

The texts in this collection were all originally written for the Cautiously Pessimistic blog hosted at nothingiseverlost.wordpress.com between October 2010 and September 2011. Quite a lot happened during that time. Most of them were written in response to a specific event at a specific time, usually in the UK: they are reproduced here in the hope that people outside of that very specific context may still find something useful about them.

Contains critical notes on the student/youth revolt of winter 2010, the left, UK Uncut, anti-fascism, solidarity and selfishness, Israel's emerging social movement, the media, the Labour Party, radical academics, and the riots of August 2011, among other things.

SOMETHING CHANGED:



ONE EXTREMIST'S THOUGHTS
ON TWELVE UNQUIET MONTHS



Dedicated to all victims of state violence. In solidarity until we don't have to do this shit anymore.

In particular, although a full list would be far too long to fit here, these words are dedicated to Alfie Meadows, Jody McIntyre, Frank Fernie, Ed Woollard, Omar Ibrahim, Mark Pearson, Patrick Reay, Toby Hobbs, David Foster, Joe Foster, James de Souza, Aaron Swartz, Tox, Ryan Cleary, lulzsec, Kenneth Harding, Kelly Thomas, Mark Duggan, Ursula Nevin, Perry Sutcliffe, Jordan Blackshaw, Jason Ulett, Anderson Fernandes, Callum Marley, Johnny Melfah, the Sartain-Clarke family, Philip Hulmes, Jacob Michael, Dale Burns, Andy Baker, Thomas Blak, Sean Cregan, Phil de Sousa, Ravinder Gill, Austen Jackson...



An occupation of ATOS Origin, a company which is paid to persecute benefit claimants, Oxford, UK, May 2011

OCTOBER

Don't hate the player, hate the game – why it's wrong to care about Ed Miliband

First written on October 6th, 2010

So, the Labour Party has a new leader. And, a fair while after the event, I've finally got around to writing about it.

When working out what to make of Ed Miliband, one obvious starting point is to look at his voting record – pro-ID cards, Trident and the repression of migrants, against investigating the Iraq war, and so on. But there are serious limitations to this approach. It would be naive to expect that looking at someone's record before they gained power will tell us how they behave when in power with a totally different set of pressures affecting them. One typical example can be seen in the behaviour of Kat Fletcher, a former student union bureaucrat who now works for Miliband, who was elected to lead the NUS running on a socialist platform and with the support of a group called the Campaign for Free Education, who she abandoned as soon as she'd gained power, but there are many more.

Another recent example of the dangers of trusting in lefty leaders comes from the 2009 postal strike, which ended in a weak sell-out deal that was endorsed by the entire Communication Workers Union executive, including Jane Loftus, a member of the Socialist Workers Party (to be fair, the SWP as an organisation condemned the sell-out deal, and Loftus left the party shortly afterward). The point of bringing this up isn't just to condemn the SWP, or to condemn Loftus as an individual, it's to make clear that she acted the way she did because of the situation she was in. As part of the CWU leadership, she had to deal with the other leaders every day, and so it's no surprise that the pressure to go along with their wishes outweighed the pressure to stick up for rank-and-file post workers. It's entirely possible I would have acted the same way in the same circumstances. The point here is that if you manage to put a decent person into a position that's designed to make people act in shitty ways, you're not going to fundamentally alter the nature of that structural position, you're just

going to ruin an otherwise decent person. That old line about how no matter who you vote for, the government always wins, actually has a fair degree of truth to it – whoever won in this contest, they would still have ended up being the leader of the Labour Party, and that tells you a lot about how they're going to behave.

While we're on the subject, a few other myths that need laying to rest. Lefties will often bleat on about the need to get back to "Old Labour", as if this would help anyone. We need to be clear about the fact that Labour has always, always been shit. The first Labour minister gained power as part of the government overseeing the mass slaughter of the First World War. The very first Labour government back in 1924 was already attacking strikers, and Ramsay MacDonald was happy to serve in the "national government", providing left cover for attacks on unemployment benefits and public sector pay in the same way that the Lib Dems do today. In the two years Labour held power between 1929 and 1931, 4 million workers had their pay cut. This tradition of attacks on workers goes on and on throughout Labour's history.

Of course, this is not to deny that Labour has ever done anything worthwhile, which would be ridiculous. But it is very important to be clear about the nature of these gains. The NHS and the welfare state were handed down from above, and control of them has always stayed in the hands of the state, not society as a whole. This is why it's been possible for both Labour and the Tories to chip away ever larger pieces of the welfare state. If we want real, lasting improvements that we don't have to fight constantly to defend, then they need to be under our control, which means that we need to alter the way society works as a whole. It sounds like a big, daunting task, but it's actually no more unrealistic than the current lefty strategy of asking for limited reforms from our rulers, then acting surprised and having to wage endless defensive fights when those reforms are taken away.

Finally, there's one more point to be made about the uselessness of continuing lefty illusions in Labour. Trotskyist groups like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty will still, with a straight face, call for "the reconstruction of Labour party democracy" and tell us that "a Labour Party reclaimed by the trade unions would be a vehicle for a political



A longshore worker blockading a train, Longview, Washington, USA, September 2011

of us can point to a lot of examples to justify their apathy: from the Miners' Strike through to the anti-Iraq War movement and right up to recent cases like the campaign to save EMA or stop the attacks on the NHS, there's no shortage of defeats to teach us how weak and powerless we are. Positive examples to show how we can win are a lot rarer: we have to go back as far as the Poll Tax, or else look at much smaller-scale victories like the recent Office Angels campaign, the IWW cleaners' disputes in London, or the Seattle Solidarity Network's impressive success in the US. We need some stories with happy endings, and the rank and file electricians look like our best bet at the moment: they certainly have the determination and spirit needed to win, so it's just a question of the numbers they can pull out. They've already won a partial victory with the surrender of MJN Coulson, but that still leaves seven other employers to beat. This is bigger than just the wages and conditions of one group of workers: the fundamental question here is whether or not it's possible for a group of ordinary people to assert some kind of control over what's going on in their lives. A victory for the electricians would be a victory for all of us who share that goal. Respect is due to those folk, like the Commune and North East Anarchists, who've been out supporting the protests, I'd strongly advise anyone else with anything happening in their area to think about making it a priority.

alternative.” What they don’t seem keen to discuss is that the project of building a socialist alternative within the Labour Party has already been pursued, with mixed results. The Militant Tendency spent decades working within the Labour Party, and eventually managed to become so influential within the Party that the National Youth Organiser and several councillors were members of Militant. Then they all got thrown out. I have yet to see any Labour-sympathising lefty give anything close to a coherent explanation of why any group attempting to do the same thing today wouldn’t just face exactly the same fate. Any takers?

Beyond Coke and Pepsi

First written on October 26th, 2010

I think the idea of our own powerlessness is one of the main ideas that prop up the current social order. But that's clearly not all there is to it. Another major prop keeping the system stable is the use of limited choices as a way to hide the existence of more radical options. People are contrary buggers, and so if you tell them that they can't do something, they're likely to do it. If, on the other hand, you offer them a choice, they may choose your least favourite option, but they're a lot less likely to just tell you to fuck off and do something else altogether. By looking at the way this system of choices has changed over time, I'd like to try and explore the opportunities that the current crisis offers us.

To start off with, I'd like to make it clear that I'm describing effects here, not causes. Cock-ups are usually more likely than conspiracies, so I'm definitely not trying to claim that the leaders of the world's lefty groups – let alone the rank and file – are all consciously part of some evil pro-capitalist conspiracy. Although, having said that, it is certainly possible to find examples of situations where rulers have deliberately decided to grant reforms in order to prevent a greater upheaval. The world's rulers didn't get where they are by being stupid, and it'd be naive to think they'd never heard Martin Luther King's famous warning about those who make peaceful change impossible making violent revolution inevitable.

The 20th Century

Near the start of the last century, the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, combined with the defeat of the German Revolution, set down a model for what it meant to be against capitalism. Other forms of revolutionary socialism appeared less relevant and practical, and so it became possible to divide politics into two opposing camps: either you supported socialism, equality, and the workers, and so you supported the workers' state, even when it created massively unequal societies controlled by a tiny elite and repressed workers trying to demand a better life; or you supported freedom, democracy

SEPTEMBER

A chance to start writing ourselves back into the story.

First written on September 27, 2011

I believe that the current struggle taking place against attacks on wages and conditions across the construction sector could be the most important thing happening in the UK at the moment. To start at the beginning: most of us don't have a lot of say in the big decisions that get made about our lives. And, if we try and change that by getting involved in protest, we find the same pattern existing across most of the left: the TUC bosses choose a date every few months for a protest or a one-day strike, and the rest of us are expected to just go along with it, to march out obediently when they tell us to and then go home and do nothing for the next few months without making a fuss. There are some groups and projects where decisions are made at the grassroots, but pretty much all of these are tiny, and this lack of numbers makes it impossible for them to have any real impact most of the time.

This situation is what makes the electricians' rank and file network so important: they offer a way out beyond the two unsatisfactory options of getting involved with either ineffective, top-down mass protest or a tiny, isolated subculture of activists. It's a rank and file group that's out of the control of the union bureaucracy, but still capable of pulling out impressive numbers at short notice, mobilising people in London, Newcastle, Manchester, Glasgow, Grangemouth, Cleethorpes, Liverpool and Edinburgh. They haven't really challenged the authority of the union itself and are urging people to join Unite, but that hasn't stopped union leaders from describing them as "cancerous". What's possible and impossible at any given moment is determined by what people think is possible or impossible, which in turn is a reflection of what's happened in the past. At the moment, someone looking for an excuse to stay in bed rather than putting their time and energy into fighting back against the attacks this system makes on all

education. There's no absolute contradiction here, since people in both groups have needs and desires that are in conflict with the logic of capitalism, and so both have the potential to be part of a movement against this society, but these cultural differences do make genuine two-way communication more difficult. To return to an idea I considered in my last piece, I think it's worth thinking about the movement against EMA cuts, and possibly also the Stokes Croft riots earlier this year, as being moments when anti-capitalists found ourselves fighting alongside some of the people who've been on the streets this week. I wouldn't generally define myself as part of the insurrectionist current, but I do think that, in this specific situation, when dealing with people who are ready and willing to attack the police, our best chance of having any influence on them is not to work out the perfect wording for a speech or manifesto or leaflet or blog post, but to create situations of conflict with the state that, if my analysis here has any connection to reality, which of course it may not, some of them will recognise their desires in and be moved to join in with.

and human rights, even when that meant backing dictatorships that tortured and killed communists, and more generally supporting a set-up that limited freedom to those who could afford it. Of course, as the Cold War went on, the Leninist movement fractured again and again, but almost all the competing groups that emerged out of it still shared the same basic hierarchical, authoritarian assumptions. The idea of a genuinely free and equal movement to create a classless society was almost nowhere to be seen.

The 90s

Of course, eventually the Soviet Union fell (ironically, this was partly because, for most of its history, it had failed to provide safety valves to let people criticise the system within carefully controlled boundaries), which upset this balance. The great battle between the state-centred form of capitalism that existed in the East and the market-centred form of capitalism that existed in the West had been settled with a clear victory for the market. In a related development, under the leadership of Tony Blair, the Labour Party, which had been the main force supporting a state-based alternative in the UK, decided to drop its formal commitment to nationalisation and opt for what they called the Third Way. Unsurprisingly, this Third Way had nothing to do with providing a genuine alternative and everything to do with shedding all remnants of leftist ideology in favour of a kind of Conservatism Lite.

For a while, capitalism appeared completely triumphant, but nothing lasts forever. Starting with the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, and gathering pace towards the end of the decade, a new anti-capitalist movement began to emerge. It's important not to romanticise things, and this new movement did contain contradictions and doubtless there were lots of shitty things about it, but it did have the advantage of not being tied to a failed strategy the way the left is. The protests that shut down the World Trade Organisation in Seattle at the end of the century were not channelled into electoral politics, nor were they aimed at the creation of a new Leninist vanguard party aiming to seize state power. Therefore, they raised the possibility of a new, genuinely effective challenge to capitalism.

The last decade

Of course, things didn't turn out quite that way. With 9/11, the unified global order cracked again. When Bush declared that "you're either with us or with the terrorists", he was welcoming back the system that had proved so effective at guaranteeing capitalist stability during the Cold War. During the decade that followed, the radical left was effectively distracted from putting forward any positive alternative and diverted into a series of arguments around war and Islam. With the start of the war on Iraq, we were told that we could either support the war or support the Stop the War Coalition, and so pour our energies into boring, ineffective protest marches with ever-diminishing returns. The possibility that the anti-war majority could have actually used their power to stop the war by bringing society to a halt was never even raised. The walk-outs by schoolchildren showed one way in which people opposed to the war could have taken genuinely effective action, but their example did not spread, and so the war was not stopped.

The new focus on Islam and Muslims allowed the far-right room to grow, leading to another false choice: between the anti-establishment rhetoric of the BNP (and, later, EDL) and the defence of existing society. Those who wanted to make a stand against racism were told to line up behind Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and council bosses cutting workers' pay. As with the clash between Stalinism and free market capitalism, the battle between the far-right and liberal anti-fascism serves to hide the possibility that ordinary people, acting for themselves without external leadership, can assert their own needs against the logic of this system, and take collective action to improve their lives.

Now

The economic crisis and its ongoing effects have served to change the terrain once again. The story of the struggle against the cuts is still being written, and the way it's told will determine whether or not there's any hope of winning. If it becomes a battle of Labour vs Tories, we've lost before it starts – either Labour will fuck it up the way they do most things, or they'll somehow manage to gain power, and then implement their own alternative cuts programme. Equally, if

fact that there's no suggestion he was involved in any rioting, his only crime was to respond negatively to police harassment, Ursula Nevin, the mum-of-two, also not involved in the riots, who's been given five months for accepting a pair of shorts, and families in Wandsworth and Manchester facing eviction because of their children's behaviour. To repeat, because this kind of atrocity takes a while to get your head around: innocent people are going to be made homeless because other people in their family committed offences such as nicking a £7.49 bottle of wine. And this shit is supposed to return the country to peace? Just thinking about it makes me see red with rage. We need to be building up networks to take action against these evictions. While we're at it, defending squats and people in debt against evictions and repossessions is also an important task and one we should be keeping in mind.

So, other than trying to fight evictions and support prisoners, do we really have anything to offer to rioting youth? No matter how exciting we may find pictures of burning cop cars and looted supermarkets, what we saw over the last week was clearly not the same thing as a movement aimed at abolishing capitalism, the state, class society and alienated work in order to bring about a new world of freedom, equality and solidarity. So how do we get there from here? Leaving out the crude Marxist idea that these people are somehow doomed by their "lumpen" status – and I wish I could say that idea was just a caricature, but it has been seriously expressed elsewhere – the answer has to lie somewhere between the two equally unlikely poles of the Leninist fantasy of revolutionaries bringing consciousness to the unenlightened masses, and the determinist fairytale that the logic of their situation will automatically lead them to adopt the "correct" ideas. There are things we can do to start trying to engage with disenfranchised youths, such as trying to use the experience of campaigns fighting police surveillance of activists to build a broader fightback against police harassment, but there are serious barriers to this. Unless my personal experiences have been very unusual, I think it's safe to say that among both the left and anarchists, the proportion of people who've been to uni and/or have jobs in education or elsewhere in the public sector is somewhat higher than it is among the population as a whole, whereas among the rioters many more people will be unemployed and without any experience of further

friend going on about sending in the army or bringing back hanging, you should tell them to go and listen to an anarchist postie talking about their experiences at work instead, that'd be as mad as interrupting a kid setting fire to their neighbour's car to ask them to read Malatesta's writings on insurrection – but they are small steps towards building the kind of fighting libertarian movement that can demonstrate its relevance by delivering real successes. There are lots of people out there with all kinds of fucked-up attitudes who have no intention of listening to anything we say, but only the most bigoted of them would refuse to work with us if we could actually demonstrate a practical ability to improve their lives.



So, if that's how (I think) we should relate to "the general public" at large, what do we have to say to those actually involved in the rioting? To start off with, we need to be supporting those facing the wrath of the state. Even when it's working normally, our "justice" system is horrifically fucked up, so it's no surprise that, in the current climate, there's some really insane shit going down, such as the cases of Jason Ulett, who's already been given 10 weeks despite the

it becomes a series of individual clashes – the government versus overpaid greedy public sector workers; versus idealistic, out-of-touch, immature, posh students; versus lazy benefits scroungers; then it'll be a walkover. But if united action is taken by everyone affected by the cuts – that is to say, as unfashionable as it sounds, by the working class – there's still the possibility of winning. If that's the case, then we might stand to go beyond fighting defensively, beyond asking for a kinder, gentler screwing from the softer faction of the ruling class, and move towards a future where a real communist movement worthy of the name – that is to say, a movement of ordinary people taking direct action to fight for their own interests without being controlled by one set of bureaucrats or another – could become a major player.

NOVEMBER

Celebrate the Millbank rioters! (Or: Why even when I'm wrong it proves I'm right)

First written on November 11th, 2010, the day after a huge student demo turned unexpectedly militant and trashed the Conservative Party headquarters

First of all, it needs to be said just how brilliant yesterday was. Sights like this:



make my little red and black heart swell with pride.

Beyond that, what else is there to say? First of all, it's vital that we need to defend everyone arrested, either yesterday or in the days to come. Also, although a lot of us (including myself) missed out on the fun, we can all be part of creating the culture that makes events

If you tolerate this, then your parents will be next.

First written on August 14, 2011

It's a full week since the riots started, and several days since they started to die down, so where are we now? Personally, I think anarchists are in a difficult position here: we're facing a country that's effectively divided between a non-rioting majority, which includes a lot of people who are prepared to support very reactionary and authoritarian solutions, and a small minority of rioters, who are prepared to attack shops and the police, and are currently facing heavy repression from it. I don't think there's a clear split of right and wrong or oppressor and oppressed here, which means that we need to be trying to relate to both sides. This sounds difficult – no, it *is* difficult – but I can't see any way around it. And it could be worse: every time two nations go to war, we're in the same position, but at least the two groups of people we're trying to relate to here aren't killing each other on a large scale. It's not a comparison that I've seen anywhere else, but in some ways the situation reminds me of Hurricane Katrina. Thankfully, the loss of life here has not been at anywhere near the level seen in New Orleans, but in both cases people were faced with the combination of the areas they lived in being physically devastated, and a racialised hysteria about looters. With that in mind, perhaps we should see if there's anything we can learn from the responses of US anarchists to Katrina.

But back to my main point: how can we have anything coherent to say to such a divided population? In some ways, relating to the non/anti-rioting majority is relatively straightforward: in the short term, we promote community responses to the violence instead of relying on the police, such as the Deptford assembly, yesterday's North London community demonstration, and Toxteth Against the Riots. In the long term, our task is basically the same as it was before: to bring people together while escalating the conflict between our class and those who have power in this society, stressing concrete projects that will bring real results. Obviously, none of this is an immediate solution – I'm not saying that if you have a neighbour, workmate, relative or

few days, and I spent a lot of their time in office wishing for any sign of an insurrection, but it is quite noticeable. Cameron's strategy seems to be have been based on sacrificing social peace for economic growth, and it's starting to look like he's lost the bet badly – at a cost of provoking Millbank and the student riots, March 26th, the closest thing to militancy we've seen from the unions in years, and now massive riots, he's managed to gain... absolutely fuck-all economic growth, and he's had hackgate fall into his lap on top of it all. It's possible that we're going to see the state coming out of this a lot stronger, but we could also see a total crisis of confidence within the ruling class. It'd be stupid to make firm predictions – after all, Thatcher carried on for a full decade after the '81 riots – but I wouldn't be surprised if the coalition collapsed in the near future, as the Lib Dems decide to try and get out of a sinking ship.

No conclusions



So, it's hard to draw up a balance sheet for the riots. A lot of people are suffering, I'm not sure how many, and a second life's been lost, meaning the police are no longer the only murderers around. At the same time, there are definitely positive sides: a large amount of wealth has been redistributed from big business to poor people, who will now be slightly more comfortable as a result. A lot of kids will have gained a taste of how it feels to fight the police and win. Even if they're not connecting their experience to the class struggle now, it's impossible to say what could happen in the future. And finally, no matter what else happens, I think it's going to be a very long time before any smug fucker tries to tell us that "we're all middle class now".

like yesterday's possible. Whenever anyone tries to condemn them, it's important to speak up and be clear about the simple fact that, when dealing with complete and utter bastards, asking nicely doesn't work, taking what you want does. The media will try and depict this as the work of a tiny group of isolated extremists, but we should all make it clear that they represented a vast tide of public anger. Every time you speak up about how great yesterday was, it empowers other people to do the same and makes our opponents less confident that everyone agrees with them. If you're at a university or college, you should be arguing for an occupation.

Also, it's worth thinking a bit about the age issue. Like a lot of people, I'm of the age when the massive, failed, peaceful protest against the Iraq war was one of the defining events shaping my political experience. A lot of these kids won't remember 2003. A lot of people will have been on their first ever demonstration. If they get the impression that that's what protests are meant to be like, and try to emulate it in future, the next few years might get pretty interesting.



Thoughts for next time: It's great that the Tories got trashed, but the Lib Dems and Labour (who, apart from anything else, brought fees in

in the first place) got off too lightly. Now that the NUS have made it clear that they're not on the same side as militant students, Aaron Porter's office should be a target as well.

Finally, I'll admit that I didn't expect it. I didn't plug it on here, and to my eternal regret I didn't go to it myself. I don't think anyone really expected it. It certainly looks like not even the police expected it (well, either that, or they just wanted to get back at the Tories over spending cuts). As even BBC news admit, it wasn't the cunning work of an anarchist conspiracy – looking at the pictures, this obviously wasn't the black bloc at work. I actually find the fact that I completely and utterly failed to guess what was going to happen very comforting. One of the major differences between (most) Marxists and anarchists centres on the usefulness of knowing lots of history and theory. Both will agree that they're useful, but anarchists think that any one individual or party can only ever have a very limited understanding, and the changing course of events will always leave even the wisest leaders behind. Most Marxists, on the other hand, will ascribe all kinds of mystical powers to a correct understanding of "scientific socialism", and use their superior knowledge to justify their authority. Yesterday demonstrated, once again, how little political experts know. A lot of people will tell you not to trust any leaders except themselves, but I can confidently say that, as a leader, I'd be as crap as anyone else. The youth who attacked the Tory HQ didn't need guidance from any vanguard, they just charged ahead and left the self-proclaimed revolutionaries struggling to keep up.

shooting, and I suspect that they can't even just be reduced to this economic crisis. Looked at from a historical perspective, the continuing appeal of mass violence seems to suggest that these kind of events are just part of the society we live in. This approach means that, no matter how much we dislike what's going on, we can't just hope for a return to normality. A balanced, sober assessment of the situation tells us that we live in a society where poor people do horrible things to other poor people on a fairly regular basis, without anyone making much of a fuss about it, and also riot from time to time, which means that they start attacking police officers and businesses, which causes a huge fuss, as well as doing horrible things to other poor people on a greater, or at least faster, level. So, those of us who are genuinely shocked and upset by people being mugged or burnt out of their houses can't just wish for things to go back to being the way they were before, since that'd just mean a return to a constant low level of anti-social crime, along with, sooner or later, the inevitable return of this kind of uprising.

Dark days for Dave, bad times for the Bullington boys



While it's clear that these problems are deeply rooted in the structure of this society, it is remarkable how closely Tory governments and social unrest seem to coincide. There's not an exact correlation – Major's rule was fairly peaceful, at least at home, while Oldham and Bradford rioted under Blair – but overall the 13 years of Labour rule now seem like an oasis of calm between the violent social conflict of the Thatcher era and the new period of class war that's just getting started. That's not to praise Labour, since their mass slaughter in Iraq was indescribably worse than anything that's happened over the last

sense of direction very quickly, and secondly that, despite all the media scare stories, “anarchist ringleaders” and other politicised minorities find it hard to have that much influence – as I’ve noted before, organised revolutionary groups played very little role in the student riots, while the black bloc on March 26th clearly didn’t inspire imitators on anything like the scale this has. It’s an idea worth thinking about, but it’s not one I’m actively encouraging.

How deep does the problem go?



Ignoring the obviously racist and deeply reactionary narratives dominating the media, the main area of debate seems to be about how much weight to put on long-term causes and short-term triggers – people have brought up Nick Clegg’s pre-election warning that this would happen, but from another point of view, these riots aren’t an exceptional eruption of violence, but a very predictable chapter in our long history of riots stretching through Wat Tyler, the Luddites, the Gordon riots, the Captain Swing riots, Notting Hill, Brixton and the other ‘81 uprisings, Broadwater Farm, the Poll Tax...

For my part, I lean towards taking the long view – the speed with which these riots have spread over the country means that they can’t be reduced to the effects of local factors like closures or the Duggan

No more heroes: against the myth of the anarchist hardcore

First written on November 18, 2010

In the week following the Millbank occupation, one theme that has been repeated in the media again and again is the idea that the disturbances were planned or co-ordinated beforehand by a small group of activists. While the media’s promotion of this idea can have some positive effects, in terms of providing massive publicity for the groups that are scapegoated, it is still ultimately one we need to be arguing against. This myth ultimately serves to hide the most genuinely subversive features of last week’s riot. To explain why, it’s necessary to look at two fundamental features of class society: separation and representation. (This bit may be very boring for anyone with a basic familiarity with Marxist or anarchist theory, but I think that it’s better to bore people who already know what you mean than to confuse people who don’t.)

Ultimately, as clichéd as it may sound, virtually everything in society is produced by work. However, as the continued existence of capitalism throughout the world shows, the idea of workers collectively taking control of everything they produce is not as simple as it sounds. While “the workers” may, in the abstract, be all-powerful, in practice our experience of day-to-day life is not one of power but of almost total powerlessness. We are separated from each other, but also, just as importantly, separated from the things that we produce.

But this is still only half the subject. Once the product of our work has been separated from us, it still needs to be represented back to us. This happens in the economy, but it also happens just as importantly in politics. When we think of Sky, we think of Rupert Murdoch, and we might think of a few actors, directors and even scriptwriters; we don’t think of the vast armies of people making the tea, cleaning up afterwards, assembling televisions and satellite dishes, or working in callcentres to sell subscriptions. When we think of the government, we think of Cameron, Clegg and Cable, but we don’t think of the millions who turned out to vote for them, or every single person

employed by the public sector, or even all the people who aren't employed directly by the state but still follow its instructions when they come into contact with it, provide it with accurate information and pay their taxes, even though all these things are necessary for the state to be able to function. (Although it was sadly called off, this is what made the threat by BBC workers to strike and black out coverage of the Tory party conference so great, as it would've exposed dramatically how powerless the great and good really are when workers refuse to obey them.)

Wherever we turn, we find this same combination: an assumption that us and the people around us are basically powerless, while the power that we create is projected onto an outside figure who can then claim to represent us. If you don't like what the government's doing, you can vote for a nicer politician who promises to represent you better. If you've got a problem at work, you can turn to your trade union representative and ask them to sort it out for you. And if you find that that's still not enough, and you want to shake up the world as a whole, you can turn to your friendly local socialist party, where the full-time organisers will be happy to tell you what to do. Following these different leaders can lead to vastly different effects – the cynicism of a Clegg is as nothing compared to the millions of workers and peasants killed by the “workers' and peasants' states” in Russia and China – but none of them can abolish themselves, or create a genuinely free and equal society. Any movement aiming at true liberation needs to go beyond just reproducing the structures that characterise existing society.

What made Millbank so exciting was the violent break with all that. For once, we got to see a crowd of people spontaneously making their own decisions. The power of that crowd came from the people in that crowd and their energy on the day, not from some cunning strategy worked out by sinister Marxist or anarchist groups meeting in back rooms beforehand. And that's what the Daily Mail worldview, where no-one can get angry unless “[m]ilitants from far-Left groups whip [them] into a frenzy” or “a small minority... had arranged it beforehand” or a “bearded man in his 30s” uses “a loud hailer to incite the crowd”, just cannot deal with. If it was true that it was all worked out beforehand by a small group cunningly manipulating everyone around them, then there'd be nothing really that new or

noticeable contrast to EDL events), but I would bet good money some of them were involved in the EMA riots that everyone was getting excited by at the end of last year.

November/December/March/August/?



At this point, it might be worth thinking about the riots we've seen over the past 12 months or so. To massively oversimplify things, I'd say that the student/youth revolt that lasted from Millbank till December saw a politicised social movement clashing with the state and attracting support from a substantial mass of disaffected youth, the black bloc on March 26th saw a politicised group clash with the state but fail to draw in that critical mass of support, and the current riots are that same constituency of urban youth rebelling without any political direction. Thinking about it, the logic of this analysis would seem to suggest that, assuming the anger fuelling these riots remains, and I see no reason why it wouldn't, one activity that revolutionaries might usefully engage in is providing flashpoints like the education demos, where the logic of the situation points towards “good” rioting, hitting the state and business, rather than “bad” rioting, hitting other working-class people. But I'm hesitant to fully endorse this approach, since I can see at least two very obvious problems with it: first that riots are unpredictable things, and this started out in Tottenham as a focused, at-least-partially-political revolt and lost that

home burnt down dismiss the problems of those who have, then they're just as callous as people who've never lived in poverty and dismiss the riots as mindless thuggery. Both the rioters and the "anti-rioters" ("riot wombles", #riotcleanup, crowds of people driving rioters out of their areas, etc) have positive and negative features: the riots combine a very justified attack on the police and big business with some utterly unsupportable destructive behaviour, the "anti-rioters" combine spontaneous community self-organisation with a defence of corporate property, and often other reactionary or racist attitudes, as we're seeing with the EDL presence at Enfield. So I can see good reasons for revolutionaries to join in with either crowd, depending on their personal situation and the situation in their area: I don't want to end up in court with the poor kids who're facing prosecution for things they wrote on facebook, so I'll leave it up to the reader to decide what kind of action you think it'd be useful to get positively involved in, but it's certainly the case that anyone genuinely wanting to argue against anti-social arson would have been much more effective if they were doing it from within the crowd, engaging with people directly. Being part of the crowd would also enable you to distribute legal information to help protect people from repression. Likewise, I can see good reasons why people would want to engage with the community reactions coming from non-rioters, such as the unity demonstrations now being organised in Deptford and Tottenham, supporting these initiatives while arguing for class solidarity and against racist and authoritarian responses.

It's obvious that there's no simple "correct" response to what's going on. Responses from radicals have varied from some completely uncritical defences of the riots to, at the other extreme, the absurd claim that "The kinds of lumpen elements involved in these actions, are the kinds of people who on another day, would be joining in with the EDL, in rampaging through workers communities." I really doubt that many of the black and Asian kids looting in London are ever likely to stand beside a crowd of football hooligans chanting "we hate pakis more than you" (to clarify: I'm not trying to say that only people from ethnic minorities are involved in what's going on, this seems to be a genuinely multicultural event, but that still makes it a very

radical about the trashing of Tory HQ, it'd just be another costume disguising the same old hierarchical power. The myth of the "anarchist hardcore" turns scenes like riots into another display of rulers and ruled. Rather than rejecting all bosses, we're expected to turn to the militant boss in the black mask to tell us how to riot properly. The ruling class need this myth to try and obscure the real lesson of riots and similar outbreaks of defiance. If people can work out what they want and how best to get it on their own, without being led by sinister troublemaking militants (or, for that matter, obscure anarcho bloggers trying to write wittily), then there's no need for a ruling class, or for society to be run the way that it is today.

* From boffyblogger.blogspot.com/2011/08/set-up-workers-defence-squads-to-defend.html

Cautiously optimistic: Walkouts and occupations everywhere

First written on November 26, 2010, a few days after a major day of action that saw a number of student walkouts and occupations

So, what to make of Wednesday's walkouts? Obviously, they were fantastic. No-one really seems sure how many universities were occupied, but it seems to have been at least 29. (Count 'em: University of West England, Manchester Met, SOAS, Plymouth, Royal Holloway, Newcastle, UCL, London South Bank, Birmingham, Oxford, Cardiff, Warwick, Strathclyde, UEL, Dundee, Portsmouth, Leeds, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Manchester, Roehampton, Sheffield, Essex, Bristol, Sussex, Cambridge, Goldsmiths, Glasgow School of Art, and Brighton.) Some of them, like Man Met and Sussex, were a bit earlier, but the vast majority were on the day itself. Have over 20 universities ever been occupied on a single day before, or is this actually unprecedented? It's pretty rare, at least. Even if they achieve nothing else, these occupations should at least have a valuable effect in bringing the tactic itself back into the public consciousness, which could be important when larger groups of workers move into struggle. It's hard to say whether there's any direct link, but it is noticeable that after a long period where occupations seemed to have disappeared completely, the wave of uni occupations over Gaza at the start of 2009 was followed by a number of workplace occupations at Visteon, Vestas, Prisme, Waterford Glass and Thomas Cook. If workplace occupations start spreading at anywhere near the rate the university ones have, the results would be amazing.

The targetting of Lib Dem HQ in Edinburgh and Simon Hughes' office in London are both very encouraging signs, and the dispersed nature of the protests around the country made them much harder to police, as well as making it easier for vast numbers to participate, and meaning that people outside the capital were presented with something happening on their doorstep, rather than just another set of vague, far-off events in London. The amount of open mass meetings that seem to be happening are another important development, and it's worth stating once again how much the left

As Britain burns, all easy answers go up in smoke

First written on August 10, 2011, as riots spread across the UK

I'm aware that, compared to a lot of people, I've been pretty slow with coming out with any kind of comment on the riots; I wanted to wait until I was fairly confident I had some idea what was going on before writing anything. I'm glad of this, because my immediate reaction when it all started was a fairly straightforward "all power to King Mob!" feeling, and it's become obvious that things are a lot more complicated than that. I'm starting to feel like a liberal fence-sitter here, because this is one of the only occasions I can think of where I can see good reasons to be on both sides of the barricades. There are only two things we can say about the situation with any real certainty: anyone who mourns the violence of the rioters, but doesn't condemn the police murder of Mark Duggan, is a sickening hypocrite, and anyone who thinks that Boris Johnson coming back earlier would've helped in any way is an utter fuckwit.

Which side are you on? Which side am I on?



No-one who genuinely opposes this society can have any objection to attacks on the police or looting of big chain stores – I'll stay out of the tricky question of which, if any, small local shops are "legitimate" targets and which ones aren't – but if people who've never had their

first, or checking that all British workers in a given workplace have sorted attitudes towards immigrants and the unemployed before supporting their strike. But the question could become a lot more relevant soon: Israeli politicians are discussing the idea of massively expanding settlements in the West Bank in order to “solve” the housing crisis, which would make the question of Palestine unavoidable – if a new programme of settlement-building started, we’d see if the movement was prepared to accept Palestinians suffering in order to make their own lives easier, or whether there’s any potential for Israeli-Palestinian unity against all politicians and landlords, of whatever nationality. The other option, which can’t be ruled out, is another war – a solution that the rulers of nations have often relied on as a way of defusing external tensions. A war would raise the stakes even further – it’s easy to imagine the class resentment of the protests being drowned out in nationalist fury if one of Israel’s rivals could be provoked into killing a few civilians, but on the other hand, wars like World War I and Vietnam demonstrate how this strategy can backfire and result in massive social upheaval, as well as new movements of international solidarity. This situation is definitely one to watch.

have been totally left behind. The original call-out may have come from the National Convention Against Fees and Cuts, but there’s no group with anything even approaching the level of presence in schools and sixth forms needed to take control of something like this. The next big focus looks to be the 30th of November, just days away. It’s possible this could backfire – anyone who went through the experience of Stop the War knows how disheartening it can be to just try to do the same thing again and again with inevitably diminishing returns, no matter how good the first time was – but this really looks like it could pay off, building on the existing mood of excitement and the massive amount of publicity the last two demos got. It’ll also give those who’ve not occupied yet a good reason/opportunity to do so, and allow those who’ve occupied and been evicted to just go all-out and occupy again.



So where next? It seems unlikely that this burst of energy will last for ever, especially with the Christmas holidays coming up. Of course, I could be wrong, maybe this is just the ideology of a politico trying to justify a role for myself in a movement that has no real need of me and the protests will just spontaneously continue to snowball and snowball, but either way it looks like at some stage there’ll be a move from the very loose networks we’re seeing at the moment to some

kind of more structured form. It's crucial that if and when this happens, we don't allow the left to fuck it up. No matter how well-intentioned individual lefty militants are, the trots have demonstrated time and time again that they ruin everything they get control of. Even when they're defending militant tactics now, sooner or later the need to build their Party will come into conflict with the demands of the movement. When local anti-cuts groups are set up, they'll try to influence them into having a closed, hierarchical leadership structure that they can then gain control of. Those of us active in the anti-cuts movement who recognise the dangers this poses need to be arguing against this. Better to risk seeming petty and sectarian now than to end up with an impotent, deradicalised movement in the long run. The other crucial point at the moment is how far the youth are ahead of everybody else. In some ways this is to be expected, since the penalties for bunking a day of school or uni are far lower than those for walking off the job, but it can't go on forever. Ultimately, no matter how heroic they are, school, college and uni students on their own aren't going to beat the government; the class as a whole certainly can. A combination of the disruptive power of public sector workers with the defiant spirit of the students and pupils would be devastatingly effective. The dream scenario would be real, practical unity across these sectors: not just a handful of right-on students visiting picket lines, but mobs of scary 15-year-olds going fucking mental at scabs. We can only hope, but even if things don't get quite that good, any action by workers that even comes close to the spirit of the last few weeks would be a very welcome move. (A few disclaimers here: obviously, students/schoolkids and public sector workers aren't the only ones affected, hopefully pensioners and benefits claimants will start kicking off as well. And by saying I want the school students to go beyond just thinking of their own immediate interests and start developing a more general class consciousness, I am in no way lining up with all those liberal wankers trying to draw lines between the "good" protesters who really care about the issues and the naughty kids who ruin it for everyone because they just want an excuse to bunk off school and fight the police. In some ways, I think kids who just want to fight the cops have better politics than those who're just really concerned about the education cuts: one group is just asking for a specific reform that can be granted fairly

everybody should have somewhere affordable to live, and that building up networks of mutual support is the only way for those of us who are currently powerless to turn ourselves into a power capable of transforming society.

The future?

When faced by lefties saying very stupid things, it can be tempting to assume that the opposite must be true. So, when they concentrate all their energies on unionised public sector workers and write off "lumpen" benefits claimants and other unorganised sectors, it's easy to overemphasise the importance of those sectors in response, but that would be a mistake; equally, when they fetishise "the intifada" and ignore the potential of Israeli workers, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that everything they say is wrong. When the left tells half the story and ignores the other half, the answer is not to concentrate on that other half and ignore the first bit, but to try and get the whole picture. The fight to create a genuine human community needs to involve the breaking-down of all these barriers. At this point, I risk becoming so abstract that I sound like I'm just spouting half-baked Zen bollocks, so to make things a bit more concrete: as ridiculous as the lefty caricatures that see all Israelis as over-privileged and useless are, they are based on a reality, which is that Israel is a racist state, and that racism gives some groups some advantages and makes it harder for them to unite with others – Ashkenazi (European) Jews have an easier time than Sephardi (non-European) Jews, Sephardis have it easier than Palestinian Arabs, and so on. This doesn't mean we should write off all white Israelis any more than we should write off all white Americans or British people (or men, or heterosexuals), but it does mean that a movement which doesn't go beyond these divisions is never going to be able to mount the kind of truly united class challenge needed to take on the state and win. Fortunately, this kind of solidarity does seem to be developing, as Arabs, Druze, and African migrants are all part of the movement. The idea that Israeli protesters shouldn't be supported until they develop a fully internationalist consciousness is ridiculous, equivalent to saying that we should only oppose the Israeli state's massacres of Palestinians if they give up all their sexist and homophobic attitudes

things aren't quite that simple.

The "anti-imperialism" common on the left is not an attempt to unite ordinary people across all national boundaries, but an expression of support for those elements of the ruling class, such as the Iranian regime or Hamas, whose interests happen to clash with those of other, more powerful factions. The ideas of anti-imperialism and national liberation are not about class struggle, but about the hope that the "good" rulers – or, more precisely, the working-class people fighting on behalf of the good rulers – will be able to militarily defeat the "bad" rulers – that is to say, will be able to kill a great number of working-class people who are in the wrong army. Independent working-class movements like the one starting to emerge in Israel can be very problematic for this kind of simplistic analysis, which might explain why the SWP seem to be currently just pretending the protests aren't happening. The flaws of this kind of "Palestinian good, Israeli bad" rhetoric can be seen when we consider the lack of support from Palestine solidarity campaigners for things like the war refusers jailed for disobeying the Israeli state, or the notorious censorship of a placard carrying the inflammatory message "No to IDF, no to Hamas, solidarity with women, workers and the left".* With the emergence of mass class conflict in Israel, these contradictions are going to become a lot more difficult to ignore. As the Israeli working class comes into conflict with their state, those who claim that "The Israeli working class is a hopeless case" or "the Israeli left has very rarely shown any sign of wanting to seriously overcome the colonial/racial injustice at the heart of the Zionist project... there is no chance whatsoever of the Israeli working class becoming a revolutionary class" or "the reforms are baseless and the protests are useless" risk ending up making propaganda for the Zionist state they hate so much.† To say that the housing revolt is worth supporting is not to deny that many individuals involved in it will still have deeply reactionary attitudes towards Palestinians, but to assert that

easily, the other is made up of those who're generally pissed off with the conditions of their lives, and are directing that anger at a symbol of the class enemy instead of one of the multitude of alternative targets that are available. I know which one sounds like a better starting point for a revolutionary movement to me.)

If the movement manages to avoid being co-opted and managed by the bureaucrats seeking to steer it into totally ineffective channels, and the class as a whole gets involved rather than leaving the youth to get picked off on their own, I think there's a real chance that we can break the coalition and bring the government down. But what then? Whoever gets in will still be required to manage the economy in the interests of capital. They may (or may not) be a lot more cautious and a lot less aggressively cocky, but there's still going to be pressure on them to attack our living standards. If we're going to be able to defend ourselves in that situation, we need to build a movement that won't be disarmed by the promises of the Labour Party and its defenders – a movement against cuts, not a movement against "Tory cuts".

So, that's the task facing us. To stop the bureaucrats and wannabe bureaucrats on the left gaining power over the movement's structures, while not boring everyone to death with endless incredibly dull arguments about structures, leadership positions and democracy. To spread the spirit of the youth revolt until we have an all-out rebellion by everyone who's fucked over in this society. And to build a movement with enough political suss to stop it getting taken in by the promises of Labour, without just turning it into another tiny sect with spot-on politics but no real power to influence anything. It won't be easy. But what else can we do?

* This may seem as though I'm endorsing the politics of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, creators of the offending placard. I'm not. I respect the fact that they are at least attempting to come up with a class analysis, but their two-state solution is ultimately about providing soft support for both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism, whereas I reject them both.

† Quotes taken from Arabawy.org, leninology.blogspot.com and smpalestine.com

DECEMBER

What next? What can we do? What about the unemployed?

First written on December 3, 2010

One question that seems to need addressing is this: in a situation where vast numbers of people are more-or-less spontaneously adopting the kind of militant tactics that normally only tiny groups of anarchists and communists argue for, is there still any particular role for those tiny groups? Having thought it over, I think there's a few things we can usefully be doing:

1) Setting up legal defence campaigns. Clearly, a lot of tactics can spread very quickly without needing to be particularly organised – the idea of occupations, the militant spirit that saw Millbank trashed and stopped the kettle, and so on. But, without wanting to be too pessimistic, I don't think that legal defence campaigns are going to spontaneously spring into being without being organised, and, since this movement is clearly not willing to stay within the bounds of legality and the police have already started making mass arrests, they are definitely necessary. Supporting anyone who gets caught up in the legal system is something that those of us with organising experience can usefully do without setting ourselves up as any kind of an ideological elite.

2) Communicating with each other. In view of the divisions which are already beginning to emerge, it seems fairly safe to say that, at some point, some factions within this movement, probably quite well-organised ones, are going to try and stop us being as effective – that is to say, disruptive – as we can be. It'd be naive to think this isn't going to happen at some point and in some form, so it can't hurt to be prepared for it. Those of us who want to take this particular phase of the class struggle as far as it can possibly go should start sharing information and tactics, and make sure that we have independent channels of communication that are open, democratic, and not easy for anyone to take over. We shouldn't be relying on NCAFC's good

a wealthy and powerful minority is trying to make everyone else pay for the ongoing economic crisis, and in many of those countries, there's some kind of a fightback going on. That is to say, the Israeli revolt is one expression of a global class struggle.

The Middle East

There's no love lost between Israel and most of its neighbours, so it might seem that a challenge to the Israeli state would be welcomed by Iran and the Arab regimes. But it's not as simple as that: the image of the Zionist threat provides a useful scarecrow to use against internal dissent, in much the same way that the threat of Islamism is used to prop up national unity throughout the West. The development of solidarity between the Israeli and Arab working classes would be as disastrous for the Arab regimes as it would be for the Israeli government. If the situation develops into an open confrontation between the Israeli working class and 'their' state, other regimes will be faced with the unacceptable choice of supporting working-class demands against the rich, which would leave them vulnerable to attempts to raise the same demands at home, or backing the hated Zionist state. Staying out of it isn't really an option, because when an unarmed population takes on the power of a state, to remain neutral is effectively to side with the army and police. It may seem like we're a long way off from that kind of confrontation, but a few weeks ago the idea of blockading the Knesset, occupying the roof of the stock exchange and seriously discussing a general strike must also have seemed impossibly far off. Overall, anything that helps the Israeli state seem menacing and strong is useful for its rivals' attempts to suppress internal dissent; anything that makes it look weak, divided and unthreatening undermines those efforts.

The left

That a rebellious working-class movement should be unpopular with the world's ruling classes is perhaps unsurprising. But surely any class struggle should be able to count on support from elsewhere. Given their much-publicised opposition to Israel, you might think groups like the Socialist Workers' Party would jump at the chance to support workers actively challenging the Israeli state. But again,

AUGUST

An inconvenient revolt: the movement no-one wants to talk about

First written on August 3, 2011

Massive protests, talk of a general strike, the roof of the stock exchange occupied, parliament blockaded. No matter how high your standards are, the current revolt in Israel is pretty impressive. So why is it not getting more attention? I'm not going to try and summarise everything that it involves, but I want to try and work out some lessons, and especially tackle the question of why it's not seen as being a bigger story. Overall, I think the emerging Israeli social movement is problematic for almost all existing political forces, which means it's good news for those of us seeking a total transformation of society.

The West

To start off with, it's obviously not great for the Israeli government. But beyond that, it's also a problem for the established European and American powers in general, since they've been pursuing a strategy of trying to distinguish between revolts in Middle Eastern dictatorships and protest movements in European democracies. When supporting the existing regime is no longer a viable option, it's simple enough to denounce a dictator – even if, like Gaddafi and Mubarak, they have embarrassing ties to the west – and praise the the opposition, who be presented as solely seeking liberal political freedoms; those rebelling in Europe or America can be belittled by presenting them as spoilt and ungrateful in comparison with the heroic freedom fighters elsewhere. Trying to draw connections between the two is “worse than silly”.*

The movement in Israel doesn't fit neatly into that story. The fact that Israelis are no more content than their neighbours in less democratic countries reveals what the real story is: in every country in the world,

intentions, we need to make sure that we have the ability to communicate with each other nationally even if the NCAFC leadership and the admins of the big facebook groups go lukewarm.

3) Spreading the struggle. In some ways, the unemployed are the group most similar to school students: a lot of them aren't much older, they're both quite difficult to effectively discipline, and there's a similar lack of formal structures – neither schoolkids or claimants have an Aaron Porter claiming to represent them. If many of them do start turning up on the streets (which they can do without even having to formally bunk off anything), it could add another potentially explosive element to an already unstable situation. But there are also important differences: all schoolkids spend a vast amount of time in the presence of other pupils, whereas the benefits system is pretty much set up to keep the vast majority of claimants separated from each other as much as possible. It's much harder for word of mouth to spread through a jobcentre that most people visit once every two weeks than it is for it to spread through a school that everyone spends five days a week in. The national day of protest against benefit cuts that's been called for the 15th is a good start, but there's no reason to assume benefits claimants will automatically know about it. Where Defend Welfare or Disabled People Against Cuts groups already exist, it's worth getting in touch with them, where not anarchists – especially those of us who're on the dole – should be taking the lead in leafletting jobcentres to publicise anti-cuts events. The days ahead are crucial. Let's not waste them.

* Quote taken from a Guardian article by Simon Jenkins, 24th March 2011

Looking for power in Topshop

First written on December 7, 2010

So, to start with, it's worth repeating a few of the basics for anyone going on the various protests this week: get a reasonable-sized group together beforehand (ideally, more than two, but not so many that you're likely to get broken up), buddy up so that everyone's looking out for someone else, think of a few places you'd like to visit (I won't make any suggestions because doing that in public is stupid, but I'm sure you can think of some – the less predictable the better), stay mobile and above all, keep an eye on what the cops are doing and don't get kettled.

Beyond that, I'd like to finally get around to writing that evaluation of the UK Uncut protests against tax dodgers that I've been intending to do for ages. To start off with, a few general observations: one of the fundamental difficulties that any protest campaign has to deal with is that power is very well insulated from any kind of popular pressure. Once every few years, we get the chance to vote, but once that's happened we lack any way to influence Parliament until the next election rolls round; and we have no control whatsoever over the bodies like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank that twist the arms of any government that steps out of line. Occasionally, as we're seeing with the current outbreak of mass militancy, it becomes possible to break through the barriers surrounding powerful institutions, but normally we're left with a choice between ineffectual demonstrations outside the centers of power, or using our ability to apply genuine pressure in places where it can't have any real impact. The summit protests that raged against the IMF, WTO, G8 and G20, but were usually unable to actually stop these institutions from meeting and doing what they wanted, are a good example of the first option, the university occupations over Gaza that saw people taking direct action against targets that had no real connection to the Israeli state are an example of the second. (I'd like to make it clear that I'm not just dismissing either of these protests: the summit protests may not have stopped many summits, but it wasn't through a lack of will to do so, and the Gaza protesters may not have influenced the Israeli

painting them as privileged young folk who don't understand the real world of work. By attacking radicals in this way, it becomes possible to portray supporting inequality and opposing workers' rights as the sort of sensible, grown-up thing that "real workers" do. This isn't helped by the tendency of many well-educated revolutionaries to express themselves in very academic language that can be inaccessible to many people who haven't been to university, and even to a lot of people who have.

To try and pre-empt any misunderstanding, I'd like to stress that I'm not saying universities hire Marxist academics as part of some deliberate capitalist conspiracy worked out in smoky back rooms, just that some situations develop a logic of their own, and I think the logic of how universities work tends to promote tolerance of radical ideas more than the logic of society in general. Of course, this certainly doesn't mean that all anti-capitalist academics, and much less students, are enemies who should be fought against – although those, like Alex Callinicos, who use their position in the social hierarchy to try and set themselves up as the leaders who will guide the working class to victory actually are the enemy, and should be treated the same as any other politician seeking to gain power off our backs. Considering how shit most jobs are, I can't really blame anyone who turns to academia as a way of escaping the grimness of the "real world". I want to abolish the difference between academics and the rest of the population, but I want to do that by creating a world where everyone will have the freedom to spend lots of time learning about the stuff that interests them, not a world where everyone will be as miserable as the most oppressed wage-slave. There are no easy answers as to how students and academics who genuinely want to destroy this system can break out of the safe roles it offers them, but one answer might be to try and forge closer links with university support staff. That's a fairly empty statement in the abstract, but the 2009 SOAS university occupation in solidarity with migrant cleaners offers an example of what it might look like in practice. It's easy to dismiss students or lecturers as posh idiots out of touch with the real world, it's a lot harder to write migrant cleaners making minimum wage or less off in the same way.

Antonio Negri and David Graeber. With the decline of interest in Marxism after the fall of the Soviet Union, a Foucault-flavoured post-modernism with a vague opposition to “power” is the most fashionable brand of radical thought, but the existence of the Anarchist Studies Network proves that there’s enough room for anarchist ideas within the ivory towers. The image of the student radical is a cliché, but it’s one with some truth to it – hardly surprising, when universities allow socialist and anarchist groups to operate openly in a way that no workplace would. So why is it that the bosses who run universities are generally so unbothered by people promoting ideas that say we should get rid of bosses?

I’d argue that the presence of radical ideas in the universities actually serves as propaganda for capitalism in two related ways. First of all, it serves as an advert for liberal capitalism’s tolerance: when people try to kick up a fuss about police repression of protests, or the absence of radical ideas in the mainstream media, or any of the other authoritarian features of this society, defenders of capitalism can point to the freedom of ideas within academia as proof of how benevolent and open the system is. The flipside of this freedom is that it’s relatively powerless: giving anarchists and socialists space to speak up on a regular basis in the mainstream media, or to organise openly in their workplaces, would carry the risk of our ideas reaching large numbers of working-class people. But most people never reach university, and the majority of those who do are on courses that don’t require them to actively engage with radical ideas, so anti-capitalist critiques mainly tend to reach a limited self-selecting audience who have an interest in those ideas in the first place.

Related to this, the association between revolutionary ideas and the universities can actually be used as a way to attack those ideas and anyone who supports them. As I’ve said, not everyone gets to go to uni, and, without wanting to get into the vexed question of who’s part of the “real working class” and who isn’t, it seems pointless to deny that those who do get the chance tend to be somewhat better off than those who don’t. Similarly, whatever attacks they’re currently facing from university bosses, academics certainly get better pay and conditions than, for example, call centre or retail workers. This means that the connection between radicalism and universities can be used to dismiss any kind of progressive cause and its supporters by

government much, but it’s not like there were many Israeli military facilities lying around that they could have blockaded. People do the best they can under the circumstances, and a lot of the time the circumstances just don’t permit effective action.) Normally, strikes and other forms of workplace-based direct action are the best hope that ordinary people have of wielding disruptive power, but that doesn’t mean they’re the only ones.

With these thoughts in mind, I’d like to turn to looking at the UK Uncut protests more directly. They aim to discredit the idea that the cuts are necessary by bringing attention to the amount of tax that corporations avoid paying. Here’s my attempt to work out their pros and cons.

Pros:

1) It’s an idea that seems to have really taken off. Their last day of action saw an impressive number of different protests taking place, and shop and bank occupations have been successful in getting quite positive write-ups from the mainstream media, even in unlikely places like the Scottish Sun. Anything that challenges the idea that “we’re all in this together” and that cuts are inevitable and in our best interests, is a positive development.

2) It’s not just for students. Protests like last Saturday’s day of action mean that workers affected by the cuts can go beyond just cheering while watching new reports of students kicking off, or visiting an occupation for a few hours and then leaving, they can actively get involved as full participants.

3) They can be empowering. Ultimately, I still agree with the Solidarity group that it’s all about “whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the egalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification”. Throughout our entire lives, we’re bombarded with the idea that we can only make ourselves heard by using the “correct” methods – voting, lobbying, etc – methods, which, of course, really rob us of our ability to affect anything. Anything that demonstrates the existence of alternatives is to be welcomed. (Well, not anything, I wouldn’t welcome racists taking direct action against a mosque, but you know what I mean.) It’s easy to forget if you’ve been involved in radical politics for a while, but the first time you do the opposite of what you’re told, take a

bollocking from a copper or a security guard, and still stand your ground, is a really liberating experience, and so a lot of people will emerge from their first invasion of a shop or a bank a lot more confident than when they came in. The opposite can also be true, of course, which is why I'm critical of badly-thought-out militant actions: when you get yourself kettled and don't achieve anything, the ultimate lesson you take away is that you can't beat the state after all, which is why black blocs and the like can actually end up being a disempowering experience for those involved in them.

Cons:

1) To go back to what I was saying at the start of this post, and at the risk of sounding redundant and obvious: Topshop aren't actually making any cuts. Neither are Vodafone. Even the evil banks aren't actually driving the public sector cuts. No matter how much inconvenience you cause Sir Philip Green, you won't make him stop the cuts, because he's not doing them. So, this is ultimately a propaganda tactic, not an end in itself. No matter how exciting and confidence-building it is, no matter how much media coverage it gets, it's still indirect action.

2) Much more seriously: Even if the government collected an extra £25 billion, or however much, in tax from corporations and the rich, it still wouldn't be an extra £25 billion for us. It would be an extra £25 billion for the state, which could choose to use that money to invest in public services instead of making the cuts – or it could choose to push through exactly the same programme of cuts, and spend the money on beefing up the police force to beat the shit out of anyone who complains. We don't exercise any democratic control over the state, and the only way to get it to do what we want is by fighting it. Anarchists and communists should always argue against any idea that confuses the capitalist state with the abstract interests of "society" as a whole, let alone the working class.

3) Finally, the argument behind these protests is limited because it's ultimately still within the terrain of capitalist economics. The claim that big business and the rich are avoiding paying £25 billion in tax may sound impressive at first, but it's simple enough for our opponents to counter-claim with the (not entirely untrue) argument that it would never be possible to collect that money because they could simply flee the country to somewhere with lower tax rates, and from then on

JULY

Radical academics: When good ideas go bad?

Originally written on July 7, 2011

I want to try and think about why it is that radical anti-capitalist ideas are tolerated in universities so much more than anywhere else. In contrast to a lot of my writing, this doesn't have much to do with current events, it's more a general attempt to work out an idea. Anyway, in general this society isn't incredibly tolerant of dissent. It's not the most repressive regime that's ever existed, but it's also a long way from real freedom of speech. If you want to protest peacefully at the wrong time – say, during a royal wedding – you're likely to face heavy repression, and while critical ideas are given some limited space in a few papers, such as the Independent, Guardian, and Mirror, most of the press forms a solidly right-wing consensus. There is an obvious reply to this, which is that this is just the law of supply and demand playing itself out, and if lefty papers were more appealing then they'd outsell the Sun, but if you think about for a second this idea is obviously bullshit: millions of people don't read the Evening Standard (notorious for its ridiculous scare stories about anarchists) and the Metro (owned by the same people as the Daily Mail) every day because they think those are the best papers around, or because they've sought them out, it's because millions of those papers are distributed free to commuters every day. There's no anti-establishment paper with anything like the resources to be able to compete with that, and so our formal freedom of speech is drowned out by the fact that the owners of right-wing papers can shout thousands of times louder than we can.

Anyway, compared to the near-total blackout of radical ideas in most of the media, it's notable how easy a time they have in the academic world. Universities offer courses like Peace Studies, Critical Theory After Marx, Activism and Social Change, and so on, and there are radical professors ranging from Alex Callinicos and Slavoj Žižek to

property destruction are immediately recognised by all sides as anarchists, whereas anarchists doing anything else tend to just be seen as “anti-cuts activists”, or striking workers, or UK Uncutters... if we don’t make our identity clear, we may even be mistaken for footsoldiers of whatever Trot group happens to be making the most noise at the time. Without disowning the need for militant tactics, we need to make it clear that that’s not all we do, and we don’t suddenly stop becoming anarchists just because we’re handing out leaflets or standing on a picket line instead of smashing windows or spraypainting walls. But “being visible as anarchists” has its own issues: starting conversations with striking workers who you’ve never met before is always a bit tricky, but some variation of “hello, I’ve heard about what’s happening in your workplace and I want to support you” has the potential to start a meaningful conversation of some kind, whereas turning up with an attitude of “hello, I have possession of the correct ideology, and I have come to your workplace so that you may receive it” is always a dead end, no matter how good the ideas themselves are. There’s no hard-and-fast rules here, because you can’t really write guidelines for having conversations with people, but we should always try to be honest and open enough that people don’t go away thinking “wow, those people who came down to support our strike were nice, but I wonder who they were?”, while also always concentrating on the need to have actual two-way conversations, rather than just reciting pre-prepared speeches of anarcho clichés. As ever, there’s no magic formula for getting it right, you just have to try and work it out for yourself.

it becomes an argument about the details of economic policy, which we’re likely to lose because a) there are a lot of economists who are Tories (or some other form of defender of the status quo), who have done their homework and know what they’re talking about, and b) arguments about the details of economic policy are really boring (even duller than my writing, and that’s saying something), and cause any normal person to stop paying attention immediately. At which point the government can go back to doing what it was doing, and we’ve lost by default. In the long run, the only arguments we can really rely on are those based on communist economics. Not “if this people paid x tax then we could afford y”, but the far simpler and more revolutionary position that “we need this, and we will fuck you up if you try to take it away from us”.

Conclusion: Clearly, these protests aren’t entirely good or entirely bad. I wouldn’t say that anarchists/communists shouldn’t get involved in them, but we should try and keep our demands clear, making sure that the message is “cuts aren’t inevitable, there’s an argument to be had here”, rather than “this particular change to tax laws will mean the state has enough money to sort everything out”. Within the campaign, we should be arguing for a clear class perspective and against reliance on statist solutions. And we should only be involved as long as it doesn’t take time and energy away from anything better: I can’t see any reason why school or uni students would bother getting involved in this, because they’re now engaged in a struggle that addresses their own needs much more directly (most recently, the Birmingham students who occupied their MP’s office deserve massive respect). For those in work or on benefits, the protests against tax-dodging companies may still be the best option immediately available, but we should still be trying to generate the mood needed to take action with our workmates or other claimants around our own immediate interests, and not around the state’s.

Don't hate the media, use the media.

First written on December 13, 2010

DISCLAIMER: In light of recent events, I have to admit that this piece comes across as very naive and one-sided. I still stand behind some of the ideas expressed in it, and still feel that many anarchists have an excessively simplistic approach to the media, but I would also like to stress that anyone wanting to try and engage with the media in the ways I advocate here should be prepared for the kind of very hostile, personal and intrusive attention that papers like the Telegraph have visited on various individuals. Of course, it is also the case that not engaging with the media is no protection against this happening. Keep your real names off the internet, folks.

In general, it seems likely that as long as the current wave of disruptive protests continues, the media will continue to portray 'anarchists' as being responsible for all the most exciting, courageous and attention-grabbing aspects of them, regardless of how small a role we actually play. Considering how marginalised anarchist ideas normally are, this would seem to offer a potentially useful platform. (Obviously, you have to be careful about this: on the day of an action itself, anyone trying to get pictures of individuals breaking the law is doing the police's job for them, and should be treated as such. Likewise, it's a good idea to avoid giving your real name – especially if you're defending illegal activity, but also just in general, really.) Now, many anarchists would object to this, saying that the mainstream media are always going to be hostile to our ideas and so they'll never represent us fairly.* There is some truth in this, but it's not the whole story. I'd argue that to view the media as entirely one-sided and hostile means misunderstanding both the way that liberal

* There is also another, more complex objection that can be made to my views here: it could be said that I'm still essentially working with a Leninist/vanguardist view of consciousness that sees 'us' as having the right ideas, and political activity as just consisting of spreading the right ideas from 'us' to 'them'. I don't really know how to respond to that, other than saying that it's a criticism that could be leveled at virtually any form of activity that involves saying that we have ideas and trying to explain what they are.

JUNE

The media vs. the union leaders – don't take sides, make sides!

First written on June 29, 2011, immediately before a major public sector strike

June 30th is finally approaching. In the run-up to the strike, most of the mainstream media have been attacking the union bosses. This is a classic example of how setting the terms of a debate can be more effective than winning it. Anyone reading these articles can choose to tut over how dreadful the unions are, or, if they have that peculiar mixture of solidarity and gullibility so common on the British left, they can choose to agree with the TUC spokesperson claiming the unions are incredibly democratic. But there's nothing in them that gives even a hint at the real story, which is that the union bosses, like all bosses, are indeed overpaid scumbags and enemies of the ruling class, but this is entirely irrelevant to the attacks that workers are facing at the moment. Prentice, Serwotka, Blower and the rest don't need to worry about their pensions or pay (they might be acting a bit more lively if they did), because they get paid by the unions, not the state. The union leaders didn't make the decision to go on strike, the membership did that by voting for strike action, and they won't even be stopping work on the day, they'll be carrying out their normal jobs as union leaders. And yet, in the funhouse mirror of the media, all differences between the leadership and rank-and-file disappear, so the fact that some people employed by the unions earn lots of money somehow becomes an excuse for attacking some people who are employed by the state and earn average amounts of money. The false choice of siding with Murdoch or the union leaders helps to erase even the possibility that we might be able to fight for our own interests, against every kind of boss.

A similar kind of false choice haunts those of us active in the anti-cuts movement: are we respectable peaceful protesters or mindless violent hooligans? I'm not interested in apologising for the Black Bloc, but we need to get around the problem that anarchists engaged in

agree with you. But, until that happens, you're left with the choice of either taking your toys and going home, or actively putting your efforts into building events that promote deluded, and ultimately dangerous, liberal/social-democratic ideas. And just saying that the correct thing to do is to "argue for anarchist ideas inside the campaign" is perfectly good in theory, but it can't cover all the difficult situations you'll encounter in practice: what, for instance, about a campaign against the closure of a specific workplace, or the cutting of a specific service, where everyone else involved knows each other from their work or through the service, and you're the outsider politico barging in and trying to tell them what they should be doing? I'd say that, in those situations, it's worth being sensitive to the context and trying to be as supportive as possible, but how far should we support people in struggle when their focus is on futile forms of action like lobbying MPs?

As I said at the start, I'm not really sure what the answer is.

Obviously, local context matters a lot: if you're in an area with a strong tradition of libertarian organising, and there are a decent number of anarchists who regularly help out with the campaign and show up to the meetings, you'll find it easier to get a hearing for your arguments than if you're isolated. But pointing that out isn't really a solution, since there's not necessarily an easy way to move from being isolated to being part of a group (although the national federations can provide some support here).

ideology in general works, and particularly how the market affects the media.

In general, liberalism prides itself on its commitment to tolerance and free speech. Of course, as the police have been happy to demonstrate, it is still ultimately founded on repression, but the current system generally tries to use repressive violence as a last resort. This means that, paradoxically, the system can afford to give space to anti-capitalists and other radical critics, precisely because the act of giving that space can be used as proof of how tolerant and ultimately fair and justified it is. Similarly, competition among media brands means they have to establish distinctive identities in order to get an audience and sell advertising space. So, the BBC brands itself as being fair and impartial, and the Guardian brands itself as being open-minded, tolerant and progressive. So, by giving space to radical critics, they can ultimately demonstrate the qualities they want to associate themselves with, and so improve their branding.

Now, there's a very obvious reply to this. If, by talking to the media, we just play into the hands of liberal ideology and the marketing strategies of particular media brands, then why do it? Wouldn't it be better to just stay outside? The problem here is that by refusing to use the space they offer us, we don't actually undermine them in any way. They benefit from being prepared to give us a platform, not from us using it. If they just say that they spoke to us but we refused to comment, that still establishes them as being willing to talk to us, and so being fair/tolerant/etc. Also, just because we don't talk to them doesn't mean no-one will; it's very easy to find people to speak on behalf of 'the protesters', from incoherent egomaniac wankers like Chris Knight to various Trots looking to take control of the movement. If people with decent politics boycott the media, that doesn't hurt the media, it just guarantees that the only people appearing in it will have dodgy politics of one kind or another.

It is true that the media does very often misrepresent us, but again, they don't need our help to do it. I've been involved in a project that attracted vicious attacks from the local press, but they didn't even bother speaking to us. In general, if the media want to attack you, they don't need you to say anything, they can just get some comments from the police, from an institution you're opposing, and maybe one or two other sources of right-wing opinion, and they've

got enough material for a hack job. Not speaking to them will not stop that happening. There are plenty of shit articles about anarchists and protesters, but there's also a surprising number of very good ones, sometimes in very unlikely places.

So, my appeal to anyone involved in an anarchist group would be this: know the media's weaknesses, and use them to your advantage. Write provocatively-worded call-outs before major demos, and then write up reports afterwards celebrating - not claiming responsibility for, but expressing solidarity with - the most subversive and attention-grabbing events that took place on the day. It's not often the media offers you free advertising, so make the most of it.

trying to build campaigns but just want to wreck everything. Regardless of whether this creature actually exists or not, when I'm involved in a broad campaign I still feel the need to prove that I'm not one of them, by working hard for the group and generally not making a fuss. Starting lots of arguments is certainly one of the things that "the bad anarchist" would be expected to do; unfortunately, it's also quite a necessary thing to do a lot of the time.

As an anarchist in an anti-cuts group, or any similar campaign, it's impossible to avoid noticing the amount of basic assumptions that I disagree with: not just the vague, abstract issues like other people inexplicably not wanting to abolish the state and wage labour, but practical issues that genuinely affect the day-to-day functioning of the campaign. To take just a few relevant examples, I believe that, at a meeting or other public event, it's better to have a speaker who lives and works in the area and actually experiences the reality of working-class life than to have a politician or union bureaucrat, no matter how high profile, who won't actually be affected by the cuts at all. I think that politicians are not basically neutral or looking out for us, and so writing to them is pointless. I think a lot of people's experiences of both work and the welfare state are very negative, and so a perspective that acknowledges this, but still insists that fighting back against the government's attempts to make them worse is the first step towards actually making them better, will have more appeal than simplistic shit like "the Right to Work". I think that Labour, if they were in power, would be doing a lot of the same things that the Tories are now, so making alliances with the Labour Party to defeat the Tories is utterly pointless. And that's before I even get started on the unions. Clearly, it's necessary to have discussions about these things. But when? At open organising meetings, which take place specifically to sort out practical matters, starting an argument about the anti-working class nature of the Labour Party can make you look like you're just trying to waste everyone's time. This is more difficult for anarchists than it is for Trotskyists and other species of bureaucrat, since the preferred Leninist approach to dealing with controversial issues is to set up a steering committee, make sure you have enough people on it, and then sort out all the difficult issues out behind closed doors. For anarchists, this isn't an option, so there's no shortcut around the very difficult task of trying to make most of the other campaigners

Write to your MP today: Thoughts on anarchists and mass movements

First written on May 27, 2011

So, in contrast to a lot of my stuff, this definitely doesn't claim to have any answers, it's just raising some questions that I think need to be thought about.

To give a bit of personal context, from the time I first became involved in the anarchist movement up to the start of the current anti-cuts struggle, I spent a lot of time and energy trying to build specifically anarchist projects, or groups that didn't call themselves anarchist but were "anti-capitalist and non-hierarchical", and so had a membership comprised of anarchists and people who didn't like the term "anarchist" but basically were. It was never the only thing I was doing, but it was certainly a high priority. At the same time, on a theoretical level I was always very conscious of the need to be outward-looking and talk to people who didn't already agree with us; to steal a term, "to be the anarchist wing of the workers' movement, not the workerist wing of the anarchist movement." But, in practice, working in specifically anarchist circles is, in some ways, easier and less challenging; and besides, between the decline of the movement against the Iraq War and the rise of the student movement last year, I'm not really sure there were any genuine mass movements that anarchists could have got involved in. The closest thing I can think of is the climate change movement, but that never really broke out of its own specific activist ghetto. Now, however, I'm focused mainly on working with anti-cuts groups in my area, and there's a whole different set of challenges.

To start off with, there's the temptation to just avoid identifying yourself as an anarchist altogether. Related to that, there's a second syndrome, whereby if you do "come out" as an anarchist, you then find yourself needing to demonstrate that you're one of the "good" anarchists, not one of the "bad" ones. You almost certainly know what the "bad" anarchist is like: they're the ones you'll find endless warnings against in both the mainstream media and the socialist papers, the mindless thugs who have no real interest in politics or

JANUARY

Egypt, England, solidarity and selfishness

First written on January 30, 2011, the day after Aaron Porter, the chief bureaucrat of the National Union of Students, was chased off a student demo in Manchester:

A few thoughts about yesterday's protests: There didn't seem to be that much new, although they were definitely a lot better than the protests the day EMA was scrapped. The dream scenario would have been thousands of pissed-off public sector workers who couldn't make previous weekday demos coming out onto the streets, but that didn't really seem to happen. On the positive side, there doesn't seem to have been much of a kettle and the demo in London was able to stay mobile and militant. The blocking of police vans is one sign that the spirit of Millbank hasn't died out just yet.

The most exciting development was definitely Aaron Porter being no-platformed – he's been facing widespread criticism for months, but this is the first time he's been confronted so dramatically. The next step is to make the argument that what we need instead of Porter is leaderless, decentralised, democratic resistance, and not just an alternative, leftier union bureaucrat or set of bureaucrats. I do think that we are genuinely lucky to have Aaron Porter – if the NUS were led by a political operator with the talent of a young Blair or Obama, they might well still be able to portray themselves as the figureheads of the movement and so channel our anger into shit, futile social democratic channels, so a bureaucrat with Porter's utter lack of skill or charm is something to be grateful for.

Other than that, the only noticeably new feature was the trip to the Egyptian embassy in solidarity with the Egyptian revolt. I have really mixed feelings about that one – on one hand, it seems like a move away from direct confrontation with our own state into the realms of a conflict that we can't have any real impact on. It would also seem to involve watering down the politics somewhat – any politician can heartily endorse a democratic revolt against a far-away authoritarian regime, so solidarity with the Egyptian uprising is considerably less

radical than challenging the interests of capital at home. On the other hand, single-issue movements are easy to buy off with a few specific concessions, while a generalised revolt against the entire international political and economic system would be much harder to contain. Obviously we're a long way off from seeing that at the moment, but growing international solidarity among anti-cuts and other social movements would be a step in that direction, and so I can see how it'd be worthwhile on those grounds. However, it's worth bearing the timing of all this in mind: in Egypt, as in Yemen, Jordan, Sudan and elsewhere, people have taken inspiration and courage from the example of Tunisia. If we really want to cheer up those engaged in struggles against their rulers across the world, the best way to do it isn't to protest outside an ever-growing checklist of embassies, it's to give them a practical demonstration of what's possible by completely fucking things up for our own ruling class.

they do run the risk of attracting more unwelcome attention than they're prepared for. It's important to be ambitious, but it's equally important to be realistic. Concentrating on fights we can win – whether with minor nationalist groups or other class enemies, such as individual employers or landlords – is the best way to build up our strength to the point where we'll be able to win the big battles.

EDL needs to be seen as one symptom of a larger problem: the lack of a culture of resistance. When large numbers of people share the idea that it's possible to solve our problems by taking action together, then it's possible to mobilise them to defeat the far-right; in the absence of this mass consciousness, it's a lot harder to mobilise big numbers of people. I think most of the major struggles over the last 30 years or so in the UK have had the effect of discrediting the idea that collective action can get results, and this is one major factor contributing to the weakness of contemporary anti-fascist activity compared to the heyday of the Anti-Nazi League or Anti-Fascist Action. It's still too early to say whether the current wave of anti-cuts struggles will see the birth of a new culture of resistance, or just end up as another lesson in how we always lose and so there's no point trying to change anything.

This means that successful anti-fascist activity is inseparable from the broader task of trying to create a culture of resistance. This cuts both ways: to take one recent example, I imagine that the unemployed ex-miner who had his benefits reinstated after a campaign by Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty would both be considerably more likely to join in with anti-fascist activity if invited by a member of ECAP now than he would have been before that campaign started. Likewise, small groups of radicals lacking the strength to take on bigger targets can gain confidence from victories over weak far-right groups. I'd argue that this is one of the most important positive features of confrontations with small groups of nazis, like the successful mobilisation against the National Socialist Movement that just happened in Pemberton, New Jersey, or, going back a bit further, the opposition to the ludicrous nazi demonstration against hip-hop that happened a few years ago in Leeds. While these tiny groups can cause serious harm to individuals, it's obviously the case that, if left unopposed, there'd still be no chance of the NSM creating a Fourth Reich in America, or the British People's Party managing to ban hip-hop. Instead, I think that the most important thing about those victories is just that they're victories, and everyone involved in them will have gone home with an increased confidence in their own ability to take action that changes the world for the better. Tiny groups mouthing off about the need to "smash the EDL" without any idea about how to do it aren't going to change anything, although

FEBRUARY

Spreading the idea of occupations

First written on February 1, 2011

One issue that anyone who's involved in revolutionary politics and still has some grasp on reality has to deal with sooner or later is that, most of the time, what we do is pretty much pointless. Outside revolutionary situations, our ideas are only going to interest tiny minorities, and in those situations where huge crowds do start to challenge the state, they're so massive that the presence or absence of those true believers who've stayed committed to radical ideas through the hard times can't make much difference. It is true that great social upheavals often start from a single spark, but it's also true that, 999 times out of a thousand, single sparks just die out without having any real effect. As regular readers of indymedia or any other activist media will know, there are plenty of fantasists out there convinced they've found the perfect way to suddenly make what we do effective; it's entirely possible that what I'm about to write falls into the same category, but it seems worth thinking through.

Looking at the recent waves of uni occupations, it's noticeable how quickly the example can spread. So, as campaigns around specific public services like libraries start to form, I think this is one way that the tiny minority of conscious, organised anarchists/communists could have a real impact. Say that you're in a fairly small radical group of 5-10 people in a reasonably-sized town. If you're not totally isolated, you should find it possible to find about 30-50 people, either from the existing lefty/anarcho scenes or newly drawn into anti-cuts activity, who you can persuade to support the idea of an occupation. This doesn't need to happen immediately, but I think it's a good goal to be worth working towards. When you do occupy your library/school/swimming pool/wherever, it'll get a fair bit of attention within the local media and the alternative press, which will inspire other groups in similar situations (obv, if you're already part of a wider network then this'd be helpful for co-ordinating action). It'll get the idea in people's heads, and hopefully the example'll be attractive

enough that another one, or two, or three, or four, or five towns will do the same. At this point, it'll no longer be some isolated event, it'll be a recognisable phenomenon. Occupations of threatened public services spreading across five or so towns should be a big enough story to get some play in the national press, and it'll be talked about in local anti-cuts campaigns across the country. And, of course, the Socialist Workers' Party and Counterfire, and all the other left groups, will be scrabbling to play catch-up. At that point, I really don't think it'd be too wildly unreasonable to hope for occupations spreading to ten or even twenty different locations, by which point it'd be pretty much totally normalised as a tactic. The standard level of militancy expected in each local campaign would be decisively raised, and occupations would move from being seen as a specialised affair for students to becoming something that everyone can get involved in. I don't think that, in the ordinary run of things, a small affinity group of 5-10 people can change very much. But I do think that a group that size can have a decisive impact on the tactics adopted by a local campaign, and I think that, having taken the decision to occupy, the example of that campaign could make it massively easier to win the argument for occupation in a second campaign, and those two together could have a big impact on the arguments inside a third campaign, and so on.

I could be wrong, of course, and I probably am. There must be all sorts of other factors I haven't included that'd mess up this simplified model. Still, it does seem like a case where there'd be the potential for a militant tactic to spread and spread – now, does anyone want to try it out?

leads to them smashing up left meetings, attacking paper sellers etc.” This is at least partly true – obviously, looking at the EDL's recent activity, there's something there – but I don't think it's that helpful to just talk about “the fascists” as if there's one fixed way that nationalists behave. The last decade saw the BNP grow considerably by pursuing an electoral strategy that meant the leadership had to actively reign in the bootboys in pursuit of respectability. Likewise, although the EDL have now turned to attacking the left, they appear to have done this largely as a reaction to the left's much-publicised opposition to them. To say that not all nationalists are going to physically attack anti-fascists is certainly not to say they shouldn't be opposed, since nationalism is always poison, and needs to be challenged wherever we find it. But that challenge needs to grow organically out of a particular situation, there's no one fixed tactic that always works. The militant tactic of trying to stop the far-right controlling the streets has a lot to recommend it when facing a group like the EDL, but it's a bit irrelevant when dealing with a group like the BNP, who gave up trying to control the streets in the mid-90s. The renewed threat that us “reds and militants” face from the EDL and related groups does clearly raise two related questions – what should we do, and what can we do? On one level, it's easy to say what we “should” do, we should just get a few thousand militant anti-fascists to turn out, physically prevent the EDL from marching, and fight the cops off if they give us any hassle. What we can do is somewhat more limited – the evidence from most anti-EDL mobilisations so far suggests that the liberal anti-fascists can get a few hundred people to stand around somewhere a long way away from where the EDL are, and militants can mobilise a small fraction of that number to run around trying to avoid being kettled. The second option may be more useful, and it's certainly more exciting, but it's still a long way from the kind of fighting force we'd need to drive the EDL off the streets. In some times and in some places, anti-fascist meetings can attract crowds that are large and determined enough that it'd be suicidal for the right to attack them. If Britain in 2011 isn't one of those times and places, it's worth thinking about why that is.

How do we get there from here?

Ultimately, I think the inability of anti-fascists to decisively beat the

Sometimes, they do pass: Unsensational thoughts on anti-fascism

First written on May 10, 2011, in response to criticism of the previous article from "Waterloo Sunrise" (<http://everybodyhatesatourist.wordpress.com/>)

When I wrote the previous piece, I concentrated a lot on the various forms of pro-establishment anti-fascism, and didn't really say much about attempts to combat the far right from an independent working-class perspective. This is partly just because I think there's a lot more to criticise about mainstream anti-fascism, and also because, in the same way that the EDL get hysterical about any criticism of the armed forces, I don't really feel that comfortable sitting around and criticising "our troops", those people who are prepared to put themselves in harm's way by taking a militant role in the fight against fascism. But no form of activity is so perfect that it can't be critically evaluated to say what works well and what doesn't, so here's my small attempt at a contribution to that.

First off, Waterloo Sunrise was absolutely correct to call me out for writing that "we need to be aware that the real problem is the ruling-class bastards ruining people's lives in the present day, not the small groups of fascists dreaming about the day they'll be able to do it."

This kind of black-and-white, either/or logic is something I've criticised in the past, and I think one of the biggest problems with the left is their tendency to say things like "the real problem is American imperialism, not Islamism", or "the real problem is the Tories, not the Labour Party", etcetera, so I'm embarrassed to realise I was saying pretty much the same thing. Still, all that being said, the problem remains that most radical groups are small and lacking in resources, so there's real limits to the number of issues they can effectively campaign around. That means that decisions about priorities are always going to have to be made, and I think there are still a lot of situations in which anti-fascism shouldn't be at the top of our lists.

All we doing is defending?

Waterloo Sunrise also raised the argument that anti-fascism is necessary purely as a defensive measure, since "When the fascists have been allowed to operate unchecked, the confidence gained

Reasons why we should oppose pretty much everything Labour ever does

First written on February 24, 2011, as a reply to an article by a Labour Party member called Paul Cotterill arguing for the left to support Labour cuts

One of the fundamental guiding truths of the anarchist tradition is that pretty much every individual and group who's set out to capture political power "in the name of the working class" (or any other ideology, come to think of it) has ended up by prioritising the defence of that power over the interests of the working class. Those who claim to represent us are not our friends. However, some leaders are very good at hiding this, which is why we should be grateful that the NUS managed to end up with Aaron Porter as its head, as absolutely no-one in their right mind could have any confidence in the man who describes the current government's policies as "relatively progressive". Now that Porter's announced he won't be standing for re-election, I think it's reasonable to start to worry about who'll replace the piece of shit, since a transfer of energy away from the streets and occupations back towards the dead bureaucracy of the NUS would be a serious step backwards. So let's be grateful for scum like Paul Cotterill, author of "Five reasons why the left should accept Labour council cuts", for his sterling work in reminding us why the Labour Party are part of the problem.

I was going to go through it point-by-point, but I can't be arsed: there's one pressingly obvious reason to oppose Labour cuts, which is that they're cuts, they'll hurt us and people we know and people like us. Asking us to accept it and to welcome Labour councillors into the movement is to ask people who're losing their jobs and services to link arms with the people who are doing the cutting. It's fucking obscene, and we should have no part in it. Paul Cotterill may claim that Labour cuts would be different from Tory cuts, but so did Alistair Darling, when he warned that if Labour got back in, they were planning to be worse than Thatcher. Labour politicians have to act the same way as Tory ones, simply because the same pressures operate on both of them, so the way to stop cuts isn't to ask for nicer politicians to make nicer cuts, it's to change the situation by creating

a different, and greater, set of pressures in the other direction. Well-meaning politicians can't stop the unstoppable force of capital, so it's up to us to make sure that our resistance becomes an immovable object. When even those who support engaging with the current political system admit that the logic of that system makes it impossible for politicians who oppose cuts to stick to their principles, the answer isn't to hope for a slightly less brutal savaging from some politicians who'll feel a bit bad about it afterwards, it's to make it impossible for that system to function as usual. And this isn't just empty idealistic rhetoric, it's simply a statement of what's already happening: in places like Wisconsin and Lambeth, people have already started to take mass direct action to disrupt the workings of the old world with a little glimpse of the new. If politicians can't make decisions that'll stop the cuts, then we shouldn't allow them to make decisions at all.

And when dealing with the sort of wanker who still thinks that a Labour government is something worth fighting for, it's worth taking a moment to remember what the last Labour government actually meant in practice. It's funny that the same shithheads who bleat on about how unacceptable violence towards property or the police is are often keen to support Labour, since Blair and Brown's rule was incredibly violent. This isn't some vague theoretical point about the nature of state power, it's a physical reality: the bullets pumped through the head of Jean Charles de Menezes and the vast numbers of Iraqis and British soldiers slaughtered by Blair's devotion to the War on Terror are part of what the Labour Party stands for. And that's not to mention Blair's support of Hosni "force for good" Mubarak and his "positive and constructive" relationship with Gaddafi, and his role in arming the dictator.



few years", your knowledge of history would be hindering your attempts to understand the world, rather than helping them. In a very similar way, as an anarchist, I naturally think that it's important to know about what happened in Spain in 1936-7, where the Stalinists in alliance with the old ruling class were able to manipulate fears about the very real fascist threat in order to disarm a libertarian revolution. It's possible that this article is just a product of my wish to delude myself into thinking that what happened in Spain is likely to happen again soon, and so I'm just reflexively saying "No! Don't listen to those people warning you about the rise of fascism, they just want to crush worker's power in Barcelona!" I don't think this is what I'm doing, but it's certainly a possibility; it's up to you to make up your mind about whether that's what I'm doing or not.

Disclaimer 2: It's also worth being aware that a lot of this is just a matter of personal perspective. To anyone unfortunate enough to have suffered harassment or violence at the hands of the far-right, to be told that they're "not the real problem" must seem like a bit of frustratingly abstract theorising. But this cuts both ways: there's a lot of areas where the fascists have little or no support and their organisation is collapsing, but where the economic crisis is having very real and serious effects. People in this situation are unlikely to be very interested in the left's constant reflexive calls to "smash the Nazi BNP."

This apparent paradox, where anyone wishing to be a truly consistent anti-fascist would have to vote both for and against AV in order to be certain of upsetting the BNP, exposes the essential emptiness at the heart of anti-BNPism. A message that can be promoted equally happily by the SWP, Labour, Lib Dems and Tories is a message with no real content to it at all. This is not to denigrate the work of those groups who do promote genuine working-class anti-fascist ideas, but it does mean we need to be aware that the real problem is the ruling-class bastards ruining people's lives in the present day, not the small groups of fascists dreaming about the day they'll be able to do it.



Disclaimer: I think it's important to be self-critical and aware of the problems with any argument you put forward. It's not easy to work out a decent, realistic analysis of what's happening in the world, and I think that, while having a knowledge of what's happened in the past can help with this, it can also be a serious drawback. So, for instance, it's certainly true that having a knowledge of the 20s and the 30s is helpful in understanding fascism, but if that knowledge led you to say "oh my god, there's an economic crisis and a far-right party exists, therefore it's just like 1929 and the fascists will be in power within a

But it'd be wrong to view Labour's violence as something that was only played out on the other side of the world: they might have been most consistently vicious towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, as seen in the conditions that provoked several hunger strikes in Yarl's Wood detention centre, but they also consistently attacked the British working class, from the introduction of fees to the cuts they made to the NHS and incapacity benefit, and they weren't shy to unleash their thugs against anyone trying to challenge their rule. Anyone who can remember the G20 protests will know that kettling is hardly a tactic the Tories invented, and they literally tried to starve out the Vestas workers trying to save their jobs. We should have no illusions about the fact that, if Labour do get in at any point in the near future, they'll try to implement their cuts plans, the ones that they promised would go further than Thatcher's. They will fuck with my life and your life and your friends' lives, and if anyone resists in a way that seriously challenges their power, they will unleash the state's violence, up to and including the kind that killed Ian Tomlinson. Yes, I know, many Labour supporters would hate to be associated with any of those things; they associate their support of Labour with all kinds of nice, do-goodery things, and some may even be confused enough to think that backing Labour has something to do with socialism. But then, a lot of the people who voted Lib Dem at the last election thought they were voting for a progressive alternative to the Tories, and look where that got them. Good intentions are not enough.

Not all coppers are bastards

First written on February 26, 2011

The title of this piece isn't really a view I ever expected to find myself expressing. To put it mildly, I am really not a fan of the fucking filth. But I have to admit that I am genuinely impressed by how they've been behaving in Wisconsin. Cops over there have actually been showing solidarity with striking workers rather than repressing them.

It should, of course, be noted that "cops for labor" is a contradiction in terms – cops can only show solidarity with workers by refusing to play their role as cops. But, even if they don't see it in those terms themselves, that does seem to be what's happening here.

Of course, since I don't have any particular desire to take on the SAS or the RAF in a straight fight, and I've never had any sympathy for the mad vanguardist ideas of the urban guerrillas, I've always recognised that any meaningful challenge to the system can only succeed if a high proportion of the people employed by the state to repress us start to sympathise with the revolt and abandon their role as part of the state. But I'd always known it as an abstract intellectual truth, not something I ever expected to see confirmed in real life, and even then I found it easier to imagine in terms of soldiers mutinying, which there are plenty of examples of, than in terms of cops... well, cops not being bastards.

Thinking about this draws my attention to one of the most impressive features of the wave of class struggle we've seen in recent months, which is the way that it's given vivid practical examples of things that I'd only ever known as abstract ideas. International solidarity between workers (or, worse, between proletarians) sounds like such a dry piece of tedious political jargon until you're reminded of what it really means. It looks like this:

token, I don't think that voting against it and in favour of the current system makes a lot of sense either. As usual, the most difficult choice I'll make on polling day will be whether to bother spoiling my ballot or just to stay at home.)



simple social democratic principles, meaning they don't need to worry about offending any potential recruits or paper-buyers. For the last year or so, this aspect of their politics has been played down slightly as anti-toryism has become a substitute for anti-BNPism, but we can expect to see it return to the front of their agenda if Labour retake power.

Speaking of the Labour Party, they also have good cause to be grateful for the BNP. As anyone with a memory that lasts longer than about a year or so will be aware, they were an absolute set of bastards when they were in power. Certainly, the 60% of their membership who left between 1997 and 2007, and the ever-increasing number of voters who deserted them in each successive election can testify to that. They've been given a bit of a reprieve by the fact that the Tories are now in power and making the cuts that they were planning, but in general it's been hard to find reasons why anyone who wants to see a better, fairer world should vote Labour – or vote at all, for that matter. This is another area where the threat of the BNP has been useful – as Labour party members deserted en masse and those not voting consistently outnumbered those supporting any particular party, Hope Not Hate and Unite Against Fascism activists could be counted on to regularly leaflet constituencies calling on people to “use your vote to stop the BNP.” In effect, this kind of activity is not just anti-fascist but also anti-abstention and pro-the mainstream parties. It's hard to say how many people have been motivated to vote Conservative or Lib Dem by UAF or HNH propaganda, but it seems likely that Labour will have gained the most from it. Gordon Brown certainly seemed to be counting on it when he publicly endorsed HNH's campaigning.

And Labour certainly aren't the only mainstream party that rely on the BNP boogeyman. The Conservative-backed No To AV campaign, for instance, have been keen to stress that the current system keeps “extremist” parties like the BNP out of power. Not to be outdone, the Lib Dem-backed yes campaign has highlighted the fact that the BNP actually oppose AV, so anyone who refuses to support it is agreeing with them. (In case anyone was in any doubt, I think AV amounts to a doomed attempt to polish the turd of parliament, and that we need to be encouraging the crisis of faith in parliamentary “democracy”, not supporting minor reforms that are intended to prop it up. By the same



People getting to eat free pizza donated by people in other countries in support of their struggle. Beautiful. And tasty.

When I started this blog, way back in September, I chose the name “Cautiously Pessimistic” because pessimism seemed the only sane response to my experience of the world so far. I'd always known that it's possible for the least promising periods to suddenly erupt into stunning struggle, but all my reference points for that idea were in the distant past, not anything I had a real connection to. My first major political experience was campaigning to stop the invasion of Afghanistan (that happened) and then the invasion of Iraq (in case you've forgotten, that happened too). For most of the last decade, the international scene seemed to be dominated by George Bush, and at a distance of a few years it's worth taking a moment to remember just how much of an utter bastard he was. When his eight years were finally up, things didn't seem to get any better, as the terrifyingly mad Tea Party seemed to be the only force capable of mobilising popular protest in the US. And things were no better at home: as a good anti-fascist, I spent a lot of time asking people to “stop the fascist BNP”, and watching helplessly as they grew in support, got some people

elected to the European Parliament, and were joined on the far-right by the EDL, who the left talked a lot about smashing and fighting but didn't seem particularly capable of actually challenging in practice. Over on the green side of things, we could watch as Climate Camp started off as a radical direct action movement with roots in anti-capitalist groups like Earth First and ended up feeling like a cross between Glastonbury and the Guardian, as liberal hippies invited the cops in for tea. I'd throw myself into support for the few strikes that came along, which almost always ended up in the union leaders settling for crumbs. And, by late 2010, we had the continually-worsening effects of a recession to enjoy as well. In short, I knew that a massive upturn in the class struggle was possible, but I knew it in the way that it was possible for people to go to the moon. It just didn't seem like something that might be relevant to my life at any point in the foreseeable future.

Now, a few months later, so much has changed. The idea, which I'd always vaguely accepted, that ordinary people are capable of spontaneously taking militant direct action with little or no encouragement from self-styled revolutionaries became a thrilling reality at Millbank and the protests that followed. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, we've seen people coping successfully with the problems of organising their own lives when the state breaks down. International working-class solidarity, direct challenges to the state, police discipline breaking down... so many beautiful ideas have, for the first time in many people's memories, become practical realities.

Of course, I'm still not a simple optimist. I recognise that this stage of the fight won't end with a global anarchist communist revolution; sooner or later, the world's rulers, perhaps joined by a few new faces, will find the right combination of repression and concessions to restore stability, and whatever victories we've managed to win will be used as a way to maintain the status quo, as proof that things aren't really so bad after all. But things will never quite go back to the way they were before. Before this, I kept myself going through hard times with the thought that perhaps, one day, we'd see events like those of 1917, or 36, or 56, or 68, or even 89. In the hard times to come, I'll be able to console myself by holding out hope for a return of the spirit of 2010 or 2011.

MAY

The importance of being Nick Griffin

First written on May 3, 2011, immediately before a referendum on Alternative Voting, a fairly minor reform of the voting system

We're living in interesting times. The British National Party, who seemed so close to entering the mainstream not long ago, seem to be on the verge of financial collapse.

So, the collapse of the UK's leading far-right group seems like it should be good news for everyone, right? Actually, I'd argue that it's bad news for almost the entire political spectrum, from the far-left through to the establishment right. If they have a good grasp of where their interests lie, I think a lot of political organisations should think about throwing the BNP a few quid to keep them going.

First of all, look at the SWP: surely anyone who's interacted with them can testify to how keen they are to drag up the spectre of "the nazi BNP" at any possible opportunity. Obviously, there's nothing wrong in itself with opposing the BNP, but their insistence on trying to shoehorn them into all kinds of completely irrelevant events, like the Lib Dem conference where they had anti-BNP placards but no anti-Lib Dem ones, does seem a little strange. As I understand it, their obsessive focus on the BNP and EDL (a tactic which seems to have backfired quite badly, considering the EDL's shift from a single-issue anti-Islam organisation to a combined anti-Islam, anti-left group) is a product of their contradictory nature: on the one hand, as a self-described revolutionary organisation, they need to demonstrate their radicalism, so they can claim to offer something that more straightforwardly reformist groups can't. On the other hand, they have a long history of populism, attempting to tailor their politics to whatever happens to be fashionable at the time, as can be seen by their wildly changing views towards institutions like the Labour Party. So, using the rhetoric (although never the practice) of militant anti-fascism offers them the best of both worlds: by endlessly talking up how hardline they are in opposing a small, unpopular racist group, they can demonstrate their militancy without ever going beyond

membership, and how inclusive or exclusive that approach should be. That depends on all sorts of factors that'll be specific to each situation, not to mention things like "common sense", so you'll never find a one-size-fits all answer laid down on a blog somewhere. Sorry if that's not much of a conclusion, but it's better than just coming up with some fixed position and presenting it as The Great Answer to everything.

MARCH

No to cuts, yes to what? – Do we need an alternative?

First written on March 13, 2011, in response to a number of pieces, including one by the prominent liberal journalist George Monbiot, suggesting the anti-cuts movement needed an alternative political programme

The idea of putting forward an alternative political program or budget for the anti-cuts movement is one I've discussed briefly in the past, but it seems to be getting a bit of attention at the moment, so I thought it was worth going over in a bit more detail.

Essentially, what's important to remember here is that, in fields like politics and economics which are shaped by human behaviour, there is no fixed "impossible" or "possible" – what is or isn't possible at any given moment is determined by the balance of power. To take one obvious example, back in October it would not have been possible to organise simultaneous student occupations of over 20 universities in a single day, or anything like the wave of militant demos at council meetings that we've seen recently; these things became possible, not because of any sudden shift in the universe, but because people active in the anti-cuts movement put the hard work in to make them happen. Continuing this line of thought, to defeat the cuts we don't need to put forward an alternative programme which is more convincing, we just need to use our disruptive power to make sure that the "unavoidable necessity" of making the cuts is outweighed by the impossibility of actually making them.

But, of course, this is an oversimplification. Our ability to defeat the government by raising hell doesn't just exist as a pure, abstract possibility – it's affected by all kinds of things, but especially our ability to convince people to join us, and that, in turn, depends on whether we can convince people that there's an alternative. On the face of it, this sounds like an argument for the idea that we do need a carefully worked-out alternative budget after all, but I'm still not convinced. I really don't think the kind of careful economic calculation

that people like Monbiot are interested in is actually what motivates anyone. If there's one thing to learn from the successes of the racist right, it's that, in the right context, it's possible to motivate people to take action on the basis of a load of shit with very little basis in reality, as long as it's framed the right way. Now, obviously that's not what I think we need to be doing, but I do think that all we really "need" in terms of an alternative budget is one or two simple ideas that can be argued for in a way that makes them sound like common sense – in other words, pretty much what UK Uncut have already provided. So, that's why I don't think the anti-cuts movement actually needs a positive political or economic alternative. But I think it's possible to go beyond just saying that it's unnecessary, and argue that it could actually be harmful. I'm glad that there's still no single organisation controlling the anti-cuts movement, and by the same token I think that signing the whole movement up to a single alternative vision would be limiting and divisive. I'm no fan of "unity" as an abstract principle, because there can be no unity between Labour councillors implementing cuts and the people affected by them. Despite that, I think that we do need a certain kind of unity – unity that's not based around ideology, but around our shared material interests. That's the basis the anti-cuts movement needs to be founded on, and trying to tie it to a specific set of alternative policies would undermine that urgent material unity. It's not necessary to oppose Trident, or the Royal Family, or any other specific waste of state money you might mention, in order to oppose the cuts – you could argue that it's necessary if you're going to be logically consistent, but at the end of the day, I don't care that much about being logically consistent, I care about fighting back against the ways that this government – and every other defender of capitalism – wants to make my life worse. To adopt a slogan from the turn-of-the-century anti-capitalist movement, our shared "NO!" is all we need, getting a single "YES" would be both impossible and undesirable.

going to look at the areas where it falls apart a bit. As I've said, I think "the liberation of the oppressed must be the act of the oppressed themselves" and "an injury to one is an injury to all" are both vital starting points for anarchist/communist politics, but I think they point in different directions. One of the most obvious examples is that of women's liberation – we can all agree that the oppression of women is a problem, but starting from "the oppressed themselves" we can conclude that the answer is for women to organise against it, and any involvement by men will lead to the risks of (mis)representation that I talked about earlier, whereas starting from "an injury to all" we can conclude that it's a problem which affects everyone, and so everyone should be involved in fighting it. But gender oppression certainly isn't the only area where these tensions exist – talking about ethnic and racial oppression, or lesbian/gay/bi/trans/queer politics, the same issues come up quickly. It'd also be a mistake to just see these issues as just being related to what get talks about as "identity politics" as opposed to "class struggle". To take a case that's clearly and obviously about class, when unemployed people start to fight back they'll obviously have more of an impact if they can connect their struggle with industrial action by jobcentre staff. On the other hand, joint groups of claimants and militant jobcentre workers might lead to the very troubling prospect of angry unemployed folk, sick of being pushed around by bossy jobcentre staff, turning up to meetings to discuss their problems and then... being told what to do by bossy jobcentre staff again. Similar issues exist with groups like teachers and school students – again, their interests both overlap and clash. There's not a simple answer to any of these questions, or if there is I don't know it. I would say it's worth bearing in mind that general, inclusive organisations and specific separate ones aren't mutually exclusive, so I'd encourage people to join both groups like anarchist federations and anarcho-syndicalist unions, which tend to take the "injury to all" position, and also to organise with other people in the same position as them, using the "...the oppressed themselves" approach. Assuming they can find the time, of course – yet another reason why you should be fighting for more tea breaks, so you can have some chance to rest among all this constant organising! But none of this can settle whether any given group, dealing with a specific situation, should have an inclusive or exclusive approach to

generalisation, and there'll be plenty of cases in which it isn't true, but I'd say that problems that affect us directly are more likely to be problems we can do something about than those which affect other people.

To take a pair of extreme cases, a lot of people on the left spend a lot of time talking about the horrific acts carried out by the Israeli state in Palestine. What the Israeli state does is undeniably monstrous, and when comparing problems like these to the problems in an average British workplace – say, people only being allowed a fixed amount of time to take cigarette, tea, and toilet breaks, rather than being able to have a break whenever they feel like it – to say we should concentrate on the latter sounds horribly uncaring, insensitive, and perhaps even racist. But it's also the case that the Israeli state doesn't really need anything from us and so doesn't care what we do or say, whereas our immediate bosses need a lot from us and so are very sensitive to what we do. This means that even a fairly simple bit of organising can win a small victory in the workplace, whereas almost nothing we can do will have any impact on the Israeli state. Even the smashing of EDO, which is as far as I'm aware the most direct protest against Israeli state murders in Britain in recent years, still only actually affected a company that deals with the Israeli army, not the Israeli army itself. It's obviously the case that stopping a house demolition or a state murder in Gaza would be much better and more important than winning an extra five or ten minutes per day for workers to spend slacking instead of working in the UK, but I'd argue that that isn't really the choice that faces us, and it is better to successfully win more break time than to have no impact at all, which is the likely result of any attempt to make the Israeli government listen to us.



So, having set out my case in favour of selfish campaigns, I'm now

Springtime for campus and university, springtime for you and me?

First written on March 23, 2011, the same week as a major strike by university lecturers and a number of student occupations

The universities have been a fair bit quieter in 2011 than in the last few months of last year, but that seems to be changing this week. The UCU strikes that took place in several regions on Tuesday, and will happen across the country tomorrow, are an important step that everyone who's interested in trying to build a truly effective movement against austerity should support. At the same time, it's important not to get too enthusiastic: it's still a very limited one- or two-day strike, firmly under the control of the union bureaucracies, and so not in the same league as, for instance, the wildcat sick-ins that shut down schools across Madison last month. The university system also displays a lot of the flaws and divisions of the trade union movement at its worst: many academics, even those with radical research interests, see themselves as professionals rather than as workers, so the idea of collective class struggle doesn't seem relevant to them, and there's little or no effort made to link up their struggles with the cleaners, porters, security guards, catering workers and other support staff who can only dream about enjoying the kind of conditions that the UCU workers are fighting to protect. Co-ordinated action by all university workers would be far more effective, but we shouldn't expect to see it any time soon. Adding to the difficulties this strike faces is the fact that it takes place at a time of generalised class confrontation, so the government will be determined not to set a bad example by surrendering to striking workers. Of course, this also means that it's important for us to do all we can to try and force them to give in.

On the positive side, there's also the fact that these strikes are taking place in a university atmosphere that's been transformed by the student movement. Militant students have given a clear example of what a movement that refuses to be constrained by its official leadership can look like, and there'll be a lot of them on the picket lines this week. Normally, the presence of radical students supporting

a strike can achieve very little – it's unlikely that anyone's going to have their outlook on the world transformed by a short chat with a stranger that they'll probably never see again, and the difficulty of communication is intensified by the fact that, on the one hand, many workers buy into the stereotype of students as lazy and over-privileged, and on the other, many radical students are members of Leninist groups, which means that, sooner or later, whether they want to or not, they'll have to go through the tired, alienating routine of attempting to flog their paper – and no-one is more untrustworthy than someone who's trying to sell you something.

In contrast, many of the striking UCU workers will be people the students already know and see on a regular basis, which increases the possibility that those on the picket lines will actually be able to relate to each other as individuals, rather than just seeing each other as clichéd lefty students and striking workers. That may sound hippyish, but it's something that has to happen in order for any actual communication to be possible. Of course, breaking down the barriers between academics and students is still a long way from breaking down the many barriers that divide the class as a whole, but it's a step in the right direction.

Of course, the strikes are only half the picture. Students haven't just been supporting their lecturers, they've also been taking the initiative in occupying – not quite on the scale of November/December, but the movement certainly isn't dead yet. Pride of place has to go to Glasgow's magnificent occupiers, who were brutally evicted by around 80 police, responded by immediately occupying the university's Senate building, and are now back in their original location having been invited back by management.

So, what next? That's impossible to predict. Just about the only thing I feel confident about saying is that the student movement has already passed the peak of what a purely student movement is capable of – assuming there ever was a "purely student movement" in the first place, which is a distortion in itself since school and sixth form pupils, and other youths not in education, played a vital role in making the big student demos so exciting. As Glasgow shows, struggles at individual campuses can still achieve a lot, but on a national level, the student occupations will either become one fraction of a broader revolt, or they'll eventually die out.

representative gains the power to make decisions, that power is taken away from all the other people directly affected by that decision. We can easily see the problems with politicians claiming to decide what's best for everybody else, or union leaders making decisions on behalf of their members, but at a more grassroots level, the same dangerous logic can affect solidarity campaigns where one set of people talk about what another set of people need. That sounds very vague, but last year the SWP gave a very clear example of what I'm talking about by sending a group, mostly made up of students, to disrupt the talks between British Airways bosses and Unite. Campaigns about issues that affect us directly don't suffer from this danger, as they allow people to talk for themselves rather than being represented by anyone else, whether that's politicians, union leaders, or well-meaning activists.

Beyond my unease around the issue of representation, there's also the very important issue of winning. I think that self-interested campaigns are much more likely to be successful than selfless ones for two main reasons: motivation and power. For a start, it's possible to get burned out and want to give up when it comes to fighting for what's right, but you're much less likely to give up when you're fighting for something that you believe will benefit you personally in addition to being right. It's possible that I tend to use the movement against the Iraq War as a bit of a boogeyman, but I do believe the course of that movement shows how a great number of people, no matter how determined they are at first, and how heroic their cause is, can quickly become tired and unwilling to fight on when it looks like they've lost. In contrast, struggles like the great miners' strike, or the Liverpool dockworkers in the 90s, show how people will fight with endless determination when they don't think they have any other options. Of course, not everyone fights in their own interest all the time (if they did, capitalism would've collapsed long ago), and it's possible to find examples of things like the animal liberation movement where people put massive amounts of energy into purely altruistic struggles, but in general I think it's fair to say that the promise of a reward, or the fear of disastrous consequences, will generally be more effective than just good intentions alone in motivating people to fight on.

There's also the issue of how we can bring about change. This is a

Mind your own business! – Thoughts on selfishness, selflessness, and winning

First written on April 14, 2011

In this piece, I'd like to try and explore the tensions around selfishness and selflessness in politics in a bit more depth, building on the ideas I talked about in my last article. In particular, I want to think about two classic anarchist/communist slogans, "the liberation of the oppressed must be the act of the oppressed themselves" and "an injury to one is an injury to all", and try and explore how they relate to each other. I usually try and avoid claiming to have all the answers, but this is especially true here – there's some suggestions I want to make, but this is mostly me raising questions rather than claiming to answer them.



First off, I'd like to look at some of the reasons why, generally speaking, I think that "self-interested" campaigns are likely to be better than purely altruistic ones, assuming that you can ever draw a neat distinction between the two. First of all, there's the issue of representation, which is a pretty massive one. The entire spectrum of mainstream political opinion, right through to the very far left, presents "political representation" and democracy as being the same thing, whereas anarchists see them as being opposites. As soon as a

Dancing in the streets: Reflections on March 26th

First written on March 28, 2011, a few days after a major national anti-cuts demo featuring that saw a large, militant black bloc and the occupation of Fortnum & Mason's, a well-known luxury shop

First of all, it's worth stressing my total solidarity with everyone who took to the streets on Saturday. Well, perhaps not everyone – Ed Miliband is still part of the problem, not the solution – but when the media's trying as hard as it currently is to divide the "anarchist thugs" from the "legitimate protesters", it's important to remember that solidarity doesn't just mean solidarity with people who act exactly like us. That said, while rejecting all the divisive crap about extremists hijacking the demo, I think it is worth considering the limitations of what happened. For one thing, when compared to the demos at the end of last year, and the more recent town hall occupations, it's notable that the disruptive protests on the 26th seemed to ignore state/political targets and concentrate solely on economic/business ones. Obviously, that's not necessarily a terrible thing – capital is pretty important to capitalism, after all – but the disruption caused to business still seemed to be mostly framed within the UK Uncut narrative, rather than a total rejection of capitalist social relationships. No matter how many anti-capitalists take part in UK Uncut actions, the basic message is still one about punishing those irresponsible businesses that dodge their taxes and don't play by the rules, a message that's very much compatible with liberal capitalist ideology. In contrast to many of the urban uprisings of the past, there didn't seem to be any looting, an act which very directly asserts the communist principle that human needs and desires are more important than the market and profit. Still, the attacks on the Ritz seemed to be a move away from wanting to punish the rich for not paying their taxes, and towards a more Class War position of just wanting to attack the rich – perhaps not the most perfect revolutionary strategy we could wish for, but definitely a good sign. My biggest regret of the day is not joining in with the incredibly brave few people who blocked the movement of riot vans until they were

shoved out of the way by cops – a little more support could have made their actions a lot more effective, but if the experience makes me more determined to act next time, it won't have been a waste. In general, there were a lot of people, myself included, who were determined not to get kettled, which was definitely a good thing overall, but I think it made us at times too hasty to move off and made it easier for the cops to isolate the most determined militants. Less importantly, Chris Knight's still an embarrassment. If anyone asked you why there was a big wooden horse, would you be able to give a coherent explanation? Seriously, what does a big wooden horse have to do with the cuts, or working-class resistance, or anything? Similarly, while I'm all in favour of making protests more fun, those berks who dress up as clowns would do well to remember that clowns are pretty much the opposite of fun – they appeal to a small minority of young children, but almost everyone just finds them creepy as fuck. From Stephen King's *It* to *Insane Clown Posse*, literally everything associated with clowns in popular culture is bad, so it's a mystery why anyone would actively want to imitate them.



Those are the negatives, but there's also a lot to be positive about. Like a lot of people, I didn't personally smash any windows, paint any graffiti, or make it into Fortnum & Mason's (not that I'd be bragging about it in public if I had), but I was part of the militant breakaway

bankers with the Jews, and argue for a populist and nationalist opposition to the cuts. Or they could offer a militant, street-fighting version of Cameron's politics, blame the crisis on Labour's "red" economics, insist that we all have to make sacrifices for the national interest, and attack anti-cuts protesters for trying to wreck the recovery. But, as far as I can see, they can't just blame it all on Muslims for causing the crisis by not eating enough pork. This could just be me underestimating the wonders of the far-right imagination: in a world where long-defunct groups like the Wombles are still regularly accused of masterminding spontaneous riots, perhaps it's possible to blame literally anyone for anything. But to adopt either of the narratives I've outlined, the EDL would have to go through a massive internal transformation and jettison their current strategy of being a single-issue anti-Islam group, and there's no telling whether they'd be able to survive the pressures of such a big change, especially since their last demo, in Blackburn, was marked by violent infighting.

It's impossible to say what will happen next. Even if the EDL does just continue ranting about other people's religious practices while being totally ignored by a population more worried about their jobs and services, that doesn't mean that another far-right group – either a revitalised BNP or a totally new player emerging out of nowhere the way UKUncut did – might not attract serious support, and it's not like we have that much reason to be complacent, since anti-EDL mobilisations have had very mixed results. In general, I'd say putting too much emphasis on anti-fascism now would be putting the cart before the horse – our major priority for the foreseeable future needs to be rebuilding the bonds of workplace and community solidarity that've been devastated by 30 years of Thatcherite rule. Still, there's grounds for hope. No racist group could hope to attract anywhere near the number of people who marched in defence of their jobs and services on March the 26th. Against the politics of nosiness and imagined community promoted by the English Defence League, the anti-cuts movement needs to become the basis of an EDLDL – an Every Day Life Defence League, which would fight to solve the problems directly affecting our quality of life, while also recognising that our problems are inseparable from everyone else's, so it'll take a collective response to make any one person's life better.

conflict taking place. Of course, there were still groups and individuals that rejected the basic ideas of neoliberal economics, but many of them chose not to make it a central priority: the Socialist Workers' Party, the largest group on the far-left and an organisation made up almost entirely of non-Muslims, spent most of the decade talking about Iraq, Palestine, the BNP, and anything else they thought was likely to attract Muslim support, and while many anarchists were involved with projects based around day-to-day economic issues, like the Industrial Workers of the World or London Coalition Against Poverty, many others were involved in things like hunt sabbing, Climate Camp, or the No Borders network, all of which can be fitted into my category of “other-directed” politics*. I think that the EDL, who formed in mid-2009, a time when the financial crash had taken place, but before its effects had really trickled down to affect everyday life that dramatically, can be seen as a last gasp of the politics of prosperity: just as the relative stability underwritten by the housing boom meant that activists could take a benign interest in the lives of foxes or Palestinians or future generations, it meant that EDL members could take a negative interest in the lives of Muslims. One of the striking things about the EDL, and a clear difference between them and the BNP, is the way that they tend to neglect traditional economic concerns in favour of cultural worries. That approach may have worked for a while, but right now I'd say that the cuts are going to have enough of an impact in everybody's lives that to ignore them is to be rendered irrelevant.

This isn't to say that there's no room for a racialised nationalist response to the recession, clearly there is. I'm no expert at thinking in far-right terms, but off the top of my head I can think of at least two clear options: following the tradition of classical National Socialism, they could adopt a “British Jobs for British Workers” position, blame the crash on greedy bankers, and more-or-less openly associate said

* just to be clear, the references to No Borders and other forms of solidarity politics are not intended as an attack on those groups and campaigns, many of which I have a lot of respect for. It's simply because I believe that any campaign will find it difficult to attract much support unless it can explain how potential supporters would benefit from their success, so I'd argue that any campaign should always be thinking of ways to appeal to self-interest – for instance, anti-war groups can stress the shared class interests of British and foreign citizens, rather than just using purely humanitarian appeals about the effects of war on others.

crowd that did enable those activities to happen, and was happy to see other people doing so. Huge numbers of people showed that they aren't prepared to be marched quietly to defeat by the union and Labour bureaucracies, and being part of a crowd that chased a line of riot cops down the street was a very empowering experience.

Overall, while there was a lot I found inspiring about Saturday's protests, the main lesson I took away from them was a renewed appreciation of street dance parties. I'm aware there's nothing new about this, since they've been part of anti-capitalist protests since at least as far back as Reclaim The Streets in the 90s, but seeing the crowds dancing on Oxford Street made a really noticeable contrast to the disempowering spectacle that was happening in Hyde Park. Not only was it far more noticeable to passers-by, since it was happening on a busy shopping street while the Hyde Park rally was only visible to those who actively sought it out, but it actually looked like something that outsiders might find appealing and want to join in with, something that's never likely to happen with a crowd listening to speeches by a union leader. And, by shutting down a major road, it contributed to the economic impact of the day. If and when we do end up with a general strike – that is to say, the most organised sections of the working class trying to defeat the government by paralysing the economy – it'd seem like a good idea to try to shut down as many roads as possible to stop strikebreakers making it into work. Using soundsystems could be a good way to make road blockades into something that people'd actively enjoy taking part in. Of course, just as no one aesthetic or style of writing will ever appeal to everyone, it'd be impossible to play music that everyone'd enjoy, but perhaps the answer would be to try and set up as many differing soundsystems as possible, so those who enjoy dubstep could take over one roundabout, the punk crowd could take another, with cheesy pop and 70s soft-rock parties shutting down even more intersections. I'm sure there'd be all kinds of difficulties with actually putting that idea into practice – not least the difficulty of getting people to turn up early enough in the morning to be sure of shutting roads down in time for rush hour, in order to cause the maximum economic disruption – but it can't hurt to at least consider the idea.

You're talking a lot, but you're not saying anything – more thoughts on March 26th and the “violent minority”

First written on March 30, 2011

I wrote this piece because I thought it was worth saying a little more about the widespread condemnation of the “violent majority”, and particularly about the fact that you can only have a conversation with someone who's prepared to listen to you. That might sound obvious, but I think it's been ignored in much of the discussion that's happened over the last few days.

The criticism of the black bloc tactics that were used on Saturday can be put into several distinct categories. First of all, there's the idea that a peaceful march might have had some impact on government policy if it hadn't been undermined by the violence. As Vince Cable himself has been polite enough to explain, that is nonsense: “No government – coalition, Labour or any other – would change its fundamental economic policy simply in response to a demonstration of that kind.” Following on from this, but making a slightly stronger case, some critics of the black bloc have acknowledged that peaceful protest on its own won't change anything, but said that the violence on Saturday will have scared off people who'd otherwise be attracted to the movement. There are numerous problems with this. Not least the fact that pretty much everyone, from the cops to the Tories right through to the TUC themselves, has been at pains to stress the difference between the main march and the violence that took place outside, as part of an attempt to paint anarchists as mindless thugs with no real political grievances. Granted, I'm sure some people will ignore all that and continue to hold the entire anti-cuts movement responsible for the violence. But anyone who completely ignores what the movement's leadership says was never likely to become actively involved in the movement, so I don't think anyone's really been alienated from the movement on that count. It's also the case that this argument rests on two very problematic assumptions: that ordinary people are attracted to peaceful protests and put off by violence.

behind the analysis I'm exploring here, I'm more or less doing the written equivalent of thinking aloud. In particular, I'm aware that this analysis rests on the idea that economic growth actually has some kind of positive impact on people's lives, which is very debatable.) When discussing the political culture of the recent past, I think one crucial starting point is the collapse of the Old Left when the USSR, and the Communist Parties that still supported it, imploded, and New Labour dropped the last of their social-democratic pretensions. Along with the general economic growth based on the housing bubble that led to Gordon Brown's famous claim about having ended the cycle of boom and bust, I think it's fair to say that, for most of the period of 1997-2010, it was hard to find voices seriously challenging the basic assumptions of neoliberal economics, and there was a general decline in politics based around economic class interest, and a rise of interest into issues that weren't directly based around economics, and which often didn't directly affect the people discussing them. The one major exception to this rule, the movement based around summit protests, still confirms my general claim about a shift from self-interested to other-directed politics: no matter how many of the people involved had a firm theoretical grasp of the fact that capitalism is a set of relationships between people that we are forced to re-create every day, the practice of that movement tended to suggest the idea that capitalism is some kind of object or creature that exists somewhere out there, and so we can confront it by tracking it down to a specific location, such as Seattle, Genoa, Gothenburg, etc. In addition, the movement's rhetoric often tended to stress the dramatic ways that global capitalism oppresses and exploits people like South American peasants and East Asian sweatshop workers at the expense of discussing the subtler, but still important, ways it exploits workers in the UK.

In general, when thinking about the political issues of the last decade or so, it's noticeable how much they were dominated by people talking about what other people were doing, rather than what was happening in their own lives: the Iraq War is the most glaring example, but the rise of green politics can also be understood in these terms (people talking about the future instead of the present), and, in retrospect, foxhunting seems like the kind of thing that can only become a big issue when there's no more open and direct class

APRIL

The English Defence League – Blair's children?

First written on April 3, 2011

To start off with, a quick disclaimer: in case anyone's worrying, this isn't going to be a crass piece of meaningless lefty name-calling along the lines of "Blair said nasty things about muslims, therefore he's the same as the EDL, or inspired them, or something". I don't think it's particularly useful to try and smear everyone who I dislike as being somehow the same as the far-right. Instead I want to try and think about the EDL as a product of the political culture of the last decade, and what that actually means. I realise that sounds a bit vague, but hopefully all will become clear.

The conventional wisdom about recessions is that they're meant to be good times for the far-right, as they can offer convenient scapegoats for popular anger, so I think it's interesting that the BNP's not made that much progress over the last year or so. However, I don't really have that much to say about the BNP, since their growth mainly seems to have been stalled by a combination of vicious infighting (always reassuring to see that it's not just us who have that problem) and financial and legal problems – I'd like to be able to say that they've been held back by a brilliantly powerful anti-fascist movement, but I don't really think that's true, since Hope Not Hate and Unite Against Fascism are both seriously flawed groups that exist more to prop up the mainstream than to seriously try and challenge fascist ideas from a working-class perspective, and while there are some good local groups, there are many areas where independent militant anti-fascism simply doesn't exist. However, while I think that, under different circumstances, the BNP could've done very well out of this recession, I think a case can be made that the EDL has inherent limitations that will make it very difficult for it to grow in this climate, and these limitations are related to the time when it emerged. (A disclaimer: I don't necessarily stand 100%

The first one is easily disproved: how many people do you know, other than people you met through activism, who went on the march? Obviously, where you work will have a big impact on this, so public sector workers and students will probably know quite a few whereas private sector workers may not know any (benefit claimants and pensioners are a different story again). But even for students and workers in the best-unionised parts of the public sector, I imagine it'll be possible to think of a lot of your co-workers or fellow students who didn't go. Clearly, there's a large number of people who just aren't that interested in the style of demonstration offered by the TUC. On the other hand, when considering all these claims about how violence alienates public support, it's worth thinking about all the people who get in fights when they go out drinking, or watch boxing matches, or horror films, or action films, or listen to Tyler the Creator, or play violent computer games. There are an awful lot of people out there who, at least on some level, find violence attractive. That isn't to say that they'll form their political opinions based on their interest in violence, and nor should they; it's just to say that they're as likely to be intrigued by violence as they are to be put off by it.

Finally, there's the criticism that's come from within the anarchist movement itself, from people who share our goals but believe the property destruction was an own goal that's made us more unpopular within the movement, and so we should have concentrated our efforts on attempting to communicate with other people on the march. I have some sympathy with this line of argument. Clearly, trying to get our ideas across is vital, and it's not as if we made no attempt to do this: I personally saw Anarchist Federation comrades out on the day giving material away, and I know people from the Solidarity Federation were doing the same. But I think to argue that we shouldn't have broken off to engage in disruptive action, and everyone should've just concentrated on trying to give our propaganda out instead of doing anything that might upset people, is a fundamentally mistaken position. It's worth thinking about the responses that those comrades giving anarchist material out will have got (I wasn't doing this myself on the day, but I've given out anarchist leaflets at enough lefty demos to be able to generalise here): most people offered something will have ignored it, either out of hostility to anarchists or just because they didn't want to be weighed down with any more bits of paper. Of

the minority that took something, some proportion will have stuck it in their pocket, forgot about it, and eventually thrown it away; others will have read it and thought it was rubbish; others still, mostly those who're already close to our politics, will have read it and agreed with it; and a tiny minority of those will have read it and agreed with it will have become more sympathetic to the idea of becoming involved in anarchist politics as a result.

Now, let's think about what would've happened if the violence hadn't taken place. Maybe a few more people would have been willing to give our ideas a sympathetic hearing, but not many. Almost all the people who are now angry at us were not willing to listen to us before the violence happened, so nothing has really changed in that respect. And, in exchange for the price of annoying people who weren't prepared to listen to us in the first place, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people, had an exciting and empowering experience that left them feeling more confident about their ability to change the world, and all those people who don't like what the government's doing, but don't want to line up behind the TUC leadership and Ed Miliband, got the message that the anarchist movement is a visible and vibrant alternative. The two largest class-struggle anarchist organisations got free publicity in the mass media, reaching far more people than we usually can. It's impossible to say how many people may take an interest in our ideas as a result of that.

I think it's important to try and communicate our ideas, but we shouldn't have any illusions about the fact that, a lot of the time, it's just not possible for this to happen. The ruling ideas in any society are the ideas of the ruling class, so, most of the time, most people will not be sympathetic to anarchist ideas. Of course, this differs from situation to situation, so more people in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia are willing to take part in radical action than in most other countries, more people in Wisconsin are prepared to fight for workers' rights than in the rest of the USA, and in Britain it's suddenly become possible to put together what might be the biggest black bloc we've ever seen, but these situations are exceptional ones.

If you ask most people what they think of anarchists, they'll probably tell you that we're a bunch of violent nutters – but if you asked them the same thing last week, they'd have given you the same reply, so there's no change there. Outside of a revolutionary situation,

revolutionary groups will be minority ones, not mass organisations. Recognising this should never stop us trying to build the biggest, best, most effective minority organisations that we can, it just means we shouldn't try and chase after a fluffy populist image that we'll never be able to pull off anyway.