

How Fast It All Blows Up

Some lessons from the 2001 Cincinnati riots

Claustrophobia Collective

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Contents

Black People Have a Right to Rebel	3
Cincinnati's Black rebellion exposes U.S. racial injustice	5
ANATOMY OF A REVOLT	5
VICIOUS POLICE REPRESSION	6
TWO WORLDS OF MASSES VS. LEADERS	7
WHERE TO NOW?	8
From uprising to recuperation	9
HOW FAST IT ALL BLOWS UP	9
"I WANNA RIOT... A RIOT OF MY OWN"	10
WHY RIOT? WHY NOT? JUST DO IT	11
THE RACE TO CALL IT A RACE RIOT	12
OUTSIDE INTERVENTIONS	13
BACKLASH POLITICS	14
BUILDING WORKING-CLASS SOLIDARITY	16
HOW QUICKLY THINGS FALL BACK INTO PLACE	17

Black People Have a Right to Rebel

A massive anti-cop rebellion has broken out in Cincinnati over the police shootings of 15 Black men, ranging in ages of 12-44 years old, all unarmed. The latest case of Timothy Thomas, a 19-year old brother, allegedly wanted for misdemeanor traffic offenses, was gunned down last week by a crazed white cop. The Black community has risen up in a massive protest against this racist occupying army, poverty, and other forms of mistreatment. Now, we are being told by various White politicians and their paid Uncle Toms that even more massive police violence should be trained on us "to keep the peace", and "stop the violence". Not the cop violence and murder, which has gone on for years, but the current rebellion by our people against police forces.

I have heard this garbage for years. Going back to the 1965 Watts rebellion, when Black folks rebelled after years of LAPD racist brutality, it was a line put forth by the white ruling class and its Negro spokespersons that we were "torching our own neighborhoods". Never mind that we didn't own a damn thing in the ghetto, that it was the cops themselves shooting and torching Black homes, and that this was a clearly a struggle with deep roots in historical oppression, the government's line was duly picked up by the negrosie, and passed off as "truth", along with "the police right to stop looters" and "we need peace". Not about justice justice, not about stopping police murders of our people, but that we must stop our resistance against our oppressors. That is their only concern, restoring "law and order."

We are an oppressed people, who have the moral and political right to rebel. We are fighting oppression, and seeking freedom. We are opposing terrorism by military agents of the white government. We have been historically enslaved, and our youth are being imprisoned and killed in massive numbers, so we must fight back or become an extinct species. There are those who say that if we will only be "peaceful" those in power will listen to us. This has never happened, and truthfully none of the civil rights bills of the 1960's outlawing Southern segregation, and other concessions of that period, would have been passed if the white government was not afraid of Black people erupting in the streets. So street rebellion is effective.

Neither I nor anyone else can say with complete accuracy, but I think we can soon expect to see other such rebellions in various American cities because similar contradictions exists, and even more murderous police forces guard the white rich of those places. For example, Detroit is a city which could go up at any time. It leads the USA in the number of fatal police shootings of civilians, most of whom are Black. It has a corrupt government, which allows violence by police, drug-peddling, robbery, and other offenses by officers. There are Detroit officers, like Eugene Brown, who have killed several persons, and yet never been punished. He is protected by the Mayor and the police union. Although worse in Detroit, police brutality goes on all over the country, along with political coverups to protect them. I hear white folks and middle class negroes say that if we arm ourselves and resist, "even more of us will be killed." I don't propose individual resistance, but rather community defense, and I believe then we will talk about funerals on both sides.

Our task, as an oppressed people, is to work to overthrow white supremacy and capitalist rule. That is the true nature of this government, not a so-called democracy" where we can expect fair

treatment. This system is based on and maintained by our oppression. This is why I believe that the task of Black radicals is not to call for new federal legislation, an FBI investigation, or a citizen review board. We must educate our people about the truth of this system, and begin to build a mass resistance movement against racism and internal colonialism. This resistance should be by any means necessary, and we must have an armed self-defense policy. I have always rejected pacifism. We must seek to build dual power base, and begin to win over the masses of the people, build a militia to protect it, and push the police and white government out of the community entirely. We must begin to govern ourselves, and create a new zone of Black power. The activists have got to stop looking in from the outside and doing all our organizing on the comfortable college campuses or suburbs, and begin to organize in the impoverished neighborhoods where the action is taking place. As activists, we have got to stop waiting on crises like the Cincinnati rebellion, and begin to set up organizing projects to make sure they don't happen, and when they do we can effectively retaliate. Yes, we have a right to rebel in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and anywhere else we are oppressed.

We are a class of poor and oppressed peoples who are fighting capitalism and racism all over the world. We are not alone, and when we fight we will find that the people of the world support our struggle.

Cincinnati's Black rebellion exposes U.S. racial injustice

Cincinnati, Ohio—"When I heard about the murder of Timothy Thomas I got together with a few friends in the park to talk about what happened. More and more people began showing up and in less than an hour a few hundred were gathered around, talking and arguing. It was incredible, out of nowhere people came out and wanted to do something. Everyone is fed up with the cops, the racial profiling, the abuse. I was amazed at how fast this thing grew. It was like a spark went off in people's minds, all at once. It was like, this is enough, no more, we're going to do something."

This is what a 20-year-old Black resident of the Walnut Hills neighborhood of Cincinnati told me about his participation in the protests which erupted after the murder of 19-year-old Timothy Thomas by a white cop on April 7. Thomas was the fifteenth man gunned down by Cincinnati police in the last six years. Every one was Black. Thomas, who was unarmed, was killed when Stephen Roach shot him through his chest. Roach was trying to arrest Thomas for having 14 outstanding warrants—all of them for misdemeanor offenses, 12 for traffic violations, five of those for not wearing a seat belt.

Though racial profiling, harassment, and murder of Blacks by the police has become an everyday fact of life in this country, Cincinnati included, the events which followed Thomas' death were anything but normal. The ensuing events represented one of those unusual moments when the everyday becomes extraordinary, when what is considered normal suddenly becomes the object of discussion, argument, and critique. In response to Thomas' death, Black Cincinnati exploded in the most massive urban upheaval since the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992.

ANATOMY OF A REVOLT

Cincinnati is no newcomer to police abuse, racism, and disenfranchisement. It is one of the most segregated cities in America, and its mainly white police force is notorious for a long history of abuse against African Americans who make up 43% of the city's populace. Last November another Black man, Roger Owensby Jr., was strangled to death while in police custody. In mid-March the ACLU and Cincinnati Black United Front filed a lawsuit charging the police department with 30 years of illegally targeting and harassing Blacks on the basis of race. Still, no one anticipated the explosion which erupted after the killing of Timothy Thomas.

As news spread of his death, several hundred mainly Black protesters, including Thomas' mother, came to City Hall on Monday, April 9. It became a clash between two different worlds. Police Chief Streicher refused to apologize for the killing, saying the police thought that Thomas was armed. Mayor Charlie Luken acknowledged the city's "racial problems" but denied that had anything to do with Thomas' death. City Council members said there was little they could do since the city charter limits their power to hire or fire police chiefs.

Angered at these responses, the crowd proceeded to take over City Hall. Windows were smashed, the American flag was removed from the flagpole and turned upside down, and the mayor was forced to leave via the back door. Hundreds more protesters arrived at City Hall that night. As the crowd swelled to 1,000, they marched to the central police station. At midnight the police fired tear gas and beanbags filled with metal pellets to disperse the crowd.

The next day 20 youth held a protest at the corner of Vine and 13th Streets. The crowd soon swelled into the hundreds. Many then marched to Findlay Market, throwing rocks at police, breaking into stores, clearing out shelves. By the evening a full scale urban revolt (dubbed "riot" by the press) was underway. Though merchants who gouged the community were a target, most of the anger was directed at the police. At 10 p.m. the police substation at Montgomery Road and Woodburn Avenue was set ablaze.

Byron Jones, 30, of Bond Hill, who joined protesters as they made their way through downtown and Over-the-Rhine (the neighborhood in which Thomas was shot) said what happened Tuesday was "the only way to get their attention. We've asked and we've asked and we've asked. We're not going to ask anymore."

A Black youth who took part in the revolt told me, "I decided to do something because what happened to Timothy Thomas could've happened to every Black I know. How many white 19-year-olds have been stopped and ticketed five times for not wearing a seat belt? How many whites have to worry about being shot by a cop on their way home from buying a pack of cigarettes? We've got to tell them we are not going to let this continue."

VICIOUS POLICE REPRESSION

The police responded with brute force. Enya Kirksey, a 23-year-old and three months pregnant, was shot by police with rubber bullets as she was trying to get to her home near Washington Park. Leroy Pearson, 52, was standing outside his Elm Street apartment with his three grandchildren when police told him to move. When he refused, saying this was his home, he was shot four times with rubber projectiles. Dozens more were injured and hundreds arrested.

Yet the unrest continued. On Wednesday, April 11, it spread from downtown and Over-the-Rhine to other Black areas like Evanston, Avondale, Walnut Hills, and the West End.

Faced with this, Mayor Luken imposed martial law and an 8 p.m.-to-6 a.m. curfew on April 12. He stated, "The situation has become unthinkable; it's like Beirut." It would have been more accurate to say the West Bank or Gaza Strip. Hundreds of youth in red and blue bandannas throwing rocks at police...stores and shops ablaze...cops firing off rubber bullets and beanbag projectiles at 11- and 12-year-olds...whole areas sealed off from the rest of the city by a wall of shotgun-toting cops...it COULD have been the Middle East.

Yet the situation was distinctively "American." It was a response to the constant racial profiling by police that has affected virtually every man, woman and child in the Black community. It was a response to a social reality in which 40% are unemployed in Over-the-Rhine, compared to 4% in Cincinnati as a whole. It was a response to the gutting of public housing, education, and welfare. Only blocks from where Thomas was shot public housing is being torn down. Recently the state sent letters to Ohio's welfare recipients warning them that their benefits will be cut off in 36 months. This is the social context of the revolt which broke out in response to Thomas' murder.

While the imposition of martial law and the curfew got people off the streets, it did not silence the revolt. Meetings, forums, and protests continue to be held. They have exposed not only the chasm separating the African-American community from the white power structure, but also the division of the Black masses from Black political leadership.

TWO WORLDS OF MASSES VS. LEADERS

At Thomas' funeral on April 14, an array of Black political officials spoke of "restoring civil peace" in Cincinnati. Rev. Damon Lynch III of Cincinnati's Black United Front called on several city officials to be fired, adding, "There is enough violence in our city right now without us adding to it." Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP called for changes in the city's power structure but urged the youth to "remain calm." Jamal Muhammed of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam said, "Don't get angry and tear up your neighborhood. Get angry and register to vote."

The youth who spearheaded the week of actions, however, had a decidedly different perspective. As one declared at a rally following the funeral, "These preachers and politicians are the same ones who a week ago were calling us undisciplined and shiftless. But if it weren't for what we did over the last few days, no one would even be here to listen to them. We're the ones who did something by taking over the streets, but you don't hear about us now. I'm tired of all their talk."

Darryl, a Black man living in Over-the-Rhine, said, "The Black leadership and civil rights organizations are trying to quiet everything down, but it's not working. You can't quiet this down so easily. Many here don't have a job. Almost everyone has had some run-in with the law. After you get out of jail, it's almost impossible to get a good paying job. Then they turn it around and say because you have a record, it's all your fault. There needs to be a change, because if it doesn't change, things are going to get a lot scarier than what we saw this week."

The separation of the youth from Black political leadership was reflected in the virtual absence of any established political organization in the street protests. All of the posters and placards at the protests that I saw before and after Thomas' funeral were handmade, by local residents. They included: "If my son runs, will you kill him too?"; "Stop killing Blacks or else"; "No peace and no police"; "Bush is part of this too—he belongs with the cops."

The chasm between masses and leaders came out sharply at a forum held April 16 at New Friendship Baptist Church in Avondale, after the curfew was lifted. Dozens of Black teenagers, emboldened by their actions of the past week, said the established community leaders don't speak for them. "The older generation could have prevented this," said Derrick Blassingame, age 14, president of the newly formed Black Youth Coalition Against Civil Injustice. "Our leaders are not leading us. Some of our Black leaders just want their faces on TV. They are in this for four things only: reputation, power, politics and money."

The emergence of such voices gives the lie to those who claim that the "riots" were "disorganized," chaotic, without reason or direction. As in Los Angeles 1992, we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of revolt, resistance, and self-organization which point us beyond the parameters of existing political structures.

When people move to tear up a world that doesn't belong to them, that is hostile to them; when they come together in collective action on the streets; when they take commodities from the shelves without paying—why is this not recognized as an act of liberation, as a drive toward

something new, as a refusal to accept what is? It is that REASON which needs to be developed and discussed—not a condemnation of the masses’ activity or a mere ”solidarity” with it based on tactics.

Cincinnati shows that the struggle to be free is real, is as much a part of the actuality of this world as its opposite—the stifling oppression we all live under. The concrete content, the self-development gained through confrontation with oppressive conditions and internal contradictions, is the point of departure for any further meaningful development.

WHERE TO NOW?

The recent events in Cincinnati will not easily be forgotten. The power structure has been forced to at least pretend to listen to some complaints of the Black community, as seen in Mayor Luken’s announcement on April 17 that he will form a race relations commission to explore problems in housing, employment, education, and police abuse.

Such commissions have been formed before, and it is very doubtful that much will come of it. But much can come from the new consciousness generated by the revolt. Its development can provide a new basis for opposing this oppressive system and projecting a genuine alternative to it.

In this sense, it is worthwhile to recall the last time major arrests of protesters occurred in Cincinnati. It was last November when 53 anti-globalization activists were arrested for ”vandalism” at the Transatlantic Business Dialogue conference, a group which brought together 100 executives from the U.S. and West Europe to recommend lower trade barriers. That protest may seem a world away from the revolt in the Black community. And yet the revolt of Black masses is not so far from the globalization of capital as it may seem.

No sector of U.S. society has been more negatively affected by the globalization of capital than Black America. Capital’s ability to migrate overseas in search of low wages goes hand in hand with deindustrialization and the mass displacement of Black labor at home. Capital’s increased mobility has also led to the flight of industries from urban areas like Cincinnati to rural areas and the South. Moreover, the cutting of welfare and other social services in the U.S. is a form of ”structural adjustment” long known to Third World countries.

Racism is an integral part of this logic of capitalist accumulation. The gutting of jobs, public housing, welfare, and the growth of homelessness, prison construction, and police abuse all flow from the specific strategy employed by U.S. capital for the past two decades.

In hitting out against these conditions, the Black masses of Cincinnati have challenged a central dynamic of capital itself. Their actions call upon us all to deepen our consciousness of the nature of capital and the alternative to it. In lieu of that, anger at existing conditions risks consuming itself in opposing the many forms of oppression, without ever getting to articulate what the revolt is for.

As Marx wrote long ago, ”We do not tell the world, ’Cease your struggles, they are stupid; we want to give you the true watchword of the struggle.’ We merely show the world why it actually struggles; and consciousness is something that the world MUST acquire even if it does not want to.”

From uprising to recuperation

HOW FAST IT ALL BLOWS UP

"What's up everybody got some news for you from lovely sin city. We're sure everyone has heard the news about our glorious riot. Well here's some inside info for you. Let us start with a little history for you. 15 African American males have been murdered at the hands of the Cincinnati police department since 1995. Six of those murders have occurred since September. The murder of Timothy Thomas was simply the last straw. Timothy was a 19 year old who had a fiancé and a new baby girl. His only crime was a few traffic misdemeanors which included the horrible offense of driving without a seat belt. He also had numerous citations for driving without a license however on the police reports that was the only offense that was written up for why he was stopped. I ask how can a cop stop you for driving without a license they wouldn't know you didn't have a license until after they stopped you, driving while black maybe?

"The community of Over-The-Rhine (which is one of the most neglected areas in the city) has a long history of incidents of this nature. It is where the murder took place as well as the majority of the protest. Over the Rhine borders the downtown business district on the northern side. Over the past 15 years the people of the OTR community have been pushed farther and farther back to make room for trendy bars who sell \$8 drinks to yuppies and \$35,000 lofts for those business people who simply want to live downtown. The people of Cincinnati have plenty to be angry about.

"The shit finally hit the fan on Mon. April 9, 2001. We simply thought we was going to another boring old city council meeting, maybe this one would be a little rowdier since Timothy was just murdered, but my hopes weren't too high. Damn, was I wrong. City council was packed, people were flowing out into the hall and everyone was angry. We all wanted the same thing - ANSWERS!!! Why did this happen...again? But of course no answers were given. The idea was come upon to hold city council; until we got those answers, no one was to leave including and especially council. This idea was kind of crushed when news reached us inside that all of city hall was surrounded by cops in riot gear. Also no one had really prepared to stay there ahead of time and it just didn't seem to be an effective tactic.

"The idea was brought up in the meeting that this was not over and that they were not satisfied with the cities lack of answers. A march to the police district one headquarters was the new idea. The march consisted of about 80 people primarily youth however there were a few hard-core old fogies as well. Once at district one the American flag was promptly taken down and re hung inverted to show a lack of respect for a racist classist city council and pig department. We then continued to the site of

the heinous police murder. Chanting the NWA song Fuck the POLICE, we continued along picking up numbers as we moved, then we were joined by cars with low end bump blaring the crowds rage. After about two and a half hours of marching, we settled once again in front of District One blocking off both streets and occupying the median. Then came out the BLUNTS... for a giant block wide smoke in which the line of sixty riot cops were forced by numbers to overlook. It was good. The night wore on this way until about 12:15am when the crowd had thinned out enough that the cops felt like they could attack. They charged the people with their horses so of course everyone ran the opposite direction straight into an ambush of rubber bullets. Apparently there were SWAT cops hiding behind us just waiting. If they thought the people were pissed before...

"Tues. April 10, it was all over. We took our city back. The streets of downtown were filled with trash and glass, there were no more windows and every single newspaper box was laying in the street. It was an anarchists wet dream. Cars were rollin down the street (and sidewalk) bumpin with people covering them. The march made it's way to our fountain square (the very spot the klan puts their cross up every year). The cars were then driven up on fountain square and all the chairs were promptly thrown into the fountain. Everyone then proceeded to the stage area, lined up and threw up the power to the people fist. I know it sounds corny but it was mad powerful to be there. The march then retreated down an external storefront lined hallway that echoed the magnificent sound of shattering glass. The day continued in this fashion until darkness fell and then the city burned. How glorious."

The following day, as the protests got even rowdier, the white liberals stepped in with their "peace march" and press conference to try and reclaim the initiative. However, there was just too much energy to divert, or more likely, the organizers just had next to zero support in the communities that were keeping the protests alive. There was even an idea pushed by CHE (Citizens for a Humane Economy), the left-liberal group trying to take over the protests, to limit the press conference to WHITE speakers to be acceptable to liberal suburbanites, but the radical momentum of the protests made this impossible.

"That night shit got kind of heavy; the media had been pushing that this was a race riot even though it was not, we were on the streets every day with the people in the thick of the shit and all we got was hugs and support. However by Weds. night people were coming down that had not been there from the beginning believing it was a race riot so some people did get hurt. Out of all the violence that did occur throughout the whole riot 99.9% of it was done by the cops and .1% was by the people."

"I WANNA RIOT... A RIOT OF MY OWN"

The history we have here is only partial, and we're certainly not in the best position to write it. Our purpose is just to tie some of the threads of stories together concerning the Cincinnati riots and draw out the lessons for those like us looking for a way to push the envelope during events

like this. Riots are opportunities - not just for 'us', but for our enemies as well. They're opportunities for the police to take advantage of the fear and hysteria created by the disturbances and further militarize themselves, in the immediate instance and for the future. They're opportunities for white power groups to recruit in white working class and middle class neighborhoods. And they're also opportunities for all levels of reformers, bureaucrats, and other self-appointed saviors to grab the nearest soap box and tout their services to one and all.

The riots were a wake-up call; a clear sign of a desperate crisis situation in the ghetto and the near-total absence of believable leadership - whether revolutionary or cooptive - to avoid mass protests. There is nothing particularly unique about the people of Cincinnati, there are plenty of cities where police have killed, beaten, and tortured as many if not more people. Any city could have sparked protests just as easily, and if our observations are on point, several other cities may well see similar protests over the next few years. The word on the streets right away was talking about a "hot summer"; only time will tell but it's a safe bet to try and be prepared for it in the months and years to come.

What we're trying to do here is bring together and contribute our thoughts to discussions that have been happening among our networks - predominantly white radicals organized around working-class centered anti-racist politics - about the possibilities for offering meaningful solidarity and support in a riot situation. Maybe the next time the black community throws up mass protests like this, we'll have thought things through and be in a position to support things better. We're hoping especially to reach people who find themselves in similar positions, but we welcome criticism or dialogue from any perspective.

WHY RIOT? WHY NOT? JUST DO IT

Over the last decade or so, the "zero tolerance" school of policing first introduced in Giuliani's NYC has spread to dozens of other cities, including Cincinnati. Police forces which have converted to the "New York model", along with the introduction of a new chief or FOP president trained in New York, emphasize tighter discipline in the ranks and an increased independence of the police as a political force in the city's politics. This means that police "partnerships" with social service agencies, drug treatment facilities, etc., are being neglected or dropped, states attorney's offices are being pressured to reorganize their priorities for prosecutions in line with police strategies, and that ghetto areas (especially those with real estate potentials) are targeted with relentless zero-tolerance pig saturation. Although this development came mainly from within the police force itself with support from city politicians, recent supporting state and federal initiatives, like Bush's plan to make all handgun charges federal crimes, are like the federal government's seal of approval.

The most obvious result of this program on street level is the increase in police/community confrontations. Nearly all the cities where the program has been introduced have seen an increase in police shootings of civilians. And while in earlier times killer cops were occasionally sacrificed to community outrage, the new police forces are refusing to break ranks on this issue. Rather, there are widely publicized prosecutions of 'corrupt' cops - the message being that the cops are 'dealing with their problems', so there should be no reason for community oversight. Cincinnati FOP head Keith Fangman's insistence that 'there are no rogue nazis on the Cincinnati police force' makes sense in this light: of course there are nazis, but when it comes to the day-to-day business

of harassing and shooting black kids, they're not going it alone anymore. We've been studying what this has meant in Baltimore, and the analysis can be applied lots of other places as well.

The anti-cop sentiment in the ghetto has all kinds of roots, but for our purposes its easiest to understand it as the identifying mark of a more general struggle in the black community against the state's micro-management of everyday life. Just on a basic level, the degree which the state regulates every aspect of life today - from mandatory parenting classes and child-support enforcement to probation programs and workfare to uniformed cops in schools - is maybe unprecedented in recent memory and resistance to it is really just starting to move beyond the isolated and unarticulated subtext to a solid antagonism. (None of this is strictly a 'black' phenomenon, but in any of the programs mentioned above, there'll be probably a dozen blacks for every one poor white caught up in the system. And, too, the white people living this reality tend to speak 'black' when they're trying to describe it - 'white' english just doesn't have concepts for a lot of the things you need to say.)

Now all along we've been thinking of our role as white anarchists as trying to bring together two radical cultures of protest, to bring the strength of the 'black bloc' and radical direct action contingents that have successfully fought riot police at anti-capitalist demonstrations over the past few years to support the much quicker and more intense street fighting that flares up against police in the ghetto. We realize this is a completely new direction for many of the participants in the direct-action movement, and a lack of political sophistication in most of our understandings of the dynamics of class and race makes any meaningful intervention difficult. But as the anarchist movement grows in strength and confidence, these kinds of alliances on the ground are crucial if we want to be a real force in upcoming struggles. Actually, the synchronicity between the Cincinnati uprising and the anti-globalization protest in Quebec was interesting because in a sense there is a real parallel between the developments of the two struggles - the all-encompassing nature of a common enemy and the empowerment of massive street actions in both cases being the catalysts that helped bring together a new front of alliances of previously isolated organizations and struggles.

THE RACE TO CALL IT A RACE RIOT

From the first word, the events in Cincinnati were put in the context of a "race riot". Happening in an American city such a description has an inevitable amount of truth to it. A lot of people on the streets saw themselves as fighting the oppressor white society (which, it shouldn't need to be said, is not quite the same as fighting against white people). And of course Timothy Thomas probably would have never been shot in the first place if he had been "white". But a few random attacks against white passersby in the midst of a full out attack on yuppie property and the police does not turn this into a race riot. America knows how to throw a race riot. Check out 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1943 Detroit, 1898 Baltimore, and so on and so on, where masses of whites and blacks fought it out in the streets. The only race riot in Cincinnati was "black against blue"..

Through the first days of the uprising, at least a couple mainly white crews took part in the street actions, and didn't report having any serious conflicts over racial issues. When the protests were just about saying fuck a cop, there was a natural unity between pissed-off black kids and at least a few pissed-off white kids. But in the alleys of Over-the-Rhine and the project complexes of the West End, that pretty quickly connected to a much deeper anger that the white kids couldn't

keep up with. Still, even though a general anti-white attitude was most definitely part of the anger that fueled the riots, its not necessarily true that the mass feeling was racial as opposed to class-based. A few organizations organized around narrow nationalist politics may have played a leadership role in the rebellion and took the spotlight on account of their strength and discipline, but the majority of protestors probably weren't so rigid in their thinking.

"As far as the 'Race War' aspects there have been some problems. 2 R&R [Refuse & Resist] kids got a really bad beatdown from some rather angry black teenagers in separate incidents and had to be hospitalized briefly. People are in fact being pulled from their cars and having their asses kicked. However this feature of whats going on is far from a dominant aspect of whats going on. But dont deny that its there. White Radicals now are not in the fighting at night because of this danger at the advice of Black Radicals who feel like they can no longer protect folks. [But] by and large folks on the ground in OTR are resisting on a class rather than race basis on their own without having to hear a book out of the mouth of college radicals about the nessecity of doing so."

As the days went on, the large crowds got dispersed and the 'rioting' was carried on by smaller crews of friends. This period coincided with the police containment of things to a few black neighborhoods where any damage done was of little concern. Each of these factors made it difficult for any sympathetic protestors from outside ground zero to continue to take part, which would account for most white protestors. This fracturing and isolation of the protests was probably the key police strategy and remains a real barrier to extending the power of these events next time.

OUTSIDE INTERVENTIONS

This situation raises the question of what role outsiders, particularly white outsiders, could play in trying to support the riots. Just being involved on the streets would be plenty inspiring and exciting, but there are a lot of other things that could be done as well. We're aware of a few different outside interventions during and after the Cinci riots, with varying results.

On Saturday, the day of Timothy Thomas's funeral, an attempt was made on the part of Anti-Racist Action/Black Bloc veterans to hit the streets in support of the community struggle. The crew however was spotted by police helicopter 'looking too much like anarchists', rounded up and robbed by cops within ten minutes of their feet touching ground. Keep in mind this was one of the tensest days since the main fighting died down - on the same day a SWAT team rolled up on people walking peacefully from the church where the funeral was held, and with no warning, opened fire with 'bean bag bullets', then drove off without identifying themselves.

The riots also brought out the graf writers who no doubt saw a chance to get up like crazy as well as offer their skills to the moment. After being asked to borrow cans and markers on so many occassions by neighborhood kids, some writers came back with crates of supplies and handed them out in Washington Park with much success. Graffiti played a minor but important role in supporting the rebellions throughout - like a street-level Independant Media Center - from helping put out the community's messages against the police during the uprising to painting swastikas on the FOP building weeks later to draw attention to the welcome given by police to white supremacist groups.

There are some basic rules we would draw out as anti-authoritarians. An obvious mistake to avoid is the typical white leftist arrogance of trying to propagandize the people actively resisting. There will always be locals to defend the neighborhood's interests, and hopefully there will arise revolutionary black leadership that can articulate the politics of the rebellion and organize in its aftermath. We should be on the ground hearing the word from the rebellion - both from the 'radicals', the neighborhood kids with red bandanas on the street, and the older civilian elements of the communities. Any alliances we make should be based on the mood we understand coming from the community as a whole. The desire to make alliances with 'respectable leadership' just to have some way of being involved in the situation is understandable, but it doesn't help anything in the long run. And the backward politics of some of the alliances that get made on these terms end up trivializing the demands of the protests themselves.

Plenty of solidarity actions can also be taking place outside the areas where rioting is happening to great effect. Some well-planned targets can put the rebellion in context to good effect without interfering, like the spraypainting of the FOP building mentioned earlier. And in this and many other cases, there is a clear cause-and-effect between white yuppies gentrifying the ghetto to have their snobby overpriced clubs and their artists lofts, and the fact that cops are shooting black kids on sight to "keep the neighborhood safe". Something that surely didn't escape the attention of the black protestors who smashed every window on gentrified Main Street during the rebellion, but the media did everything possible to ignore. There's gotta be a way to turn up the heat on these spots. Ain't that supposed to be what anarchists do best?

BACKLASH POLITICS

Of course predictably enough, the right wing spent a lot of time taking the news media to task for playing DOWN the racial aspects of the riots. A report by a local militia leader and former head of the Libertarian Party claims:

"Most everyone outside the Cincinnati area was treated to tightly edited footage of what appeared to be integrated crowds of blacks and whites. What actually happened was that a few local white Socialists and Communist activists joined in the rioting and later were reinforced by white leftist activists from outside the city and even the region. The national media then went to work editing the footage to make it look very much unlike what it really was - a RACE RIOT..."

See, the radical right wing knows how to manipulate white fears and racial tensions to their advantage. Look at the recent troubles going on in northern England, where white supremacists and Pakistanis fight each other in the streets and the only clear winners are the fascist Nationalist Party. What happened in Cincinnati was a completely different situation, but if its allowed to be seen as a black vs. white 'race riot', then it fits perfectly into the nazis' strategy the same way.

Related was the fascists' propaganda trying to ridicule whites who were involved in the uprising - just a slightly more sophisticated version of the 'race traitor' diatribes they go on all the time. The third-positionist "Libertarian Socialist News" put out an article complete with phony quotes from the Refuse & Resist kids who were beaten up, concluding snottily: "Communist and left-leaning groups for the past few days have been trying to deny the racial characteristic of the

riots, and have been ordering their local white members to go out and get involved to make it appear as if the riots are not racial. Their efforts, as can be seen, have been less than successful.”

See, black riots like these are just the kind of scenes that trigger militia end-of-the-world fantasies, and send every little crew of would be racial holy warriors riding. What are the objectives of the right wing at a time like this? Glimpses of white power activity during the riots in Cincinnati suggest a range of responses. To what extent there were coherent overall strategies is unclear. If they're anything like the "left", white power activists probably operated on a few half-baked dog-eared battle plans. There was one case where a 20 year old white man got arrested for throwing a brick through a black man's windshield and yelling some racial shit. Not too much of anything there. The initial reports from nazis and third positionists made it sound like there were groups of white vigilantes out all over attacking blacks in 'retaliation'. For the most part this was probably just nazi wishful thinking since we haven't heard much since, but its a safe bet that these ideas are taking hold in the white power movement, who are seeing a clear path of action to organize their recruits to a higher level of involvement.

Most of the bigger national players on the fascist scene, predictably enough, used the riots to bait their propaganda hooks. The National Alliance put a print ready flyer ("Diversity... had enough yet?") online for militants to download and litter peoples windshields with. Matt Hale of the World Church of the Creator used the riots to pump his own brand of white power, as did the Aryan Nations. This kind of shot in the dark propaganda efforts most of the big name fascists are making is somewhat hard to gauge in terms of effectiveness and harder to counter. If each time out they might draw a few strays into their fold, they're still less troublesome than any real on-the-ground organizing would be. From what we know there was little visible nazi activity that would serve to galvanize a real counterforce, but there was no doubt some significant direct propagandizing by local crews.

We need to have effective intelligence that identifies local crews of white power activists - as well as non-ideological white crews that could be swung toward this stance in a racialized situation - so that we can be in a position to counter any moves they make. As far as we're aware this has never been on the program of the left at times like this, and it needs to become so. Among current anti-fascists doing this kind of intelligence gathering we could define two types. Those that are at least half prepared to do something on their own with this information and those who will be left out of commission when they realize that dialing 911 on nazis in the middle of a black anti-cop riot is sure to be the funniest skit on the next Def Jam Comedy special.

Moving to actively counter physically and politically any organizing attempts by white-power groups is a crucial rear-guard support maneuver during black rebellions that we can easily work towards pulling off. Cincinnati ARA seems like they've already picked up this line and done some good work, challenging the cops on their white power politics and preparing to confront the WCOTC and any other nazis who plan public appearances to capitalize off the riots. For example, there's a mass racist rally planned in Cincinnati for July 13th: we need to mobilize right away to shut that down along with any other similar events.

More of an immediate problem for Cincinnati's black community, although harder for us to counter, are the 'respectable' racists who actually managed meetings with people in power. Klansman David Duke reportedly somehow met with the county district attorney and convinced him to press 'hate crime' charges against people arrested during the rebellion - his work is already showing fruit as 14 year old kids are getting convicted as adults and sent away for ten years or more just for getting caught up in what was happening. And Richard Barrett, head of the

Mississippi-based Nationalist Movement, held a rally in support of the F.O.P. where he was invited onto their property to speak in front of their memorial to fallen officers. These big-name clowns can really only be fought by publicizing their involvement and using it to attack the police who are stupid enough to meet with them.

BUILDING WORKING-CLASS SOLIDARITY

But even without the efforts of the white power groups, far too many working class whites are going to fall victim to the race hysteria pumped by media and insecurities over how to relate to black rage. Every city in the Northeast and Midwest is full of otherwise seemingly cool and anti-racist white dudes who'll tell stories about standing by the window in pop's store during the 60's riots with a shotgun. And a lot of old people still remember the anti-black race riots of the 40's too. Beyond countering white power activity, we need to build sympathy and solidarity for the uprising outside of the neighborhoods in which it was provoked. This of course doesn't begin at the next riot, but the next riot is a time to solidify and express some of the social bonds that have been developed prior.

In the best case, the experiences of black rebellions can be a lesson in struggle for poor whites and folks like us to learn from and build off of, and adapt to the needs of own own communities. This should always be the point of whatever agitation we do. It seems like any softer line, of just trying to get people to feel a bit of sympathy for the black protesters and stay out of the conflicts themselves, might work for suburbanites but for working-class city folk, it offers no help cause ultimately it doesn't give people the strength to deal with the racialized context of the situation. The moment when somebody feels threatened or has to defend themselves, they're liable to slip right back into the racist siege mentality. The only way past that emotional block is arguing a position of total solidarity with the rioters and against the police and the state.

From basic common sense and our general experience, we know the same antagonisms between police and community exist in poor white or mixed neighborhoods as in the ghetto. The cops are much quicker to shoot without provocation in black ghetto neighborhoods, but its a matter of degree, not an altogether different relationship. [related to what?] (In a lot of cities there seems to be an unwritten rule on the police force keeping the black officers in white areas, while cops in the ghetto are almost always white...) Poor whites fear and hate the police too, but often they're just as scared of black rage as of power-tripping pigs. What we need to do is attack this fear and find the fault lines in the 'white community' where a significant core of people who support the rebellion can come together and make their presence known. Cultural strands of resistance, especially outwardly anti-racist ones, need to be deepened and supported. From the beginning of a protest situation (and long before), we should be explaining the role of the police, making some cultural space for kids to articulate their anti-cop feelings, and from there working towards a position of support for the black community's protests, whatever form they take.

A recent scandal in York, PA offers a few warnings. Mayor Charlie Robertson was arrested recently on a murder charge stemming from his role as a cop in a gang war in the summer of 1969. At the time two white youth gangs had made an alliance in a conflict with several crews from black neighborhoods. As the two white crews were meeting in a park a police cruiser approached and the kids began to scatter until Robertson got close enough and yelled out "white power", reconvening the meeting but on a whole new level. During the meeting Robertson told the

crews that if he weren't a cop he'd "be leading commando raids against niggers in the black neighborhoods". Robertson was also seen supplying ammunition along with a few other cops from an armored police vehicle to the kids on Newberry St. Soon enough Lillie Belle Allen was shot dead beside her family car. Two local white youth gangs were drawn into the conflicts first by fate of history and circumstance and then pushed over the edge by the cops. These two crews were no more committed to white power politics than any other teenage white boys of their time, but their crew affiliations were manipulated by police into serving police repression efforts. The specific geopolitics of cliques and crews beyond just those affiliated with any outright political sect or ideology need to be understood and some basic mutual understandings developed.

HOW QUICKLY THINGS FALL BACK INTO PLACE

Two months after the rebellion, the white liberal left finally and dramatically achieved its goal of taking back the momentum of the struggle. No longer a shared outrage of the black community and its allies, the struggle is now seen as a reform issue in which they and their hand-picked black representatives call the shots. (And even that tokenism will probably soon disappear; when the city announced the membership of their 'special taskforce on race' it was - no surprise - almost all police and white politicians.) That this happened was probably inevitable - after suffering over 800 arrests and seeing no reinforcements anywhere, the revolutionaries had grown tired of fighting a losing battle. What seems more fruitful is describing how the struggle collapsed, and where along the way there were openings that we as outsiders could have moved into to support.

Probably the first sign of the collapse of the spirit of the rebellion was when the Rev. Damon Lynch, head of the Black United Front and a prominent public spokesperson of the black community through the rebellion, accepted a position on a Reconciliation Council set up by the city as a pacification program. This nearly split the Black United Front, but even still, the community outrage remained strong enough that Rev. Lynch continued to run afoul of the city in his public statements and the 'reconciliation' that police and city officials hoped for did not come easy. Blatant co-optation like the "Proud of Over-the-Rhine" posters that appeared in the same yuppie businesses that were targets during the rebellion just seemed laughable. But eventually the joke grew old, and the peace sign billboards stayed up, and the city's promotional festivals kept happening...

Finally, when the live anger had diffused sufficiently, CHE felt it was safe to take charge and call for a "March for Justice". Early on it was apparent that this would be carefully moderated and coordinated with the cops to keep the community it was supposedly speaking for quiet and out of the loop. It was out of a sense of disgust at this that we in Anti-Racist Action decided to get involved. Months ago CHE had made it clear that ARA was not welcome at any action they organized, and we felt that if we were excluded just the same way the militants in the black community were going to be excluded, well, we'll just crash the party and hope others feel up to doing the same thing. And so a call went out for an anti-authoritarian bloc (or "Black Bloc" as the slang goes).

All along there was a lot of ambivalence towards the official CHE protest march. Some carefully orchestrated public displays of submissiveness like 'peace prayer' sessions where a few Over-the-Rhine residents would join hands with groups of white suburbanites set the mood. The few radical BUF members who got involved had to fight tooth-and-nail just to give the march at least

the surface appearance of the militant culture of the rebellion, like having the neighborhood marching band "The Bucket Boys" lead the way. (This was initially vetoed by organizers for being 'too loud'!) What little organized black opinion we in ARA were in touch with seemed to be split - on one hand, a feeling that the time was still ripe to tear up the city, and if we could help with that, so much the better, and on the other, a more resigned "Screw them, let them have their march, do something in a white neighborhood if y'all want to do something" attitude. In the end, only two points were clear to us: one, that simply swelling the ranks of an essentially racist recuperation march wasn't really an option, and two, that whatever we from the outside anarchist movement would do, we'd have to be on our own for the most part cause the local community had already done more than its share of fighting.

ARA's organizing for the June 2nd march really only seriously started a week or so ahead of time when a few out-of-towners stopped by to help out the local activists. At that point there was still no clear plan for action, so we started by flyer-ing a few neighborhoods with our call and our demands - primarily amnesty for everyone arrested during the rebellion. While we got about 500 leaflets out beforehand in a few racially mixed working-class neighborhoods, we didn't have the chance we needed to really talk to people. As a result, local involvement in the march leaned heavily toward the liberals.

Planning for the anti-authoritarian bloc ran up against a few clear political problems. It became clear that the CHE organizers were pulling out all the stops to keep the anarchist presence from stealing their thunder. Members of the Nation of Islam who had volunteered to do security were directed to watch out for the anarchists, to physically stop any disruption, and to take pictures for the police if necessary. The clear threat to us was a media spectacle of a mainly white anti-authoritarian bloc scuffling with black marshals, making us look like juvenile outsiders disrespecting the black community. The combination of lack of community outreach beforehand on our part and political differences within the anti-authoritarian bloc made it impossible for us to adequately deal with these problems. (In the end, the NOI turned out to be basically a no-show, so this really wasn't an issue during the march.)

One other attempted intervention by anarchists, as bold as it was flawed, is worth mentioning. The Cincinnati Radical Action Group (CRAG), taking the line that the 'black community' had made its wishes known that radical whites should protest in white neighborhoods, called for a civil disobedience in Mt. Adams, an upper-class restaurant and artist district north of Over-the-Rhine. 80 demonstrators walked into the neighborhood and briefly blocked the street before police herded them onto the sidewalk, arresting and pepper-spraying 12 people. This kind of symbolic martyrdom appealed to some, but plenty more people stayed away. While the people who took part deserve respect for boldness, we had some problems politically with this action. Its hard to claim to take leadership from the 'black community' when there's no one viewpoint predominant in that community. And symbolically 'confronting priveleged space', while its always fine, is not necessarily the same as supporting the struggle of the Black community. The demand that curfews should be implemented equally in rich white neighborhoods when they're imposed in the ghetto, while its an appealing idea in its utter absurdity, is at the same time kinda irrelevant to the situation happening in Over-the-Rhine.

What we need to do is think through the situation and find ways we can offer real and direct support for the community struggle at the base of the riots and protests - not just the empty words or symbolic protests the 'white left' lives on. Hopefully some ideas will have come out in

this article. As we've said, the story of the rebellion itself was only a small part of the story. Of course there's much more to be said about that experience, but we weren't there.

"This riot has definitely been one of the most inspiring moments of our lives. We've developed some very strong coalitions with groups in this city such as Black United Front and we see now without a doubt where some other pretend to be leftist groups really stand... All we can say is we hope a riot comes to your city soon. Some advice for cities across the country in the wise words of the Wu-Tang Clan: wake the fuck up before you get woke the fuck up."

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Claustrophobia Collective
How Fast It All Blows Up
Some lessons from the 2001 Cincinnati riots
July 2001

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This pamphlet collects three essays, 'Black People Have a Right to Rebel' by Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, 'Cincinnati's Black Rebellion Exposes US Racial Injustice' by Peter Hudis, and the titular piece, 'How Fast It All Blows Up: From Uprising to Recuperation' by the Claustrophobia Collective. It stems from the argument made by some that insurrectionary events in the US must necessarily come to terms with the problem of race as one of the many webs in our little network of domination.

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