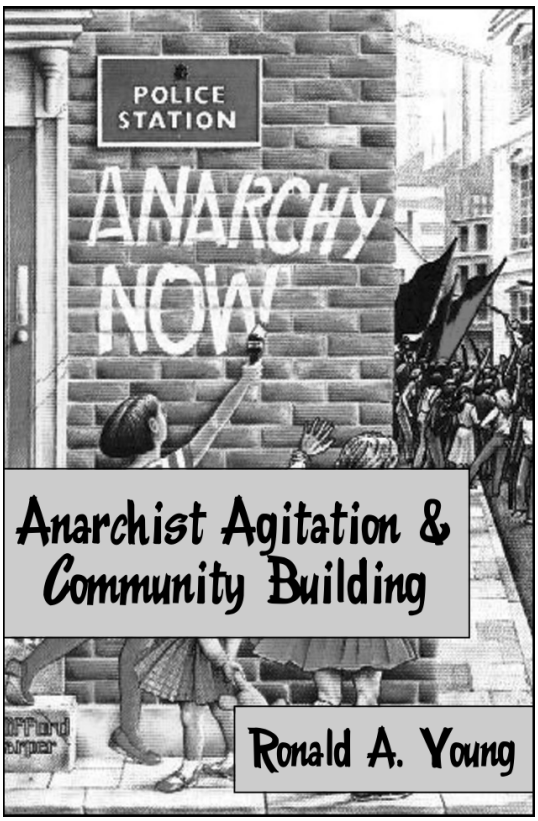
Anarchist Agitation & Community Building

Ronald A. Young



September 1, 2001

Contents

Foreword 3
Anarchist Agitation & Community Building 4
Education and Empowerment 4
Developing a Communal Perspective in an Individualist World 5
Providing Hope for the Young; Security for the Elderly 7
Gangs and Drugs 8
Withdrawing the Forces of Occupation 9
Defending Our Communities 12
Building the Anarchist Social Revolution 12
Building Solidarity Between Libertarian Groups 14
A Few Words on Hierarchy 15

Foreword

The ideas presented in the following essay are not all-encompassing, but are intended as a starting point from which to move the principles of anarchism, and particularly anarchist-communism, out of the theoretical realm and into the reality today of the working-class struggle against the exploitative system of capitalism and the State that defends it. Much of what I've included herein is not original but needs to be expounded upon within a revolutionary anarchist perspective.

Some of the tactics I discuss can be considered as falling into the category of reforms, and I don't hide the fact that that's exactly what they are. But until the anarchist social revolution becomes a reality and is successful in overthrowing capitalism and the State, we must work within the present system toward mitigating the worst effects of oppression in the here and now. At the same time, we must combine these efforts with a comprehensive revolutionary anarchist strategy.

There are those revolutionaries who staunchly oppose all involvement in relief efforts for the working-class that fall short of complete overthrow of the system. Such elitist attitudes show a callous disregard for human suffering in favour of adhering to dogmatic ideology. While we must unequivocally make known the severe limitations of reforms, we as humanitarians would be remiss in our obligations to humanity if we simply abandon people to the capitalist sharks because the majority have not yet embraced the need for anarchism.

I have written previously on the subject of reforms versus revolution, and have always sided with the need for revolutionary social transformation. And I still maintain a firm position that opposes any ideology that claims we can reform away the repressive aspects of capitalism and the State while retaining both in a "friendly" configuration. There is also no doubt that immediate reforms have the potential for dampening working-class revolutionary fervour. However, while travelling the road to the anarchist social revolution, we must remember that abstract ideologies have little meaning to most people if they continue to be hungry, homeless, naked and oppressed.

Anarchists cannot expect people to be enthusiastic about the marvellous future anarchist society, no matter how glowing our description of it may be, when we completely fail to provide some form of immediate relief today. What good is a future anarchist society to the person you are trying to win over if she/he will be too dead to enjoy it? We have to get in touch with the grassroots or else we set ourselves up for failure.

Anarchists need to make a distinction between short-term reforms used as a means of giving the working class "breathing space" to fight another day and the ideology of reformism which views reforms as an end in themselves. We can support the former while rejecting the latter and it not be a contradiction in terms. And that's where we stand separated from the mere liberal reformists.

Onward to the revolution,

Ronald A. Young
September 1, 2001

Anarchist Agitation & Community Building

Being perhaps the most distinguished theorist of anarchist communism, Peter Kropotkin emphasized the constructive and creative possibilities of anarchism. Part of his vision of anarchist society was that it consists of residential communes, autonomous and self-governing in nature, based on voluntary co-operation and loosely bound together in a federation.

It's time we anarchists quit merely theorizing about what the anarchist society of tomorrow will look like, and instead begin to provide concrete building blocks today that will move us closer in the direction of achieving the anarchist social revolution. Anarchists should challenge the status quo of our current existence at every available opportunity. This means taking the idea of direct action beyond just being a tool of protest. Confronting the oppressive police powers in the streets certainly has its place in an overall revolutionary anarchist strategy. But direct action should also include positive acts of improving the human conditions within oppressed communities and developing methods of self-organisation that make people less reliant on the government and in the process weakening the State's grip on our lives.

There are no shortages of oppressed neighbourhoods where anarchists can become involved in the daily struggles of resistance against repression. While postindustrial urban neighbourhoods have been hardest hit by neo-liberal capitalism and its paramilitary minions, rural communities also have their share of oppressed neighbourhoods where the underclass struggles to scratch out an existence that offers at least some semblance of dignity and hope.

Before I go any farther, let me say that I have no illusions about us being able to overthrow capitalism and the State simply through establishing "counter-institutions." We are only deluding ourselves if we believe capitalism and authoritarianism can be smashed without a major upheaval and confrontation between the working class and the ruling class. While we cannot know for certain at the present time whether such a confrontation will involve largely violent or non-violent means, we can observe the present repressive nature of the superstructure and see that it's likely to put up a fight even in the face of majoritarian opposition to it. On the other hand, in order to ensure that the anarchist social revolution is successful in destroying capitalism and its concomitant police state, the development of autonomous neighbourhoods today will operate as the precursor to a libertarian/egalitarian revolution. As part of a comprehensive revolutionary anarchist strategy, anarchists can adopt a two-fold mission while we still labour under capitalism. The first is to assist our respective communities in developing alternative means to mitigate the worst effects of capitalism today. The second is to keep "fanning the flames of discontent," educating the people about the true nature of capitalism and getting them to see that any relief we achieve within the system is only a temporary fix to strengthen us and give us breathing room until we are able to overthrow it.

Education and Empowerment

Education brings forth empowerment. The majority of people living in oppressed neighbourhoods have long since been disenfranchised by the capitalist system. The underclass has become just another throwaway product in a throwaway society. People recognize this and they become angry, but their anger is often misdirected. People need to be awakened to revolutionary working-class struggle. An important part in achieving this awakening is for people to also rec-

ognize that their present repressive conditions are a direct result of the capitalist system and the liberal republic that supports it.

You would think that the downtrodden masses would have arrived at this conclusion a long time ago. Well, actually they have in the past to some extent and have been met by the repressive enforcers of the business class or co-opted into deadends by liberal politicians and trade union cronies. However, most people today are unaware of the libertarian/egalitarian alternatives to capitalism. Through our example, anarchists can show people how to empower themselves and their communities and take control of their lives. Our educational efforts should be accompanied by actually working with people in oppressed neighbourhoods to develop concrete strategies for attaining self-reliance and ending their dependency on a government that has no concern for them.

It would be naive on our part to believe that oppressed communities are going to automatically open up and welcome anarchists into their midst, even within our own communities. Suspicion about outsiders and a new way of doing things are roadblocks we will commonly encounter. Initially an outright hostility toward anarchism in genera should be expected, but it must not deter us. My experience inside the Texas gulags has taught me that even those people most oppressed by capitalism and the State will tend to be supportive of the system on a whole. Strange but true. That's why at this point in time the battle anarchists face isn't so much against the present system itself as it is against the ambivalence people exhibit concerning it. In many respects they hold the boot of oppression firmly on their necks while simultaneously crying out about the pain it is causing them. Perhaps this is a perfect example of how effective the public indoctrination system has been in enlisting people to cooperate in their own exploitation.

Anarchists should therefore recognize that our concrete efforts at building, autonomous communities must include a comprehensive educational program which explicitly outlines the duplicity of capitalism and its unstable, exploitative nature in the continuing misery of the masses. By putting a face on the true enemy of the people, we can reasonably expect that at some point this will act as the catalyst that constructively directs the discontent of the people toward anarchist social revolution.

Developing a Communal Perspective in an Individualist World

Of primary concern to anarchists in organising autonomous neighbourhoods is getting people to talk with each other and come to the realization that the welfare of the individual is intricately interwoven with the welfare of the community as a whole. This doesn't mean that people should abandon all aspects of individuality. On the contrary, I support Kropotkin's position that there is no inherent conflict between the individual and society, and that the aim of anarchism should be "the most complete development of individuality combined with the highest development of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible degrees, for all imaginable aims." The individualist tendencies which I view as detrimental are those associated with competitive American "rugged individualism." Rugged individualism is characterised by selfishness and an adherence to Social Darwinism — the belief that it is the natural order of things that some people should live the good life and be on top while others live at the bottom of the social ladder in squalor.

Even the most economically devastated inner-city neighbourhoods can begin to make amazing strides toward improving the quality of life for all concerned if people would abandon their

selfish attitudes and adopt a spirit of solidarity and mutual cooperation. That means giving what you can to help others who, in turn, give what they can to help you. I make no illusions that such co-operative communities will be able to solitarily solve all their problems. That's where the idea of federation comes in with its principle of mutual aid between autonomous communities. But there is no reason why garbage cannot be picked up and properly disposed of even if the city sanitation department doesn't fully co-operate. There are local alternatives to allowing it to pile up in alleys and streets, even if that entails temporary burial. Vacant lots can be cleared and put to constructive use. People can work together to improve unsafe and unhealthy housing conditions. In many instances, the only limitations on accomplishing such things are those imposed by the people themselves and can be overcome only when those same people adopt the anarchist principle of mutual aid and put it into action. Under present conditions we must begin to utilize the resources and means available in the most effective way we can.

Anarchists can work together with the people in oppressed neighbourhoods to establish community centres where estranged neighbours can get to know each other in safe and non-coercive surroundings. The emphasis of the centres will not only be to educate people about anarchism, but also provide some essential services as well as a public forum for developing immediate concrete improvements and long-term strategies. However, substantive material improvements can occur in oppressed communities only after there first arises a change in attitudes and perceptions about our relationship with both each other and the world at large.

Racism and sexism probably top the list as the two most divisive elements within the working class. Our rulers have no qualms against scapegoating one segment of the working class so that other segments facing capitalist and State oppression will focus their wrath on the scapegoat instead of the real problem — capitalism and its police-state apparatus. Such diversionary tactics are played out endlessly around the world. Not a day goes by when the media aren't ragging on immigrants "taking jobs away from citizens," or the right-wing religious zealots point their finger at the liberation of women and their increased presence in the workplace as being part and parcel to all that ills society. This is all pure rubbish, but people fall for it all the time. Why? Because they're angry about their economic situation and increasing social repression, yet are badly misinformed (or disinformed?) about the true cause. Therefore, an important part of any anarchist educational program should alert people to the sophistry of scapegoating, how to recognize it, and how to eliminate it.

An equally serious problem that anarchists should confront is the misogynist attitudes harboured by many men. Anarchists must be forthright in denouncing all institutions — formal and informal — that operate to oppress women and subject them to second-class status. Such attitudes are much too prevalent even within the anarchist movement. Related to misogynist attitudes is this idea men harbour that it's "manly" to get a woman pregnant. Yet, beyond "planting their seed" they in many instances feel no financial or emotional responsibility to either the woman or the child. This is so wrong. Still other men want to jump on the "righteous" bandwagon being pulled by religious fanatics who still adhere to patriarchal concepts of women, and who leave no stone unturned in their quest to obstruct a woman's right over her body and access to reproductive services. At the same time, there are far too many women (even one is too many) who live in impoverished conditions and are alone in shouldering the responsibilities of child rearing. Children are our future. Raising and nurturing them must become a core community concern and responsibility. Children have been regarded as chattel for far too long, to be done with as

the "owner" sees fit. This tradition of repression and authoritarianism should be repudiated by all anarchists while also challenging the mainstream concepts of marriage and family.

Providing Hope for the Young; Security for the Elderly

Anarchist agitational activities should also include a youth outreach dimension. In fact, many young people today are attracted to anarchism through its connection with punk and hip-hop music. Anarchism can be the mechanism through which young people are provided with positive role models who through example teach youth constructive forms of resistance against the current system. One way to do this is by including young people in the building of mutual aid co-operatives. This provides them with an alternative to gangbanging and allows them to be part of something where they are recognized and respected as an integral and valuable part of the community. Anarchism should be about providing hope and reassurance to people, both young and old, who otherwise feel trapped in a hopeless situation with no alternative except to lash out at those around them.

Anarchists write and talk a lot about workplace oppression, but we should also be actively involved in resistance to other oppressive institutions as well; such as schools, nursing homes, abusive households, social cliques and bullies, and of course jails and prisons. These institutions too, along with many others are an intricate part of the repressive machine that keeps the working class enslaved. We must work hand in glove with people in all manner to empower them with the ability to knock down the hierarchal and patriarchal structures which so much of our daily lives revolve around.

The blinders of ignorance that keep people trapped in and recreating these oppressive structures must first be removed so that they can begin to realize their true nature. Young people in particular, are increasingly becoming disenchanted with what capitalist society has to offer. However, discontent and disillusionment alone are not enough in themselves to ignite the fires of anarchist social revolution. More often than not, these feelings lead to apathy; withdrawal or committing random acts of violence against one's family and neighbours. Yes, we must fight, we must do battle. After all, we are involved in a war — CLASS WAR — WHETHER OR NOT WE WANT TO ADMIT IT. But our fight is not against each other within the working class, and the anger young people feel needs to find positive direction toward the source of their oppression and resulting feelings of hopelessness. This is when people become empowered and begin to self-organise for victory over repression.

Oppressed communities of all colours must awaken to the fact that the enemy is not some other within the working class, but is government and the capitalist system it supports. This is not to deny the existence of racism and cultural bias within the working class or to deny the fact that white supremacy and Eurocentrism play a central role in sustaining the current system. For surely we must recognize this and deal with eliminating it from our midst if we ever hope to achieve unity of purpose. This is what building working-class consciousness is all about — arriving at a point when you suddenly realize that it is the nature of capitalism and the State itself which rely on perpetuating these hierarchal and patriarchal constructs in order to remain in existence. This present system thrives on the cannibalistic rituals we so willingly follow of devouring each other in the game of dog-eat-dog. As long as we're busy clawing over each other trying to get to the top of the heap (another manifestation of American rugged individualism),

our attention is diverted from the root cause of our poverty and oppression. And the capitalist system uses that to its advantage in continuing to keep us shackled and subjugated.

The older generations within oppressed neighbourhoods hide fearfully behind locked doors and barred windows, imprisoned within their own homes because the violence which arises as a natural result of the hopelessness found in post-industrial working-class neighbourhoods is often directed towards them. Many of these neighbourhoods are wracked by violence associated with the black market drug trade and other gang related "turf wars." Domestic violence is commonplace as a reaction to hopelessness turned inward. This is a result of capitalist economics. Post-industrial American society has abandoned the old working-class neighbourhoods, creating an economic void that came to be filled by drug dealing, theft, robbery and murder. With a lack of income-producing employment (necessary for survival in capitalist society) and a complete failure of the New Left to offer any comprehensive alternatives for sustaining life, it's not surprising that the occupants of these free world prisons should begin to feed on themselves.

This does not mean that because anarchists recognize the root cause of most working-class on working-class violence that we approve of it or any other form of predatory behaviour. We don't. But until we are capable of providing the means to counteract the most egregious aspects of capitalist oppression, we will be severely limited in our efforts to reduce predatory acts of violence. The first step in obtaining the means to overcome capitalist oppression is for the people living in oppressed neighbourhoods to recognize the benefits of communal organisation. This is what actually constitutes a "community." It's time for people to adopt the view that the individuals that make up their particular neighbourhood are all part of an extended family. These neighbourhoods, in turn, become freely associated with other autonomous neighbourhoods and carry this idea of family to the next level.

At the present time this extended family is basically non-existent, but that can all change with some effort on the part of all concerned to engage in open and honest communication with each other. Not in a hostile or confrontational manner, but rather providing a forum where everybody can voice their hopes, fears, and opinions without being ridiculed. The idea is to bring the community together and hopefully achieve a consensus on a strategy that builds on solidarity and improving the overall quality of life for the people. To this end, anarchists can work together with other activists in the community (not boring from within, but maintaining a separate anarchist critique) to establish autonomous "safe spaces" such as the aforementioned community centres. These safe spaces can be configured in a variety of ways — recreational, entertainment, health services, educational, food distribution, clothing and housing assistance, or simply reclaimed open spaces where young and old alike can relax in a comfortable and safe atmosphere without having to fear that they will be subjected to violence or predatory behaviour.

Gangs and Drugs

While gangs are generally portrayed as being predatory and anti-social, they derive this behaviour and many other tactics from the hierarchal and patriarchal tendencies exhibited and approved of by the capitalist society at large. Gangs often fill an economic and social void caused by capitalism's economic abandonment of oppressed neighbourhoods and the accompanying disintegration of families and nurturing relationships. I don't make myself out to be an expert on gangs. In a gathering of representatives of street and youth organisations in front of New York

City Hall on April 14, 2001, a representative of the Youth Advocacy Coalition declared that the media and police demonise youth to justify their repressive campaign and that the "gang problem" is over-hyped and does not address the fact that the city has no program to deal with the problems of youth. I agree fully that the focus of the media on youth as being overly predatory is way out of proportion with reality. Still, this does not mean that we turn a blind eye to the fact that gangs are also a reality and do use various forms of oppression against people already oppressed by capitalism.

We must also recognize that in many respects the success or failure of building community solidarity will hinge on how successful anarchists and other community activists are in bringing gangs and other disillusioned youth together and constructing an atmosphere of co-operation. It's necessary that we approach these young people with an opportunity to fully participate in establishing and co-operatively managing various socially-beneficial programs and activities. Intervention and prevention programs within an anarchist perspective, such as youth outreach and educational programs; establishing community centres, substance abuse counselling, conflict mediation, recreational activities, and even employment assistance programs can all benefit youth as well as benefit from their energetic participation in operating the programs. However, as anarchists we should make it a priority for participating youth (and hopefully all neighbourhood youth) to recognize the necessity of repudiating violence perpetrated against the community.

Drug and alcohol addiction also need to be addressed, as they have a primary relationship to dysfunctional families and the violence associated with the black market drug trade. Some libertarians posit the theory that a society based upon egalitarian principles will eliminate most people's desire to indulge in recreational drug use. Perhaps there's some truth to that, but I believe the recreational use of drugs will always be a part of society to some extent. My position concerning drugs is that a majority of the social ills attributable to them are caused by the violence associated with black market drug distribution and the economics of people having to spend large sums of their income to support their drug habits. Discrepancies in drug purity are the leading cause of drug overdose deaths.

Under the current capitalist system I advocate complete legalisation of drugs. As for an anarchist society I believe that there should be free access to drugs and alcohol if that's what people want. Too many people — even so-called progressives — are of the mind that whatever alternative we develop to the current war on drugs must solve 100 percent of the social problems associated with drug and alcohol consumption. Nothing in this life is 100 percent and it's idiotic to expect such from an alternative to the present illegal status of drugs or even concerning alternatives to capitalism and the State.

What I propose as an alternative will eliminate most of the problems currently associated with drug and alcohol use. We can deal with the problem of addiction itself through drug and alcohol treatment programs. One thing is for certain, as long as their is a demand for drugs and alcohol, criminalisation and prohibition aren't going to do anything but perpetuate the violence and dysfunction oppressed communities are currently experiencing.

Withdrawing the Forces of Occupation

Many of the violence-weary residents of oppressed neighbourhoods have opted to call in the occupation forces — the paramilitary police goon squads — in a last-ditch effort to restore peace

and safety to the community. People's concern for their safety is a valid one which anarchists clearly empathise with. We all want to live and thrive in an environment free of violence and oppression where adults and children alike can walk the sidewalks and play outside without having to constantly be on the defensive against muggings, rapes, and drive-by shootings. However, bringing in an army of occupation doesn't solve the problem and has only given license to these forces to inflict their own form of brutality and killing on the people. Police paramilitary operations act to further antagonise the already alienated members of oppressed neighbourhoods. Police actions only exacerbate the violence or drive the perpetrators into adjacent neighbourhoods spreading the siege mentality instead of improving the quality of life.

In recent years the establishment of "zero tolerance" policies by both governmental and educational administrators has resulted in mass arrests and increasing repressions as paramilitary police forces "sweep" through neighbourhoods and school campuses. The invitation from local residents for police intervention cracked open the door which eventually was kicked down altogether by the massive influx of paramilitary goon squads. In the process, police routinely murder unarmed residents with virtual impunity.

The paramilitary death squads are further acting as cleanup crews to sweep urban neighbourhoods clean of the underclass in advance of the encroaching developers who cater to the highbrow tastes of the increasing hordes of yuppie "settlers" migrating back to the urban environs after decades of "middle-class flight" to the suburbs. These retro-philes have suddenly developed an insatiable appetite for old urban homesteads. Why should anarchists be opposed to yuppie urban renewal projects? For the simple reason that this rush to buy-up urban housing has zero benefit to the current inhabitants of oppressed neighbourhoods since many of these people do not own the housing they live in.

Thus, when developers eye a particular neighbourhood, the rising property valuations result in quick evictions of the underclass who are rounded up by the goon squads and scattered into outlying oppressed areas until the time comes when those too are deemed suitable for yuppie settlement.

Even the "economic empowerment zones" created by former president Bill Clinton as a way to build economic prosperity within oppressed neighbourhoods have done little to ease the grinding poverty of current residents. Instead, EEZ's have been exposed as yet another pipeline to funnel money and resources to already bloated capitalist developers and property speculators in their quest to propagate the yuppification and Disneyfication of urban America. In the process, the shining new streets and building facades are also swept clean of "undesirables" who are herded from one ghetto to another like Third World refugees.

This ongoing chain of events represents a challenge to anarchists which we should be working to meet head-on through educational and grassroots programs that assist oppressed communities in developing alternative means for addressing the violence and associated social problems which are now brutally tended to by the occupation forces. A cornerstone to developing these alternatives, as previously mentioned, is to get gangs and other alienated youth to participate and co-operate in these efforts. While I make no claims that this will be easy to accomplish, it is nevertheless a process that must be successfully undertaken if we expect to achieve lasting peace within the community. It may even come as a pleasant surprise to the older folks at how willing young people are to get involved in community-building activities when properly approached, and youth begin to see the importance of their role in a concerted community initiative.

Generational lines of communication with respect and concern for each other's welfare must be developed. Block meetings can be organised that bring all age groups together for discussions free of coercion and intimidation. This can even be done on a smaller level with individual housing units. Then plans for concrete actions can be formulated and implemented with the support and co-operation of all concerned. Once again, however, we should not be quick to reject any idea simply because we cannot garner 100 percent co-operation. As an anarchist I support a person's right not to participate if that's what they choose. But by the same token, that person has no right to interfere with those people who do choose to participate, and certainly doesn't have the right to oppress and exploit others.

With that said, I do not believe that it's a naive assumption that together we can build a better community, free from police and yuppie invasions. Together we can build alternative educational and day-care centres that promote total community involvement in raising and educating children. Together we can build co-operatives operated by and for the community; providing food, clothing, shelter, healthcare and many other basic necessities that have a substantial effect on improving the quality of life. Together we can create recreational and educational venues that provide the people with options to mind numbing TV and give people opportunities to participate as well as partake in cultural activities. Together we can create autonomous safe spaces where people of all ages can "hang out" without fear of drive-by shootings or attacks from rogue cops. Together we can clean-up, fix up, spruce-up, plant a garden and paint a mural. If we must "squat" housing in order to make it safe and habitable, then together we will do so. If slumlords won't fix their properties and show some respect for the dignity of the people who occupy such housing, then together we will fix the properties and the slumlords, availing ourselves of whatever legal and extra-legal means are necessary to wrest control of the properties from the oppressors. If legal counsel is necessary, together we will attempt to enlist sympathetic pro bono attorneys, or in the alternative, develop legal self-help groups that provide legal information and assistance to empower others to act on their own behalf. Of course we should realize that the legal system favours the oppressors and offers only limited remedies when it does rule in our favour. It will also be necessary for oppressed neighbourhoods to structurally harden themselves against the possibility of reprisals from the State. Our success in defeating the repressive powers that be lies primarily through direct actions aimed at ultimately smashing capital and State.

As neighbourhoods begin to free themselves from the clutches of oppression, they should also begin to seek to establish a co-operative federation with other neighbourhoods. Combining resources and building the momentum toward a total liberation from authoritarianism works to break communities free from the isolationist and siege mentality that they may otherwise experience singularly. This is what empowerment is all about: self-organising at the micro level (i.e., house, block) and then continually expanding outward to include neighbourhoods, communities and entire regions on a macro level. This is an evolutionary process which leads to the anarchist social revolution but which should not be confused with being the social revolution itself. It is merely preparation in anticipation of the overthrow of capitalism and State.

As Alexander Berkman stated in *The ABC of Anarchism*:

> The social revolution, therefore, is not an accident, not a sudden happening. There is nothing sudden about it, for ideas don't change suddenly. They grow slowly, gradually, like the plant or flower. Hence the social revolution is a result, a development, which means that it is revolutionary. It develops to the point when considerable

> numbers of people have embraced the new ideas and are determined to put them into practice. When they attempt to do so and meet with opposition, then the slow, quiet and peaceful social evolution becomes quick, militant, and violent. Evolution becomes revolution.

Defending Our Communities

As our co-operative efforts begin to improve the quality of life within our respective communities, it is imperative that we develop self-defence mechanisms to stave off the forces of oppression. Along what lines these are developed will have to be the product of decisions reached by each community. As conditions improve, oppressed neighbourhoods risk being invaded by an onslaught of speculators and yuppies who will be salivating at the mouth to move in once they get a glimpse of the improved conditions. The paramilitary police forces will be right there to lend a helping hand in dislocating the current residents of the neighbourhood to outlying areas and even prisons. And our imposing upon the slumlords' properties with the audacity to take things into our own hands will surely elicit a repressive response from the vultures inhabiting city hall. This, however, should not deter us in our actions but instead move us to be resolute in our preparations for defending against the inevitable ruling-class backlash.

The fact that an oppressed neighbourhood exhibits the ability to help itself and self-organise in spite of the repressive forces surrounding it, will enrage the local plutocracy. Therefore, we should expect that our shining example of solidarity and cooperation will eventually butt up against the wall of the authoritarian power structure. The powers that be are fearful of the masses, and particularly so when the people exhibit the ability to self-organise and make the government irrelevant to their lives. Instead of hailing our co-operation as a great social achievement, the reactionary forces of authoritarianism will consider us a threat to the capitalist way of life and will work feverishly to undermine our efforts. Therefore we must be prepared.

Building the Anarchist Social Revolution

The challenge for anarchists today is to make anarchism relevant to the daily struggles of the working class and all those alienated by the exploitative tendencies of the capitalist system and its repressive State machinery. A part of this challenge is an honest re-evaluation of how we work within the current system to ease the suffering of oppressed peoples today while at the same time implementing agitational efforts aimed at building a successful revolutionary anarchist movement. If we become too embroiled in the activities of liberal reformists (which is the context in which most struggles are being fought today) we run the risk of becoming simply radical reformists rather than social revolutionaries. Contrary to the position of some concerning our involvement within liberal organisations, the strategy of "boring from within" has historically been a failure for any revolutionary group and there's no reason to believe that much has changed today in that regard.

How far should we go in supporting reforms that tend to give added life to the very system we wish to overthrow? Because regardless of how we label it, when we struggle within the present authoritarian capitalist system to ease working-class oppression, we are operating as "reformists." Yes, we must struggle today against police brutality, racial profiling, sexism, racism, homopho-

bia, homelessness, poverty and injustice, just to name a few of the many repressions imposed on oppressed communities by this capitalistic and authoritarian society. And our purpose for becoming involved in these struggles shouldn't just be about increasing the number of anarchists (though that is important), but in seeing that they are successful in combating oppression. At the same time, however, we should be moving away from the 1960's protest model, which operates under the assumption that we have many separate struggles to fight. Instead we must move toward constructing a comprehensive revolutionary anarchist strategy that recognizes the interrelationship of all these separate struggles as actually constituting a single struggle to smash the present economic and social structure and replacing it anarchy.

It is a mistake on the part of anarchists to lead the masses into believing that anarchism can provide them with the means of obtaining equality and social justice within the framework of the capitalist system. Anarchists recognize the inherent disparities of capitalism, and that freedom from oppression for the masses cannot be achieved through reformism. So it would be misleading, to say the least, for anarchists to give the impression that we believe otherwise. To do so can only lead to disappointment and resentment against anarchists. Let us not delude ourselves and others into believing that autonomous communities in a sea of capitalism will solve all our problems. It won't even come close. For that we need an anarchist social revolution. The starting point, as previously mentioned, is awakening the people through education to see the necessity of trashing the entire capitalist system — a system that thrives on inequality and exploitation — and that this is the fundamental point of attack in our struggle to be free of oppression, exploitation, and miserable living conditions.

On a personal level, it has been my experience as a prisoner caged in the Texas koncentration kamps that even those people most oppressed by capitalism and the State here in America still tend to be supportive of these institutions even as the iron boot of authoritarianism presses against their necks. And though they may be constantly harassed and repressed by the police apparatus, they still sit around in front of the TV watching "Walker Texas Ranger" and "Cops" while getting testy with anybody who dares speak sacrilege against their hallowed institutions. Thus, they tend to be severely stunted in their ability to envision a society free of government and police. As anarchists we definitely have a challenge ahead of us.

Agitating for a future anarchist society probably doesn't at first sound like much of a solution to someone who is confronted with hunger, homelessness and daily repressions. That's why I have at the beginning of this put forward some ideas on helping people in oppressed neighbourhoods mitigate the worst effects of capitalism today while also struggling for its overthrow. As revolutionary anarchists, ours is not to bandage up this corrupt and exploitative system we so graciously call capitalism. Ours is to rip off the scab and expose this bleeding, festering lesion on humanity. By this we must make the case for anarchy and its relevancy to the plight of the people. Only then will the masses be provoked to rebel and overthrow this rotten capitalistic system.

Revolutionary anarchists should not be confused with social workers. Our goal is not to "fix" the system. We need only look at today's neo-liberal capitalist model with its substandard wages, speed-ups, increased work time, and the gradual elimination of most of the social gains achieved by the working class during bloody struggles throughout most of the 20th century. We have played the reform game for over 100 years, only to have everything we've struggled for snatched away on account of the over-riding capitalist pursuit for larger profits. Once again the working class finds itself flat on its back with a capitalist boot pressing down ever tighter against our

collective necks. It's time for the working class to stand up and fight back. Anarchists shouldn't be stumping for friendlier police departments or wasting our time once again begging the boss class to give us a bigger slice of the wealth which they robbed from us in the first place.

Our involvement in such struggles as the one against police brutality and racial profiling should consist of anarchists loudly and publicly demanding the abolition of the State apparatus along with its terroristic forces of oppression while we simultaneously organise the masses for direct actions to make this a reality. Anarchists should further be assisting the masses in expropriating by whatever means available the wealth stolen from the working class and redistributing it in an egalitarian manner. While community solidarity will go a long way toward improving the quality of life in oppressed neighbourhoods and building a strong revolutionary movement, unless we have access to outside resources we are simply not going to be able to achieve a substantial rise in living standards. However, this should not be construed as supporting or encouraging the ideology of the consumer society spectacle. On the contrary, we should be educating people against the idea of conspicuous consumption. We want people to begin questioning the entire consumer-commodity relationship and realize that happiness and well-being don't go hand-in-hand with how many toys and gadgets one accumulates.

The reason I decided to take up the fight against capitalism and the State and become a revolutionary anarchist is because I want to see all of humanity attain a life of dignity and prosperity. To be revolutionary means to challenge accepted conventional wisdom and smash through the wall of ignorance and complacency that up until now has crippled the struggle to be human. While working today to ease the pain of exploitation, we should also be comprehensively focusing on ways to hasten the demise of the capitalist system and its coercive State apparatus. That requires a change in people's concepts. The State and capitalism are not separate entities removed from the people, as we often make them out to be. The State and capitalism constitute the social relation between the people, which has often been referred to as the "social contract." The people themselves continue to support this social contract for the most part, and that's why these institutions of oppression remain as a potent and destructive force in people's lives.

Building Solidarity Between Libertarian Groups

Building a social revolutionary movement that will be successful in overthrowing capitalism and the State requires the various libertarian, socialist/anarchist tendencies to find a common bond through which we can unite in solidarity. Engaging in endless sectarianism about how the new society should function is a rather meaningless exercise, as far as I'm concerned, if we are unable to overcome our differences long enough to pull off the social revolution in the first place. We need to be more concerned with the present and building a revolutionary movement capable of challenging capitalism and the State, than with theories about the future. Emma Goldman once said, "I don't care if a man's (sic) theory for tomorrow is correct, I care if his spirit of today is correct." While theory certainly has its place, the final "blueprint" of how the new society will be organised will come as a democratic decision of the people at the time the revolution is actually carried out.

There will always be disagreements between different groups about the method of distribution, immediate abolishment of the State versus the "withering away" of same, and a host of other theories dealing with the organisational structure of the new society. But if we truly believe in

autonomous and democratic principles, then these things will be decided in a democratic manner according to the will of the people and not beholden to any rigid dogmatic scheme. This goes back to what I said earlier about people wanting everything to be 100 percent or not at all. We certainly should all hold to a core set of principles: opposition to hierarchies and in favour of libertarian/egalitarianism. There are parameters in which we all should be able to work together without feeling that we are selling-out our ideals. As Emma herself noted, anarchists should be working together to apply to everyday life and our relationships with each other the anarchist principles of living like a human being, treating others with respect, refusing to dominate others or be dominated oneself. Can we at least agree on that much?

Though the various anarchist tendencies may hold fundamentally different ideas of how best to achieve anarchy (I generally hold to an anarchist communist perspective), we must not view each other as enemies but as fellow anarchists who hold a richness of ideas. This should also hold true concerning our relationship with libertarian socialists. The enemy is the capitalist system and the authoritarian state, and I for one will stand in solidarity with all anarchists and libertarian socialists in the fight to overthrow these structures of oppression. At the same time, co-operation is a two-way street and one group cannot be expected to do all the giving while another does all the taking. With that said, I believe we must focus on a strategy most likely to succeed. And unfortunately I believe that it is impossible to bring about a social revolution by using the ruling class electoral process.

I realize that this sounds sectarian and dogmatic to those libertarians who support such a scheme, but I don't believe that historically-supported positions can necessarily be considered sectarian and dogmatic. By this I mean that certain strategies have been shown through historic events to be complete failures in achieving libertarian/egalitarian objectives. We must not waste our scarce agitational resources following after schemes that have been proven not to be successful. Perhaps I appear to some to be contradicting myself. I don't believe so.

A Few Words on Hierarchy

The reason we have racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and a wide array of other forms of exploitation and oppression is because humans continue to accept and perpetuate hierarchal structures as part of our world. A hierarchal structure is any system — whether formal or informal — of persons or things ranked above another. By taking a cursory glance around our immediate environment and applying this definition, we soon begin to realize that we are surrounded by hierarchies and hierarchal structures.

The most obvious manifestation of hierarchy is government and the State. Coming in at a close second is the capitalist economic system. These two hierarchal structures exert the greatest influence over our lives.

Profits and capital accumulation are the two forces propelling capitalism, which take priority over everything else, including human rights and the environment. This is why capitalism can never be reformed, because whatever form it takes, these two forces always remain active. This is true of all capitalists whether they are of local, national, or international origin. It is a hierarchy that puts profits on top and people on the bottom — particularly working-class people and the poor.

If capitalists can keep patriarchal social structures in place (patriarchy is a form of hierarchy) thus keeping women from achieving equality with men, then that works to the business owners' advantage since they can continue to pay women disparate wages compared to men. This allows capitalists to exploit women for the benefit of profits. It also keeps a wedge between men and women that thwarts attempts at building working-class solidarity. Let me clarify one thing, one should not construe my comparison of disparate pay under the wages system as saying I support such a system. I'm opposed to the wages system and favour a moneyless, free access system of distribution. My point here is to show how even the wages system is used to divide the working class.

Capitalists use racism to keep workers divided and fighting against each other instead of joining together in solidarity and battling the real enemy — capitalism and the State. Racism also allows capitalists to exploit ethnicity for the benefit of profits. If capitalists can whip up xenophobic hysteria and keep the borders of the various nation-states closed to the free movement of workers while being open to the free flow of capital, then the capitalists can continue to exploit the wage disparities between workers in different parts of the world. This allows capitalists to exploit workers in developing countries by paying them starvation wages and at the same time to keep wages stagnating in the so-called industrialised nations by threatening workers with relocation of their jobs to another country if the workers don't accept wage concessions. When the capitalists do resort to such tactics, the workers in the country with the lost jobs blame their unemployment on the "foreign" workers when in reality it is the capitalists and their greed that is responsible.

In order to eliminate sweatshops, sexism, racism, classism, ageism, homophobia, environmental devastation, and all other forms of oppression and exploitation, we must first eliminate the hierarchal attitudes residing to some extent in each one of us. We must learn to think outside the concept of hierarchal structures as much as is humanly and logically possible if we ever hope to eliminate most of the misery now foisted upon humanity and the planet.

The many forms of oppression and exploitation we daily struggle against are only symptoms of a much larger disease — HIERARCHY! And since the two hierarchal most responsible for human suffering and environmental destruction are capitalism and government, it is only logical that we rid ourselves of both if we are serious about building a better world in which all people are partakers in health and happiness.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright

Ronald A. Young
Anarchist Agitation & Community Building
September 1, 2001

archive.org
Originally published by Austin Anarchist Black Cross (Austin, Texas, USA) and Kansas Mutual Aid Collective (Lawrence, KS, USA). Republished by Zabalaza Books (Johannesburg, South Africa).

theanarchistlibrary.org