

**We defend ourselves so we can all breathe in
peace**

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“Negroes must concern themselves with every single means of struggle: legal, illegal, passive, active, violent and non-violent.”

— Lorraine Hansberry

This is not as bad as things can get. They can — and often do — get worse before they get better. Think about all the previous rebellions, uprisings and protests against white supremacy and the oppressiveness of capitalism that brought us to this point. Even the civil rights movement was *not* a completely legal or nonviolent affair, though its purposefully misrepresented this way. Black men, women and children did fight back and form self-defense patrols everywhere resistance occurred.

Keep in mind, Black people were engaged in an illegal struggle, *breaking laws* to protest against apartheid Jim Crow policies. People are “sick and tired of being sick and tired,” as Fannie Lou Hamer said back in 1964. If they were already exhausted over half a century ago, imagine if she and others who died struggling alongside her were alive to see what is happening now.

Things should not be like this, but the struggle for the freedom to live without fear will continue as long as oppression is rampant in the United States. What is happening right now is the result of unaddressed issues like white supremacy, state violence and capitalism. If we do not deal with them now they will only arise again. So, our intentions regarding how we choose to fight and rid ourselves of these problems are everything in this moment that was forced upon us. The past can help guide how we approach this unwanted present. Every slave revolt; every Native uprising; every Black riot; every sit-in, walk-out and strike has something to tell us right now.

People throw around the word “revolution” every time there is an uprising, but many fail to understand that such momentous change does not happen in an instant. In minds that have been shaped by popular culture, and often romantic retellings of the past, some things can get lost. Former Black Panther Party member and Black anarchist Lorenzo Komboa Ervin’s writing provides a guiding light in this regard. In *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, he explains that “revolution is a social process, rather than a single event.”

These events, revolts and rebellions like the ones taking place in the streets this very moment, are not the revolution itself. They are singular events in a long process that eventually can lead to a revolutionary struggle, which in itself is a *substantial* undertaking. Nonetheless, people have been doing important work that should give us hope.

Taking back what is ours

In the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic and non-stop police violence, many people on the left sprung into action, forming new collectives and mobilizing existing ones to support their communities through mutual aid. Without the funding or backing that nonprofits have, anarchists, communists, abolitionists and people with no ideological label began feeding and caring for those in need when the state abandoned them. Many of these efforts had *already* been going on for many years before the pandemic.

Now, survival programs, much like those utilized by the Black Panthers, are of the utmost importance to sustain us in the fight against this horrific disaster of a pandemic amid continual, escalating state violence. By creating services within communities when no one else will, survival programs meet the needs of people when the state refuses to. Think free clinics, free

breakfast programs, freedom schools, community self-defense and more. The possibilities are endless and it has been done before.

There has to be something or someone to nourish, protect, bailout, educate, house and provide healthcare for those in need, since the state is clearly more interested in killing those it deems undeserving of care and aid. That someone is all of us. And all of this should be done in ways that directly challenge the capitalist logic of moneymaking and profiteering. These are rights that we are afforded by birth, not something we should have to be able to afford based on the state of a manipulated economy. These priorities must come first, not the securities of the rich and their hoarded wealth, while others perish from poverty.

With tens of millions of people unemployed, the US government gave people crumbs, while at the same time bailing out the banks and corporations with trillions of dollars to survive a crisis they helped create. A lack of universal healthcare forced the most vulnerable; the poor; Black people; Native people; people of color and others to bear the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic.

Desperation is evidenced by the so-called “looting” in the midst of uprising. People will take as they please because that is the precedent the state had already set, extracting from the poor so the rich can grow richer. It is the effort to reclaim what has been taken from us year after year without giving anything in return that is now shaking the foundations of this country. We can change this reality.

There have been calls for a return to normalcy. People reminisce about former presidents Bush and Obama. Yet, if we are being honest, that for too many this means missing being able to comfortably ignore the problems we are facing now. Those presidencies set the stage for this moment through wars, neglected crises, countless deportations and continual state overreach. Some are willing to accept oppression as long as they are allowed to consume as they please and conveniently go about their day-to-day business.

That way of living is not true liberation, but now is a good time to shape a world that is. We are prevented from experiencing liberation because of the problems created by money and class. Since we live in a country where having enough money decides virtually every facet of life, many survive miserably because they do not have enough.

Removing the barriers

These revolts across the US are a class struggle and people are going to have to answer questions about why some have more than enough and others do not have anything at all in the world’s wealthiest nation. The country that labels itself the most free in the world, should not have unchecked public police executions and poverty levels similar to those in the Global South.

Nowhere on the planet should have such poverty, but the grating reality is wealth inequality is made plain when a nation has the wealth the United States does. This led Malcolm X to predict there would be “a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing,” a fight “between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.”

This is why celebrities and politicians and those who were comfortable enough before this are facing a backlash too. The riches that come with fame create problems when people who share an identity with the most oppressed people in the country put their class concerns first. They are ultimately revealing that they were okay with the way things were before this by prioritizing

their relevance, brand, and repeating the same narratives as authorities. Celebrities who had more than enough when others did not, often feel they deserve for things to stay that way. But no one deserves more because they are famous, elected, or designated a “leader” of some sort. We all deserve safety and resources. This is the overt problem of capitalism that requires it to be abolished and relinquished to the hell from whence it came.

Now, as the government forces people back to work, it is clear that our labor is a crucial organizing tool. The need for a general strike is extremely relevant. Lorenzo Komboa Ervin also addressed this need, saying that “[the] general strike can take the form of industrial sabotage, factory occupations or sit-ins, work slowdowns, wildcats, and other work stoppages as a protest to gain concessions on the local and national level.” Since our labor is important enough for us to risk our lives during a pandemic, it should be withheld until people have what they need. This can happen in sync with all of the other actions taking place.

Massive efforts to provide political education to everyone possible are needed. People must be organized and politicized to harness the power we have when we work together. This is not about leadership, voting, or pleading away the problem. If that worked, we would not be here to begin with. As Lucy Parsons once wrote, “There are actual, material barriers blockading the way. These must be removed. If we could hope they would melt away, or be voted or prayed into nothingness, we would be content to wait and vote and pray.”

However, none of this is going to be easy; none of this transformation I speak of here will just be *allowed* to happen. We all have to find our place and our purpose whether we are teaching, planning, organizing, caring, cooking or creating art. Not everyone will be in the streets, but some will, and people should not do anything they are not ready, trained, or prepared to do.

There is not a single correct way to protest, and authorities will attempt to divide us by trying to shift blame to those who embrace radical tactics, as Black people have done historically. We can all learn new things, but we should be aware that this is not about any of us as individuals, it is about all of us together.

Actions need to be motivated by our collective needs, rather than a single person’s wants. May that guide our thinking as we move forward. Channeling Ella Baker, abolitionist educator and activist Mariame Kaba has told us to figure out who our people are. We have to know who we are accountable to, what our people’s needs are and have a purpose in every action we take.

Do not sit back, wait and complain. It is time to defend ourselves and each other. If you understand the revolutionary importance simmering in this pot of revolt, then find your place and start doing something to assist these actions in any way possible.

The conflict is at our doors, but keeping them closed will not shield anyone from the stench of a rotten society far past its expiration date. Help clear the air so everyone can breathe in peace.

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<https://roarmag.org/essays/we-defend-ourselves-so-we-can-all-breathe-in-peace/>
To move from uprising to liberation we each have a role to play. The conflict is at our doors,
and we need to put collective needs before individual wants.

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