



# Counter-power at the Plan C Fast Forward Festival

*by AngryWorkers*

First of all thanks to the comrades of Plan C for getting us all together and organising the festival. This is totally what we need – a space for all of us to come together and discuss our politics in a comradely way, even if we might disagree.

This is a plenary about the tactics of counter-power. We want to start by stepping back a bit and looking at the concept of counter-power. The idea that power and counter-power are two self-contained, opposing forces with little inner relation is often confirmed by our daily experiences. Can we defend the squat or will the police overpower and evict us? Will our friend be deported, or can we stop the plane from taking off? We have to fight the power!

At the same time, if we want to look further ahead and go deeper to the roots we have to ask ourselves what constitutes power in capitalism, what is its essence. Here we can distinguish three separate perspectives, each one of them based on empirical evidence and experience, but with different political trajectories.

## **\* A bourgeois perspective**

Based on the institutions of democracy and the subject of the citizen, power is understood as influence yielded within the institutions through mobilisations as citizens, e.g. electoral politics. There is the assumption that people can participate in decision-making processes equally and that the authorities acknowledge majority positions.

## **\* An immediate perspective, often emphasised by anarchism**

Power is primarily understood as an act of coercion by state or other violent forces. The only way a mass of people can overcome this is by beating those (armed) forces. Resources like land, water etc. ('the commons') exist and there is a struggle about their distribution from above and below. Of course, there is an immediate truth: we have to beat the fascists and get them off our streets. But this won't address the social conditions which breed fascism.

**\* A historical perspective, emphasised by Marxism and materialist gender theory**

This understanding sees capital or the state not primarily as some external oppositional power, rather as part of a wider set of (violent) social relations that are the result of how *we* produce this world. Capital maintains its power through private property relations, but these are not merely upheld through violence, but through the production process itself, which alienates us from ourselves and the product. Capital combines our labour with the labour of workers on the other end of the globe and only under capital can we make use of our previously exploited labour (in the form of machinery and knowledge). The fact that capital is able to combine this otherwise separated labour makes capital itself look productive and all-powerful –rather than us. Similarly, power is not held by 'men' in themselves, but patriarchal domination is mainly a result of the isolating and devalued way domestic labour and reproductive work is organised within capitalism and the resulting wider sexual division of labour (from science to armies). 'Counter-power' would thus start from questioning the already existing social practices (i.e. workers working side by side, but remain divided; women doing socially necessary work, but in private and with relegated status).

We don't think that (counter-)power is some kind of quantitative or neutral force, but a material social relation with specific content. To make it clearer:

\* workers can yield power as citizens and vote for a 'labour government', but the power they yield won't bring them closer to emancipation from class relations;

\* 'revolutionary' armies can liberate zones from the enemy, but their military form of power requires alliances with bourgeois forces (needing weapon supply etc. from 'my enemies' enemy'), hierarchical relations and new divisions in society - e.g. the decision to establish a standing 'Red Army' with full-time soldiers during the Russian Revolution required productive discipline in factories and on the land to secure army supplies; this in consequence led to the termination of workers' councils and opposition and marked the end of emancipation.

**\*\*\* How is this relevant to the debate today?**

At the last Plan C Fast Forward we sat together and debated the concept of a 'social strike'. At least conceptually, the debate started from the premise that within the working class there lies a potential power that radiates beyond workplaces and borders. There are existing social connections in our daily lives - international supply-chains, students working in and beyond the campus, care work at home making social production possible – that not only bind and exploit us but that could also be weapons by working class people against this system - and that we can support this.

The focus this year has changed to the question of ‘municipalism’. For us, this is not just a question of changing one concept for another, or trying a different tactic. Instead it is a fundamental shift in perspective. Municipalism focuses not on the productive power of working people, not even on the potential power of poor people in direct confrontation, but on the influence of people as ‘citizens’. Before we ask why the FastForwardFestival’s shift of focus could ‘just happen’ we want to give a few historical and current examples for why we question the emancipatory character of municipalism from an anti-capitalist perspective.

### \*\*\* **The historical and current dead-ends of municipalism**

‘Counter-power’ as citizens is something qualitatively different from ‘counter power’ from a working class point of view. History has shown us, time and again that these different forms of power don't just add up or strengthen each other, but that in the medium term they clash with each other.

The debate about ‘movement and institutions’, had a revival during the short-lived 21st century socialism in South America. Many political activists voiced the hope that a left government could open up spaces for the social movement (‘institutionalising the gains of the movement’), but in hindsight we can see that the governments of Chavez and Lula rather contributed to the movement's decline and political disarray.

While many comrades on the radical/autonomist left would agree that this is the case when it comes to the national state level, there is still a flirtation with local level institutions and local electoral politics. We can see that local government is operating within the legal framework of the national state, is financially dependent on federal state money and on wider reproduction of capital. It is therefore only logical that most ‘municipal electoral tactics’ of the (not so) radical left end up trying to fix the higher up

problems by getting involved with national politics: from the electoral flirtations of the ‘Spontis/autonomist’ in Germany, which laid the groundwork for the imperialist-neoliberal German Green Party, to the leadership of the social centre-politicos Disobedienti in Italy, like Luca Casarini, who entered European parliamentary politics together with the sell-out Tsipras from Syriza.



Given the dependency of local government on capitalist finance it is no surprise that ideas of ‘radical municipalism’ sprout in more affluent towns like Brighton, less so in Wolverhampton. One of the best and matter-of-fact criticisms of local electoral strategies we read recently was put forward by Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor in her brilliant book ‘From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation’. She

describes clearly how the electoral focus of former militants of the Black liberation movement after its decline in the late-1970s meant that in towns like Chicago and Baltimore, black mayors had to enforce austerity and anti-poor policing measures in the 1980s, which further weakened and divided the movement while stabilising the system: who better to enforce cuts against black proletarians, but a black mayor?

While history provides us with ample examples, cracks also appear in the present. If we look at Barcelona En Comu, the citizen platform that won the local elections in Barcelona and provided the new mayor, Colau, we can see various moments of tension between the local working class and the new ‘citizen-friendly’ local government:

*\* Airport security workers’ strike, August 2017*

After three weeks of struggle the central government under the Popular Party brought in the paramilitary Guardia Civil in order to break the strike. Colau, has come out in defence of Guardia Civil strike-breaking on the grounds that “they are not substituting workers, and right now what we need is to guarantee security above anything else.”

*\* Metro transport workers’ dispute, March 2016 to July 2017*

3,200 workers of Barcelona’s public Metro system (TMB) went on strike, demanding more job stability and pay rises. Once the strike was announced, Colau called on the unions to withdraw the strike threat as a precondition for negotiations, insisting it was not in the ‘general public interest’ and that budgetary constraints meant that the city could not make a better offer. She then sought to neuter the strike by setting legally-mandated ‘minimum services’ of 65 percent during rush-hour and 45 percent in off-peak hours. In July 2017 the Colau government threatened the Metro workers with ‘enforced arbitration’.

Comrades in Spain also noticed that the ‘redistribution’ of local politicians’ wages by platforms like Barcelona En Comu did not primarily benefit rank-and-file organisations, but created a larger number of so-called ‘movement jobs’, a new layer of professional activists with all the contradictions of professionalisation.

One outcome of these tensions with the local working class is that Barcelona En Comu tries to channel some of the discontent into Catalan nationalist waters, as if Catalan independence had much to offer to working class people. In contrast the most recent wildcat strikes of port-workers in Barcelona against privatisation spread beyond the ‘borders’ of Catalunya - workers in Valencia and other ports in Spain took solidarity action.



A comrade from Italy told us that: *“In Naples, the social centres Ex Opg and Insurgencia (disobbedienti) have rallied behind the municipal government of Luigi de Magistris, even joining him in nationwide tours promoting “rebel cities” as a general strategy. However, the rhetoric of popular democracy has been limited to the involvement of a layer of social centre activists in initiatives such as the inspection of migrant shelters or in picking electoral lists. Meanwhile, De Magistris administers the dictatorship of capital by repaying the city’s debt to banks through cuts, privatisations and attacks on public workers’ conditions, to which graveyard workers responded succinctly this summer by carrying their own tombs to town hall. Last December even saw the introduction of what are called ‘vouchers’, an extremely precarious, contract-less form of employment, which De Magistris himself had campaigned against.”*

### **\*\*\* Why the shift from social strike to municipalism?**

We are sure that there is a genuine political excitement that a movement as impressive as M15 and a wider social ecology made up of anti-eviction groups, workers’ coops etc. can contribute to ‘taking power’ in a city like Barcelona. Nevertheless, we reckon that the shift of focus towards municipalism also has to do with less obvious political reasons. Here are some suggestions:

#### *\* The difficulty of getting rooted.*

If we understand a social strike as a (concrete, rather than symbolic) dispute that connects workplace-based power with wider proletarian issues and forms of struggle, e.g. squatting, then this would require building a permanent and strategic presence within the local working class. Perhaps given the social composition of the ‘autonomist left’ in the UK this might seem daunting. The material difficulties of going on strike or engaging in other forms of collective action are significant - to push boundaries within the legal system of representation seems easier.

#### *\* A ‘pluralism’ that avoids strategical decisions.*

We are not aware of internal discussions within Plan C about municipalism and what it would mean for the organisation as a whole. We can imagine the recent wave of Corbynism has created certain tensions within the organisation, like in the rest of the milieu - people joining and canvassing for the Labour Party must have clashed with some of the anarchism within Plan C. Municipalism seems like a bit of a compromise in order to avoid a sharper discussion: municipalism as some kind of ‘parliamentarism light’ is not as contentious as engaging in national politics, but gives concessions to the desire to ‘engage with the institutions’.

#### *\* The ease of seeing ourselves as ‘active citizens’.*

At first ‘citizen’ seems like an inclusive category. While students and academics might start squirming at the prospect of categorising themselves as part of the ‘proletariat’, we can all identify with the category of ‘citizen’, right? While organising a ‘social strike’ might mean

having to engage with people who have little or no political background, organising a 'citizen platform' as an electoral machine tends to focus on people who have a certain background of activism, who are media savvy or eloquent. It also tends to mainly address those who feel represented by the UK parliamentary system in general - which tends to exclude migrant workers, amongst others.

### **\*\*\* Building a class organisation**

We are aware that our alternative proposal to local citizen platforms or electoral strategies will sound like 'the same old stuff' to many. But we do think that in order to build a political revolutionary organisation we have to start from scratch and build local working class cells in a coordinated and strategic effort. We distinguish four levels of this building process:

- \* Set up a solidarity network in a working class area, addressing wider (migrant, domestic, individual, environmental) proletarian issues through mutual aid; the main aim would be to create a dynamic between a mass base (SolNet) and workers' activities in the main workplaces and/or sectors. At the very least it grounds our politics in concrete experiences.
- \* Create groups in main/large workplaces (universities, hospitals etc.) of the area that can make use of not only economic leverage, but the social character of production; only once the dynamic between SolNet and workplaces takes off will we be able to force local authorities to re-allocate resources etc.
- \* Document the experiences of both SolNet and workplace activities in a regular local newspaper that is distributed at strategic locations; use the newspaper to make programmatic points, e.g. regarding nationalism, crisis etc. in relevant non-activist language.
- \* Understand this process as a cell-building one: as self-education of new working class militants we meet, and as a local cell that reflects on its experience within a wider (international) organisation, e.g. through regular reports; this also means building bridges between a proletarian base and experimentation with 'alternative ways', e.g. workers' or housing coops, alternative technologies, environmental struggle etc.

This is hard-going but basic stuff, but without which, any discussion about tactics or strategy will remain airy or, lacking a proletarian base, will mainly address the political scene and replicate campaign politics. Many people will ask: but how does all this rank-and-file/local organising around mainly daily-life matters relate to general social transformation? And it's true, we have enough examples in the UK of 'honest and decent organising' developing a fetish for localism and anti-political attitudes. But then times are

changing and many people are eager to debate the relationship between ‘daily working class organising’ and the wider political organisation again, e.g. see the current debate in the IWW in the US. Apart from getting rooted, for us, the main task of a revolutionary organisation now is the analysis of class composition. This is a precondition to discuss the prospect of ‘insurrection and production’ towards a fundamental social transformation. This would entail looking at the objective and subjective conditions under which we produce capitalism and reproduce ourselves at the moment:

\* Objectively:

- how is science production, agriculture, manufacturing, care work organised nowadays?
- what are the main technological and social developments?
- what are the main capitalist contradictions? (over-capacities, bureaucracy etc.)

\* Subjectively:

- what are the hierarchies within social production (gender, intellectual/manual labour etc.) and how are they being reproduced?
- where are the strategic concentrations of workers? what are areas of social decomposition created by uneven development (surplus-population)?
- what are the main tensions and struggles in the essential industries?

The debate about how to prepare for a revolutionary moment should form part of our day-to-day organising: like the early IWW we have to self-educate ourselves, e.g. as food processing workers, we should be learning the modern and complex ways agro-industry



and food production is organised nowadays - while linking up with workers along the supply-chains in our daily struggles. At the same time we have to discuss the relation between the ‘productive existence’ of workers and the wider proletarian condition of being impoverished, marginalised and subjected to direct (state) violence. We question the traditional idea of ‘taking over the means of production’ through gradual organising within the industries, general strike and take over for two main reasons:

- \* the working class composition is too complex, larger parts of the class work outside of major industries; the vision of a gradual take-over ignores the organised violence and corruption of the state, targeting mainly the more atomised sections of the class;
- \* the production process as it is is alienating, creating and reproducing hierarchies, it is environmentally damaging; the struggle against this starts here and now and is not just a task for ‘after the take-over’.

We wrote a small pamphlet titled ‘Insurrection and Production’ where we criticise both the ‘automated communism’ vision and a purely ‘surplus population insurrection’ perspective

on social change. We try to portray class composition as the relation between organised proletarian violence and workers' productive collectivity and knowledge - both aspects being unevenly distributed amongst the class, according to regions, sectors etc. We try to outline the main steps a proletarian revolution in the UK region would have to undertake within the first months: What is the role of the 13 million workers in the 'essential industries' and how do we create domestic units for 250 people? What does the UK farming sector look like and what chances are there to undermine the division of manual and intellectual labour within a short span of time?

**\*\*\* To conclude...**

We are eager to connect with comrades who are willing to build local cells - we don't care in what name you do this.

We suggest systematising the exchange about local/sectoral working class conditions and organising efforts. This is not mainly a technical question, e.g. setting up channels of communication, but a question of a change in political focus: clarity in describing conditions in detail and honesty in sharing the experiences of difficulties we face when trying to organise.



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