In the same way that socialist organizations argue for the need to build an independent political party, we should make our argument for *building independent social movements*.
- **Push Offensive Campaigns:** A surefire strategy to let the Trump agenda win is to fall onto a defensive footing merely trying to prevent the many attacks on social programs, unions and scapegoated populations. An orientation of permanent retrenchment and defense is a failed strategy that the most conservative elements of the left have been pushing for decades. Instead, moving struggle forward with offensive demands could turn the tables and put major segments of power on the defensive, prevent the worst of many of the cuts, and dramatically change the political climate.
- **Advance an explicitly libertarian socialist practice and program:** The cumulative weight of the 2008 economic crisis, Occupy, BLM, and the Bernie Sanders campaign, has laid the groundwork for the growing appeal of radical politics in general and socialism in particular. Growing discontent over the two party system and “politics as usual” has created space to sharpen and deepen our criticisms of electoral strategies and the state. Overt forms of state violence and repression against black and brown communities has expanded critiques of the police, the prison industrial complex, and ICE, opening space for advancing a broader anti-state, anti-racist and internationalist revolutionary practice. In the face of cascading capitalist crisis and the failed history of state socialism, there is a wide demand and audience for an alternative vision and a coherent path forward.

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