

# **'It's Going to be Anarchy' (fingers crossed)**

**Anarchist Analyses of the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic crisis**

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This article critiques a selection of the wide range of anarchist responses to the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic so far,<sup>1</sup> and discusses the currency of anarchist ideas in this profound crisis.<sup>2</sup> Different variants of anarchism hold to specific (though largely overlapping) political priorities, and these characteristics have been emphasised in the analyses of the pandemic crisis from across the anarchist spectrum. This could be interpreted as a kind of sectarian confirmation bias as people cling to their favoured ideologies like self-affirming life rafts, but anarchist ideas have, once again, gained some traction in the wider popular imagination. Anarchists of all stripes can, and should, contribute to this popularisation from their own specific perspectives, but we cannot remain confined within our comfortable echo chambers. Anarchist ideas are crucial at this moment as a bulwark against the ‘nightmare’ re-installation of ‘a savage neo-liberal system’ imposed by ‘powerful state violence’<sup>3</sup> – the ‘neo-liberal plague’<sup>4</sup> as Chomsky has recently termed it – and, as such, we must do everything we can to sustain and deepen the proliferation of anarchist thinking and organising in this moment.

## Is it going to be anarchy?

In the midst of any crisis or disaster, swarms of commentators shrilly warn of the ‘anarchy’ that is about to befall us (unless we follow the specific course of action exhorted by that particular commentator, naturally). But, in the context of the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic crisis, we can identify numerous manifestations of the kinds of ‘anarchy’ we, as anarchists, would applaud. I don’t want to be glib – the reported death toll is already approaching 120,000<sup>5</sup> globally, thousands upon thousands more people are going to die as a result of this pandemic, and millions upon millions will see their livelihoods upended by the economic recession and depression that is taking hold. Those apparently hyperbolic voices that cry, ‘it’s going to be anarchy’<sup>6</sup> aren’t entirely wrong – as Proudhon put it in his own adoption of the ‘anarchist’ nomenclature in 1840: ‘[t]he ordinary meaning attributed to the word “anarchy” is ... as a synonym of “disorder”’.<sup>7</sup> But it is the ‘positive anarchy’ of a much more hopeful bent that has been a key trope of people’s response to the crisis. We should push this popularisation of anarchist ideas and anarchistic forms of organisation as far as possible against the oppressive trends of increased police powers and state surveillance. The pandemic crisis has called to a halt the political circus that Frank Zappa de-

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<sup>1</sup> Including sources published up to 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> By dint of the ‘lockdown’, the research has been internet based (using several search engines to widen results, and drawing on my subscription to various anarchist listservs), and is necessarily selective because of the huge volume of material that has already been published. The sources are largely drawn from the UK, with some from Ireland, France, Canada and the US. I try not to participate in ‘social media’, but comrades occasionally send me interesting bits-and-pieces by carrier pigeon, hence the ‘meme’ images in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Noam Chomsky (2020), ‘Noam Chomsky: Coronavirus – What is at stake?’, *DiEM25 TV* [YouTube], Srecko Horvat (interviewer), 28<sup>th</sup> March, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Update from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center website, [coronavirus.jhu.edu](http://coronavirus.jhu.edu) [accessed 08:57 GMT, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>6</sup> For example: William Sitwell (2020), ‘“It’s going to be anarchy” – top chefs plead for clarity on the coronavirus lockdown’, *The Telegraph*, 17<sup>th</sup> March, [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>7</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1994 [1840]), *What is Property?, or an inquiry into the principle of right and of government*, Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 209, footnote ‘a’.

scribed as ‘the entertainment branch of industry’.<sup>8</sup> In place of ‘Politics’, more fundamental social issues have come to the fore, and anarchist ideas are resonating around those conversations.

In recent weeks, anarchistic language has become commonplace even beyond the plethora of anarchist media platforms, blogs, listservs and message boards. For example, mainstream/right-wing journalists have discussed UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s ‘libertarian mind’<sup>9</sup> struggling to come to terms with the huge state interventions that have been undertaken to try to tackle the pandemic. Jon Bigger, writing for *Freedom News*, has skewered that bogus application of anarcho-terminology, reminding us that the word has been ‘bastardised’ and that ‘to be really clear ... Boris Johnson is not a libertarian’.<sup>10</sup> Whatever shade of Tory Johnson was supposed to be prior to the crisis, he seems to have undergone a Damascene conversion, as evidenced by his statement on 29<sup>th</sup> March that ‘there really is such a thing as society’<sup>11</sup> (contra Thatcher – though he was already on his way to full communism with his ‘fuck business!’ blurt in June 2018<sup>12</sup>). The Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, also struck a ‘libertarian’ pose, telling journalists while playing in an ice hockey match on 28<sup>th</sup> March that ‘it is better to die on your feet than live on your knees’.<sup>13</sup> In Ireland, the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, announced a tightening of ‘lockdown’ measures on 27<sup>th</sup> March with a paean to the virtues of freedom:

Freedom was hard won in our country, and it jars with us to restrict and limit individual liberties, even temporarily. But freedom is not an abstract concept. We give it meaning every single day – in the way we live our lives – and in the decisions we take willingly to protect our loved ones.<sup>14</sup>

Varadkar may have been attempting to deflect from the uncomfortable gaffe of paraphrasing Winston Churchill during his St. Patrick’s Day speech ten days prior,<sup>15</sup> but in any case, this extraordinary language from state ‘leaders’ would have been a ludicrous prospect just a few short weeks ago. We are a far cry from Politics-as-usual.

## Mutual Aid

Even beyond the broad-sweep concepts of freedom and liberty, more niche anarchist terminology has been prominent. Mutual aid has become a veritable buzzword across social media

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso (1989), *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, New York: Poseidon Press, p. 322.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Harris (2020), ‘Coronavirus has changed the facts, and so Boris Johnson has changed his libertarian mind’, *The Telegraph*, 18<sup>th</sup> March, [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>10</sup> Jon Bigger (2020), ‘Boris Johnson a ‘libertarian’? What a joke’, *Freedom News*, 26<sup>th</sup> March, [freedomnews.org.uk](http://freedomnews.org.uk) [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>11</sup> Boris Johnson (2020), untitled statement, *Twitter*, 29<sup>th</sup> March, [twitter.com](https://twitter.com) [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>12</sup> Robert Shrimsley (2018), ‘Boris Johnson’s Brexit explosion ruins Tory business credentials’, *Financial Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> June, [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Unattributed (2020), ‘Lukashenko: Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees’, *Belta*, 30<sup>th</sup> March, [eng.belta.by](http://eng.belta.by) [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Department of the Taoiseach (2020), ‘Speech of An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD, Government Buildings, 27 March 2020’, *gov.ie*, 27<sup>th</sup> March, [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020]. Just to be clear, Varadkar is no more an anarchist than Johnson or Lukashenko are libertarians – for those unfamiliar with Irish politics, Varadkar is leader of Fine Gael, a bog-standard neo-liberal party, albeit one founded by religious conservatives and fascist sympathisers.

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Fottrell (2020), ‘Borrowing from Winston Churchill’s wartime speech, Ireland’s leader gives chilling warning on coronavirus: “Never will so many ask so much of so few”’, *MarketWatch*, 18<sup>th</sup> March, [www.marketwatch.com](http://www.marketwatch.com) [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

feeds and on all sorts of mainstream media platforms. An excellent example came as early as 16<sup>th</sup> March, when the BBC's nicey-nicey teatime programme 'The One Show' interviewed Anna, one of the organisers behind the Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK network, and ended up broadcasting a neat treatise on anarchist organising. Anna said:

I'm a firm believer that people organising at the local level is what achieves change. And I think what we failed to see is an adequate response from the government, and what we have seen instead of that, and in response to that, is local people saying 'you know what, we're gonna stand up for the most vulnerable people in our society' ... The most effective organising is happening street-by-street rather than in bigger groups.<sup>16</sup>

The presenter, Alex Jones (not to be confused with the loud mouth, right wing conspiracist), interjected to try to save the government's blushes, but it was live TV and the genie was out of the bottle. This fundamental anarchist organising principle has mushroomed in popularity, with thousands of local-level mutual aid groups springing up in recent weeks – there are more than 4,000 groups in the UK and Ireland listed on **this public spreadsheet**,<sup>17</sup> and, if you are in the UK, you can find or register your local group **here**.<sup>18</sup>

The mutual aid theme has inevitably struck a chord with numerous anarchists, of various stripes, and this commonality has opened up some examples of inter-group collaboration. The people behind the Punx.uk website<sup>19</sup> have been working together with the SabCat<sup>20</sup> screen printing co-op, Anarchist Federation,<sup>21</sup> Freedom,<sup>22</sup> Seditionist,<sup>23</sup> We Shall Overcome<sup>24</sup> (anti-austerity fundraiser event group), the London Anarchist Bookfair collective,<sup>25</sup> the Autonomous Design Group<sup>26</sup> (open source creative collective), and Class War<sup>27</sup> to produce a series of benefit t-shirts to help fund mutual aid groups and networks in the UK. They have three designs available to buy now, for £15 each, **here**.<sup>28</sup>

Ruth Kinna and Thomas Swann link contemporary mutual aid groups back to Kropotkin's original use of the term<sup>29</sup> as a riposte to 'survival of the fittest' Social Darwinists of the late 1800s/

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<sup>16</sup> Anna on 'The One Show' (2020), 'The One Show meets the organiser behind Covid 19 Mutual Aid UK group!', BBC The One Show Facebook page, 17<sup>th</sup> March, [www.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>17</sup> Covid 19 Mutual Aid Groups, public Google Docs list, [docs.google.com](https://docs.google.com)# [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>18</sup> Website of Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK, [covidmutualaid.org/](https://covidmutualaid.org/) [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>19</sup> Punx.uk (2020), 'Mutual Aid vs Covid-19 | Fundraiser', *Punx.uk*, 20<sup>th</sup> March, [www.punx.uk](https://www.punx.uk) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>20</sup> Website of SabCat printing co-operative, [sabcat.com/](https://sabcat.com/) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>21</sup> Website of Anarchist Federation (Great Britain), [www.afed.org.uk](https://www.afed.org.uk) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>22</sup> Website of *Freedom News*, [freedomnews.org.uk/](https://freedomnews.org.uk/) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>23</sup> I can't find any current information about this group – any help appreciated.

<sup>24</sup> Website of We Shall Overcome, [weshallovercomeweekend.com/](https://weshallovercomeweekend.com/) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>25</sup> Website of Bookfair 2020 (London Anarchist Bookfair), [bookfair2020.org.uk/](https://bookfair2020.org.uk/) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>26</sup> Website of Autonomous Design Group, [www.weareadg.org](https://www.weareadg.org), [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>27</sup> Facebook page of Class War, [www.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>28</sup> Covid-19 Mutual Aid Benefit t-shirts on the Punx.uk 'Dissident Wear' online shop, [www.punx.uk](https://www.punx.uk) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>29</sup> Peter Kropotkin (1902), *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, London: Freedom Press, available free here: [theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

early 1900s.<sup>30</sup> They argue that the emergence of mutual aid ‘bears out Kropotkin’s observations about the capacity for everyday solidarity’,<sup>31</sup> but are equivocal about the post-crisis prospects:

If business-as-usual austerity returns after the crisis, the fertile ground of mutual aid may well dry up. The maintenance and extension of basic income, in contrast, may help preserve and promote grassroots social change in the longer term.<sup>32</sup>

The crucial question they pose is: ‘how can we expand these practices to rethink our social organisation?’<sup>33</sup>

There are (inevitably) variations and qualifications across anarchist analyses of the significance of mutual aid in the current crisis. In a brief missive for the PM Press blog series ‘All We Have Is Each Other’,<sup>34</sup> US-based writer scott crow describes mutual aid as ‘a mindset that challenges the dominant narratives’.<sup>35</sup> OK, but what happens when the hitherto dominant narratives have (at least for now) been disrupted? As highlighted here, mutual aid *is* one of the most prominent narratives of the moment. crow reiterated his point in an interview on the *Green & Red* podcast, but in that interview he also stated that in disaster contexts, ‘radical ideas sound not so radical anymore’<sup>36</sup> – i.e. the formerly dominant narratives begin to lose their dominance. crow has direct experience of mutual aid initiatives in the aftermath of 9/11 in Washington DC and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans – part of crow’s downplaying of the political significance of mutual aid stems from a desire to avoid ‘preaching’ anarchy to people, especially in those acute disaster contexts where there are immediate needs to be met. However, unlike terror attacks or natural disasters, the slow burn of the pandemic allows space for critical discussions to take place as the situation unfolds – and the point is that these critical discussions *have*, in fact, been taking place, and we cannot afford to sit them out.

The *It’s Going Down* ‘digital community centre’, based in the US, celebrate the blossoming of mutual aid initiatives there, but also raise the vulnerability of this emergent norm, and the threat of a statist reassertion of social control. They warn that, ‘everyday people have to seize the initiative and get organized; *before a new normal takes hold* and the State can re-solidify its authority’ [emphasis in original].<sup>37</sup> Jerry Rogers, in a contribution to UK-based *Freedom News*, shares his first-hand observations of exactly this re-assertion of state authority in the co-optation of mutual aid initiatives by ‘Politicos’ of various state and para-state guises. Rogers’ is a ‘cautionary tale’ about the rapid ‘takeover by councillors, ex-councillors, higher-ups in NGOs and Labour Party organisers’ of one Covid-19 mutual aid group in London.<sup>38</sup> He writes that ‘[s]pontaneous, grass-

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth Kinna and Thomas Swann (2020), ‘This anarchist thinker helps explain why we feel so driven to help each other through the coronavirus crisis’, *The Conversation*, 27<sup>th</sup> March, theconversation.com [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Webpage of the PM Press ‘All We Have Is Each Other’ blog series, [www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>35</sup> scott crow (2020), ‘#MutualAid’, *PM Press ‘All We Have is Each Other’*, 18<sup>th</sup> March, [www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>36</sup> scott crow (interviewee), ‘G&R Episode 10: Mutual Aid and COVID19 with scott crow’, *Green & Red* [podcast], 26<sup>th</sup> March, [anchor.fm](http://anchor.fm) [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>37</sup> *It’s Going Down* (2020), ‘Autonomous Groups Are Mobilizing Mutual Aid Initiatives to Combat the Coronavirus’, *It’s Going Down*, 20<sup>th</sup> March, [itsgoingdown.org](http://itsgoingdown.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>38</sup> Jerry Rogers (2020), ‘Mutual Aid in London: A Cautionary Tale’, *Freedom News*, 21<sup>st</sup> March, [freedom-news.org.uk](http://freedom-news.org.uk) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

roots action was never celebrated as a good thing, but as a spanner in the works of the machine [the statist Politicos] were trying to create'.<sup>39</sup> Rogers calls for the particular political and social significance of mutual aid principles to be defended:

Do not let those who have traditionally held power tell you that you need to wait for their orders – you don't need them, you never have, and you never will.<sup>40</sup>

A commentator under the pseudonym 'W' posted a piece on the anarcho-communist Anarchist Federation website discussing the conflict between mutual aid initiatives and the state. However, rather than joining the celebration of these community self-help networks, 'W' argues that 'Mutual aid has been *forced on us* by the state's neoliberal approach to public services and life in general during the last decade of austerity' [emphasis added].<sup>41</sup> This peculiar framing reduces mutual aid to a mere stick with which to beat the neo-liberal state. Of course, we *should* be beating the neo-liberal state with all the sticks we can get our hands on, but other responses, such as Bigger's piece in *Freedom News* about the 'evil nature of conservatism' on 18<sup>th</sup> March,<sup>42</sup> successfully do this while still celebrating mutual aid as 'anarchy in action'.<sup>43</sup> 'W' reduces mutual aid to a last resort reaction to government failure, which seriously underplays the wider social significance of the proliferation of this anarchist organising principle. Then again, if 'business-as-usual austerity returns',<sup>44</sup> as Kinna and Swann fear, perhaps this kind of meagre Political point scoring will be the best achievement we can hope for.

Anarchist Federation's 'W' is not alone in this pessimistic analysis of mutual aid as merely filling the gaps left by the 'rolled back' state, and it has been echoed by insurrectionary anarchists in Greece. A call for action by the Anti-Covid-19 Aid Network in Athens, republished on the insurrectionary anarchist info website *Anarchists Worldwide*,<sup>45</sup> emphasises that the state is to blame for the scale of the crisis:

The pointed shifting of responsibilities from the state and its representatives to each individual for the acquittal of the systematic under funding and under staffing of the healthcare system is unacceptable and vile.<sup>46</sup>

This position is clearly informed by the resistance narratives that emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, where blame *and debt* were foisted from states onto individuals, but the Athens Anti-Covid-19 Aid Network also emphasise the conflict between mutual aid and the state with characteristic insurrectionary flair. They write that:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> 'W' (2020), 'More of the state you've got (while mutual aid grows to tackle coronavirus)', *Anarchist Federation*, 15<sup>th</sup> March, [afed.org.uk](http://afed.org.uk) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>42</sup> Jon Bigger (2020), 'Covid19 exposes the evil nature of conservatism', *Freedom News*, 18<sup>th</sup> March, [freedom-news.org.uk](http://freedom-news.org.uk) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kinna and Swann, 'This anarchist thinker helps explain why we feel so driven to help each other through the coronavirus crisis', *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Website of Anarchists Worldwide, [anarchistsworldwide.noblogs.org/](http://anarchistsworldwide.noblogs.org/) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>46</sup> Anti-Covid-19 Aid Network (2020), 'Greece: Anti-Covid19 – Network for Mutual Aid and Struggle', *Anarchists Worldwide*, 28<sup>th</sup> March, [anarchistsworldwide.noblogs.org](http://anarchistsworldwide.noblogs.org/) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

The survival of the repressed and the exploited in times of a general crisis depends directly on their self-organisation, thus any attempt to repress must be answered in *defiance of any restrictions*. [emphasis added]<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, themes of defiance, authority and individual freedom have been prominent in anarchist analyses of state-enforced ‘lockdowns’.

## Authoritarianism and freedom

States’ responses to the pandemic crisis have, in almost all cases, been a blatant power grab, legitimised by the need to protect lives, and ameliorated with the (vague) assertion that new powers and martial enforcement are temporary. Some non-state measures (albeit encouraged by the threat of government intervention) have included WhatsApp limiting the number of times a message can be forwarded by each user to limit the spread of ‘Fake News’,<sup>48</sup> and YouTube suppressing content<sup>49</sup> related to a 5G phone mast conspiracy theory.<sup>50</sup>

However, the key conflict between state authority and individual freedom has been most clearly evident in discussions around police enforcement of ‘lockdown’ measures. In the UK, police forces were immediately accused of ‘overreach’ in their cack-handed deployment of new COVID-19 related powers (*The Guardian* has highlighted some of the far more brutal ‘lockdown policing’ elsewhere in the world<sup>51</sup>). ACAB Andy, on the *Dissident Island* radio show of 5<sup>th</sup> April, warned that ‘[t]he little jumped-up school prefects who formerly could only generally bully marginalised elements of the community now think that they can bully everyone, so they are more dangerous than usual’.<sup>52</sup> The police abused and misinterpreted their new powers so badly that even the Etonian old boy, former Tory advisor and ex-Supreme Court judge Lord Sumption weighed in, warning that ‘such behaviour risks plunging Britain into a “police state”’.<sup>53</sup> One of the *Dissident Island* presenters asked an incisive question on this issue: ‘Why do you think people are all-of-a-sudden talking about “the police state” when there *has always been* a police state?’

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Alex Hern (2020), ‘WhatsApp to impose new limit on forwarding to fight fake news’, *The Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> April, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>49</sup> Alex Hern (2020), ‘YouTube moves to limit spread of false coronavirus 5G theory’, *The Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> April, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>50</sup> The burning of 5G mobile phone masts, in response to the conspiracy theory that the technology is causing coronavirus, or is otherwise related to it, has had some limited coverage on fringe anarchist media platforms, such as the ‘illegalist’ anarchist 325 website, with a particular focus on the direct action aspect of the arsons (Unattributed (2020), ‘5G Arson Sabotage, Conspiracy Theories and UK’, 325, 325.nostate.net [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020]). The 325 contributor prefers to term the coronavirus conspiracy theory as an ‘unpermitted idea’, but places more emphasis on the theory that 5G masts are being installed as part of the infrastructure for a planned ‘techno-prison-world’. From 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> April more than 20 masts were burned in Belfast, Liverpool and Birmingham. In Belfast, the arsonists were reported as shouting ‘vive la revolution’ (Paul Ainsworth (2020), ‘Police appeal for witnesses to ‘5G’ arson attack on phone mast in Belfast’, *The Irish News*, 4<sup>th</sup> April, [www.irishnews.com](http://www.irishnews.com) [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020].)

<sup>51</sup> Maheen Sadiq (2020), “‘Shoot them dead’: extreme Covid-19 lockdown policing around the world – video report”, *The Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>52</sup> ACAB Andy [interviewee] (2020), *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020, [www.dissidentisland.org](http://www.dissidentisland.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>53</sup> Lisa O’Carroll (2020), ‘Covid-19: ex-supreme court judge lambasts “disgraceful” policing’, *The Guardian*, 30<sup>th</sup> March, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020].



[emphasis added].<sup>54</sup> The response from interviewee Kevin, from the Network for Police Monitoring (NetPol),<sup>55</sup> was that, in this new ‘Corona State’<sup>56</sup> people are ‘beginning to experience the reality that other people [especially working class and BAME people] have experienced for many years’.<sup>57</sup> NetPol’s current key message is: ‘talk to neighbours at a safe distance instead of reporting them – they’re not the enemy’,<sup>58</sup> and Kevin points to the examples of ‘people denouncing their neighbours’ as the most telling characteristic of a burgeoning police state.

Carl Spender, writing on the same theme for *Freedom News*, warns that ‘we cannot let the necessity of strong social distancing measures blind us to what is a flagrant abuse of power’.<sup>59</sup> As a practical response, Spender encourages us to ‘challenge the cops whenever you see them harassing someone for supposedly breaking lockdown regulations’ and not to ‘meekly accept[] fines or plead[] guilty to coronavirus related offences’.<sup>60</sup> ACAB Andy concurs with this advice, but goes one better, saying: ‘Don’t associate with cops. They’re probably contagious with other stuff as well as COVID-19’.<sup>61</sup> On the longer view, Kevin from NetPol highlights the threat of a ‘strengthening of the surveillance state ... [and] potentially the introduction of new powers’,<sup>62</sup> all underpinned by the state’s basic lack of trust in people. Echoing this, the US-based CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective write that in the context of the pandemic crisis people will not be able to ‘imagine doing without’ the state, ‘insofar as it is misunderstood as the protector of our health’, but that this will be a state characterised by ‘ever-increasing violence’.<sup>63</sup> We know that the state doesn’t trust people – but shouldn’t people be able to trust themselves and each other?

The problem here is that the conflict between freedom and authority in the context of coronavirus lockdowns has been *mischaracterised* as a trade off between the individual and the community. This was exemplified on *Dissident Island* radio on 5<sup>th</sup> April, when an interviewee, identified as a medical doctor and given the pseudonym ‘GDM’, bemoaned that in ‘the Western developed culture ... the right of the individual surpasses that of the community’, and that in the ‘community battle that we need to be fighting [against coronavirus]... the rights of the community outweigh the rights of the individual’.<sup>64</sup> There are several issues with ‘GDM’s statement: the neo-colonial language of the ‘developed’ West is deeply problematic; and the war-invoking discourse, also favoured by right-wingers, has been criticised as having ‘adverse effects ... lead[ing] to anxiety or indeed aggression towards people who may be seen as guilty of causing or spreading the

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<sup>54</sup> Interviewer (anonymous) (2020), *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020, [www.dissidentisland.org](http://www.dissidentisland.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>55</sup> Website of the Network for Police Monitoring, [netpol.org/](http://netpol.org/) [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>56</sup> Website for ‘Policing the Corona State’ by NetPol and the Undercover Research Group, [policing-the-corona-state.blog/](http://policing-the-corona-state.blog/) [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>57</sup> Kevin [interviewee] (2020), *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020, [www.dissidentisland.org](http://www.dissidentisland.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>58</sup> NetPol Twitter feed, [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/netpol) [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>59</sup> Carl Spender (2020), ‘Legal: People are being criminalised for coronavirus offences that don’t exist’, *Freedom News*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, [freedomnews.org.uk](http://freedomnews.org.uk) [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> ACAB Andy, *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Kevin, *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, *op. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> The CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective (2020), ‘Surviving the Virus: An Anarchist Guide’, CrimethInc. website, 18<sup>th</sup> March, [crimethinc.com](http://crimethinc.com) [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>64</sup> ‘GDM’ [interviewee] (2020), *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020, [www.dissidentisland.org](http://www.dissidentisland.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

virus'.<sup>65</sup> But aside from these problems, the central point being made by 'GDM' is that individual rights and freedoms *must* be abandoned to the 'community battle' against the pandemic. This thinking can only lead us in the direction of increased authoritarianism. An anonymous contributor to the *North Shore Counter-Info* platform in Canada points to not just the inevitable function creep of bio-surveillance and police-enforced lockdowns, but also the *logic creep* of this binary trade off between the community and the individual:

The response to the virus in China gives us a vision of what technocracy and authoritarianism are capable of. The virus slows to a stop, and the checkpoints, lockdowns, facial recognition technology, and mobilized labour can be turned to other ends. If you don't want this answer, you'd better ask a different question.<sup>66</sup>

AngryWorkers, a London-based collective, pose a series of 'different questions' in an article on the *LibCom.org* website – but of particular relevance to this issue they ask: 'How can the left respond in a way that dodges the minefield of strengthening the state?'<sup>67</sup> The *North Shore* contributor offers an answer: 'we don't have to adopt the state's project as our own',

We can understand the benefits of an infection-control protocol while being critical of the ways the state is using this moment for its own ends ... There is a big difference between following orders and thinking independently to reach similar conclusions.<sup>68</sup>

However, not all anarchists *have* been reaching similar conclusions to the state, even when it comes to social distancing and contagion control. A text titled 'Contre le confinement généralisé'<sup>69</sup> ['Against generalised confinement'] posted to Indymedia Nantes states that 'everyone has the choice to expose themselves or not, to take risks but above all to take care of themselves as they see fit'.<sup>70</sup> This echoes the Athens Anti-Covid-19 Aid Network's insurrectionist call to defy 'any restrictions' imposed during lockdowns [emphasis added].<sup>71</sup> The Down And Out insurrectionist group state this even more strongly:

We detest the turn-coating, so called anarchists all around us, who are suddenly unquestioningly abiding the states advice, laws, and lock downs. We refuse the prison logic (like all prison logics) and will never trust the state to keep us safe. The worst Virus is the State.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Elena Semino, quoted in unattributed article (2020), 'Beyond the battle, far from the frontline: a call for alternative ways of talking about Covid-19', news section of Lancaster University website, 6<sup>th</sup> April, [www.lancaster.ac.uk](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk) [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>66</sup> Anonymous (2020), 'Ask a Different Question: Reclaiming autonomy of action during the virus', *North Shore Counter-Info*, 20<sup>th</sup> March, [north-shore.info](http://north-shore.info) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>67</sup> AngryWorkers (2020), 'Thoughts on the Corona regime', *LibCom.org*, 19<sup>th</sup> March, [libcom.org](http://libcom.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous, 'Ask a Different Question: Reclaiming autonomy of action during the virus', *op. cit.*

<sup>69</sup> #jeveuxsortir (2020), 'Contre le confinement généralisé', *Indymedia Nantes*, 17<sup>th</sup> March, [nantes.indymedia.org](http://nantes.indymedia.org) [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>70</sup> Contributeurs et contributrices de Non Fides (2020), 'Pandémie, autorité et liberté', *Non Fides – Base de données anarchists*, 1<sup>st</sup> April, [www.non-fides.fr](http://www.non-fides.fr) [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020]. Also republished on the insurrectionist Anarchists Worldwide website: [anarchistsworldwide.noblogs.org](http://anarchistsworldwide.noblogs.org)

<sup>71</sup> Anti-Covid-19 Aid Network, 'Greece: Anti-Covid19 – Network for Mutual Aid and Struggle', *op. cit.*

<sup>72</sup> Down And Out (2020), 'Disclaimer', *It's The End Of The World As We Know It ... (And people applaud, quarantined at their windows)*, 4<sup>th</sup> April, p. 4, [downandoutdistro.noblogs.org](http://downandoutdistro.noblogs.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

Contributors to the *Non Fides* anarchist database in France critique this ‘reflex’ to ‘exercise ... “freedoms” that seem to be slipping away ... by picnic[ing and] party[ing],’<sup>73</sup> and ask:

Does our freedom lie in those little pieces of ‘*freedom of choice*’ that are usually left to us and have now been taken away? Is exercising one’s freedom really choosing ‘freely’ to catch or spread the virus ‘*as one pleases*’, to cure oneself ‘*as one pleases*’?<sup>74</sup>

Drawing on the individualist anarchist tradition, *Non Fides* conclude not: ‘Freedom is much more than what the State can take away from us, give us, take away and give back to us again. Freedom is struggle and revolt.’<sup>75</sup> The key point they make is that the conflation of individual freedom with a knee-jerk reaction against state ‘lockdowns’ (by picnicking, partying or breaking curfew for its own sake) is ‘a deeply liberal and manifestly capricious dividualism.’<sup>76</sup> *Non Fides* argue that the pandemic crisis, which has brought experiences of *unfreedom* to the fore, necessitates a wider evaluation of the freedoms we desire: ‘wouldn’t this unbearable situation be precisely the moment ... to reflect on *the meaning we want to give to life and to our activities*.’<sup>77</sup> They quote Max Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* (or *The Unique and Its Property*, if you prefer) to bolster their point: ‘Freedom can only be the whole of freedom; a piece of freedom is not freedom.’<sup>78</sup> Despite their particular engagement with Stirner, who refuted revolutionism, the concluding emphasis of the *Non Fides* article echoes those of numerous other anarchist groups, pointing to ‘[m]utinies and revolts in prisons and detention centres, rent strikes, strikes by those who are forced to work and subjected to the spread of the virus’ as key examples of the ‘revolt, struggle and solidarity that are equal to this widespread authoritarian hold’.<sup>79</sup>

## Work and refusal, domestic life and self-care

The pandemic crisis has laid bare the essential conflict between people’s wellbeing and quality of life, and the exploitation that underpins capitalism. Bosses everywhere have been summarily sacking precarious workers, or putting lives at risk and contributing to the spread of the virus by forcing people to work in unsafe conditions. Class War attack this callousness in their coronavirus bulletin *Class War Daily*: ‘[e]very unnecessary job, every unnecessary worker being forced to travel, is another potential death – and since this is a contagion, an exponential number of deaths leading from that’, and they reject the bosses’ bogus claim that some of these jobs are essential: ‘what they really mean is essential to their bank balance’.<sup>80</sup> The Anarchist Communist Group (ACG) put it simply: ‘Don’t die for their profits!’<sup>81</sup> The Manchester branch of Solidarity Federation

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<sup>73</sup> Contributeurs et contributrices de Non Fides, ‘Pandémie, autorité et liberté’, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Max Stirner 2017 [1844], *The Unique and Its Property*, Wolfi Landstreicher (trans.), Baltimore, MD: Underworld Amusements, p. 175. Available free here: [libcom.org](http://libcom.org) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>79</sup> Contributeurs et contributrices de Non Fides, ‘Pandémie, autorité et liberté’, *op. cit.*

<sup>80</sup> Class War (2020), ‘Bosses Exploit Corona Crisis’, *Class War Daily*, 7<sup>th</sup> April, [drive.google.com](http://drive.google.com) [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>81</sup> ACG (2020), ‘Northern Ireland workers strike over Coronavirus’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 28<sup>th</sup> March, [www.anarchistcommunism.org](http://www.anarchistcommunism.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

also criticise those businesses who are ‘cashing in on the coronavirus crisis’ but lay the blame ultimately at the government’s feet, writing that they are ‘trying to protect the UK economy even if this results in more people dying as a result of coronavirus’.<sup>82</sup> Admittedly, some businesses have been repurposing their production lines to materially support the efforts against the pandemic by turning out Personal Protective Equipment, hand sanitiser, or sharing epidemiology research, but, as Logan Marie Glitterbomb, from the mutualist *Center for a Stateless Society* website, puts it:

Imagine how much more companies would do if they were run by the workers in the communities they were established in instead of CEOs and business professionals far removed from the lives of everyday working people.<sup>83</sup>

ACG have been reporting extensively on coronavirus-related strikes and walkouts at workplaces all over the world, including: in Northern Ireland, a wildcat strike by around 1,000 workers at the Moy Park chicken processing factory in Portadown on 25<sup>th</sup> March, followed by strikes by workers at the ABP and Linden Foods processing plants in Dungannon and Lurgan;<sup>84</sup> in Scotland, a wildcat strike by postal workers in Alloa,<sup>85</sup> with further walkouts by posties in Lochgelly and Edinburgh; and in England, a walk out by Marks & Spencer distribution centre workers in Swindon, a strike by construction workers in Hull, and 500 workers on strike at the ASOS warehouse in Barnsley.<sup>86</sup> ACG have also reported on strikes worldwide, including: strikes in Lazio and Lombardy, Italy; Amazon workers on walkouts in New York, Chicago, France and Italy; and more actions by bin workers in Canada, call centre workers in Brazil, Coca-Cola factory workers in Chile,<sup>87</sup> supermarket workers in Belgium, metalworkers in Spain and Turkey, tea plantation workers in Bangladesh, health workers in Papua, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, and dockers in Australia.<sup>88</sup> These examples of workers collectively fighting back against their bosses are notable in terms of their wide global spread, the diverse range of work environments they cover, and the prevalence of wildcat actions – which obviously chimes with the tenets of anarchist-informed trade unionism.

Manchester Solidarity Federation (SolFed) ‘urge workers to act collectively ... [w]herever possible’ but also state that ‘[i]f that is not possible, you can refuse as an individual’.<sup>89</sup> To this end, anarcho-syndicalist and revolutionary union initiatives such SolFed<sup>90</sup> and Industrial Workers

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<sup>82</sup> Manchester SolFed (2020), Facebook post headed ‘Close Down All Non-Essential Industries Now’, *Facebook*, 31<sup>st</sup> March, [www.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>83</sup> Logan Marie Glitterbomb (2020), ‘Anarchism in Crisis: Dealing With Pandemics’, *Center for a Stateless Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> April, [c4ss.org](https://c4ss.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>84</sup> ACG (2020), ‘Northern Ireland workers strike over Coronavirus’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 28<sup>th</sup> March, [www.anarchistcommunism.org](https://www.anarchistcommunism.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>85</sup> ACG (2020), ‘Strikes around the world over Coronavirus’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 1<sup>st</sup> April, [www.anarchistcommunism.org](https://www.anarchistcommunism.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>86</sup> ACG (2020), ‘More Coronavirus Strikes’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, [www.anarchistcommunism.org](https://www.anarchistcommunism.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> ACG (2020), ‘Workers Strike Against Coronavirus’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 6<sup>th</sup> April, [www.anarchistcommunism.org](https://www.anarchistcommunism.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>89</sup> Manchester SolFed, ‘Close Down All Non-Essential Industries Now’, *op. cit.*

<sup>90</sup> Solidarity Federation (2020), ‘Coronavirus Crisis: The Government has produced more information in regards to the 80% of wages Jobs Retention Scheme including how pay will be calculated. Here are some of the details.’, Solidarity Federation website, 29<sup>th</sup> March, [www.solfed.org.uk](https://www.solfed.org.uk) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

of the World (IWW)<sup>91</sup> have been publishing practical advice on workers' rights during the pandemic, and have in some cases been actively engaging in workers' struggles. The Brighton Education Workers, a section of the Brighton branch of SolFed, have been organising to resist job losses of casualised workers at University of Brighton, which has, they write, 'effectively sack[ed] some of its most vulnerable workers during a period of unprecedented crisis'.<sup>92</sup> Other UK universities that have shown a similarly callous attitude to their precarious workers include University of Bristol, Newcastle University and University of Surrey.<sup>93</sup> These 'mercenary' university bosses have been criticised for using 'Covid-19 as a convenient excuse for cost-cutting strategies they had in mind anyway'.<sup>94</sup> Workplace issues are already emerging as a key arena of struggle in the pandemic crisis, but collective organisation of workers will surely increase in importance in the post-crisis recession and depression. The Cooperation Jackson network, posting on the PM Press 'All We Have Is Each Other' blog, point to the spreading '[c]alls for a rent strike ... as working poor and homeless workers are starting to occupy hundreds of vacant homes to meet their needs'<sup>95</sup> – this has been particularly prominent in London,<sup>96</sup> which was already in a severe housing crisis, and anti-eviction campaigns are also underway in the US.<sup>97</sup> Cooperation Jackson seek to 'build upon this momentum' calling for a General Strike on 1<sup>st</sup> May:

We have an opportunity to take control now, and we are ready to fight for a society in which all people can live with full autonomy without having to worry about survival.

General Strike! No Work, No Shopping Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>98</sup>

Mayday holds particular significance for the anarchist movement (and for the labour movement more widely) and has long been a focus of anarchist protest and celebration. Cooperation Jackson take an inclusive approach in bringing together some of the struggles that are emerging in different spheres of life, and this call for a General Strike targets both production (work) *and* consumption (shopping).

However, in the context of lockdowns, school and workplace closures, the sphere of our lives that has perhaps been brought into sharpest focus is that of the home. As Rowan Tallis Milligan writes on *AnarchistStudies.Blog*:

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<sup>91</sup> IWW Ireland (2020), 'WHAT WORKERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COVID-19', IWW Ireland website, 31<sup>st</sup> March, [www.onebigunion.ie](http://www.onebigunion.ie) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>92</sup> BrightonEducationWorkers (2020), 'Brighton Education Workers demands University of Brighton protect vulnerable workers', Brighton Education Workers website, 6<sup>th</sup> April, [brightoneducationworkers.wordpress.com](http://brightoneducationworkers.wordpress.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>93</sup> David Batty (2020), 'Hundreds of university staff to be made redundant due to coronavirus', *The Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>94</sup> Richard Watermeyer, Aline Courtois, and Hugh Lauder (2020), 'Reacting to Covid-19 by slashing fixed-term staff would be a disaster', *Times Higher Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, [www.timeshighereducation.com](http://www.timeshighereducation.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>95</sup> Cooperation Jackson (2020), 'A Call to Action: Towards a General Strike to End the COVID-19 Crisis and Create a New World— By Cooperation Jackson', PM Press 'All We Have is Each Other' blog series, 31<sup>st</sup> March, [www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>96</sup> Rent Strike London (2020), Facebook post titled 'LONDON RENT STRIKE IS ON!', 29<sup>th</sup> March, [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>97</sup> Website of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, [www.antievictionmap.com/](http://www.antievictionmap.com/) [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>98</sup> Cooperation Jackson, 'A Call to Action: Towards a General Strike to End the COVID-19 Crisis and Create a New World', *op. cit.*

For the first time in living memory people across large swathes of the world have been forced to stay at home ... we are having to take a close look at our domestic lives.<sup>99</sup>

One of the most harmful impacts of ‘stay at home’ restrictions has been the severing of face-to-face social interactions and support networks (formal and informal). Dani Burlison, on the ‘All We Have Is Each Other’ blog, asks: ‘How can we get through the hard work and pain of healing ourselves and our communities while isolated from each other?’<sup>100</sup> With a particular emphasis on self-care and coping with trauma, Burlison suggests all sorts of activities, such as online socialising, chatting with neighbours, looking after our physical health by sleeping and eating well, keeping to a daily routine, making and reading zines, doing yoga, watching comedies, and getting involved in mutual aid initiatives. Apart from the last suggestion in the list, and maybe the zines, none of this diverges much from what we’d likely find in the corporatised wellbeing tripe flaunted by ‘progressive’ workplaces or ‘lifestyle guru’ celebrities. This isn’t to criticise Burlison – readers stuck at home are likely to welcome any ideas to enrich their isolation or find coping mechanisms for stress, and the online blog format was originally imagined for exactly the reflective ‘public diary’ style of Burlison’s post. However, we can push reflections like Burlison’s in the direction of radical critique. To quote Milligan again: ‘Suddenly we are noticing that the only *actually* necessary labour is the labour of care, of food, and of health and sanitation’ and this ‘has historically been largely feminised and isolated within the home’ [emphasis in original].<sup>101</sup>

As the Anarchist Communist Group highlight, the increase in time spent in the home has resulted in a spike in reports of domestic abuse, which they argue ‘highlights the whole nature of a patriarchal system that has been incorporated into capitalism, and raises questions about the essential nature of families as they exist at present’.<sup>102</sup> Milligan concurs, and points to anarcha-feminist critiques of ‘the oppressive logic of the nuclear family’ and ‘the relationship between women and the work of social reproduction’.<sup>103</sup> ACG write that:

The gender division of labour both outside and inside the home will require a revolution in the way we see the roles of men and women. But that doesn’t mean we can’t start thinking and acting differently. Solidarity and mutual aid must be the principles we practice – at work, in the community *and at home*. [emphasis added]<sup>104</sup>

Milligan surmises that ‘forced isolation’ could encourage people to ‘think[] more hopefully, more optimistically, of alternative ways of living and being together’.<sup>105</sup> For anarchist feminists, this hopeful alternative is ‘[t]o socialise and communalise “the home” on our own terms’, and to

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<sup>99</sup> Rowan Tallis Milligan (2020), ‘COVID-19 and Social Reproduction’, *AnarchistStudies.Blog*, 8<sup>th</sup> April, anarchistorstudies.noblogs.org [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>100</sup> Dani Burlison (2020), ‘Overcoming Personal and Collective Trauma in the Age of COVID-19— By Dani Burlison’, PM Press All We Have Is Each Other blog series, 26<sup>th</sup> March, www.pmpress.org [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>101</sup> Milligan, ‘COVID-19 and Social Reproduction’, *op. cit.*

<sup>102</sup> ACG (2020), ‘Domestic abuse and coronavirus’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, www.anarchistcommunism.org [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>103</sup> Milligan, ‘COVID-19 and Social Reproduction’, *op. cit.*

<sup>104</sup> ACG (2020), ‘Women and Coronavirus’, Anarchist Communist Group website, 9<sup>th</sup> April, www.anarchistcommunism.org [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>105</sup> Milligan, ‘COVID-19 and Social Reproduction’, *op. cit.*

fundamentally reframe ‘socially reproductive labour for the good of the *community* rather than the individual’ [emphasis in original].<sup>106</sup>

So, across these aspects of anarchist thinking – mutual aid, individual freedom, struggles in the workplace and in the home – the (largely) shared response to the coronavirus pandemic has been to recognise that the crisis has exposed fundamental social problems, and to draw on anarchist philosophies and organising principles to point to a way out of the crisis that leads to a better world for everyone. But, as Kevin from the Network for Police Monitoring remarks: ‘Any moment like this could be a window of opportunity, or it could be ... a shock doctrine moment, where we end up with things being even worse’.<sup>107</sup>

## Window of opportunity, or ‘shock doctrine’<sup>108</sup> moment?

Some anarchists are incurably grumpy – it comes with the territory. But across the various emphases expressed in anarchists’ analyses of the pandemic crisis, *hope* has been a strikingly common theme, and two main hopes have been prominent. One is for the demise of the neo-liberal status quo, the other is for a radically altered (and improved) future society.

Ruth Kinna makes an important point about resisting the temptation, or indeed the demand from some commentators, to set out an ‘anarchist programme’ for the post-pandemic future. Kinna writes:

Don’t expect an anarchist to decide where mutual aid should lead. The point about self-organising and do-it-yourself culture is to work things out co-operatively. Knowing what you don’t want and sharing this with others is quite a good starting point.<sup>109</sup>

Anarchists have been abundantly clear on what we *don’t* want. Across the anarchist spectrum there is a stark rejection of the inequalities and pointless suffering that have characterised society in the early twenty-first century. So the *first* hope that unites anarchists in the midst of this crisis is that that the ‘neo-liberal plague’ might be coming to an abrupt end. In an article titled ‘Coronavirus and the collapse of neo-liberalism’,<sup>110</sup> Manchester SolFed point out that ‘[e]ven the most ideologically-led and fervent advocates of the “minimum state” have had to cave in to a looming disaster that would spell even the end of market capitalism’.<sup>111</sup> The Cooperation Jackson group write that ‘[t]hose who control the land, the property, and the businesses want you to believe ... that things will return to “normal” within a matter of months, and even weeks’,<sup>112</sup> but as Kinna puts it: ‘Who wants normal?’<sup>113</sup> Kevin Carson, of the *Center for a Stateless Society*, writes that despite states’ abandonment of extreme neo-liberal economics, we’re still ‘on our way

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Kevin, *Dissident Island*, Episode 245, *op. cit.*

<sup>108</sup> Naomi Klein (2007), *The Shock Doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*, New York: Allen Lane.

<sup>109</sup> Ruth Kinna (2020), ‘Normality’, *DiY Culture*, no. 6, not yet published.

<sup>110</sup> Manchester branch of Solidarity Federation (2020), ‘Coronavirus and the collapse of neo-liberalism’, Solidary Federation website, 20<sup>th</sup> March, [www.solfed.org.uk](http://www.solfed.org.uk) [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Cooperation Jackson, ‘A Call to Action: Towards a General Strike to End the COVID-19 Crisis and Create a New World’, *op. cit.*

<sup>113</sup> Kinna, ‘Normality’, *op. cit.*

to another Great Recession or worse'.<sup>114</sup> The message is that the neo-liberal capitalist norm of the last several decades is simply untenable. A frequently spotted analogy of the moment is of capitalism (or the state) as a virus,<sup>115</sup> with anarchism (or a related concept) as 'the cure'.

However, somewhat distinct from this assertion of a fundamentally changed post-crisis world, Noam Chomsky situates the coronavirus pandemic as 'a small fraction, of [the] nature crises that are coming along'.<sup>116</sup> He repeatedly emphasises the *continuing* 'deterioration of democracy' and 'civilisational crisis' of the west, with resulting environmental catastrophe and nuclear war,<sup>117</sup> as the more fundamental threats we face *and have been facing* for some time.<sup>118</sup> Chomsky doesn't completely dismiss the seriousness of the pandemic crisis, but rather alerts people to the far larger scale of these 'enormous problems that we're facing right down the road'.<sup>119</sup> As a sliver of hope against this bleak assessment, he offers that coronavirus 'should bring us to awareness of ... the deep dysfunctional characteristics of the whole socio-economic system ... So this could be a warning sign and a lesson'.<sup>120</sup> Anarchist Communist Group also qualify their hopes for post-pandemic society, though in a slightly different vein, warning that, '[g]eneration after generation of rampant advertising has created a consumerist sensibility in many that won't simply drift away'.<sup>121</sup> But they concur with Chomsky that the 'fragility of the System and the illusion of its stability has been laid bare'.<sup>122</sup>

Despite these qualifications however, the *second* hope that has underpinned anarchist responses to the pandemic crisis has been a defiantly positive appeal to the future. This small selection gives a flavour:

There is an opportunity to rethink how we might want to live differently, what it means to live happily, and what really is important in our everyday lives.<sup>123</sup>

(Rowan Tallis Milligan, *AnarchistStudies.Blog*)

We owe it to our comrades to build a society that allows us all to dream the same dreams; that allows all our children to thrive. We've seen just who keeps the country running – and just who cares for nothing and no one but themselves. Fuck the bosses! Power to the workers!<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Kevin Carson (2020), 'Pandemics: The State As Cure or Cause?', *Center for a Stateless Society*, 17<sup>th</sup> March, c4ss.org [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>115</sup> The Anarchist Communist Group have (tactfully) not made too much hay out of the name of their 'theoretical journal', *Virus in the Body Politic* (issue one, October 2019), which inverts the analogy, putting anarchism as the virus and capitalism as the body.

<sup>116</sup> Chomsky, 'Coronavirus – What is at stake?', *op. cit.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Chomsky notes that the Doomsday Clock is, as of 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, at just 100 seconds to midnight as a result of the threat of environmental catastrophe and nuclear war. See the Doomsday Clock on the website of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, thebulletin.org [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>119</sup> Chomsky, 'Coronavirus – What is at stake?', *op. cit.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> ACG (2020), 'The coronavirus long term effect...'. Anarchist Communist Group website, 24<sup>th</sup> March, www.anarchistcommunism.org [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Milligan, 'COVID-19 and Social Reproduction', *op. cit.*

<sup>124</sup> Class War, 'Bosses Exploit Corona Crisis', *op. cit.*



(Class War)

We're tired of being fucked with ... let all the ... expedients we adopt to survive through this crisis, to help each other survive it, be the seeds of a society where we can live without fear of it happening again.<sup>125</sup>

(Kevin Carson, *Center for a Stateless Society*)

When this is over, we cannot continue to accept the way things are. No going back!<sup>126</sup>

(Anarchist Communist Group)

Maybe these hopes will be in vain, but with so much at stake, and with the encouragement and inspiration of all the anarchistic green shoots that have been springing up around us, defeatism is not an option.

## Concluding remarks

During the process of writing this article, from late March to early April 2020, the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic crisis has hit closer and closer to home. There have been stresses and joys. Disruption to the grinding drudgery of 'normal' work and a lengthy commute has been welcome. But, working from home, the (sometimes excessively joyful) domestic chaos of my two young children has meant snatching at fleeting moments of peace for the concentration to write. As if to prove the point, I had to go and change a shitty nappy before I could finish typing that last sentence. More seriously, two close family members have bullying bosses who tried to force them to work in unsafe conditions – one business markets sugary drinks store-to-store, the other sells dog shampoo online (the work couldn't be any *less* essential!). I'm proud that they both stood up for themselves, but they have already had to take unpaid time off work, and will likely face further punishments just for putting their safety (and the health of the wider community) ahead of their bosses' profit margins. One of my parents, an NHS worker, contracted COVID-19, but luckily has displayed only mild symptoms and is on the road to recovery. I know other people have suffered far worse, and the peak of the pandemic hasn't yet been reached here, but my point is that *all of us* are experiencing this crisis directly and personally. The 'anarchist analyses' discussed here have come from people who have been, and are being, and *will continue to be* affected by the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic in all sorts of ways. On the other side of it, core ideas that animate anarchist political philosophy are being pulled from abstraction into lived experience in a very immediate way, and this applies to people with no prior engagement with anarchism – as scott crow puts it: 'People care about this when it becomes relevant to them, when it affects them directly'.<sup>127</sup>

I'm not about to set out a road map to our shining post-pandemic anarchist utopia, but we would do well to take a look around and take stock of where we're at, and to recognise the opportunities and challenges emerging from this period of profound disruption of taken-for-granted 'realities'. It hasn't been possible to include here all the variants of anarchism, broadly

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<sup>125</sup> Carson, 'Pandemics: The State As Cure or Cause?', *op. cit.*

<sup>126</sup> ACG, 'Domestic abuse and coronavirus', *op. cit.*

<sup>127</sup> scott crow, 'G&R Episode 10: Mutual Aid and COVID19', *op. cit.*

conceived, that have had something to say about the pandemic crisis – and there are plenty of perspectives I simply wouldn't *want* to include. However, the net has been thrown quite widely. This article includes the perspectives of anarcho-individualists, anarcha-feminists, revolutionary unionists, anarcho-insurrectionists, anarcho-communists, anarchist punks, anarcho-syndicalists, 'left market' anarcho-mutualists, class struggle anarchists, anarcho-illegalists, and even trusty old anarchists-without-adjectives. *North Shore Counter-Info* argue that we will need to 'broaden[] our sense of inside-outside to include enough people to be able to organize',<sup>128</sup> and I agree fulsomely that:

if we actually want to challenge the ability of the powerful to shape the response to the virus for their own interests, we need to start by taking back the ability to ask our own questions.<sup>129</sup>

Narrowly sectarian attitudes often prevent us from taking the critiques of 'other sorts' of anarchists on board, but the diversity of anarchist political philosophies is a quality to celebrate, not a problem to be overcome. This article points to some of the critical engagements we *can* make with the ideas of comrades from 'other' anarchisms, and the 'ability to ask our own questions' can only be enriched by that.

Here's hoping.

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<sup>128</sup> Anonymous, 'Ask a Different Question: Reclaiming autonomy of action during the virus', *op. cit.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

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Jim Donaghey  
'It's Going to be Anarchy' (fingers crossed)  
Anarchist Analyses of the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic crisis  
April 13, 2020

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