

People Get Ready

Popular Power In The Coming Crisis

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Contents

An Age Of Crisis	3
Rebellion And Reaction	3
A Looming Election Crisis	4
A Choice Of Two Enemies	5
How To Stop A Coup	5
Keep Your Eyes On The Prize	7
What Now? Get Organized!	7

As the November election rapidly approaches, a larger battle is raging over the future of this country. While the fate of the Presidency will be consequential to say the least, its wider implications will be shaped by forces far beyond the ballot box. To understand the full weight of this moment, we have to look beyond the election itself, at the broader context of a nation mired in crisis and rebellion.

It is the strength of popular movements, more than anything else, which will determine the fate of the United States, for better or worse. As Trump threatens to trigger a constitutional crisis over the election results, organized mass resistance is the best weapon we have, not only to stop an attempted coup, but to fight for a just and livable world. We are living in an age of crisis, and with or without Trump, popular power is our only hope.

An Age Of Crisis

We are living through a time of unparalleled and compounding crises. The almighty US empire, with its promise of safety, stability and prosperity, is in a state of sharp decline. Its veil of legitimacy is lifting. Under the backdrop of a deadly global pandemic and rapidly accelerating climate change, American society is being ravaged by systemic racism, state violence, unemployment, housing insecurity, gender violence, declining mental health, escalating political violence, and a looming election crisis.

Like most crises, this moment has been accompanied by widespread polarization and radicalization. As faith in the legitimacy of existing institutions plummets across the board, people come to their own conclusions and increasingly take matters into their own hands. The center simply cannot hold. On the left, we've seen this in the wildcat strikes of the pandemic as well as the militant tactics and abolitionist demands of the George Floyd Rebellion. On the right, we see it in the armed protests against State COVID restrictions, conspiracy theories like Qanon, white supremacist violence and the growing militia movement. As the ranks of radicals swell on both sides, conflict between them intensifies. The 2020 Presidential Election (and its mainstream media frenzy) has only served to amplify this polarization as a deepening culture war.

What we are seeing is a fundamental instability of the neoliberal establishment, as its basic institutions increasingly cease to function. Its demise is far from inevitable, but as it weakens, cracks are beginning to open, presenting opportunities for both left popular movements and the far right to push for alternatives. Whether our current system is ultimately reconstituted or transformed into something else will depend on the outcome of these struggles in the coming period.

Rebellion And Reaction

Rather than quietly submitting to fear and disillusionment, the people of this country have met crisis with outrage and direct action on a mass scale. The first wave came in response to the pandemic. When bosses and politicians condemned thousands of people to death in order to safeguard their own profits and political control, workers and community members fought back with a wave of wildcat strikes and grassroots mutual aid networks.

The second wave came in response to the relentless racist terror of American policing. We are still in the midst of an unprecedented national uprising against state violence and white

supremacy. Since May, tens of millions of people have flooded into the streets of America, demanding systemic change through sustained mass protest and bold disruptive action. In doing so, the George Floyd Rebellion has exercised real transformative power, capturing public consciousness and uniting diverse social movements around a radical vision of racial justice, abolition and self-determination.

This movement has transformed the cultural and political landscape with remarkable speed. Less than a week after George Floyd's murder, a majority of Americans said the burning of a Minneapolis Police precinct was "justified." Calls to defund and disband the police spread like wildfire, winning broad support across the country. As the streets swelled, protestors held their ground, often laying siege to local police departments night after night, forcing some to retreat from their stations altogether. Through the act of collective struggle, people have begun to uncover a dangerous secret – that the police are not invincible, and sustained mass action can quickly bring the powerful to their knees.

This rebellion has posed a direct threat to State power, provoking panic and reaction across the spectrum of the ruling class. The liberal establishment has attempted to neutralize the rebellion through co-optation, pacification and division. On the other side of the spectrum, Trump's GOP and its far-Right base have tried to crush it by force, through vigilante violence and direct state repression. This conflict has not only given voice to communities terrorized by centuries of systemic oppression, it has also exposed the violent racism which still permeates the very foundations of state power and much of the American psyche.

A Looming Election Crisis

Nothing illustrates the volatility of our current moment more clearly than the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming election. Amidst a deadly pandemic, a collapsing economy and escalating political unrest, the sitting US President is openly threatening to throw the country into a full-blown constitutional crisis if he is not re-elected. This is unprecedented in modern US history, and even top officials are unsure whether existing legal structures can withstand the challenge.

There has been much speculation about possible scenarios and how they may unfold in the period following election day. But suffice it to say, the stage is set for a full-blown meltdown. Unless Biden wins such a staggering victory across the board that Trump and the Republicans miraculously give up and set aside all their sinister plans, the results will be contested. Trump has made it crystal clear that unless he wins outright (which is looking increasingly unlikely), he and his party will sound the alarm, claiming widespread voter fraud and denying the legitimacy of the election. From there, we could quickly enter uncharted territory, from which there's no turning back. An ensuing battle will rage, not only in federal courts and the halls of congress, but in the streets of America.

In the weeks and months that follow, this conflict could dramatically transform the social and political landscape of the country in unpredictable ways, regardless of who eventually takes office. If Trump makes a clear effort to steal the election, we will almost certainly see a dramatic and widespread upsurge in political activity on the left, including mass direct action on a scale possibly beyond even the George Floyd Rebellion. The right will likely respond with aggressive actions from "Patriot" militias and other loyalist groups, easily leading to an escalating cycle of

political violence which could edge the nation closer and closer towards the brink of low-grade civil war.

A Choice Of Two Enemies

In this election, two broad forces are coalescing around the respective parties, presenting popular movements with a choice between two enemies: the neoliberal establishment and an insurgent right-wing authoritarianism. The neoliberals, represented by the Biden-Harris Democratic Party, are committed to maintaining the stability of the current system by co-opting, pacifying and dividing today's progressive movements. Trump's GOP and its far-Right base represent a fascist alternative, committed to crushing progressive movements by force, enforcing a racist and nationalist agenda, dismantling the existing regulatory state, and consolidating their own power beyond the official bounds of representative democracy. That both these forces are hostile to our movement should be clear. The question is which will wield the full powers of the State for the next four years.

Not all enemies are created equal. They don't all wield power in the same way. They don't have the same interests and vulnerabilities. Under equal pressure from social movements, they don't yield the same results. While Biden and the Democrats undeniably represent the same rotten system our movement is fighting to dismantle, the blatant authoritarianism and white supremacy of Trump's GOP represents a unique threat, not only to the left and to communities of color, but to the very notion of democracy itself (whether we believe our current system is actually democratic or not).

If reelected to a second term, Trump will almost certainly move to consolidate his power and expand his most reactionary policies. If emboldened through a successful power-grab, there's no telling how far he will go. The difference between these two enemies controlling the State is therefore enormously consequential. It could mean the difference between our movement playing offense or defense – between fighting for a Green New Deal, police abolition and universal health care, or fighting just to keep our communities safe and our comrades out of prison in Trump's America 2.0. For some, it will mean the difference between life and death.

None of this is to suggest we can simply vote our way out of this crisis. If anything, Trump's attempt to override the election results should be proof enough that voting is a woefully insufficient strategy. Regardless of which party holds the presidency, our movement must continue fighting a war on two fronts – advancing struggles for social and environmental justice in the face of both neoliberalism and Trump's insurgent right-wing authoritarianism.

How To Stop A Coup

In the days following November 3rd, the action (or inaction) of popular movements will prove decisive in determining Trump's chances of staying in power. Immediately following election day, as votes are being counted, the left has to mobilize an enormous show of force, making it clear that he will have a national uprising on his hands if he so much as whispers about overriding the results.

As soon as Trump makes the slightest attempt to steal the election, we have to respond immediately with massive direct actions across the country. Dozens of major cities and large sectors

of the economy should be effectively brought to a standstill until Trump concedes. We have to make it abundantly clear not only to Trump, but to his entire party and its powerful corporate backers, that the country will become ungovernable until he steps down. Rapid escalation is critical here. The Republicans cannot be given any time or wiggle room to exploit the legal system, spread disinformation, or intimidate people into inaction. Security forces loyal to the President must be quickly overwhelmed by the sheer scale of collective action.

There will surely be widespread calls for public protest, supported by the Democratic Party. But to exert the power necessary to make Trump's bid untenable, popular movements have to push these mobilizations beyond protest, into a full scale national uprising. The Democrats will likely discourage anything beyond symbolic protest, urging us to stand on the sidelines and trust the legal system to work itself out. They will be mistaken. It will be crucial at this point for popular movements to push back and insist on bold disruptive action.

Shutting the country down is no small feat. While we're likely to see a massive surge of energy in the streets, energy alone is not enough. It will take organization and resolve to effectively sustain that level of action. Here, the George Floyd Rebellion has provided us with invaluable lessons. We know from recent experience that success will require mass participation, strategic alliances among diverse groups, a commitment to direct action, and organized support networks to sustain momentum and keep people safe. Our power lies in our numbers and our ability to directly disrupt the routine political and economic functioning of the country. That means organizing mass blockades and occupations of major infrastructure such as transportation corridors, ports, railways, federal courthouses and capitol buildings.

Strikes are another crucial tactic. Organized workers hold a tremendous amount of power, especially in key industries and government agencies. The threat of a possible coup attempt has already provoked many unions to consider post-election walkouts. These efforts should be enthusiastically bolstered and supported. The collective action of organized workers could prove pivotal to the success of the uprising, broadening its reach and dramatically expanding its disruptive power. This power would reach its ultimate potential in the form of a general strike, where workers across a range of industries, throughout an entire region (or the whole country) strike simultaneously with the same demand.

Whatever form the uprising takes, it will not go unchallenged. Trump will almost certainly unleash the full extent of his loyal forces in an attempt to crush the uprising and galvanize his supporters. Based on his reaction to recent #BlackLivesMatter protests, we can expect these forces to include the police, DHS, the National Guard, and various far-Right militias. We could easily see a further escalation this time around, depending on how the situation develops. If Trump feels threatened enough, he could order the DHS to round up activists and detain them as suspected "antifa terrorists." He could also attempt to deploy the US Military again, this time invoking the Insurrection Act. If that fails, he could openly call on loyalist "patriot" militias to deploy into American streets. It's impossible to predict, but we should consider all these courses of action to be within the realm of possibility.

The most important thing to remember is that our best self-defense from any of these threats is to build a movement that is simply too big to crush. Many of us think of the police and other state forces as invincible but if the uprising this summer taught us anything it's that they are not. Trump only has so many forces at his disposal, and (crucially) the military does not appear to be one of them. That means a straight-forward military coup is out of the question. If everyday people are able to effectively shut down dozens of major cities and entire sectors of

the economy for a prolonged period of time through a massive and sustained popular uprising and widespread labor strikes, there are simply not enough cops and soldiers to bring that kind of situation under control. Many of them would eventually become demoralized, and some would refuse orders. Even Trump's most loyal ruling class backers would have to rethink their position. The sheer scale and force of disruption by popular movements would instill a fear of institutional instability which outweighs whatever potential benefits Trump promises them. Eventually the president would have no choice but to step down.

Keep Your Eyes On The Prize

An attempted power-grab by Trump should be seen not only as a major threat to the left, but also as an enormous opportunity to build the power of our movements. If mass popular resistance forces the President to step down, our movement will hold an enormous amount of leverage – the power to bring the U.S. government to its knees. In such a moment, we will face a critical decision: do we surrender this power to the Democrats, or continue to wield it in the interests of our own transformational goals. Will our energy be turned towards a Biden Administration, or deflated by it?

Those who fail to realize the power they hold will be easily convinced to “go home” as soon as Trump concedes. This would be a grave mistake. The moment we demobilize, we will not only weaken our prospects for progressive change, we will also be opening up space for the inevitable backlash of the far-Right. Our ability to avoid this pitfall will be shaped over the course of the uprising itself. It will depend on our ability to fight on our own terms.

Just because an uprising is sparked by election-tampering, doesn't mean our demands should be limited to the terms of the election itself. Are we fighting for Joe Biden, or for liberation? Are we fighting for the status quo, or for the full realization of our movement's vision? The limits of our power will be shaped by the way we define victory itself. If we define it as defense of the status quo, then the most we can hope for is what we already have. If we define it as liberatory transformation, then our resistance to Trump can become resistance to the entire ruling establishment itself.

This opens up a world of possibility for transformation from below. With this revolutionary spirit, we can build lasting structures of popular power over the course of the uprising. Local assemblies, action councils, militant unions, community defense groups and mutual aid networks could sustain mass momentum beyond the uprising and lay the groundwork for a revolutionary movement. Only then can we begin to emancipate ourselves from the system that gave rise to Trump in the first place and go on to fight for truly free, ecological and democratic society.

What Now? Get Organized!

Organize with your coworkers or fellow students and prepare to strike after election day. Organize with your neighbors and community members to care for each other and defend each other. Organize mutual aid networks. Join a local grassroots organization. Unite diverse organizations into strategic coalitions. Organize an affinity group with your friends and prepare to take action. Organize study circles about direct action tactics, first aid, legal rights, security culture and how

to stay safe at a protest. Raise money for community bail funds. Open up your home as a potential safehouse for activists. Discuss revolutionary politics with your fellow activists. In short – get organized.

And never forget: Trump is a symptom. Capitalism is the crisis. Popular power is our only hope.

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