

Notes from the Rockford Rebellion

Black Revolt in the Rustbelt from a New Afrikan Anarchist Perspective

Anonymous

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“Just put a rag on ya face when you ride
you don’t want them sattelites to take ya picture”

– *Dead Prez, D.O.W.N. (2004)*

“They building up the East Side and investin’ too,
While the entire West Side is left destitute”

– *Judah The LyricalRev, Rockford Files (2006)*

“They try to tell us to believe in the government,
But even when Barack is president, niggas had to sell rocks”

– *Vic Mensa, No More Tear Drops (2020)*

Intro

This is a revolutionary anarchist perspective from Rockford, Illinois and the conditions here. Smaller cities are often not focused upon enough when it comes to revolutionary analysis. There is a real lack of radical memory and analysis in this area. However, many of the dynamics described in this piece are evident in other cities. It may be helpful for people in other cities. The hope is that this document is turned into a zine and distributed among the participants in the movement here. This reflection is meant to be document of some thoughts on the rebellion and what will be required to advance the revolutionary struggle against racial capitalism in Rockford further.

The black revolt here is justified and understandable. Rockford’s black population is probably about 22 percent of the entire population of the city. Rockford is a declining industrial center. In a report released in June of 2020, Rockford was rated the 8th worst city in America to be black. The black poverty rate in Rockford is 37 percent. In the past ten years, there have been a number of police shootings by the RPD and Metro Enforcement. There have also been a number of deaths inside of the Winnebago County Jail. There is much to be angry about in this city.

Black organizations acting as mouthpieces for the pigs and the city have claimed that the rioters were white and from “out of town.” Despite this, the most militant forces against the police were predominantly black youth and black folks who had come up from the Fairgrounds projects as the march approached the precinct.

The perspective of this piece comes from a New Afrikan anarchist perspective. The description of New Afrikan is to honor the legacy of revolutionary anarchist Kuwasi Balagoon and to set the anarchist politics described apart from white anarchism. There is a lot of demonization of anarchism by the State right now and many black misleaders are attempting to act as if anarchism is only for white people. It is not. New Afrikan comes from the Republic of New Afrika, a black revolutionary nationalist formation that continues to fight for black self-determination. The author situates New Afrikan anarchism within the Black radical tradition similar to black anarchists such as Kuwasi Balagoon, Ashanti Alston, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, and the Anarkatas. The State is anti-black so we as New Afrikan anarchists must oppose and destroy the State.

The goal of the document is to spread light on the movement in Rockford and what it will require moving forwards. However, the author is just one participant and does not hold any or

all of the answers. These thoughts are the product of a variety of conversations among black anarchists and revolutionaries from the area.

The Uprising

On May 30th, there was a march in solidarity with uprising that was taking place in Minneapolis and across the country at that moment. It was one of the largest marches in Rockford history. Thousands took to the streets unpermitted. Due to the pandemic, many were masked up in addition to organizers telling folks to utilize tactics of masking up. The chants and banners were very militant. A lot of “fuck the police” and abolitionist messaging through chants and banners was present. This initial mood set the tone for the rest of the march. The group marched to District 1 Station on West State. Whatever the organizers had planned, black autonomous action took the forefront. Anti-police graffiti was thrown up on the police signs, fireworks were shot off, people began to destroy the RPD district 1 sign, and eventually throwing rocks and bottles at the pigs. *The attacks on Capital and the police are revolutionary action.* The clashes with the police began shortly after these actions were taken near District 1. The clashes lasted late into the night. Looting began all over the city soon after. There were attempts by young rebels to burn down buildings on the East Side. The looting lasted for two days.

These organizations are opportunistically taking advantage of the rebellion to advance their own agendas, as black middle organizations tend to do.

Dozens of people have been arrested and are facing charges for their participation in uprising on May 30th. This moment must be understood as the revolutionary surge within the city. The protests are continuing although they range in militancy and class character. They have never reached the height of May 30th. Many within the Rockford community have condemned the actions of black youth and others, as “outside agitators” even though most of the arrests were people from the city of Rockford. It is clear they are frightened of revolt and revolution. Black organizations acting as mouthpieces for the pigs and the city have claimed that the rioters were white and from “out of town.” Despite this, the most militant forces against the police were predominantly black youth and black folks who had come up from the Fairgrounds projects as the march approached the precinct. Black people do not need white people to take revolutionary action. Furthermore, if the march had not ended in an uprising, it is unlikely the subsequent demonstrations and teach-ins, which have been ongoing from over two months, would be happening.

On Counter-Revolution

The counter-revolutionary tendencies within the black community are strong. Many of these so-called organizations for black empowerment or anti-racism are clearly linked to the racist city government. Groups like 100Strong, the NAACP and others came out the next day with white city leaders to “condemn the looting.” Some of these groups even helped to clean and fix up the police station the day after the rebellion. These groups do not represent black power, they represent deference to the white power structure. They utilize language and aesthetics of black power such

as the clenched fist but they are clearly very much tied to a politics of respectability. They must be opposed at every moment. Revolutionaries must not have any respect for organizations or individuals who sell Black Lives Matters t-shirts or Black Panther hats while in the same moment host cookouts and take photos with the pigs.

Black people do not need white people to take revolutionary action.

The United Way has been particularly opportunistic in how it has used “Black Lives Matter” in its youth programming while also working explicitly with the police. These organizations are opportunistically taking advantage of the rebellion to advance their own agendas, as black middle-class organizations tend to do. This follows along a longer history of co-optation and social movement repression in Rockford. This is partially why there was never a sustained Black Lives Matter moment in this city between the years of 2014 to 2016 other than a few so-called peaceful protests that worked with the police. The co-optation in the current moment is clear as the city creates “Listening Sessions” with the intent of co-opting the revolutionary actions of black youth during the uprising on May 30th and distracting from the revolutionary demands of the local black radical organizers. Groups like the NAACP and other black liberal organizations (such as the local preachers) have allied themselves with the white establishment and the police. This is unsurprising as revolutionaries understand that the class struggle cannot be separated from the struggle for black liberation and vice versa.

The opportunist black leadership and local “activists” seek to improve their own conditions while forsaking the black lead multiracial rebellion that occurred on May 30th. The white establishment and the black mis-leadership class have rejected even the reformist demands such as the resignation of the police chief or firing officers responsible for brutality on May 30th while the District Attorney Marilyn Hite-Ross charges black youth with felonies for holding water bottles in their hands. Counter-revolutionary cop-collaborationist organizations such as Rockford Youth Action and Empowerment have set up to distract from the abolitionist demands.

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To combat this, radicals must actively name these groups as counter-revolutionaries and eject them from our spaces. There must be political education showing how liberal opportunism destroyed black movements in the 1960s. The demonstrators have done a good job at not cooperating with these organizations. Clearly there is a lack of knowledge here as well; anti-police rebellions exist in the long tradition of black struggle against slavery and racism. Condemning the looting when the United States and white society was built upon the looting of indigenous land, Africa and African people shows the ignorance and class allegiances of these so-called black leaders. *Looting is reparations!* Without the rebellion, these so-called black leaders wouldn’t even be talking about police brutality in the community. Condemn the police, not the looting. There are no good cops and there are no bad protestors. Of course, the experiences of New Afrikan militants or anarchists who took part in the rebellion in a variety of ways were erased. *To loot and revolt is a politic.* Political education is deeply important right now in order to combat the lies of the black mis-leadership class in Rockford.

On Tactics

Tactically, it is very clear from this action that it is possible to have sustained militancy in this area. People just need to be better organized and prepared. Most of the radicals who turned up on May 30th did not anticipate actual revolt. Thus, radicals lagged behind many of the black and brown youth who pulled up with plans of action. The marches subsequent to May 30th have not been full-on revolt. There was only a day or two of true rebellion here in Rockford.

Despite this, there are some tactics that revolutionaries pushed that have had an affect on the character of demonstrations in the following two months. The normalization of full masks and black bloc has been very essential. This has become normalized at demonstrations making it very hard for the city or liberals to decry individuals as “agitators” or “anarchists.” However, black bloc should not be the only tactic people utilize when it comes to concealing one’s identity. People should experiment with other types of disguises in situations where black bloc may draw more attention from the police than needed. Black bloc has a tendency, especially within white anarchist circles to be fetishized. There must be an emphasis on black bloc as a tactic rather than an identity or signifier of radical politics. The punk bloc or partial bloc has been an issue in Rockford. People do not seem to understand that the goal of bloc is too completely mask any identifying characteristics.

There needs to be better development of street tactics and deepening of the existing ones. For instance, banners were used to conceal people’s actions from cameras at the first demo. This particular tactic could be used more especially for folks who need to do a clothing change out of black bloc. The use of bike crews to block traffic, accompany the marches, and scouting. The bikes were even used to block fascists who tried to ram the marches. The street medic collective which formed is deeply important. Hopefully, these autonomous crews will continue to function even after the uprising. There is a good amount of support based infrastructure at these protests.

However, for things to grow there must be more autonomous collectives especially to build capacity for action, de-arrest people, and to defend ourselves against police attacks. The aversion to addressing these concerns is a big problem in regards to keeping the momentum going. Anarchists have failed for the most part to even take low level actions such as doing street art or pulling temporary barricades into the street. The black and brown youth at the action on May 30th were far more militant than the revolutionaries on the street. This is partially due to a lot of peace policing rhetoric as well as inexperience with street tactics locally. The most escalation we do see is typically with militants yelling at police. If things on the streets are going to grow past simply protest, energy must be redirected. The militant de-arrests and night marches are encouraging developments. In short, militant resistance needs to grow to keep people safe.

Anarchists and radicals in Rockford need to also become more adverse to cameras and media. Recently, participants have made the media more uncomfortable after a protestor was targeted by the police, which is an important development. Many of the photographers are actively aligned with the city and represent a threat to protesters if they are allowed to remain embedded within demonstrations. On a similar note, revolutionaries and anarchists should be taking decentralized action that is not traceable on social media. There needs to be more under the radar actions that are not announced over social media so they cannot be repressed.

There has been some fear locally about the levels of repression especially since Rockford is not a city with good radical legal infrastructure that has made people reluctant to escalate against

the State and Capital. Militants need to be building more support for groups like the Winnebago Community Bond Fund, which helped bail protestors out on the first night.

Furthermore, it would be really excellent if radicals could find a few lawyers in this area willing to do pro-bono work on criminal cases. Legal support is going to be deeply important in the coming years. Revolutionaries cannot sustain a movement without deep amounts of infrastructure. There is a deep need for serious armed security as well. In marches subsequent to May 30th, there were guns pulled on demonstrators. Those demonstrations were on the white side of town on the East Side. There may be a need for armed self-defense as a precaution if demonstrators return to Forest City Plaza. Generally though, there is a large fascist presence in the white suburban and rural areas. In other cities, white supremacists are very willing to murder demonstrators. It is only a matter of time before they try that here so those of us who can be armed, should be. However, this will be difficult, because there is no open carry in Illinois.

New Afrikan anarchists want the end of this anti-black world. No mayor or politician will ever grant that to us. It can only be granted through the actions taken with our own hands.

Subsequent from May 30th, there has been a failure by the organizers and participants to build and grow, which has led to diminished turnout. However, the sit-in outside of the jail and the noise demonstration on July 4th which both took place at night have taken the most revolutionary character with militants taking autonomous action to throw up street art and burn flags. Night marches may be tactically more advantageous when it comes to escalating things as the most militant actions have taken place at night. Protestors recently did a noise demonstration late at night outside of the Mayor's house on July 25th in solidarity with Portland and to push the demand of dropping charges of people arrested on May 30th. This was a particularly effective tactic. Although the West Side and Downtown has many sites of State power (City Hall, District 1, and Winnebago County Jail), the East side is where all of the Capital in the city is.

The decentralization of the protests has also aided in the city being unable to pinpoint a leader in order to stop the protests from continuing. The police in this city do not have experience handling protest so anarchists and rebels must seize on this opportunity to employ decentralized and varied tactics. People should continue to form affinity groups and autonomous collectives rather than listening to protest leaders. Many of the militants involved in organizing protests have been averse to meeting with politicians. This should continue. There is no point in meeting with bourgeois politicians at all regardless of whether or not they will meet demands. In a revolutionary view, there is no demand that the city can grant that should drive people out of the streets. New Afrikan anarchists want the end of this anti-black world. No mayor or politician will ever grant that to us. It can only be granted through the actions taken with our own hands.

Due to how car-oriented and spread out this city is, integration of cars into demonstrations and subsequent uprisings will be essential for keeping people safe. There was some integration of cars with autonomous individuals driving around and looting. Some of the marches were very long and there were rightly many concerns about accessibility for folks who could not walk for miles. We need to integrate cars into longer marches or develop routes that are more accessible. Part of this is developing more concrete plans of action that extend beyond simply disruption. These tactics have been effective with the targeting of the mayor and the jail in night marches called for by Rockford Youth Abolitionists as mentioned previously.

On Revolutionary Organization, Ideology and Strategy

The major challenge that Rockford as a city is facing is the lack of black revolutionary organization. There are no organizations in this city with an analysis similar to the Black Panther Party or the Black Autonomy Federation. However, there are groups and individuals which front as if they are coming from that tradition. Building organizations engaged in political education and mutual aid is the most important thing to do coming out of this moment. Organization is not synonymous with hierarchical, Statist, authoritarian, or oppressive forms of organization. Revolutionaries must be willing to build decentralized organization that can take on the State in every capacity. The few collectives and informal networks that exist in Rockford have provided an essential base to keep the protest movement going.

One group, the May 30th Alliance has done demonstrations outside of Rockford City Market, which has lead to it closing. This tactic has been particularly effective. The crowds at these demonstrations have been smaller but the vibes have still been very disruptive and abolitionist. The City Market is an event that began in 2010. It has been a part of the effort by city leaders to gentrify downtown to make it more attractive to businesses, white professionals and white people from out of town. The choice to target City Market in a sustained fashion is very effective. It is clearly upsetting the white power structure. On July 31st and August 1st, there were more arrests albeit these arrests occurred due to protestors blocking East State Street and due to clashes between “Blue Lives Matter” demonstrators on August 1st aided by the police. The “non-violent” nature of these arrests has lead to more supportive from mostly white professionals to provide legal and financial support.

Revolutionaries in Rockford need to be engaging in political education and deepening our own mutual aid/community defense networks as the economic crisis continues to deepen.

There is no reason for demonstrators to put themselves on a platter for State repression as some protest leaders have indicated. It is not the 1960s in a small Alabama town. The non-violence of the 1960s did not exist in a vacuum. They can fill these jails up and they have been charging demonstrators with felonies. Demonstrators should try to avoid arrest at all costs. There will be more revolt in the next few months as a result of anger around elections and continued economic insecurity, we do not want our people to be tied up in charges when that happens.

Revolutionaries in Rockford need to be engaging in political education and deepening our own mutual aid/community defense networks as the economic crisis continues to deepen. There were a few teach-ins in early June which were very successful in building relationships and bonds. In terms of political education, focusing upon deepening a local analysis of racial capitalism as it relates to the police and the prisons is going to be very essential in our city. The protests here although they are very abolitionist in their rhetoric and character do not seem to have fully developed class-consciousness. There has been no explicit critique of capitalism by these organizations. There needs to be deep development of political education around the tactics utilized by radicals and security culture. Both of these elements seem to be deeply lacking in the current moment which has made repression of the State more effective as participants are not doing enough to guard themselves and one another from repression.

Revolutionaries and anarchists must form our own affinity groups so protest leaders or organizations with large Facebook followings do not dictate our actions or tactics. Decentralize our

action. There are a lot of people here calling for defunding and abolition of the police however it does not seem that abolition has translated into the day to day practice of many protestors. Recently, the zine *If You See Something, Do Something: 12 Things to Do Instead of Calling the Police*, has been distributed locally at events. This is good. There must be more education developed locally on creating our own abolitionist networks to deal with harm without the police. Much of the rhetoric online is still very carceral and Statist such as the calls to report and work with the police to track down racists. Too many protestors have been talking to the police at demonstrations despite claiming to be abolitionist. Talking to pigs does not keep us safe. Rockford must build cultures of non-cooperation.

The May 30th Alliance organization despite some of the more disruptive actions does not seem to be truly invested in a revolutionary strategy. Some of the members actively talk or negotiate with the police at actions for “safety” purposes. This is really discouraging behavior from a group that claims an abolitionist perspective. The organization is not actively counter-revolutionary but rather many of the people involved seem to be still going through political transformation. If the group is truly invested in tactical non-violence, they should be creating workshops to train folks in NVDA tactics. There is a real lack of training in that regard locally. Much of the rhetoric of that group and their supporters is similar to the Black Lives Matter movement back in 2014 to 2016. It is frustrating because the issue is that Rockford never experienced a Black Lives Matter moment, so many of the proposals and actions taken in this city feel 4 or 5 years behind. The use of “die ins,” the “we are not our ancestors,” and so-called “revolutionary” non-violence are all in play here. The issue is that we must move past the Black Lives Matter moment. Voting some candidates out next year is not the same as insurrection or true revolution. Despite this, the broad acceptance of abolitionist frameworks to some degree is encouraging.

On the Class and Racial Character

Racially, the demonstrations have been black lead but multi-racial in their composition. Black abolitionist organization has been key to advancing the movement. There has been an attempt to cast the protests as white-lead. This is very wrong. A revolutionary movement must center black people and black struggle. Specifically, the most marginalized black people must be centered. Black trans people and black women must be at the center of our movements. That has been a struggle here with the lack of black queer radical formations. There has not been enough emphasis on the particular oppression of black women and black queer people in the educational sessions or rallies. The cis-hetero black male leadership whether radical or liberal has been more averse to escalation against the State and Capital than the participants who were not from that background.

This struggle has clearly defined the lines of the class and political struggle in Rockford. Fundamentally in this moment, the black working class revolted for a day against the black misleadership class or black middle class aided by a group of multi-racial radicals with black leadership. The sustained protests afterwards have continued to shake up the city although it is unclear whether or not the leaders of these protests are “rebels for reform” or revolutionaries as Robert L Allen describes in his book *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*. As mentioned previously, the calls for reform may be important to further radicalize but revolutionaries must oppose reform as the end goal.

There has also been a large amount of participation from white working class people and youth. The first demonstration had a lot of involvement from the Latino community in Rockford, however the failure of organizers to link the anti-black violence of the police to the violence of ICE against the Latino community has depressed turnout a bit. There needs to be more alliance building. Generally though, there have been a good number of Latino militants involved. Perhaps a black and brown unity march through the south east side would be a good way to build relationships in the future.

There is not a political base for the abolitionists yet. It must be built.

In terms of class character, the first day many black folks from the hood came out. The protests continued to have some mass character but at this point, the marches consist of predominantly the same group of traditionally political or activist types (this group ranges from radical to liberal in orientation). This was definitely because of the pivot towards non-violence after the first demonstration. It is clear that this move alienated many working class people as well as some anarchist militants. The cross section of support of the demonstrations is truly interesting. At this point in the struggle, the demonstrations have become predominantly white in racial makeup. This isn't necessarily a bad thing but it points to the lack of connection between the black protest leadership and the black working class. There is not a political base for the abolitionists yet. It must be built.

Conclusion

A revolutionary movement in Rockford must emerge through mutual aid and political education alongside revolt, which is the work that some of the groups in the city have been undertaking. Revolutionaries must be cynical about the possibilities for any type of reform. However, the failures to achieve actual reform in this area will only push the revolutionary consciousness further so perhaps making demands such as "defund the police" and then have those things fail to materialize will force people to understand the need for revolution and complete social transformation. Reactionary politicians and reactionary police who are supported by an armed base of reactionary supporters control the County. The only way forward in my view towards actual abolition will demand revolutionary action. That necessitates that we build structures and affinity to revolt against the State in the next moment. Finally, as abolitionists, we need to start deepening our resistance to Winnebago County Jail through building and strengthening systems of support for people locked up. Prisoners make up one of the most revolutionary segments of our society and the lack of attention to the conditions in Winnebago County Jail in the midst protests has been a problem.

There is no one way forward. Resistance will look different from region to region. That is an idea that many radicals do not understand yet. At the same moment, revolutionaries have to remain principled to our values as anarchists committed to black liberation and decolonization.

Recommended Reading

Theses on the George Floyd Rebellion by Shemon and Arturo
On the Black Leadership and Other White Myths: A Communiqué from the streets of New York
by We Still Outside Collective
The Rise of Black Counter Insurgency by Shemon
Black Awakening in Capitalist America by Robert L Allen
Anarkata: A Statement
Reparations as a Verb by Salish Sea Black Autonomists
Burn Down the American Plantation by the Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement
The Wretched of the Earth by Franz Fanon
Black Fighting Formations by Russell Maroon Shoatz
Black Marxism by Cedric Robinson

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