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Interview in Swedish Anarchist Paper

CrimethInc.

September 12, 2008

This is the English version of an interview appearing in the new issue of *Brand*, a quarterly Swedish anarchist paper founded in 1898. It explores the complexities of challenging capitalism from outside the economy, clearing up much of the confusion around the infamous anti-work stance associated with CrimethInc.

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Retrieved on 9th November 2020 from crimethinc.com

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The theme of this issue of *Brand* is work. CrimethInc. calls itself an “Ex-Workers’ Collective.” What does “work” mean for you and why have you left it behind?

It’s not so much that everyone involved with CrimethInc. has permanently left work behind, but that we focus on what we can do outside our role as workers in the capitalist economy. Identifying as ex-workers is a way to emphasize that we want

our lives to revolve around what we do freely outside wage labor and capitalist competition.

We feel that capitalist competition rewards the most ruthless and selfish people with the most power, and that participating in such an economy drains us of all our potential as human beings, turning our creativity and labor power into monsters (such as global warming and patriarchal propaganda) that destroy and subjugate us. The less any person can contribute to this, the better—and the more we can realize our potential outside of the economy, the better we can fight it.

In the realm of capitalist ideology, there are some who identify with their role as workers—they measure their value according to what they produce and earn, the same way the economy does. Today there are probably more workers who don't identify with their role as workers at all—for them, it is obvious that they're only working because they're forced to earn money to pay bills. Their "real lives" are elsewhere—in leisure consumption, for example. So identifying with the non-work aspects of life doesn't necessarily make a worker into a revolutionary. All the same, we feel the tensions in this aspect of modern society can easily give rise to revolutionary desires, if we make demands that the capitalist economy cannot fulfill. One example of this is demanding that we should be free to live life to the fullest at all times; obviously, as long as capitalism exists, this will be impossible for most of us, so this desire can inspire people to revolt and resistance.

In the realm of anti-capitalist ideology, there are also some who identify with their role as workers. For them, the primary way they see to contest capitalism is by organizing with other workers to strike for higher wages and so on. In the best case scenario, aspiring revolutionary workers can hope to seize their workplaces and use them to produce goods to be shared by all, as Marx and various anarcho-syndicalists have described. But a lot has changed since 1848. In the era of climate change and alienating technology, it is becoming very

never seduced to do things because they pay more. Sometimes one of us gets arrested for shoplifting, but we support each other and so far it has not been a serious problem—at least not compared to the long prison sentences some comrades are serving for ecological direct action.

absorbed into the machinery that perpetuates capitalist domination, we desperately need other starting points for class war. Effective anti-work struggles can only complement workplace organizing—that is, so long as we don’t misunderstand them as conflicting approaches.

Could you end with some examples of what “ex-workers” do besides publishing books and organizing protests and convergences?

In the community where I live, a town of less than 15,000 people, we maintain a number of community-oriented programs that we could never do if we had full-time jobs. We operate a free grocery distribution in the two low-income neighborhoods, and we sometimes do a free breakfast program for migrant laborers as well. We get the food for these from dumpstering, and also from sneaky employees—another reason to cultivate connections between workers and ex-workers, and to popularize anti-corporate theft. Every month, we help with a Really Really Free Market, at which hundreds of local people from all walks of life come together to give and receive resources without any capitalist exchange. We maintain a program sending free books to prisoners, since US prison conditions are terrible and prisoners otherwise have no access to reading material. We run a free zine distribution of perhaps 6000 zines, which we produce by means of theft and scams, for tabling at public events. There are underground networks to provide health care to people who cannot afford it, especially women. And of course we have gardens, bands, reading groups, postering and graffiti, and great parties.

These are just a few examples of what we focus on in the spare time we get from living outside the economy. In the US, unlike in Sweden, there is no government funding for any social programs or cultural projects, so we have to do these things on our own. Perhaps this is healthy, because it means we are

difficult to believe that anything worthwhile can be produced in some of those workplaces. Because of this, we feel it is especially important for aspiring revolutionaries to be experimenting outside the workplace as well, where our activities and our sense of self are not dictated by the necessities of production and competition. In organizing a squatted social center or a Really Really Free Market, we discover more hints of the world we want to live in than we ever could under the bosses’ whip. Marx and Lenin might call this bourgeois; we would counter that we want revolution as much as they did, but unlike them we can imagine a society without authoritarian structures or destructive mass production.

So calling ourselves ex-workers is also a challenge to ourselves and to others to make the most of our potential outside the exchange economy right now, in order to fight that economy. Of course, different individuals, classes, genders, and nationalities have different relationships to that potential, according to how dispossessed they are by hierarchical social structures and repression. Some workers outside Europe and the US—say, in Korea—have almost no free time and resources outside the workplace; their primary weapon against capitalism is their ability to refuse to work. Elsewhere in the world—say, in India and Africa—there are millions of people who are already unemployed. Some dogmatic Marxists say they cannot be part of the “revolutionary subject” because they are not positioned to seize the means of production; we would counter that they too can participate in revolutionary struggle by interrupting the channels of distribution and control (think of Argentina’s piqueteros, or the street urchins who raided the World Social Forum in Africa).

But let’s be honest, young Swedish workers: in Sweden and the US, many of us have a great deal of unused potential to act outside the exchange economy to fight capitalism. In our countries, there is some degree of social mobility and social security, and many luxuries are available on credit; these can

seduce workers so they conflate their interests with those of the middle class, rather than desiring freedom via the abolition of capitalism. So one of the primary challenges in our context is to spread a value system that counters middle class values in workers. Middle class values mean that, since the worker might one day be able to afford to own his own house, he identifies with the laws of the wealthy that protect those with big houses—even if these laws are used against other poor people like him. An example of counter-values would be valuing togetherness over property, so workers (or ex-workers!) could find fulfillment in living cheaply in collective spaces without a lot of status-oriented consumerism. The less we need to buy to feel good about ourselves, the less we are at the mercy of our enemies. This holds true for workplace organizing as well—the less workers feel they need the luxuries produced by capitalism and the more their necessities come from outside the capitalist economy, the longer and harder they can strike.

Incidentally, really beautiful things sometimes happen when workers go on strike: they write plays about their workplace conditions, they get to know each other outside the constraints of the shop floor, they help each other, they get to stand in the sunlight and raise their voices—sometimes they even utilize corporate equipment to make things according to their own desires. Perhaps you could say “ex-workers” are attempting to stage a permanent strike, to seize the means of production in the form of our own time and energy, as a step towards provoking a general strike.

CrimethInc. organizes an impressive number of projects and publishes an impressive number of books and journals. Is this not work?

Let’s not waste too much time on semantics—let’s just say we consider there to be a fundamental difference between voluntary labor and wage work. Obviously, we are not

plishing its specific purpose. It would be more sensible for political activists who feel it is not relevant to their lives to simply ignore it, rather than obsessing over it.

Incidentally, all the criticism of *Evasion* I’ve ever heard has come from middle class or working poor people. When the book was first published, the middle-aged African American and white homeless men with whom I shared tasks at Food Not Bombs said they thought it was right on, including the quote on the back cover. That quote was removed after the first printing, all the same, out of respect for the frustration some had expressed with it.

Can there be any place for trade unions? What about syndicalism? Class analysis? Is this all outdated leftist baggage, or can it still be a worthwhile pursuit, at least under certain circumstances?

Oh, syndicalism is still relevant, absolutely! I think most people involved in CrimethInc. projects see it as a complimentary strategy, not a competing ideology. Some people simultaneously participate in syndicalist organizing and anti-work organizing; others try to find connections between the two, such as providing dumpstered or stolen food to day laborers and those on picket lines. As for class analysis, we’re simply saying that it’s not radical enough to frame our interests as workers in this society—we have to start developing new conceptions of what our interests might be outside capitalist structures, or else our solutions will always be based in capitalist assumptions.

In light of this, what are your prospects for the ex-workers’ movement?

As the economy becomes more and more based on “precarious” work, it will be more important than ever to experiment with forms of resistance that are based outside the workplace. Likewise, in the US, where most trade unions have been totally

with regard to this situation, also in the context of the infamous blurb on the *Evasion* back cover.

Free-market intellectuals always defend corporate exploitation of “third world” nations (including US ghettos) by saying the exploiters are “creating jobs” that are desperately needed. Of course, once upon a time, long before European colonialism, the ancestors of these potential employees had access to the resources around them without having to trade their lives for them as wage slaves. People in rural Mexico and Brazil don’t need corporate exploitation so much as they need land reform. Lack of wage labor is only a problem when it is coupled with capitalist domination; to campaign for jobs for all, rather than for the abolition of capitalism, is cynical if anything is.

But this whole question is somewhat beside the point. Just because someone needs a job to get an income in Belgrade doesn’t mean a radical in Malmö is doing them a favor by working a lot instead of developing local anarchist projects and international solidarity efforts. Likewise, there are people who deliberately refuse and avoid wage work all around the world, even in the poorest regions. In some cases, these are people whose non-capitalist traditions are still alive, who are resisting assimilation into the culture of production, competition, and violence.

Evasion has to be seen specifically in the context of our efforts to promote a “counter-values” in the US, where middle class values have infected so much of the working class. In presenting an adventure story in which the protagonist makes the most of a life without financial means or stability, we were countering the pervasive message in the capitalist media that there is no pleasure or freedom without money. Many young people who start from an uncritical fascination with *Evasion* subsequently move on to more serious anti-capitalist ideas and efforts. The book is certainly not representative of most of what we do, but it has been surprisingly effective at accom-

against labor—we put a tremendous amount of effort into our projects. Some of it is not “fun” at all—for example, supporting our friends through trials and lengthy prison sentences, or washing all the dishes after three hundred people eat at a Really Really Free Market. But the important matter is that it’s all activity we have chosen for ourselves, rather than activity the economy coerced us into.

Okay, what about praxis then: How can we imagine the effort of a CrimethInc. collective to, say, bring out a book or organize a convergence? There are CrimethInc. texts rejecting mandatory meetings, consensus decision-making, even individual commitment to collective processes. So what happens when you get together in order to plan a project?

You know, there is no “CrimethInc. party line” about anything, so you can find CrimethInc. texts rejecting things that other CrimethInc. texts (and agents!) embrace. Different structures are appropriate for different situations. In some cases, you need a structure that works for a lot of people who don’t know each other, that guarantees that all of them will have an equal voice. But really strict formal structures tend to be more exhausting, so they sometimes break down over time. We make use of such forms when needed, but we are also trying to stage a long-term struggle that will go on for the rest of our lives if need be, so we try not to use them unnecessarily. Because we are not trying to make decisions for whole neighborhoods, but only to collaborate on specific creative projects, we can afford to be more fluid. Most of our projects function on a basis of informal or semi-formal consensus among groups of comrades who share affinity and have been working together a long time. It seems that this structure has proved to be the most efficient and long-lasting for us. It means that the people

cooperating on a project share long-term investment in it and know what to expect from each other, so we don't have to start over from scratch again and again.

If we follow what you've said so far, it sounds like your understanding of work is strongly tied to the wage labor system. Obviously, many folks are dependent on this system, otherwise they can't pay their bills, feed themselves and their families, etc. How do you think these folks should deal with their situation?

I hope it's clear from the answer above that we see the refusal of work as a strategic approach for those who can make use of it, not as a litmus test to determine who is really radical. The point is simply that to the extent to which people can realize their potential outside the exchange economy, this can be a point of departure for anti-capitalist resistance. It's not the only point of departure, and it's not available to everyone, or to the same degree.

You are familiar with the critique that the CrimethInc. ex/non-working stance might function for young, healthy individuals with few responsibilities, maybe in particular for white middle class kids who have their color and class privileges to fall back onto in a bind. What do you make of this?

The refusal of work is a strategy that takes different tactical forms in different situations; obviously, specific tactics are better suited for people in some situations than for others. We're not saying that working single mothers who slave all day cleaning floors to feed their children should quit their jobs and live on the street; but we are saying that anarchists who make comfortable incomes from wage labor should consider cutting down on their hours to start free childcare programs. We're

not saying African American men in the US who are always watched by racist security guards should steal (though many of them already have to do so); we're saying that white radicals who have an easier time stealing should steal resources for collective projects that help everyone who needs food. We're not saying that "freedom" means middle class punk kids dropping out of school to hitchhike around the world for a couple years before getting high-paying jobs at NGOs; we're saying nobody is really free until all of us can make decisions based on desire rather than economic need, and the first step towards real freedom is for us to commit our lives to lifelong resistance... whether or not it comes with a salary.

Working class and middle class anarchists in the US and Sweden should be honest about acknowledging our privileges: we have access to resources and opportunities others around the globe do not, and we owe it to them and to ourselves to use those for everyone's benefit. That means spending less time at work earning money for our own personal advancement in capitalist society, and more time fighting capitalism tooth and nail. Most full-time participants in CrimethInc. projects and related anti-capitalist activities have no bank accounts, no insurance, no retirement funds, no fancy wardrobe, and often have to steal and scam from one meal to the next; some of our harshest critics are probably much better off, financially speaking.

What about ex-working ethics in the context of communities where unemployment is rampant: many communities of color in the US, whole regions of Eastern Europe, vast areas of the so-called "Third World"? Usually, the lack of available (wage labor) work is seen as a serious problem within these communities. Some political activists have accused CrimethInc. of "cynicism"