

Should Anarchists Raise a Program of Demands?

With a Bit of Controversy Among Anarchists

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This essay is slightly expanded from one which was rejected by a US anarchist magazine for political reasons. It deals with a disagreement among activists: Should we propose that the movement raise a program of demands? I think that anarchists should, but with a more libertarian-democratic version than the liberals and state socialists. The essay is followed by a response to the political points raised by the editors of the anarchist journal.

During the height of the Occupy Wall Street encampments, a dispute broke out among activists. Various liberals and state socialists advocated that the movement raise a program, a set of demands on the capitalist class and the state. This approach was opposed by a number of anarchists. Given the economic situation, the program-raisers typically called for full employment policies, such as public works projects providing useful services, to be paid for by taxing the rich and cutting the military budget.

While many anarchists vehemently opposed to the Occupy movement raising demands, others were for a more libertarian-socialist approach to raising programs (as I am). To some degree this disagreement among anarchists reflects a long time split, or more precisely, a polarization, since the alternatives are not sharply either/or. Since Proudhon, one anarchist pole has primarily advocated building alternate institutions within capitalist society. These might be worker or consumer coops, bike clubs, community gardens, or block associations. These anarchists hoped that community Occupations would be such “dual power” institutions. These would gradually expand to take over—and replace—the economy and state. Such activities do not lead to making demands on the state or the ruling class—except maybe to be let alone.

From the other viewpoint, all these things are good in themselves and worth supporting, but as a strategy for changing society, they are limited. Most likely they do not threaten the system (can they really replace the auto industry with an alternate national transportation system, or replace the armed forces with a popular militia?). If they do threaten vital institutions, the state will crack down on them. As the state disbanded Occupy encampments all over the country.

Since Bakunin, this other pole of the anarchist movement has primarily advocated building mass movements. These anarchists want to join with workers and all other people oppressed by capitalism and its various subsystems of degradation. (They see a strategic role for workers, who have their hands on the means of production, distribution, transportation, and services—who can stop society in its tracks and start it up in a different way. But they want to reach out to all those oppressed by this society.) They want to build movements which will confront the power structure, fight it, and eventually overthrow it. This includes community organizations as well as unions. They wanted Occupy to be part of such a movement, and the same for struggles which have followed the end of the encampments. For this to develop, it is necessary for the movement to have at least a partial program of demands to fight for against the rulers.

The anarchists of the first, alternate-institutional, strategy criticize the raising of demands by a movement. They say that it gives legitimacy to the state or the corporate rich. It cedes them power. It is corrupting and leads to bureaucratization and electoralism.

But the ruling rich and, even more, the government, already have legitimacy. They are respected, or at least accepted, by the mass of US citizens, even if many people are becoming increasingly disgruntled. If a few anarchists, or even a minority movement, ignore the state, this will not change. Oppositionists need to change people’s minds, to persuade a majority to reject the rich and the government—to want to get rid of them.

Even more importantly, the state has real power. Turning our backs on it will not make it go away. The capitalist class has power. The police have power. The military has power. Anarchists have to isolate and demoralize the capitalists and police and professional military, while winning over the ranks of the military (youth from the working and middle classes). Revolutionaries want the oppressed to build alternate sources of power, based on the people's numbers and the workers' potential industrial power. This requires a program which offer them hope and reasons to fight the ruling class.

Is there a danger of such a strategy becoming co-opted and bureaucratized, the way labor unions have? Absolutely. This is why anarchists advocate as much decentralization, participatory democracy, and militancy as possible for unions, community organizations, and all other popular organizations. Co-optation has become less possible as the economy declines; the capitalists are less interested in buying off sections of the population and more concerned with attacking the working class.

Revolutionary anarchists also advocate mass struggles, general strikes, boycotts, workplace occupations, civil disobedience, militant demonstrations, and general hell-raising. This is instead of a passive electoralism, as advocated by most of the statist Left. Anarchists do not want people to vote for someone else to be political for the people. They oppose any support to the Democratic Party, which plays a major role in defusing popular movements and co-opting the oppressed. They do not see any advantage in building new "labor" or "green" parties, which will actually be third capitalist parties.

An Anarchist Program of Demands

Anarchists and other militants must not appear as some sort of elite, separate from other working people, who sneer at needed reforms. People want their needs met now, including cancellation of student debts, stopping racial discrimination, protection of women's reproductive choices, ending discrimination against GLBT people, clean air and water, an end to the various wars the U.S. is waging, etc., etc. They have a right to these reforms.

Demands are not a trick. They are based on calling for what people really need: jobs, food, housing, peace, and so on. Unlike liberals, anarchists do not limit their demands to what they think the capitalists can grant. If the capitalists and the state do meet the demands, then, great! Perhaps they will (under pressure) finally agree to a higher minimum wage, a ban on fracking, or an end to a particular war. On the other hand, if they refuse to meet the reform demands, then anarchists can use this to expose them as enemies of the working people.

Let me return to the original demands mentioned at the beginning, raised by state socialists. Yes, anarchists too should be for full employment demands, which speak to the existing needs of people. They too should be for public works projects—but (unlike state socialists) they should demand that such projects be self-managed by the workers employed in them, perhaps together with local working class communities. Also funding should be provided for groups of workers to start their own non-profit cooperatives. For this, businesses should be expropriated (confiscated, taken away from their owners) without compensation. This should be done, the program should say, if they cannot provide employment, or if they pollute, or if they mainly make armaments, etc. These too should be managed by their workers and local communities. Rather than treating such enterprises as producer coops competing on the market (except perhaps for the short run), all

such self-managed public works projects and occupied businesses should coordinate with each other, creating a democratic economic plan.

Such a program may make sense to many people as part of a solution to the economic crisis. It is likely to be more popular than calling for nationalization and government management. Who is being called on to take the firms away from the capitalists and turn them over to their workers and local communities? Most people will look to the existing state. After all, it has a lot of money and power, and it claims to represent the community. Why not challenge it to live up to its claims, they ask? And indeed, just as working people can make demands on a firm's management (raise wages, recognize a union, etc.), they can make demands on the state, which is the overall management of capitalist society.

It is even possible that the government might make some minor reforms in this direction (say, tax breaks for worker-owned businesses). But the state would never carry out the main parts of this program, which would threaten the existence of capitalism. For the program to happen, workers and their allies would have to form a federation of workplace committees and neighborhood assemblies to replace the state with a self-managed society. Revolutionary anarchists must not try to fool people. They would need to openly say that this program would require a libertarian-socialist revolution—even as they expect people's own experience to demonstrate that they are right.

Anarchists are not a separate grouping, apart or opposed to the rest of society. We are that minority of the population which has come to see the need to abolish capitalism, the state, and all other forms of oppression. To win over the rest of the people, we need to raise ideas that others can agree on, to build the overall movement, and increase its anarchist aspects. Unlike vanguardists, we are not seeking to be the new masters of society, but to be in dialogue with people who are in struggle, mutually developing a way out of oppression and mass suffering.

Response to the Editors of an Anarchist Magazine

To repeat, the editors of an anarchist journal decided not to publish this essay after all (as was their right). As an explanation of their views made clear, the main point was that they disagreed with it politically (also their right). Rather than print it and have a comradesly debate among anarchists, they decided to reject it, claiming that it appeared to be “vanguardist” and “elitist.”

They wrote me, “*Agreeing with liberals and state socialists about raising a program of reforms is nothing we want [to] promote in the magazine. ... This seems like a barely altered trotskyist Transitional Program. Who would formulate such a program? I suspect the socialists and liberals would since I can't imagine what anarchists could add to a list of reforms that these groups routinely put forth.*”

My response would be:

(1) It is true, oh it's true: I agree with some liberals, reformist state socialists, Trotskyists, and others in proposing that a program should be raised by Occupy or other movements. This program would be a set of demands on the capitalist class and its state. I even agree with some of the proposed demands, such as public works as part of a full-employment program. In general, I am in favor of learning from and agreeing with people of all ideological hues, whenever possible. For example, I agree with many right-wingers in opposing government banning of guns. I am for working with a wide variety of people of differing views in united fronts, to advance limited goals.

I have always done so. In practice, OWS was such a united front in all its local encampments. Any other approach is sectarian and purist.

(2) However, I am for being open about revolutionary anarchist politics. I am for raising them wherever possible inside and outside of united fronts. In this case, when discussing a common program, I would fight for including workers' and community control of public projects, self-management of expropriated industries, and so on, as the essay says. These are "*what anarchists could add to a list of reforms.*" The statist left usually raises electoralist politics, whether endorsing the Democrats or calling for a new party. As I wrote, anarchists should fight against these approaches, in favor of independent mass actions, general strikes, etc. These are also "*what anarchists could add.*"

(3) I do not believe that it is necessarily "elitist" or "vanguardist" for an individual, small group, or political organization to express its opinion and to try to persuade others of its views. In this case, of the value of making a series of radical demands on the state and the capitalist class. It is only elitist if this is done in a know-it-all fashion, as if you knew the Absolute Truth. It is vanguardist if it is done with the aim of your party eventually taking over, and ruling over, the people, in the name of the Working Class and the Historical Process. But if an individual or grouping of anarchists sees themselves as part of the oppressed people, in dialogue with others, then it is not elitist or vanguardist. For example, if a group of anarchists puts out a national anarchist journal of opinion (as you do), this is not elitist, even though it seeks to persuade others of its minority viewpoint.

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