

Response to Crimethinc's "Why We Don't Make Demands"

Debate among Anarchists over Raising Demands

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Contents

Crimethinc's Arguments Against Demands	3
What is Wrong with Crimethinc's Statement	5
Do Demands "Legitimize" the Authorities?	6
Summary	7

A response to Crimethinc's statement, "Why We Don't Make Demands." Wayne argues that revolutionary anarchists should propose to movements which they are part of to raise militant, radical, demands. Done in dialogue with the people, it moves the struggle forward and challenges the state and the capitalist class.

Recently Crimethinc (the "Ex-Workers' Collective") published a statement, "Why We Don't Make Demands." (Crimethinc 2015) I had previously written an article, "Should Anarchists Raise a Program of Demands?" (my answer being "yes"). (Price 2015) So it seems appropriate for me to respond to Crimethinc's article, which is a serious presentation by anarchist revolutionaries. The document is divided into brief sections, headed by bold-faced assertions. I will go through it, making my responses section by section

The statement begins with a rejection of those "who...negotiate with authorities to advance a concrete agenda through institutional channels...with proper etiquette....for movements to limit themselves to well-behaved appeals." (page1) Crimethinc seems to confuse the raising of demands upon the state or the capitalist class with certain ("moderate") methods of action. For example it criticizes the New York People's Climate March of 2014 because it was so peaceful no one got arrested. It counterposes this negatively to the angry Baltimore rebellion ("riot") in reaction to the police murder of Freddie Grey, which resulted in the bringing of charges against police officers. But in fact the PCM failed to raise official demands, outside of a vague appeal to the governments to—somehow—stop global warming. And the Baltimore actions did make a demand, namely "Justice for Freddie Grey!" The text confuses the need for militant mass actions with whether or not to raise demands, although these are distinct issues.

For example, a union might raise demands for better pay and treatment, and back them up with a soft, sell-out, negotiation between union bureaucrats and management personnel. Or it might raise the same demands and back them up with a mass strike and occupation of the workplace. The question of "demands" is not the same as the need for militant mass action. (Of course, militant demands and militant actions tend to go together, and the same with "moderate" demands and actions. I am just saying that demands and actions are not the same thing.)

In any case, demands are not "well-behaved appeals." They are demands!

For example, the climate justice movement should demand confiscation and socialization of all fossil fuel corporations, without compensation, to be managed by the workers in the industries and local working class communities—as part of working out local, regional, and national plans for a transition to nonrenewable energy. This would include developing decentralized, agro-industrial communities. For the majority, this is a demand on the state, since most people believe that the state is the agency which can solve the problem. But anarchists should openly say that this program can only be carried out by a federation of workplace councils and neighborhood assemblies, replacing the state through a revolution.

Crimethinc's Arguments Against Demands

The paper argues that "Making demands puts you in a weaker bargaining position," (1) even in negotiations. That is supposedly because they are "spelling out from the beginning the least it would take to appease you." (1) This is an odd argument, since negotiations usually begin with each side presenting maximum demands and only lowering them in the course of bargaining.

Instead Crimethinc proposes that we “implement the changes we desire ourselves, bypassing the official institutions.” (1) I am all for building alternate institutions, such as coop groceries, credit unions, community centers, bike clubs, worker-run enterprises, etc. They are good in themselves. But, as a strategy, these do not threaten the capitalist class enough to force it to implement changes. Our resources are just too limited as against the class which controls the market and the state (which is why it is called the ruling class). It is another matter when workers take over, occupy, and start to run, factories and other workplaces! That really would threaten the ruling class and force it to make deals—or, if widespread enough, lead to a revolution.

The next section begins, “Limiting a movement to specific demands stifles diversity, setting it up for failure....A movement that incorporates a variety of perspectives...can develop more comprehensive and multifaceted strategies than a single-issue campaign.” (2) But why would a multi-issue, diverse, movement be unable to raise a variety of demands? Why would raising a variety of demands prevent a movement from being multifaceted and multi-issue?

The following section states, “Limiting a movement to specific demands undermines its longevity.” (2) “It makes more sense to build movements around the issues they address, rather than any particular solution.” (3) Why must a movement be only “limited to specific demands?” If a demand becomes outdated, why cannot it move on to further demands which are newly appropriate. Why does the document counterpose “issues” to “solutions?” Issues require solutions, and a proposed solution clarifies an issue. It is not enough to be against something, it is also necessary to be for something—a solution. And, again, if a solution becomes outdated by developments, why not work out new solutions?

“Limiting a movement to specific demands,” Crimethinc then states, “can give the false impression that there are easy solutions to problems that are extremely complex....We speak as though there are simple solutions for the problems we face...” (3) Complex problems may need complex solutions and complex demands (such as my example of plans for a transition to nonrenewable energy).

But sometimes there are simple solutions to the complex problems society faces. There are things that might be immediately and directly done to improve matters. Would it really be technically difficult to replace gasoline-based transportation with electric cars and improved mass transit? What makes this difficult is not the technical aspects but the institutional barriers which capitalism puts in its way.

Besides confusing the question of demands with that of the kinds of actions which are necessary, Crimethinc makes another error. It ignores the different kinds of demands. All demands are not the same. There are good demands and bad demands, smart demands and stupid ones, demands which are part of a reformist program (improvement through gradual reforms), demands which are part of a totalitarian program (such as the Maoist “mass line”: offer the people what they want because you dare not tell them your true program of state capitalism), and demands that reflect revolutionary libertarian socialism (anarchism). Yet the paper constantly speaks as if there are only one kind of “demand.”

What is Wrong with Crimethinc's Statement

Crimethinc concludes this section by asserting that it “believe[s] that the fundamental problem is the unequal distribution of power and agency in our society... No corporate initiative is going to halt climate change...no police force is going to abolish white privilege.” (3)

This gets to the heart of what is wrong with Crimethinc's statement. Sure, Crimethincers believe this, and I believe it, and all revolutionary anarchists agree with this view. But most people do not believe it. This includes the hundreds of thousands who marched against global warming as well as the militant demonstrators who protested angrily in Baltimore. It is not enough for a marginal minority of radicals to be super-militant; it is necessary for broad numbers of people to participate in militant action. There is virtually nothing in this document which discusses what can be done to win over the majority of working and oppressed people. They too should “believe that the fundamental problem is the unequal distribution” of power and wealth, and that significant, lasting, reforms cannot be won through the system. Crimethinc's statement is all self-centered: what actions should be done by the few people who already agree that the system needs to be overthrown. Instead, the question is how can this anti-capitalist minority win over the many who are oppressed and exploited so that they too will believe that the system needs to be overthrown.

The document declares, “Making demands presumes that you want things that your adversary can grant.” (3) This is indeed the reformist or liberal version of demands: only demand things which the bosses can deliver. That approach has become increasingly problematical as the economy continues to stagnate and decline—since about 1970, and especially since the Great Recession of 2008. The years of prosperity which followed World War II are over and not coming back. This means that there is less and less which the capitalist class can grant. The liberal program has lost whatever adequacy it once had.

Alternately, there is the view which is (perhaps unfairly) ascribed to the Trotskyists, of making demands which they know cannot be won. The aim is to devilishly trick the workers into making such demands and thus being forced to learn that only a revolution will solve their problems.

Instead our idea is to demand what the people need—whether or not the system could provide it. The people need a decent standard of living. Since the capitalists claim the right to run society, we demand that they provide jobs or a guaranteed income for all. If the capitalist state provides what we demand (or at least some improvements), then great! The people will have learned that mass pressure works, and anyway life will be better. If the state says it cannot provide such (needed) benefits, then revolutionaries argue that the capitalists and their state must be replaced by institutions which can provide them (that is, by the self-organized working people).

Anarchists are not an elite which stands outside the lives of the people. When the people need jobs or safety from police or clean air and food, we must not declare that we will only help them if they agree to completely oppose the capitalist, statist, system. When the people—especially the working class—especially the most oppressed sections of the working class—goes into motion, they shake the whole society. We need to be part of them, part of their struggles, in dialogue with everyone, proposing our ideas for demands and listening to everyone else's ideas.

Consider this statement by Colin Ward (2011): “One of the tasks of the anarchist propagandist is to propagate solutions to contemporary issues which, however dependent they are on the existing social and economic structures, are *anarchist* solutions: the kind of approaches that would be made if we were living in the kind of society we envisage. We are much more likely to win

support for our point of view, in other words, if we put anarchist answers in the here and now, than if we declared that there are no answers until the ultimate answer: a social revolution....” (x)

Radical demands—also called “transitional” demands or “non-reformist reform” demands—are what we revolutionary anarchists propose to the movements to be raised (as opposed to those demands which the movements may raise and which we may chose to support). What we propose as the “solution” is, in fact, anarchist socialism, “the kind of society we envisage.” If there is unemployment, anti-capitalists can propose dividing up the existing amount of work among the workers (a shorter work week without loss in pay). If there is poverty, we propose dividing the wealth of society among the whole population (equal pay or guaranteed income for all). If businesses shut down, we demand worker occupation and management of the workplaces. As we explain to the people, these are all aspects of the socialist anarchist society.

Do Demands “Legitimize” the Authorities?

Next, the statement says, “Making demands of the authorities legitimizes their power, centralizing agency in their hands....They frame a narrative in which the existing institutions are the only conceivable protagonist of change.” (4) However, the capitalist class already has centralized state power. Nor does it require us, the revolutionary minority, to “legitimize their power.” The people generally accept the state as the legitimate power.

What revolutionaries should want is to show the people that there is another source of power, the masses in motion. This can be shown when the people put demands on the capitalists and force them to grant them, under threat of further pressure (as the Black demonstrators in Baltimore forced the government to charge the police officers). The whole of U.S. politics is an effort to prevent the people from realizing their power! One successful general strike in a major city would transform the entire political landscape. But for that, the workers need something to strike for, some set of demands.

Then it says, “Making demands too early can limit the scope of a movement in advance, shutting down the field of possibility. (4) “It is better for the objectives of a movement to develop as the movement develops....” (5) I agree with this. A program of demands should not be raised immediately but should be developed as part of the process of a movement developing.

Next, it states, “Making demands establishes some people as representatives of the movement, establishing an internal hierarchy and giving them an incentive to control the other participants.” (5) Again, Crimethinc is treating all demand-raising as the way liberals or Stalinists raise demands. But militant, radical, activists would raise demands by mass mobilization, active participation of all members, and democratic group processes. Anarchists reject raising demands through elections—unlike much of the Left which is mad for forming a new, third, party, unless they are for joining the Democrats.

Now it says, “Sometimes the worst thing that can happen to a movement is for its demands to be met.” (5) It is true that the state may seek to defuse a movement by offering minor concessions. It is the job of revolutionary anarchists to point out when this is happening and keep on demanding more—demanding what is needed. However, overall, I think that it is better for a movement to win its demands than to fail to get them. When it comes to building a movement, winning is better than losing!

The statement refers to the 2011 Egyptian revolution. This “ultimately failed not because it asked for too much but because it didn’t go far enough; ...unseating the dictator but leaving the infrastructure of the army and the ‘deep state’ in place...” (5) Entirely correct. The radicals needed to persuade the majority to demand “Disband the army! Arm the people! Build workplace, soldier, and neighborhood assemblies! Federate them together! Seize the factories and offices! All power to the assemblies!” These would have been revolutionary demands, which would have required the people to organize themselves to put them in place.

“If you want to win concessions, aim beyond the target,” it says. (7) The government may grant concessions to more moderate parts of the movement, if it fears that not giving concessions will strengthen a more radical wing (as Malcolm X pointed out to Dr. King). That is true, and it is why, even in a non-revolutionary period, it is helpful to mass movements to have a militant, revolutionary, wing. The U.S. state finally ended the Vietnam war, in part because it was threatened by the growth of revolutionary sentiment among a layer of young students and workers. But this is not an argument against raising demands. It is an argument for revolutionaries to be proposing radical, militant, demands.

“Doing without demands doesn’t mean ceding the space of political discourse. Perhaps the most persuasive argument in favor of making concrete demands is that if we don’t make them, others will.” (7) That is, liberals or even fascists. This actually addresses the issue of persuading others. Crimethinc responds by being against burying the radical goals in a mushy liberal program. It opposes “conceal[ing] our radical desires within a common reformist front for fear of alienating the general public.” (8) Again, there is no real connection. Being in a united front of different people and groups does not have to prevent radicals from raising their own vision and program. Revolutionaries can propose a more radical set of demands to those raised by the liberal groupings. Or they can agree with the common demands, but propose more militant ways of fighting for them.

Its concluding section asks, “If not demands, then what?” It answers, “Instead of making demands, let’s start setting objectives...seek[ing] more and more ambitious goals.” (8) There is certainly nothing wrong with setting objectives and goals. But how shall we achieve these goals? Surely we need to build a militant, participatory, and angry movement of many people who are prepared to fight against the capitalist class and its state. This requires a willingness to openly demand a better life for all from those who rule, and when people see that they cannot provide it, to overturn and dismantle all their institutions.

Summary

In brief, the statement by Crimethinc confuses the issue of whether to raise demands with the issue of whether to have militant mass actions. It lumps all demands together and treats them as “demands” raised only by liberals, reformists, and Stalinists, ignoring the possibility of radical, transforming, demands. And it mostly ignores the key question of how to persuade the big majority of working people and oppressed people of the need for a total change in society. To address this issue would be to see the importance of raising demands in a revolutionary libertarian-socialist manner.

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