

Opposing the Rise of the Far-right

Building Solidarity, Protecting Our Communities

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These are anarchistic times—times in which increasing numbers of people are resisting the horrors of contemporary society by engaging in direct action without waiting for leaders to tell them what to do. So, it is no surprise that anarchists are once again at the center of fights against the capitalist system and the subjugation of the many to the will of the few.

Donald Trump's rise to national prominence and power has ushered in a marked increase in visible far-right expressions of racism and other bigotry, as well as white supremacist individual violent attacks and ominous para-military militia activities. From 2016 on, there has been a fivefold increase of reported hate crimes.

However, according to a recent estimate, they represent less than half of those that occur. Many hate crime victims understandably hesitate to inform police for a variety of reasons, and often local law enforcement agencies don't file hate crime reports with the FBI's central database which issues the official national figures.

Many—although far from all—of these incidents have occurred at colleges and universities across the country as far-right groups seek to recruit new members. In several instances, their hate-filled speeches and rallies, and the distribution of propaganda have been accompanied or followed by attacks resulting in injuries and even deaths of those opposing them.

But there has also been a significant increase in oppositional activities by people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, diverse genders, ages, disabilities, unemployed and those with well paying jobs.

Between January 20, 2017, the day Trump was inaugurated, and the time of this writing (mid-August), thousands of protests have taken place in the US. Highway blockages, pipeline resistance and sabotage, disruption of Trump and white supremacist/neo-fascist rallies, parades, sit-ins, airport occupations, and other manifestations have been increasing in numbers and size.

This highly energized resistance has been largely the creation of horizontal self-organization in the spirit of broadly non-authoritarian principles.

Anarchists, socialists, communists and progressives cooperating together as anti-fascists (antifa) are working within local communities to aggressively disrupt far-right and white supremacist activities and influence.

The intent is threefold. First and foremost, they are determined to drive hate-mongers out of public spaces and off college campuses to protect those most likely to be targets of their vicious attacks.

Second, they are directly challenging the bigotry and lies of these dangerous far-right groups in order to discredit them and block their recruiting attempts.

Third, they have the goal of making it difficult if not impossible for such hateful expression to be readily available publicly, thereby reducing the poisonous influence of such groups and individuals and stifling their ability to normalize their heinous ideas.

Much of antifa activity focuses on research, writing and distributing educational and agitational literature, as well as speaking in a variety of educational contexts. However, they also see as ethically justifiable, militant and even violent actions against racists and other bigots who aim at hurting vulnerable people and radicals.

The strong opposition to far-rightists is certainly encouraging. But it is necessary to consider some problematic aspects. For example, while anarchistic ideas and ways of organizing are at the heart of the current resistance against the far-right, anarchist groups and individuals are still in the minority. In this context, it is relevant to consider the pitfalls as well as the positive aspects of anarchists collaborating in ad hoc coalitions with left-liberal and leftist organizations, particularly authoritarian ones, while people are in the process of developing the capacity to take control of their own lives.

One important unresolved consideration is how anarchists can engage in coalitions with left-liberals and leftists without having their energies subverted or absorbed into reformist activities that such groups promote, activities which might take the focus away from the fight for a society based on mutual aid, solidarity, and individual freedom.

And, how might this impact horizontal self-organization and even divert energies into support for specific parties, aspirants to power, and government functionaries, and away from forcefully opposing all the other aspects of this old world that block the way to a new one?

While working for immediate relief from the repressive institutions of capitalism and the state, it is imperative that anarchists prioritize conversations about developing actual egalitarian alternatives to the police, the courts and prisons, as well as more pro-active community self-defense, protection of demonstrations and of threatened individuals. These are important considerations as increasing numbers of people mobilize to protest against the growing number of far-right and neo-fascist events being held throughout the country.

Many far-right events have resulted in injuries and even deaths on or in close proximity to campuses, such as at the University of Washington in Seattle (UW) in January, and the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in August.

All too many liberal and even some leftist and anarchist commentators have followed the far-right in framing the story of the injuries and deaths as nasty protesters facing off against nasty rightists, in order to claim or imply that the militant actions of protesters were at least partly responsible for the actions of the rightist aggressors.

This kind of framing of the story is similar to the normalization of far-right activities that has been taking place elsewhere.

Many people involved with peaceful anti-rightist activities, such as teach-ins, theater performances, rallies, and postering, have been subsequently targeted by ultra-rightists with rape and death threats, character defamation, and publicizing of personal and family information to enable more vicious attacks.

All of this has continued for months via the internet and social media, as well as through phone messages and direct threats in classes and other places on and off campus. The situation has become so acute that students and faculty from several colleges and universities are joining together to form the Campus Antifascist Network, a broad, campus-based countermovement.

Anarchists have a long and honorable history of fighting for freedom of expression as part of struggling for a society that prioritizes solidarity and social justice. Unlike liberals, they understood from early on that the state cannot be a neutral protector and regulator.

Anarchists also generally reject as a gross distortion the liberal belief in competition in the marketplace of ideas as a mechanism for eliminating bad ideas while strengthening good ones.

Throughout U.S. history, whenever groups demanding social justice and liberation expressed themselves in affective ways, the government exercised both repression and recuperation to silence and subdue them.

This was true when the socialist and anarchist labor movements began growing in the 1880s, when the Industrial Workers of The World, and anarchist and socialist groups were on the rise during the first decades of the 20th century, when various movements for social justice and liberation were gathering strength during the 1960s, and again in the 21st century up to the present.

As economic and political power shifts between different factions, the structure of power remains intact and the state is used to promote the dominant faction's perspectives.

Far-right speech and other forms of expression should be understood not as neutral, but for what they are—incitement to dangerous activities with potentially lethal consequences.

There is no reason to expect that the police or other agents of the state will protect vulnerable people or anyone else against bigoted groups today any more than they did in the past. Luckily, over the past two decades anarchists have been accumulating many of the skills and resources that can be used imaginatively for this struggle.

But it is important to remember that anti-fascist activities are based on coalitions of groups and individuals who may or may not always agree on methods or goals. With this in mind, it is necessary to ask:

How can anarchists maintain an emphasis on challenging far-rightists, white supremacists and other authoritarians, while leaving the way open to ideas and activities of diverse non-authoritarians?

How can bottom-up egalitarian activity be strengthened so as to broaden resistance to the far-right?

How can far-right violence be effectively countered without creating its mirror image or giving that impression to those not part of antifa?

How do people figure out when direct confrontation and fighting is advantageous and when this would work against the main goal of empowering the community to defend itself?

Despite the right's attempts to assert otherwise, counter-protesters (including antifa) in Charlottesville on August 11 and 12 were generally able to tackle most of these issues in very constructive ways.

Going forward, anti-fascist community self-defense needs to be balanced with a recognition of the problematic role of arbiter of acceptable communications, and an understanding of the importance of freedom of expression as the basis of an anarchistic society.

An anti-fascist response to the far-right needs to be combined with a positive anarchistic vision of the possibilities which point to the kind of society we want and are working on creating.

For updates on the University of Washington shooting case, check:

- Greater Seattle IWW General Defense Committee Local 24, greaterseattleigdc.com
- For more information on anti-fascist resistance to the far-right on campuses check out: campusantifascistnetwork.com

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the *Fifth Estate* and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning.

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