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Spread the Chaos from Capitol to Capital

CrimethInc.

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Since February 15, the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin has been at the center of a storm of popular protest against proposed austerity measures including anti-union legislation. Hundreds of people occupied the building until March 3, touching off other actions around the state, including an ongoing university occupation in Milwaukee that began March 2.

On March 9, while Senate Democrats were absent in protest, Wisconsin's Republican Senators passed a bill stripping public-sector unions of collective bargaining rights. In response, thousands returned to the capitol building, forcing open windows and pushing past state patrolmen to reenter and occupy it. Police eventually gave up attempting to control the crowds, and the announcement went out that they would not remove demonstrators from the building despite the court order that had forced the end of the previous occupation. At the high point on Wednesday evening, several thousand people filled the first three floors of the building entirely; after midnight, a few hundred still remained,

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despite the usual pleas from authoritarian organizers for people to leave.

Unions are legally prohibited from calling for a general strike, but there has been much talk of striking. In any case, a series of protests are planned for the next several days. In addition to this list of demonstrations Thursday morning, Thursday evening a flash mob is planned for the university library in Madison at 10 pm, Saturday farmers will drive their tractors into Madison in protest, and it's rumored that teaching assistants will go on strike on Monday when the state contract with the Teaching Assistants' Association expires.

Events are still unfolding in Wisconsin, and may yet escalate further. But we can already draw some conclusions from them, which can guide us in the months ahead—for Wisconsin is surely only the first of many states that will see public outrage over austerity measures.

The role that the capitol building has played in Wisconsin's protest movement shows the importance of establishing a public relationship to physical sites that can serve as social centers during upheavals. Just as university occupations served as nerve centers during the December 2008 uprising in Greece, the capitol building offered a focal point for demonstrators to build up momentum over a period of weeks, and a space to congregate in response to new developments.

There are several other important points to make here. First, however devious the Republican Senators' machinations, the bill was passed by democratic process, the same way countless other bills are passed. Those who protest against it are essentially proclaiming that representative democracy has failed them: they are asserting that there is more legitimacy in angry people occupying the capitol building than there is in Senators doing what they were elected to do. As anarchists, we wholeheartedly agree—workers deserve access to the resources currently being hoarded by capitalists regardless of what goes on in voting booths or politicians' offices.

The most important question of all is how to spread the action beyond the capitol. The capitol symbolizes “democracy,” which is to say *top-down control*. But capitalism is not simply maintained in government buildings. Initiatives like the university occupation in Milwaukee are important in that they offer a model for how to expand the terrain of conflict. Rather than everyone descending upon the capitol to be mere faces in a mass, people should go wherever they will be most effective proportionate to their numbers. An occupation of 50 people in La Crosse could have ten times the impact of 50 more people joining an existing occupation in Madison.

It’s also crucial to expand the issues beyond legislation affecting unions and state employees. Spontaneous high school walk-outs already set a precedent for this in February, connecting the proposed cutbacks to the alienation of young people who have not yet even been thrown at the mercy of the job market. This isn’t just about government cutbacks or union rights—it is above all about self-determination. If you don’t have a union job or a state salary, if you’re unemployed or precariously employed, you’re *already* affected by the same conditions the Republicans in the Wisconsin government hope to intensify.

To say this once more, we shouldn’t evaluate efforts according to how effective they are in immediately achieving changes in legislation, or for that matter how many people they draw to rallies. The real question is their *content*: do they create new relationships between people, new ways of relating to material goods? Do they demonstrate values that point beyond capitalism? Do they produce new momentum, new ways of fighting, new *unruliness*?

If you live far outside Wisconsin, take this as a warning shot; don’t be caught off guard when the same things occur where you live. Think about how you can prepare so you’ll be ready to push things further when the window of opportunity opens up. This is not a fluke, but the first signs of a long war finally beginning in the United States.

The question is whether the movement will adopt this position outright, or remain mired in the contradictions of claiming to pose a democratic opposition to the democratic process.

Second, this is not simply a question of politicians being mean: from the capitalist perspective, these austerity measures really are unavoidable. The state budget director claims that Wisconsin faces a two-year budget shortfall of \$3.6 billion—for comparison, that’s more than three times what the Canadian government spent for security at last summer’s fully militarized G20 summit. As far as the politicians are concerned, that money really does have to come from somewhere, whether from higher taxes or government cuts. Indeed, elsewhere in the US Democrats are proposing similar measures for their own states. This may legitimately break their hearts, but they see no other way.

From our perspective, of course, all this is despicable nonsense. Corporate magnates are sitting on the biggest fortunes in the history of the world. The net worth of just one of the planet’s 1210 billionaires—let’s say Bill Gates—could pay off a budget shortfall over fifteen times the size of the one in Wisconsin; distributed among Wisconsin’s 5.6 million residents, that would be \$10,000 *each*. The problem is not that there’s no money—at this point money is simply created by the Federal Reserve whenever they choose—but that the vast majority of it is held hostage by a few rich people who don’t give a damn what happens to anyone else. If this is even causing trouble for governments, which work hand in glove with capitalists, that just shows the magnitude of the crisis.

There’s another way to say this: capitalism has reached its limits and can only produce one crisis after another—war, recession, bailouts, austerity measures. Politicians are being honest when they say they see no other way, but only because they’re not willing to consider the possibility that the system itself is the problem. It’s up to us to point the way to another social system that could distribute wealth and power more sensibly.

In this context, it's a mistake to expect a little protesting to achieve immediate results. Even if we manage to stop one wave of cutbacks and rollbacks, a thousand more assaults will follow. The state literally can't back down—the politicians have nowhere to go. So rather than focusing on achieving “realistic” goals, such as blocking a particular budget or bill, we have to think bigger. How do we build a long-term movement that can fight against capitalism itself? How do we approach these protests as the starting point for the savage, years-long struggle that undoubtedly awaits?

Those considerations make it particularly dispiriting to come across attitudes like the one expressed by Wisconsin teacher Peggy Kruse, quoted as saying, “Most teachers are more than happy to take the 18% pay cut, to do anything that will help get the state back and running. We're most concerned about the loss of collective bargaining rights.”

In other words, Kruse is willing to concede anything, so long as she retains her right to concede. Let Bill Gates keep his \$56 billion while we get pay cuts or pink slips—just don't touch the illusion that we *choose* this state of affairs!

Accepting defeat in advance in this way goes along with a blind faith in “peaceful protest.” Signs in Wisconsin read “FIGHT LIKE AN EGYPTIAN,” but Egyptian protesters burned down police stations. Neither “peaceful” protests nor more assertive ones are likely to bring about the immediate repeal of the bill passed March 9—so questions about how disobedience plays to the media or affects the prospects of the Democrats are beside the point. The question, once more, is what will catalyze a fierce new movement that can go beyond single-issue defensive measures to push for a fundamental shift in the social order.

Anything the movement accomplishes, it will accomplish in defiance of the authorities, in defiance of would-be leaders who would tame and direct it, in

defiance of union bureaucrats who don't dare call for a general strike even as they are stripped of all power.

Thus far, everything that has given vitality to the movement in Wisconsin has come out of a spirit of rebellion. Those who broke into the capitol building the evening of March 9 did so in defiance of the court order that had concluded the previous occupation. In this light, it is particularly embarrassing that certain authoritarian organizers would enter the building illegally just to tell people to leave it politely. If police did not arrest or remove demonstrators, it was not because the demonstrators had the right to be in the building—police beat and murder people with no justification on a regular basis—but because the demonstrators have mobilized enough power to force the authorities to back down; politeness and obedience can only detract from this leverage. Anything the movement accomplishes, it will accomplish in defiance of the authorities, in defiance of would-be leaders who would tame and direct it, in defiance of union bureaucrats who don't dare call for a general strike even as they are stripped of all power.

Some of the protesters understand this already. The chants of “OCCUPY!” and “GENERAL STRIKE!” that echoed in the capitol building Wednesday night recall the chants of more militant and deeply rooted overseas anti-austerity movements. As the conflicts generated by capitalist crises intensify, anarchists can expect to be outdone by other working and unemployed people.

What can you do to take a side in this struggle? If a general strike really does take off, that means—in the words of our comrades—*NOBODY AND NOTHING WORKS*. If you are in or near Wisconsin, you can support a strike by interrupting business as usual: calling in sick to work, occupying buildings, blocking streets. Look for ways you can connect with others in the process—what you can do on your own is not nearly as important as how your efforts become infectious.