

# **Please Riot Issue 1: Retrospectives**

**Reflections on 2020**

Please Riot Collective

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## **(re)Introduction**

We are a collective of students and staff working at Colorado State University. In the fall of 2019 and spring of 2020, we published a few radical newspapers that were, in retrospect, both extremely of their time and wholly inadequate to the circumstances we faced. At that time, with the possibility of an electoral path to something approaching socialism—at least as popularly defined by left-liberals and social democrats—articulation of the interconnection of supposedly distinct but poignant social problems alongside policy prescriptions seemed reasonable and victory looked possible. That is no longer the case. The COVID-19 pandemic and cascading social crises laid bare the breadth and depth of the social malaise overcoming the so-called “United States” and the world. The murder of George Floyd by a racist cop and the subsequent insurrection for Black life offer a vision into a world of real resistance to the imposition of white supremacy, one that necessarily occurs outside traditional institutions of acceptable social change: the courts, the legislature, the nonprofits, the Silicon Valley tycoons and technocrats. Fighters in Minneapolis and around the country showed what it meant to fight back against a deeply racist system of policing that has dominated the lives of Black and Brown USians, but also the lives of poor and working-class whites. There will never again be a sight as beautiful as when the Third Precinct burned, across the street from that Minneapolis Target.

In the glow of those flames emerged a truth known by revolutionaries throughout history: we aren’t voting our way out of this Hell. No ballot box can hold the truth that we hold in our hearts. A better world is possible, but we must fight for it. Anyone who tries to sell you on electoral politics and reform is a dupe or a fraud. The clock is ticking; every minute that passes is another minute of living subservient to a system that denies the humanity and autonomy of all but the wealthiest and most powerful, and every day that passes will be the last for thousands around the world, killed by the uncaring and violent systems that structure our whole lives. Climate catastrophe, too, looms close over the horizon as extreme weather systems, that will only become worse as the earth cooks, wreak havoc on human communities the world over. What is incremental change in the face of so many life-ending and world-shattering slow catastrophes? What is reform as we face down apocalypse?

In the pages that follow, we will discuss the lessons we have learned from these seminal events. We feel we have an obligation to try and convince you that, although the times in which we live are bleak, there is hope. There are ideological tendencies, historical practices, and political frameworks that have won social change in the past. They have shaped the world as we know it. The times in which we live are not a symptom of some novel blight or unforeseen consequence, but a very obvious logical end to an extractive, racist, late-capitalist system. And thanks to capitalist, racist, and (small c) conservative indoctrination, we as a species have forgotten that we have the power to shape our world, though in many ways that power has been taken from us.

In the pages that follow we will reflect on what we see as being the three most important issues of the past year and a half:

1. The racial domination by the state via racist police killings that led to the death of George Floyd and so many other Black, Brown, and Indigenous people every day,
2. The management of COVID-19 that has killed or maimed millions in the “US”, and,

### 3. The failures of representative government to improve social wellbeing.

Our hope is to illustrate that, though it may not seem to be, nothing has fundamentally changed since early 2020. From this, it ought to become clear that the energy and actions of genuine militants must be redirected from courses of action that are fundamentally incapable of effecting social change—electoral reformism and NGO work—to those proven effective and capable of delivering the sort of total social reconstruction we advocate. Though it may seem bleak, the only path forward is revolution. It may sound far-fetched, but by working together we can build a better, more humane world. In fact, it seems more likely every passing day that revolution will be the only route to maintaining a livable world.

The deck is stacked against any change, let alone revolution. But, in the words of anarchist science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin: “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings.”

Those kings are dead.

## **Retrospective: Police**

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, a white police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd for more than 8 minutes, killing him. Three officers looked on while a crowd gathered. Floyd had the police called on him for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill at a bodega, and he had just recovered from COVID-19. He was a tall man and had worked as a security guard in Minneapolis. He had a daughter. But most of all, to the cop who murdered him, George Floyd was a Black man and a threat.

Policing in the “US” came from two places. In the North, private militaries like the Pinkertons were hired by capitalists to violently break strikes and to destroy worker organizations. Pinkertons were infamous for firing into crowds of striking workers and blackmailing labor organizers. Though the most recent time a Pinkerton themselves made the news was when one shot a fascist in the face in Denver in 2020, the role played by that private detective agency has been internalized in state institutions like the FBI and Secret Service, and also the police (in controlling strike activities and cracking down on radical labor activists). To this day, police regulate the militancy of the labor movement through enforcement of anti-worker laws and by harassing poor and unhoused people.

In the South, which relied upon enslaved Black labor for cash crop production, slave patrols were constructed to hunt for Black people who fled their captivity. The end of private slavery after the Civil War eliminated the need for slave patrols, but the newly formed Klan occupied a similar role. Slave Patrols sought to catch and return Black people who tried to escape enslavement, which itself served to maintain that slave society. The Klan sought to maintain white supremacy in the South (and across the country, in different forms) with terror and murder. While the immediate aftermath of emancipation was a significant increase in political power held by the Black community, Klan violence prevented Black participation in electoral politics and helped to form the emerging sharecropping replacement to chattel slavery. Even without the Klan, lynching was frequent in the South as a means through which the white community held power over their Black neighbors. White controlled courts and sheriffs had no problem looking away.

Public Slavery, wherein prisoners of the state were forced to work without a wage, grew during this time. The most infamous sites of this, the former-plantation-current-prison Angola (located in Louisiana), is a look into the past, where white guards watch over Black men working in fields for cash crops. This practice is found throughout the country. The rise of mass incarceration following the Civil Rights movements of the 1940s-1960s has left the “US” with more than 2 million people currently incarcerated. Black people make up 13% of the population, but 40% of the prison population, thanks to decades of heavy policing and increasing poverty<sup>1</sup> in Black communities.

The relevance of these historic roles was revealed in the causes and responses to the murder of George Floyd. George was a Black man who allegedly gave a clerk a counterfeit \$20 bill—an act near exclusively taken by the poor and working class. The color of his skin was an invitation of the power of police to use violence. If there is ever a truth about the police that rings true throughout history, it is that All Cops Are Derek Chauvin. Just like his forebearers and just as countless more police fascists will do in the years between now and the end of policing, officer Chauvin took the life of a Black man. He did so because he could, because so many before him had done similar things without consequences. He did so as his fellow officers looked on, just as so many fellow officers have done so in the past.

Enough was enough. Crowds gathered then and the next day and marched on the precinct where the officers worked. They demanded many things. Police fired upon them with tear gas. Though some left, those who remained fought back. Bottles, rocks, bricks, whatever they could get their hands on; projectiles of all sorts were lobbed at the police wielding grenade launchers and pepper-ball launchers<sup>2</sup>. On the second day, militants torched an AutoZone. On the third day, they torched the Third Precinct. All the while, rebels looted stores and clashed with the police around the city.

After the burning of the police precinct in Minneapolis, the “US” exploded with protests. At one point, there was a George Floyd/Black Lives Matter protest in every state and in every major city in the country, with even more cities around the world marching in solidarity. For months, from late spring into the summer of 2020, people marched in the streets, demanding a variety of things. From demanding Derek Chauvin be fired, arrested and put in prison, to “defunding” the police, to altogether abolishing them. In a few short months, the Overton window of what the world could look like in regard to policing shifted greatly. What once seemed like a pie-in-the-sky dream was now being discussed daily on CNN, MSNBC, and even FOX News. The demands were met wholly with resistance from the ruling class and their cronies. Crowds of protesters were tear-gassed indiscriminately, beat, and shot with so-called “less lethal” rifle rounds. Far Right militias roved the streets in attempts to intimidate, injure, and many times kill protestors. The National Guard began pulling up in unmarked vehicles and disappearing protestors. President-to-be Joe Biden offered his two-sense when he suggested that cops “shoot [suspected criminals] in the leg” with live ammo. As the summer went on, Democrats refrained, “We see you, we hear you” with the next phrase being “Rioting and violence is never justified.”

Though demonstrations around the country were called the days after Floyd was killed, the burning of the precinct and arrival of the weekend propagated this revolt for Black life to local-

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<sup>1</sup> Which forms a vicious cycle due to discrimination against the formerly incarcerated and the financial costs incurred in legal fees, jail time and lost income.

<sup>2</sup> Pepper Balls are small plastic shells filled with aerosolized capsaicin, fired from paintball guns. Upon impact, pepper balls rupture and spray the capsaicin around, irritating eyes, lungs, and mucus membranes.

ities big and small. Towns as small as Alamosa, Colorado, or Norfolk, Nebraska, held regular demonstrations against police brutality and racism. Every major city was a site of some sized demonstration, and many turned violent after police officers rioted<sup>3</sup>. Firing into peaceful crowds after misdemeanors were committed by members of those crowds, police reveled in the opportunity to prove to the public that they, even while the embers of the Third Precinct still smoked, were still In Charge. From batons and Flashbangs to Tear Gas, pepper balls, and the remainder of their arsenal<sup>4</sup>, police departments unleashed all they could on unprepared crowds.

In Denver, the story played out just like this: the day following the burning of the Precinct, crowds gathered at the capitol building in the afternoon and marched towards the interstate. Weaving through the downtown, traversing 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall and the labyrinth of one-way roads, bicyclists blocked traffic for the hundreds gathered while the police attempted to cordon off the march from any “high value targets” (think court buildings, police stations, and major roads). Though the initial path to the interstate was blocked and the crowd faced down the handful of police officers standing in the crowd’s path, the marchers crossed two pedestrian bridges and a park. A third pedestrian bridge laid ahead, but a number of marchers instead vaulted hip-height barriers and began to inch onto the highway. Cautiously, and with increasing numbers of participants, both directions of interstate 76 were shut down. Then the police arrived in force.

Patrol cars, sirens blaring, weaved through traffic and parked nearby those most brave rebels who had traversed most of the highway while the remaining hundreds watched. Cops exited their vehicles and began arresting those they could catch. Their partners and riot clad officers who had approached the site from which those rebels had entered the highway from began to fire their modified paintball guns at the crowd on the bridge above and nearby. The pepper balls they unleashed, which hit like a paintball but release aerosolized capsaicin<sup>5</sup> upon impact. Some officers fired foam rounds at protestors who they deemed a threat and blinded a young person that day. The crowd dispersed and many returned to the capital building by the time the sun had set. The population of Denver was not ignorant to the demonstration, and many had cheered or jeered the march as it worked its way to the city’s transportation arteries. On the return, a number of fights broke out between those who had just been attacked by police and bootlicking supporters of police violence. One Right-Winger even fired a firearm thrice above the demonstrators as they returned to the capital that evening.

Those who returned to the capital and who did not leave for their homes or vehicles found themselves facing off with riot police who arrived later. Warning the crowd of an impending curfew, the crowd responded to the police with insults and trash. With the final call to disperse, the police equipped their gas masks and lobbed tear gas canisters into the crowd. Night had fallen and the crowd split every which way. Police set up a cordon around the capital and trucks with riot-gear clad officers patrolled the downtown that night, firing pepper balls upon any who dared loiter outdoors after curfew.

The following few days in Denver operated in similar ways: protestors assemble at the capital, some local group leads a march through town for a few hours (but never gets close to a police station), then police officers riot and start firing upon crowds. News spread locally of this violence, but crowds kept growing and kept fighting back. Barricades did little more than slow a

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<sup>3</sup> Police violence after the burning of the Precinct (or after any circumstance where their power is threatened) is a clear example of the sort of orgy of violence associated with rioting.

<sup>4</sup> So well-stocked after two decades of counter-terror grants to local departments.

<sup>5</sup> The same active ingredient in peppers, pepper spray, and common types of tear gas.

police force that seemed unstoppable, but they were erected nonetheless. Bank windows were smashed, and buildings tagged. Conservatives raged in their suburbs, and liberals were pushed either against the protests or against the police.

Following days of revolt across the country, counter-insurgency tactics developed from the colonial occupations of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were deployed. The two most significant were simple enough: divide and co-opt. The dichotomy of the good protester versus the bad one, which harkened back to those most acceptable of mass social movements—those of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi—claimed that a passive nonviolence, where protesters ought to be content with being attacked by police and should not fight back or damage property, is the only acceptable form of civil action. Any behavior that did not comply was counterproductive and can be forcefully prevented by those who cared enough about the movement. The self-deputized who sought to control the behavior of demonstrators and handed over to the police any rebels they could were called “peace police”. The enforcement of this dichotomy that painted the righteously violent as an enemy to a movement for the end of police brutality served well to drive revolutionaries from the streets and from liberal demonstrations. Police had noticed, as had occupying forces in the international frontiers of US empire, that the presence of rebels within larger, more moderate social formations protected the rebels from more precise retribution from the police and could push more moderate members of those formations to more radical action. Further, the inability of police (or any occupying force) to effectively target rebels meant that punishment of rebels led to collateral damage; firing upon rebels could just as likely harm a moderate who will turn against the occupying force. Encouraging peace policing brought rebels out from these larger social formations and made targeting them easier. It also served to keep masses of people from radicalizing, as they had during previous days’ attempts to crush militancy in mass demonstrations. Co-option of that remaining moderate element of the movement allowed state forces of the state and the status quo to control the movement and its demands through (at least the appearance of) concessions. Key Democrat leaders and party operatives, as well as nonprofit leaders, small business owners, and local megalomaniacs made symbolic gestures towards the demands of the movement or attempted to plan and lead local events. In so doing, they were able to indirectly or directly empower key discourses around the status of police, elevating visions of reform and paying lip service to the pain of Black people while delegitimizing rebellious narratives around police abolition or violent insurrection. In Denver, staff within the Mayor’s office served this role, leading marches with the police chief (who had, for the past days, ordered the brutal suppression of street action) and dispersing crowds well before the sun set (where rebels had most effectively fought back against police and the cover of darkness aided smaller bands of militants to move around less seen). Alongside the Denver Police restraining themselves and not firing upon crowds, this co-option effectively ended the rebellion in Denver.

What was the result of so many days of violence? Many people lost eyes and others suffered permanent injuries caused by impact munitions: some had brain damage, others suffered from internal bleeding, some received joint damage. The Denver Police Department lists 75 injuries inflicted upon officers during the uprising. While all should be proud that more than 50 of those were caused by protestors fighting back, the list also includes self-inflicted injuries<sup>6</sup> and accidents. Compared to the thousands of people who were attacked by and fought back against the police, such a list pales in comparison. What of victories gained? The Colorado State Legislature revoked

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<sup>6</sup> Though it is safe to argue police caused most of these injuries by their own action.

many legal privileges police enjoy in the court and now victims of police violence can sue officers for up to \$25,000 in damages after police misconduct. Compared to medical bills after police violence or lost income from time spent incarcerated? This is nothing.

The response to the murder of George Floyd reignited the Black Liberation Movement nationwide and vastly widened its militancy. Though variation emerged due to local histories of police violence and previous organizing, streets across the country echoed with the demand: Abolish the Police. Even the seemingly-less political “Fuck The Police” was demonstrated by the militancy with which average people fought with riot-gear clad officers and with the vast numbers who looted. Most every city had local Black people attempt to claim some sort of authority over these demonstrations and steer them towards “peaceful” ends. These local leaders deradicalized these demonstrations by emphasizing the importance of peaceful demonstration, by removing or handing over rebellious protestors to police, and by participating in publicity stunts with police officers.<sup>7</sup> In the process, as radicals left demonstrations and as liberal demonstrations gained legitimacy due to media intervention and were less dangerous to attend, the average tenor of the Black Liberation Movement became more liberal (with the demand shifting to “defund the police” or “reform the police”) but more stratified. Those most radical would form their own demonstrations and clash with cops at night while liberals marched with cops during the day. The clearest example of this was in Portland, where anti-police demonstrations went on nightly for more than one hundred days after George Floyd was murdered. While liberal marches fizzled out quickly, radical demonstrations were repeatedly crushed.

The demands of this movement, as varied as they are, have hardly been met. Though some meager concessions have been made, things have largely remained the same, and arguably are getting worse. At the epicenter is Minneapolis PD. After the burning of the precinct Minneapolis protestors, community members, and organizers moved to “defund” the Minneapolis police department. When the city council of Minneapolis voted to disband the police department as a whole and replace it with a public safety team, many celebrated. But now, a year and a half later, the department has remained mostly unchanged. Legal challenges to the vote and resistance from within the city government have left the police force intact. The City Council in Minneapolis did vote to move \$1.1 million from police department to the health department, but a recent ballot proposal to disband the police there did not pass. Nationwide, liberal politicians, and even many radicals, distance themselves from any support for defunding police (let alone abolition). Now, the Biden administration and the Democratic blocs in Congress have increased police spending, saying it’s for “more training”. Barring a few cities, most sectors of the “US” state have increased police budgets. Police spending remains one of the largest proportions of municipal and state spending, especially in predominantly Black and Brown cities.

What of the dozen cities that did defund their police departments to some degree? Most of these spending cuts were relatively small compared to the overall size of their police budgets. Claims about subsequent increases in crime rates, so often touted by blue-lives bootlickers, fail in a number of consequential ways to justify increasing police funding. Perhaps most importantly, data used in these arguments is tainted by the pandemic. Claims by police advocates about large increases in homicides or domestic violence in cities that defunded police omit the nationwide increase in certain violent crime. Further, it is the police themselves who collect data on crime

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<sup>7</sup> The most infamous form these stunts took was the all-too-common “police officers take a knee with protestors”, with white high-level Democrats posing for a photo while doing the same.



rates. Police unions are the strongest labor organizations in the country, and police chiefs and many political leaders agree with these unions: fighting budget cuts is vital to their careers and to the police as an institution. Police often ignore or fail to investigate certain crimes, so what is stopping them from inflating these numbers to prove a point? Police officers on patrol, for example, instigate most of the crimes they themselves must report through traffic stops, and harassment of poor people, Black and Brown people, and sex workers. Finally, it is important to note that the police do not even do the job they purport to do (stop or solve crime) well. Most crime goes unsolved, even for more heinous ones (murder, sexual assault, robbery). Long-term data suggests that police funding does not influence crime rates, and it is not hard to see why. As for those cities who did cut police funding, only the passage of time will illuminate the impacts.

So, was last summer a failure? If so, what lessons can be taken from said failure and how can the movement for Black Lives and those who fight for a world without police move forward? It is disheartening to see that after almost a year of tirelessly protesting through tears and grief that the movement has so few victories to show for it. But there are many lessons that can be taken from these “failures”.

To abolish the police, it is vital to maintain a unity between the end goals for radicals and the means through which those goals are achieved. For anarchists, this notion is called prefiguration. The move of many, after the murder of George Floyd, was to demand state policy to alleviate the harms caused to Black and Brown communities by state policy. The only reasonable way for the working class to end police terror is through the creation of institutions that can mediate the harms caused by human action so as to prevent any possible need for the police. Delegitimizing the police’s supposed role in capitalist society—by preventing and repairing harm through an alternative system based in working communities that is capable of actually doing so—will reveal the true social role of the police: the heavy hand of the racist and violent status quo. Backing away from a prefigurative path to the end of police yields political gridlock and compromise that is, itself, tantamount to murder. Every day that passes while the police still exist is another day of unbearable pain and suffering for those whom the police were built to suppress.

Alongside this must be efforts to directly confront the power of the police, capital, and the state. Every strike and every stone thrown are admirable. For this, it is important to recognize the bravery of all those who have and will fight back against police in the war for human emancipation. Radicals must protect their peers and communities from the state and capital and should do this through prisoner support and mutual aid alongside the torching of outlet malls and cop cars. Without past radicals who have chosen to fight for themselves and others, the world would be unrecognizable. Doing so together, with neighbors and loved ones, can multiply the impact of every act of resistance tenfold.

What can be said about the George Floyd Insurrection? People around the world reacted to George’s murder with the ferocity of someone who knew him personally, who loved him. Revolutionaries nearly did what has not been done in the US for so long; the flames leaping from the Third Precinct revealed an end to a deeply racist system, if only enough people chose to take that path. Most USians at the time thought these revolutionaries were justified, too. State violence and cynical co-option quelled an insurrection that may have changed everything. The path for liberation is a long one but starts with building the power of working people to govern themselves. That path, seen so clearly in the burning of the Third Precinct, is the path to a better world and it is time to prepare to finish what was started that evening in May.

## Retrospective: COVID

Though early on it was relegated to a similar status to many previous infectious diseases as something that only happens “over there” in some foreign land, COVID-19 came to dominate the lives of all living in the so-called United States since lockdowns in the spring of 2020. Alongside the billions of people around the world facing some degree of economic and social dislocation, working-class residents of the “US” faced mounting debt, income loss, eviction risk, and physical danger from a viral illness that has killed hundreds of thousands within the borders of the “US” and left millions disabled or permanently scarred. The result of this death toll: significant increases in social isolation and substance abuse, and vast infliction of the sort of psychic damage that occurs during any sort slow mass-casualty event such as the one simmering throughout the past year and a half. Why did so many suffer, even just in the “US”, during this crisis? The answer is simple enough: there are more many “Americans” than are needed for capitalism.

The State is that entity entrusted with great power in times of mass social crisis, and all levels of the state—from the city to the federal level—acted in relative harmony during the early days of the pandemic. Though some localities, especially more Right-Wing ones, resisted implementing lockdowns or instituting mask-mandates or public health regulation of commerce, most issued policies that limited indoor gatherings and recommended mask use. Further, the federal government pushed wide-ranging fiscal stimulus that sought to keep the economy humming along while many businesses shut their doors (at least temporarily) and millions were left without a paycheck or with one severely reduced in size.

That month of lockdown was a number of things, from surreal and mind-numbing to hopeful and novel. So the story went: lockdown for a month, and things will be back to normal. Huge sections of the working-class people in the “US”, even in a healthy economy, struggle to cover their cost of living, but the lockdowns intensified this. Millions were unable to pay their rent, and more were forced to forego essentials. Even as the lockdown lifted and the categories of labor deemed essential to the normal functioning of capitalism expanded (and thus as millions returned to work, to weather the onslaught of customers who demanded prompt and friendly service and the ever-present risk of viral infection), the economic and social crisis persisted. State relief was often slow and was painfully insufficient; how far does \$1400 in stimulus go in a city where rent for a single bed apartment is \$1350? Any seemingly positive State action, like that of increased unemployment benefits, appears to have unmentioned strings attached: far too many people around the country are ordered to repay any amount of unemployment aid they received, and many more found even the increased amount to be unable to handle the increased costs of caring for children and relatives or paying for medical, student, or credit card debt accrued during the pandemic.

So, even as the economy started to whimper back into action, millions continued to face an uncertain economic future, one that could contain increased debt or eviction or even death. The remainder of 2020 after the lockdown was this process of State policy makers seeking to further reopen the economy by expanding the categories of economic activity deemed “essential”, by loosening public health regulations that limited indoor dining, bar use, and other key elements of the service economy, and by limiting protections and benefits granted during the beginning of the pandemic to working people. The momentary lapse in economic activity was devastating for the capitalist class; it had eliminated the majority of profit that was so essential to the reproduction of their class and State aid to the working class—as meagre as it was—had succeeded in decimating

the coercive power of capital in enforcing labor discipline. With State aid, it was more feasible for working people to steer clear of or quit low-paying service work and other labor in high-risk sectors of the economy that were key to the existing capitalist order. Eliminate the aid, and workers must return.

The fall and winter of 2020 was characterized by accelerating rates of COVID transmission, hospitalization, and death. The spring of 2021, though, offered hope. Vaccines had been approved for public inoculation and had shown promising effects: decreased transmission rates, lower rates of hospitalization, mitigation of symptoms of “Long COVID”, and far lower rates of death. Though slow at first, millions within the “US” were vaccinated leading up to the summer. Optimistic forecasts said that COVID may soon be a thing of the past, and some even predicted some future date where everything would be “normal”. New variants, far more transmissible than the original strain and seemingly more resistant to existing vaccines, soon put an end to this hope. Mask mandates and other public health precautions, relaxed or removed in previous months, returned as Delta ripped through communities, paying little heed to the vaccination status of individuals<sup>8</sup>. Children, sent back to school in person after a year of mask-wearing or distance learning, are now a hotbed for COVID transmission. Whole communities where social and political pressure weigh against mask-wearing (let alone mask mandates) and vaccination are sites of increased social tension as fascist forces and movements turn from failed electoral campaigns and riots to “protecting children”, arguing mask wearing and vaccination harm kids. Alongside a defense of white-supremacist education that indoctrinates generations, these fascists are willing to have those same generations suffer from unknown long-term effects of COVID illness or even risk death rather than cede control over their children (and the children of others) or appear weak in an increasingly important realm of the culture war. The early adoption by the fascist Right of campaigns to “save the children” (with origins in the Q-Anon hivemind conspiracy) from alleged sex-trafficking undertaken by the so-called “globalists”<sup>9</sup> and the subsequent violence committed by fascists in the pursuit of that goal does not bode well for the possibilities of fascist campaigns to control school boards and local education systems after the radicalization experienced by the Right after the failed J6 riot, but it does point to the consistency of the ideology of the Right-Wing: the existing social order, which is racist and classist and patriarchal and transphobic and homophobic, must be maintained and they must stay at the top.

For the working class, 2021 has offered both continuity and break. While early in the pandemic much was said about the importance of “essential workers”, nothing more than lip-service was offered to working people after the start of 2021. Especially after the vaccine rollout and a year of living and working during COVID, labor militancy has reached unheard of levels. Even with a more “worker friendly” ruler in the White House, the end of economic support for working people and traditional union-busting techniques seem somewhat capable of managing labor discontent. What appears to the owning class as a “labor shortage”, manifesting as the inability of capitalists to employ workers at the same dismal wages as before the pandemic, seems more likely to be the refusal by working people to continue to suffer in unsafe conditions for poverty wages. This mass refusal has managed to raise wages in many sectors, especially in service work, and time will tell by how much. The increase in wages will not prevent the hundreds of thou-

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<sup>8</sup> Current data suggest COVID vaccines prevent transmission of the delta variant to vaccinated people half the time, holding other precautions constant.

<sup>9</sup> “Globalists” is a common antisemitic dog-whistle (a word or phrase that sounds innocent or that most people cannot hear, but those who are aware of notice), often used by Alex Jones and other nationalists.

sands of potential evictions in the coming months, as eviction moratoria lapse and potentially more than a year of unpaid rent comes due. For the most part, those evicted will be unable to rent again and will likely be forced into a life of precarious housing or homelessness. Meagre renters' protections put in place early on in the pandemic, meant to prevent an acceleration of the existing public health crisis, fell out of effect after protracted political conflict and liberal apathy. Nothing remains between millions of working people across the country and the uncertainty of a life without access to capitalist housing markets. Only time will tell the magnitude of the crisis to come.

Altogether, COVID-19 has accelerated the sort of social breakdown and impoverishment that capitalism requires. The only way the owning class can maintain the profits they need to perpetuate themselves as a class is with unemployment; the risk to the working class of a lost income and all that entails (hunger, austerity, homelessness, forgone medical treatment) is often enough to keep wages low and thus keep profits high. High rents and costly medical treatment exacerbate this risk and themselves serve to channel wage income from working people to the pockets of parasites like landlords and insurance speculators. In the face of a disease like COVID that lead to job loss and can lead to permanent disability, these risks come further to the fore. Even the measly crumbs offered by the state to the working class during the pandemic were granted not out of a humanistic care for the suffering of the masses but out of a concern that a prolonged fall in consumptive behavior would destroy the economy. When the capitalist class signaled that the deaths of hundreds of thousands of USians was preferable to a more strict but costly lockdown, pandemic restrictions were lifted. Fewer "Americans", especially fewer Black and Brown working people, means less spending on schools, pensions and other social services. To a ruling class concerned with maintaining profits against increasing wages, these people are dead weight. To a state tasked with replicating capitalism first and foremost, the interests of the owning class must become the law of the land. Now, as the Delta Variant spreads, no help is on the horizon.

The only path out of the pandemic, and all the consequential social crises that have followed, is together.<sup>10</sup> Mutual aid programs, most formed early during the pandemic to share groceries and stimulus checks as well as to run errands for the immunocompromised, have shown themselves to be capable of developing into a form of social organization capable of providing for the most vulnerable of us all, especially poor and disabled neighbors (housed or unhoused). Working together, members of the working class are fighting to alleviate the most glaring harms rising out of this pandemic. From providing food to the hungry and preventing evictions to transporting people to vaccination clinics, this action by the working class has done incalculable good.

Mutual aid can be a liberatory practice. Through democratically governed organizations that operate on a principle of solidarity—that is, an understanding that all oppression is linked together and that there can be no freedom for anyone from oppression without the freedom of all from oppression—instead of a principle of charity. Acting in solidarity means recognizing that care for others is as important as care for yourself and it requires acting in a way that fights against hierarchical (that is, top down) control over the distribution of goods and resources and care. It means understanding that a landlord pricing your neighbor out of their home may soon leave you on the street. It means recognizing the health of any member of a community is de-

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<sup>10</sup> Do not forget that the most vociferous advocates for personal freedom are also the least likely to get vaccinated or wear masks, both of which are strong tools to prevent transmission of COVID and to lesson harm done to oneself upon contracting COVID.

terminated by the health of the community overall, which itself is composed of the health of its constituents. Using resources to control others is not mutual aid, that is charity. Charity has not brought us liberation yet, and never will. Part of overcoming all oppressions is through changing the way that people relate to one another. Oppression is relational and based in differences in material power. By building mutual aid practices, working people can start to build a better world in the ashes of this one.

While COVID-19 has done much to disorganize the lives of billions, returning to normalcy means returning to poverty and social domination<sup>11</sup>. COVID-19 is an opportunity, if anything, to reimagine the world. To return to what once was normal is to choose death: death from deprivation and climate inaction, a death ensured by the hubris and greed of the owning class. The only acceptable path, that of Life, requires a rejection of the old status quo. It means the end of Work, the end of the government, and the end of social hierarchy. The path of Life is built by the oppressed, together, fighting for a world where their lives matter and where they, not rich assholes or slimy politicians, build their future. The path of Life is called many things—anarchy, socialism, communism—but it is the only cure for the social suffering highlighted by COVID-19. Against a violent system, revolution is the answer.

## **Retrospective: Electoral Politics**

The fact of the matter is, the “US” is essentially in the same place under Joe “Shoot them in the leg” Biden as it was under Donald Trump— the pandemic still rages on while his administration is lying about the severity of COVID cases and deaths, and he governs brutally too (Biden has deported 1,283,415 people at the time of writing, more than Trump did in 4 years). Biden bombed Syria in early July, killing 5 militia members and one child, and drone bombings in Afghanistan have killed more than that. Biden’s domestic policy amounts to miniscule state handouts (he was responsible for ending expanded unemployment insurance that pulled millions out of poverty during the pandemic, and he gave out less in cash than Trump) alongside massive investment in police and intelligence agencies. Biden’s governance has been like a funhouse mirror image of Trump’s, similar seeming in many ways, though the original has been twisted and turned in noticeable ways. Nothing is substantively different under Biden, except that all those who voted for him, those who proudly marched with pink hats in 2017, can safely go back to sleep now that the Orange Man is out of office.

Things might actually be measurably worse under Biden, not only for immigrants and refugees, but for the Left as a whole. Under Trump, the Left had an enemy to unify against, albeit one that empowered the far Right of the country and egged on culture and race war rhetoric; he was easy to be against because he was and is at the same time both grossly stupid and plainly evil. Under Trump, liberals, democratic socialists, communists, and anarchists were able to, in large part, be somewhat united against Trump and his administration. Now that things are back to normal, Liberals are back to blaming those on the Left just as much as they blame the Right (though, who really wants to work with liberals anyway?). The political logic liberals operate under, that of an equivocation of fascists and antifascists as “extremists” who harm the stability of the existing capitalist system, requires them to form alliances with the Right to punch Left.

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<sup>11</sup> The inability of COVID vaccines to be issued throughout the world due to profitability concerns and the heavy hand of intellectual property rights points to COVID never really going away.

Liberalism must be the only possible route to “progress”, however shallow, and fighting the Left makes this appear true. Blaming radicals for “being unrealistic” is, though, a tacit admission by Liberals; real substantive societal change is a risk to the Liberal project, and most Liberals do just fine under a Right-Wing government (though they tend to think Right-Wing leaders are a bit ostentatious).

The phrase “voting as harm reduction” was floating around discussions of who to vote for in the 2020 US election, as the phrase always does every 4 years. But if voting is harm reduction, how does one measure harm? Consider voting from the perspective of an indigenous person. From the zine by Indigenous Action, Voting is Not Harm Reduction: “If voting is the democratic participation in our own oppression, voting as harm reduction is a politics that keeps us at the mercy of our oppressors.” If one candidate is a lesser of two evils, for whom are they less evil? In regard to the metric of deportations and denial of sanctuary of Haitians, Trump was the lesser of two evils. By the metric of being less outright crass and unpleasant, perhaps then Biden was the lesser, but certainly not in regards of deportations. Biden has not had the time nor the same circumstances as Trump with regards to sabre rattling (considering the relative amount of time each has spent in office), but is it reasonable to expect Biden to stand against worsening tensions with nearby states like Venezuela and Cuba or far-away ones like China? A Biden White House may be even more capable of meddling in the affairs of the developing world, which should be frightening. Would Biden resist fighting the seemingly eternal War on Terror (especially given the murder he has already ordered in that conflict)? Biden and the Democratic establishment are looking to expand the powers of the surveillance state after the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot, which will undoubtedly be turned against radicals and Black organizers (as has been after the passage of the Patriot Act). These questions of how harm is calculated and by what metric one candidate is “more evil” is what problematizes the supposed simplicity of voting in the US.

But Biden wasn’t the foregone conclusion. Many radicals put their hopes and dreams into another candidate: Bernie Sanders. Many looked at Medicare For All and saw it as at least marginally better than what we have now. A future with reforms to the healthcare system, climate action, racial justice, and student loan forgiveness. But was that future really even possible? Or would have things been relatively substantively the same under a Sanders candidacy as well? How would the last year have been different? George Floyd would still be dead. The COVID pandemic would still be ravaging the nation. Police would still not be abolished, and Black rebels and their accomplices would have still been told to stop rioting last summer, albeit with a thick Brooklyn accent. It seems like a foregone conclusion that Sanders would have trounced Trump at the ballot box (especially given opinion polling information), but what would have happened after the polling locations closed? A Sanders Presidency may have provided student debt relief and maybe another stimulus check, but the rest would be relatively the same. Sanders in the White House would likely result in the majority of Democrats, alongside Republicans, refusing to work with the administration. Bernie would not have been able to socialize medical care, nor would he be able to tax the rich. He and his administration would still deport migrants and would still order the murder of innocents.<sup>12</sup>

All of that said not to be overly cynical or to suggest that an apathetic, nihilistic approach to things. In a number of ways, a Sanders Presidency would be markedly superior to either Biden

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<sup>12</sup> All of these caveats would hold, too, for a Sanders Presidency starting in 2016, though with less existential fear driving policy.

or Trump. Radicals must not, though, have any delusions about the capacity of electoral politics to build a world worth living in. Electoral victory is limited by the structure of the state in many important ways. The division of power within governments prevents the exercise of power by elected officials without overwhelming control over the state apparatus. As seen wherever self-declared socialists have won political office, incomplete control over the political institutions those positions reside within result in compromise. These elected socialists must scale back rhetoric and must lower their demands if they wish to ever win support for any of their policies. The result? How many socialist politicians have voted to expand funding for the police or the border control or the military? How many have broken foundational campaign promises for the sake of fundraising or playing nice or playing politics? The presidency is one of the most limited of all these offices and highlights some of the implicit constraints of any sort of socialist holding power in a capitalist country. The president is responsible for management of the military, manages international diplomacy, oversees the administrative state, and has some power over legislation (among other powers). A socialist president could refuse to utilize military force, but they cannot unilaterally disband the military. They could ease tensions internationally but can only do so as long as they hold office. Top administrators can set priorities in their departments but much of the labor in those departments is carried out by bureaucrats who can simply refuse to pursue those goals vigorously. Any legislation pursued by a socialist president would require approval from both houses of Congress and would need to pass scrutiny by the Supreme Court. Even with the explicit constraints on politician's pale in comparison with implicit ones; without complete control over the state and its bureaucracies and over capital, socialist politicians are bound by the function of the state in capitalism to rule in the general interest of the capitalist class. In the "US", too, this role requires the maintenance of the American Empire for the sake of business interests, domestically and abroad. Imperialism is profitable, and this knowledge is a strong determinant of state policy. Factions within the state have shown themselves more than capable of intervening in political affairs (with the clearest being sections of the security state leaking info about Trump meeting with Russians to the media), and this would play out here. The more radical the president, the more radical the pushback. There is nothing special about the structure of the "US" state, and there have been countless times around the when a socialist president has been booted from power by some section of the military. What is stopping that here? In order to learn from this past year, we must make an honest, clear-eyed analysis of why things played out the way they did and what we can do differently in the future to achieve our goals.

The lesson is clear: it is time to stop putting effort into electoral campaigns for leaders who not only have, in reality, little concern for the working, poor, and marginalized of this country, and who's power either does not reach far enough to change the conditions in which many live, or which power they so frequently choose not to exercise or to exercise in opposition of the will of the people. Although it is probable that Bernie is a person who genuinely cares about working class issues and, as president, would earnestly strive to enact things like Medicare for All, the fact is that he is only one man, with a host of congressmen and women who all oppose him for different reasons and likely would have been able to accomplish very little as president. The very apparatus and infrastructure of the State is not one that has social progression preconfigured into it, and that is apparent by the bureaucracy, elitism, nepotism, corruption, and money laundering it enables.

Many often posit that “Yes, presidential electoralism is corrupt and bad, but local elections are where you can really make a change”. While local elections may have the potential to make change in one’s community, they often contain the same pitfalls as presidential electoralism. Take, for example, the election for the City of Fort Collins last spring of 2021. One of the ballot issues was “Should the land that Hughes Stadium is on be turned into Hughes Open Space?” The initiative passed 68.6% to 31.4% in favor of turning it into an open space—a clear majority in favor. However, despite the will of 68.6% of residents in Fort Collins, CSU, the current owner of the land, decided to tell voters to go fuck themselves. “The decision and authority rests with the Board of Governors of the CSU System,” the university said. In other words: “you had your cute little election, but the decision has always been ours.” In electoral change, and political change through existing channels, the owning class has the power to decide whether or not to abide by “democracy”, despite the illusions many of these elections may cast. If the rich do not like the rules, they can change the rules. If they cannot change the rules immediately, they will buy elections until they can.

Voting is an easy solution: go to the ballot box, fill in the bubble and then stop. It takes minutes, not including prior research of candidates. People are told that voting is the means through which real change happens in the “US”, that electing representatives is the best possible way to make big decisions. Radicals can easily fall into this same trap. The action needed to save ourselves from the clutches of capitalism is going to take much more time and militant commitment than what modern US electoralism offers. The BLM uprisings of 2020 and 2014 have shown that you cannot just abolish the police by popular vote. You cannot vote away pandemics. It ought to be clear by now that nobody is coming to help the working class but the working class themselves. No longer can you put all hope into elected officials, no matter how genuine their hearts; the position they occupy and the system in which they function is not meant for liberation. The highest priority of the revolutionary sections of the class must be building dual power in working communities to help each other. Radicals must fight for liberation through direct action, and solidarity, and by building non-hierarchical institutions like those in the world they wish to build. It is clear: the ruling class has convinced the working class that the only power workers can utilize to affect political change is through the ballot box, but this is a lie. Every single day, the working class builds and reproduces the world and the system that dominates the lives of everyone. Wage labor and profit keep the whole system running, to one extent or another. Workers daily make the world, and they have the power to unmake the world, too. By fighting to create institutions and entities that challenge the hegemonic capitalist system, and not by settling and playing by the rules of the political game as it exists, oppressed people around the globe can struggle towards a better world.

After all, as Lucy Parsons said, “If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal”.

## **Conclusion**

Little has changed over our absence. Police violence, as typified in the murder of George Floyd, continues, and the racialized domination central to the foundation of the “US” remains. COVID-19 is as deadly as ever, with no end in sight. The authoritarianism of Trump has been followed by the authoritarianism of Biden.



Small differences in circumstances around the edges of these issues exist, without a doubt. Many cities are experimenting with social systems less reliant upon the police. COVID vaccines greatly reduce death and injury rates for those who catch it and can slow the spread of the disease overall. Social programs under Biden have reduced the financial cost of being a parent, too. Regressions in all these fronts exist, too. Most cities increased police funding after George Floyd was murdered. Politicized vaccine hesitancy and the removal of mask mandates have made COVID increasingly pervasive, and an eviction wave of millions of working-class people looms over the horizon. Biden and Democrats, in both wings of that party, denounce any efforts to combat police violence.

New threats are emerging too. The deadliest of these will likely be the increased radicalization of the Right Wing and increasing calls for secession and civil war. Though this movement is small compared to the population, the police and military, as well as small business tyrants and anxious white suburban men form the core of a movement that views the present control of the state as illegitimate and considers violence as acceptable means to cleanse a country they view as degenerated by liberation movements. These reactionaries possess greater material wealth and knowledge of firearms use, and the variety of social locations they inhabit makes them both incredibly common in some spheres (especially those granted increased rights to kill and maim) while their numbers make the diffusion of those in other spheres as an ever-present threat, especially when considering stochastic violence<sup>13</sup>. Prevention and mitigation of this violence takes a number of forms, but all effective methods fall under a broader category of building revolutionary potential called Dual Power. In the next issue, we will outline how to build Dual Power. We hope to see you there. After all, we have nothing to lose in this fight, except our chains. And if we win?

We Want Everything.

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<sup>13</sup> Stochastic violence refers to violence undertaken, typically by the right wing, in a seemingly random pattern. This violence is increased in probability of occurring by ideological encouragement. The right-wing stochastic terrorist is typically motivated by anxiety over social position and seeks to use violence to “take back” or “cleanse” social space they think belongs to them. Stochastic terror that is not explicitly right wing often is justified along similar lines (control over people or places that belong to the shooter in some way). Ex of right-wing stochastic terror: Christchurch Massacre, El-Paso Walmart Shooting, Mother Emanuel AME Church massacre, Oklahoma City Bombing.

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