**‘Reformist!’ What a dreaded word for any self-professed revolutionary to be attached to. It is one of those accusatory labels that ends intelligent debate and is designed to intimidate one into silence. Much like the labels of communist! or, more recently, terrorist! used by those in power and their propagandists. These labels serve as ideological whips to force someone into the proper mindset; god forbid someone does not spout the proper theories or rhetoric. It is amazing how much activity is considered reformist by some, leaving one to wonder exactly what can be done that is considered revolutionary besides running around with gun and bomb in hand, attending meetings with the necessary scowl, or dancing around a campfire. Reformist vs. revolutionary. The eternal debate. And while we stand around fighting over which actions are which, we accomplish no action, and the world goes to hell ★**


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# From Reform to Revolution

## by Ian Martin

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headed where these main roads lead to, but rather that we are around to inform people of the existence of alternative paths. Staying on our back roads and surrendering our voice in everyday life will insure our irrelevance. When it comes to electoral politics, our presence should be as an anti-electoralist voice. This is a more productive course than participating in progressive electoral campaigns.

The goal, ideally, should be to implement a process of community liberation, which would entail the build up of independent, non-hierarchal programs/institutions to meet all of the community's needs and establish self-sufficiency and autonomy from the State. Of course self-sufficiency should not mean isolation, and federation of such liberated communities would be both necessary and desirable for defence, mutual aid, and co-operation. Yet anarchists cannot move into a community and set up these institutions and get the ball rolling tomorrow, at least not completely. This is why participation in reform movements is necessary, so that such a revolutionary program and orientation can enter the discourse and people can ultimately choose to pursue it if they so desire. Right now, that choice is absent.

The course and strategy I advocate is not easy, and I am not blind to the difficulties. Many reform movements are highly hierarchical with reformism deeply ingrained. Many also are willing to resort to under-handed and repressive measures to stifle radical voices, which we obviously would be. Yet the difficulty of a proposition should not necessarily be the determining factor in whether anarchists should pursue it or not. Whoever said that achieving social revolution was easy? Whoever said that anarchists should run from difficulty? Following the path of least resistance is not usually the best choice. There is a reason why a path has little resistance, and almost always it's because that path doesn't lead to real change. It's time to step up to the plate and turn words into deeds. We cannot sit back and trust with religious intensity that the revolution will make itself or that the State, capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy will kindly disappear themselves.

time, money, and energy put into political campaigns, little if any gain in people power is made and social transformation is brought no closer (especially since electoral campaigns are a win-lose, all or nothing proposition). Progressive politicians, even if elected, can be a hindrance to the furtherance of revolution. People may come to depend on the granting of reforms from above, and cease the building up of alternative community institutions from below. The amount or intensity of the fight for reforms may be less than during the reign of a conservative administration, which is harmful because the fight is what is productive. This is not always true, though, as strikes, demands, and militancy have often increased under progressive governments because people become frustrated by the lack of response from officials supposedly on their side. This too can be constructive and instructive. So often the outcome of an electoral campaign is not what is important, rather what we make of that outcome is, since both conservative and progressive administrations can be made to serve as important lessons. Ideally, we should pursue our revolutionary strategy with a single-minded intensity that seems to put little stock in the outcome of elections. It is undoubtedly confusing if anarchists constantly claim that the problem is authority itself and all politicians are pretty much the same, yet during election time we push for a certain politician or party! The final point against participation in electoral campaigns is that even if progressive politicians gain power, their ability to effect reforms is limited by the structure of the capitalist system itself, especially in this era of neo-liberalism. Even if a politician wants to do some good, he or she is forced to work within the confines of the system and the realities of power and wealth that dominate it. I actually do call for anarchist participation in the field of electoralism, but as an active voice for anti-electoralism. Unfortunately, anarchists have been content to abstain from the political arena completely instead of using the opportunity to explain and articulate an anti-electoralist position to the wider population. Most people in this country are amenable to our arguments to some degree as can be seen by the lack of voter turnout, yet we have largely forfeited this opening through which we can provide a context and justification for people s ambiguous feelings of disillusionment and advance the idea that there are possibilities beyond voting. Such possibilities of social and political participation beyond voting are omitted and smothered by those in power to insure adherence to safe channels of electoral politics. In a way, my approach to electoral politics is similar to my approach to reformist movements, in that in both cases I advocate the presence of anarchists on the main roads of political participation so that our voice can be heard. Presence does not necessarily mean that we are

## ‘Reformist!’

What a dreaded word for any self-professed revolutionary to be attached to. It is one of those accusatory labels that ends intelligent debate and is designed to intimidate one into silence. Much like the labels of communist! or, more recently, terrorist! used by those in power and their propagandists. These labels serve as ideological whips to force someone into the proper mindset; god forbid someone does not spout the proper theories or rhetoric. It is amazing how much activity is considered reformist by some, leaving one to wonder exactly what can be done that is considered revolutionary besides running around with gun and bomb in hand, attending meetings with the necessary scowl, or dancing around a campfire. Reformist vs. revolutionary. The eternal debate. And while we stand around fighting over which actions are which, we accomplish no action, and the world goes to hell.

The Zapatistas, while enjoying support from many people throughout the world, have also met with criticism. When coming from the radical community, this criticism most often takes the form of, you guessed it, accusations of reformism. What is the basis for these accusations? Well, some do not like the fact that the Zapatistas did not try to march on Mexico City after their initial revolt, and that they have not tried to take power. In fact, they state very plainly that they have no intention of doing so. As for a march on Mexico City, I would very much like to see those who propose this course of action lead it. The Mexican Army outnumbers and outguns the Zapatista forces, not to mention that it has the full support of the United States. American officials have routinely intervened to stop insurrections in the farthest reaches of the globe, so it is safe to say that one in the U.S.’s southern neighbour would engender the harshest response possible. This is not to say that revolution is impossible in Mexico, but some practicality is necessary. A Zapatista march on Mexico City in 1994 would have been suicide, and it is unsettling to see certain individuals so willing to throw away lives, especially one’s not their own. As for not wanting to take power, this is a philosophy and mindset to be commended, not derided. To be unwilling to seize power and impose one’s ways on others is a trait that was sorely lacking in certain other revolutions in the twentieth century.

Criticism from anarchists, however, is most often directed at the Zapatis-

tas because of their simple demands for food, housing, education, health care, land, democracy, liberty, and autonomy. It may be easy for middle class rebels to haughtily shrug off these things as reforms to be mocked, but to the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, and many others throughout the Global South, these demands are anything but simple. In many cases, the situation is dire, and these reforms may be the difference between survival and destruction, either literally or figuratively. It's pretty hard to have a revolution if there is no one to revolt anymore! Sure, they are reforms in the sense that they are demands made to a government, and do not fundamentally change the economic or political system of Mexico, but they will fundamentally change the situation of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. And who can doubt that the Zapatistas reformist struggle has radicalised many in Mexico, and provided them with the inspiration to make their own stand against those in power?

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defence, formed in the 1960's, was also criticized and continues to be criticized to this day as reformist for some of the same reasons as the Zapatistas. The BPP's Ten Point Program was indeed a, simple statement of desired reforms to strive towards. But again, the situation of African-Americans then (and now) was extreme, with extraordinary levels of violence, police brutality, infant mortality, poor health, and poverty common. As the Black Panthers conceived it, the Ten Point Program was a program for survival, to keep the community alive long enough to form some kind of revolutionary movement. Perhaps some may scoff at demands such as affordable housing that is not squalid, crowded, decaying, and in horrible condition, or not having to be at the whim of capricious, uncaring, and greedy landlords, but to the poor, these things are essential. It is difficult for any human being to pay attention to and fight against relatively nebulous concepts like militarism and the State when they are forced to fight concretely for the very necessities of life everyday.

I do not defend the Black Panthers with blinders on to their Marxist-Leninist leanings and hierarchal structure, nor by defending the Zapatistas do I necessarily agree with every single aspect of what they do or who they are. But that is not the issue. The issue is that people seem to have a misunderstanding of what reformism actually is, to the point where they fail to see that reforms, or more accurately the process of fighting for reforms, are a necessary step toward social revolution. The transformation of anarchism into a counter-culture has led to a counter-culture mentality, where anarchists worry more about the lifestyle of rebellion and the appearance of rebellion than actually working towards it in any concrete fashion. Anarchists can spout off until the end of time about the social revolution, but without



The fact is that removing our voice from these movements is to remove our voice and message from the people in general. People will not just come to revolutionary organisations; rather, our presence in reform movements can serve as a bridge/conduit between revolutionary organisations and the people. In addition, reform movements in the right situation can and have been pushed into being revolutionary movements in their own right, and our presence can serve to increase the likelihood of this occurring.

Given my arguments, many might think it contradictory that I espouse the traditional anarchist policy of anti-electoralism. Surely a progressive anti-Bush campaign or Green campaign can be used in the same manner as a reform movement such as tenant's rights, can't it? Well, no. For one thing, the goal of electoral campaigns promotes the belief that the problem is in certain leaders, not in hierarchal authority itself, and thus legitimises what anarchism is fundamentally against. While a movement pushing for rent controls, for example, can be said to be promoting false notions as well, namely that we should look to government to protect and provide for us, anarchists in the movement can push for an understanding that sees the movement's goal as the extraction of demands from an enemy (until self-sufficiency is attained), not as asking gifts from government. It is important to remember that the process of fighting for reforms is more valuable than the actual reforms themselves. The fight for reforms gives people a sense of their own power to transform society, imparts dignity, and fosters the development of a revolutionary counter-culture (as opposed to a music-based counter-culture such as punk). Through the battles they fight and their participation in organisations that are structured in empowering ways based on equality, justice, freedom, and co-operation (if anarchists are present in organisations to push for this type of structure), people can get a taste of the future society and thus begin to believe in and deeply desire an alternative. It is important when anarchists participate in reform movements to push for direct action and more militant tactics, when appropriate of course, so that people power is built and not the power of movement leaders and government/co-opted institutions. Though some may think that I am advocating the abandonment of anarchist principles and a reckless immersion into reformism, this couldn't be more false. What I am actually proposing, as can be seen, is a careful, tactical participation of anarchists in reform movements, where we judge our actions and fashion the agendas we push for based on what will advance the cause of freedom, equality, and justice, and what will build people power.

So why doesn't participation in electoral campaigns work? One reason, to put it in crass, capitalist terms of cost efficiency is that for the amount of

There is much work that anyone can do, it's just a matter of seeing where one fits into the struggle. There should be no place in anarchism for those who despise the masses as cattle.

Huey P. Newton said that revolution is a process, not a conclusion, and I agree wholeheartedly with that statement. What it means is that revolution is happening everyday, and we can fight for it everyday. Fighting for reforms is not preparing for a future revolution tomorrow; it is fighting the revolution now. We must stress effective actions that accomplish concrete objectives instead of miring ourselves in alienating ideological debates, symbolic guilt-assuaging protests, or choosing battles that accomplish little in furthering the transformation of society. Revolution is not a course of study where one must read the proper textbooks, it is not the basis for a new elitism and hierarchy of more and less revolutionary individuals, it is the cry of the human spirit for freedom and justice whose language is passion and action.

## ★ Reforms Part II - Anti-Electoralism

My first essay was an attempt to explain why it is integral to an anarchist revolutionary strategy for anarchists to work in broad-based reform movements. This follow-up to that essay will further flesh out my argument in a more specific way, and also explain what might seem like a contradiction in my thinking when I advocate a position of anti-electoralism.

Anarchists should work in reform movements because that is where the battle for the people's hearts and minds is and will be waged. Unfortunately, by abstaining from participation in such organisations and movements, anarchists have unwittingly allowed reformist and sell-out elements to monopolise power in communities and be the only voices that people hear. Anarchists should be present to argue against and counter the reformist elements in movements, which will clearly demonstrate the existence and legitimacy of revolutionary alternatives to reformism, as well as push the movement on so that concessions do not pacify and a revolutionary agenda is placed on the table. I do not mean to imply that anarchists should take over these organisations, but rather that they should provide people with a choice. Those who argue against anarchist participation in reform movements because such participation for some inexplicable reason would inevitably result in an anarchist takeover of such movements, ignore the fact that movements have already been taken over, albeit by reformist elements.



serious discussion and implementation of a strategy to get there, we are nothing more than a joke. It's as simple as this: we are here at point A, the society we want is at point B, what steps do we need to take to get there? Despite how elementary this question is, it is the most neglected in the anarchist discussions of today, at least in the way of any concrete, serious answers to it. Therefore, this article is my attempt to bring the question to the forefront, and explain why reforms should form an integral part of our revolutionary strategy.

Reforms are vitally important for a whole host of reasons. One is just to help people in need survive and have a better life in the present. Both the BPP and Zapatistas, as I mentioned, adhered to this idea and advanced survival programs. While many believe that this is actually an indictment of reforms because it takes the edge off revolutionary anger, not only is this a callous and classist argument, often coming from middle-class radicals who do not have to experience this deprivation, but it betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the causes of revolution. Revolutions do not spring from despair or deep deprivation, they actually occur when expectations are rising, there is a belief in a better world, and this belief chafes against the reality of government as a hindrance.

Another necessity if revolution is to occur is that people must be freed from having to fight daily battles for simple things, so that they can then become interested in and join bigger ones. Reforms are useful for this purpose, such as the 4-hour day advocated by the IWW. Reforms are also necessary to impart, for lack of a better phrase, 'revolutionary consciousness' in a community. Many oppressed groups probably feel a bit irritated and annoyed that radicals spend so much time on certain subjects and so little time on others, like fighting for people of colour and the poor, in a concrete way. It is one thing to spout off the necessary rhetoric about fighting for the oppressed masses, but it is quite another to join them in the battle for rent controls, an end to police brutality, decent housing, and the establishment of social programs. By fighting with them, one can not only demonstrate that radical philosophies do pertain to issues that concern them, but also can explain how they do so, so that these reforms do not end as merely reforms, but become stepping stones to bigger and bigger battles. Now, this is not to imply any kind of vanguardist attempt by radicals to come into a community and educate the ignorant population. Notice I said join the battle, not lead the battle. But a presence is necessary to establish contacts with communities, and solidify those connections over time. These kinds of attempts at outreach have been ignored for far too long, when they are the real meat and bones of any attempt at a revolutionary movement.

Many seem to act under the assumption that a population can go from zero to revolutionary in a day. This does not and will not happen. It especially will not happen if we go on having protests, meetings, groups, and political discussions and expect people to come to us. We have to go to them. We must not force our priorities and pet battles onto them (though we can certainly mention them), but instead must fight for the things that are important and vital to them, even if they are reforms. Our purpose will be to use these battles to show them their own power. Many do not even believe that they can win a fight against their landlord, let alone capitalism, the military, and the entire state machinery of the United States of America! But if they can start winning these smaller skirmishes, then a sense of their own power and ability to effect change will take hold and ferment. However, as mentioned before, there has to be the constant reminder and push to make sure that reforms, once gained, never satisfy. Reforms can be problematic, and though I have been hard on those who speak out against reformism, I can sympathize with where their viewpoint comes from. Oftentimes, once a movement or group has won a reform, they are content and go back to their regular lives. Indeed, governments and institutions grant reforms for this purpose to pacify. And this is exactly why we have to be part of movements fighting for reforms. To build a revolutionary presence in communities and movements striving towards reforms is the beginning of radicalising those communities and movements, and placing those reforms in the proper context. Some scoff at the idea of trying to work within reformist struggles, and proclaim that the only way to achieve change is from the outside, by creating revolutionary organisations. But there is a necessary news-flash for all the vast majority of the population will not join revolutionary organisations and does not have a revolutionary mindset. It is absolutely absurd to expect them to make the effort, as I said, to come seek out these organisations, when they are busy with their own struggles. Not to say that revolutionary groups do not have a place, they most definitely do, but it is time to go where the fight is.

The ghettoisation of anarchism and radical politics has by this point been lamented by many, and for good reason. Relationship with communities is what makes or breaks a movement for change. It is an irony that a revolution based on anarchism is the type that needs the broadest support by the most amount of people (otherwise it would be a vanguard group coercing the rest of the population to follow their way and therefore not anarchist), yet some (not all) of its adherents seem to abhor the idea of associating with regular people and rarely make attempts to establish a presence in anywhere but their own circles. There is a woeful lack of outreach. A lot of



this has to do with not wanting to be reformist well let me put those fears to rest. Fighting for reforms is not inherently reformist, and is indeed the basis and springboard for revolution. If nothing else, fighting with others for needed reforms can inspire sympathy. Say, Anarchist A fights with a community against the demolishing of housing to make way for condominiums. From now on, even if Person A from that community hears bad things in the media about anarchists, maybe now he or she will say, 'You know, I don't think that's true, Anarchist A was a good person and fought with us.' The media and government paint anarchists and radicals as irrational fanatics, basically inhuman and unnatural, which makes it easy to suppress us without public outcry. We only make this more effective by remaining aloof and being abnormal in most people s eyes, but we can dispel this misconception by simply being around. Ideally, the reforms we fight for should actually be independent institutions outside the State that meet a community's needs. While supposedly fighting for reforms, in this case the community would actually be establishing self-sufficiency and embarking on the road to the transformation of society. In working with communities, not only is our goal to demonstrate to people their own power, but also to give them a taste of the society that could be built with that power. There is a wrong-headed notion going around that people are clueless about the ills of society and we need to just bombard them with enough logic and facts until they see the light. Instead of focusing so much time on illustrating the various problems, which many people know about already, we should be focusing on convincing people that an alternative is possible and that they have the strength to make it a reality. Most people are attached to the current system more out of a lack of faith in the possibility of an alternative than any love for it. The key to revolutionary consciousness is sparking that fire in people s hearts that makes them believe in a new society, want it with all their soul, and feel that it is within their power. Unfortunately, even in left and anarchist circles, there dominates the Western fetish of logic and rationality. We need people who believe in revolution with their hearts and not just with their heads, and in fact, that's the only way in which we can truly reach them.

The final point is just to say that there is a current in anarchism that views anarchists as some sort of enlightened, elite group separate from everyone else. But the fact is that the people are not out there somewhere, we are the people. Many anarchists have class and skin privilege and quite rightly assert that attempts by them to enter a community made up of people of colour would be ineffective to say the least and likely resented. But this is not an excuse for inaction or maintaining the insulated cult of anarchism.