



# Anarchism and Revolutionary Strategy

*Insurrectionary Councilism*

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Notes:

Special thanks to the comrades in RED who helped to shape these ideas.

This piece is a companion to another from the RED entitled "The Insurrectionary Campus: A Strategy Proposal." The article was a specific application of the wider theoretical and strategic framework developed more fully here.

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## Outro

## INTRO

How can anarchists help mobilize mass revolutionary struggle in America?

Socio-political fascism is on the rise again, giving this question fresh urgency. But that rise is the result of the basic structures of neoliberal capital. Fascism is the ruling social class' attempt to tame a basic contradiction. Capitalism's ruthless domination of human life and nature drives economic and ecological catastrophes and growing rebellion. To suppress widespread unrest, the establishment mobilizes the white supremacy, patriarchy, xenophobia, and militarism that have always been essential to capital, combining them in a more nakedly and aggressively authoritarian state. Trump is merely the puppet of this dynamic. America is hardly unique. The dynamic plays itself out in different ways and in various degrees in India, Russia, Turkey, Europe, and beyond.

Anarchists are facing a historic opportunity. We are witnessing an unprecedented outpouring of resistance in America, building on long-standing radical struggles. And in recent decades, anarchist ideas and practices have played an essential role in organizing radical resistance—from consensus-based decision-making to affinity groups, horizontal assemblies, and emphasis on decentralized direct action. This influence was obvious in the Global Justice Movement, in Occupy, and in Antifa coalitions today. Moreover, Trump's brand of state fascism has sparked a crisis within the ruling class itself; it hasn't fully established itself inside the state.

All of this means anarchists are poised to play a powerful role in helping organize a radical challenge to fascism's rise and the oppressive society that requires fascism to function. But radical struggle is deeply fractured and reactive. How are anarchists to respond? In recent years, anti-authoritarians have debated a number of organizing possibilities to channel radical energy into mass projects: using insurrectionary methods to assert our freedom and provoke the masses into action; building coalitions of multiple leftist groups, like in Antifa; emphasizing “cadre politics”, entering existing mass movements to push them leftwards; creating and expanding specifically anarchist movements (“especificismo”); organizing workplace, neighborhood, or city councils (as in anarchosyndicalism or, in a different way, in Occupy); and beyond.

To this debate—and drawing in various ways on all these traditions and beyond—I propose an “insurrectionary councilism.” This proposal is rooted in an analysis of the material conditions anarchists face today. Capital is undergoing an uneven, combined regression into more savage and direct forms of domination. At the same time, the radical left is beginning to congeal into a more radical form but remains deeply divided. In this context, insurrectionary councilism does not focus on either entering existing mass struggles (like in cadre politics) or building a specifically anarchist movement (as in *especificismo*). Following the lead of Antifa in Michigan and Charlottesville as well as the tradition of anarchosyndicalism, it calls for something else: creating radical, hybrid councils of delegates from the most radical anarchist *and* non-anarchist groups in a city for the sake of an experimental, federated, direct-action oriented system.

These are the aims of an insurrectionary councilism: to help tap into and share the rich and deep experience of groups too long separated from each other; to use those connections to build revolutionary solidarity and networks of coordinated radical action; and therefore to help congeal the revolutionary power of the radical left—to capitalize on this moment of crisis and danger. The aim is a more vibrant, intersectional, and coordinated federation of revolutionary groups.

This proposal emerges out of my work with the Radical Education Department. RED is a “pan-radical left,” rather than a strictly anarchist, organization. But it contains a strong anarchist current, and it is attempting to put many of these ideas into practice in Philadelphia. Ultimately, this proposal is self-consciously provisional. Arising out of RED’s experiments, it means above all to provoke non-dogmatic strategies, tactics, and ideas to help combine radicals and add to the creation of a powerful, broad, and revolutionary mass movement. It will, of course, need to be challenged, revised, and rethought as these experiments continue.



## PART I Conditions of Radical Struggle

### ***The law of uneven, combined regression***

To be effective, a revolutionary strategy must be grounded in an analysis of material conditions.

Capitalism in America and beyond has assumed a “neoliberal” form. Neoliberalism was a reaction to two connected stimuli. It was born as a way of coping with the falling rate of profit that was sending the economy into crisis in the 1970s—a comprehensive, failed project<sup>1</sup> of restoring previous levels of profitability, especially by destroying the power of workers over the production process.

Neoliberalism was also the name given to a capitalist counterrevolution. It is the ruling class’ response to the explosive struggles by workers and students against patriarchy, racism, and class domination in the 60s and 70s, and against the fetters on profit placed on capital by workers since the 1930s. In the aftermath of that explosion in America and beyond, the ruling class and its central committee, the state, mollified some struggles by enacting a series of limited compromises. They were forced to concede important civil rights to women and people of color, and Boltanski and Chiapello chart how capital integrated the New Left’s embrace of “freedom” and “creativity” into capital’s management techniques.<sup>2</sup>

The state resorted to obscene violence for more threatening struggles. The Black Panthers were murdered and arrested while the establishment launched a “war on drugs” to both rebuild white supremacist politics and target communities of color for mass incarceration. Unions were systematically dismantled or defanged to open the way for increased profits. Craters made by federal grenades in Alcatraz are permanent reminders of the savage repression of the American Indian Movement. Reagan in America, like Thatcher in England, consolidated a politics of repression and privatization. Under such pressure and due to internal pressures as well, the radical left splintered. Capital was left without a mass, revolutionary opponent within. With the collapse of the USSR—though it was hardly a radical and liberatory power—capital’s last major *external* opponent disappeared as well.

Neoliberalism is the form capitalism took when it burst the fetters that struggle placed on it—unleashing its blind, catastrophic drive to extract surplus value and expand.

Neoliberalism is governed by a law<sup>3</sup> of uneven, combined regression. It leaps behind the gains made by radical struggles past. It is rooted in the central and driving mechanisms of social

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Kliman, *The Failure of Capitalist Production* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 74.

<sup>2</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> This is a law in the same way that the tendential fall in the profit rate is a law. It is a constitutive tendency that can be offset for a time (by victories by leftist movements, e.g.), but that nonetheless

domination that movements weren't strong enough to destroy: the power of the ruling class over the economy and state; private property; the police; prisons, the hierarchies of work and schools; the patriarchy reproduced by the family unit and by political and management structures; etc. It mobilizes those bases in order to reinstitute earlier levels and kinds of domination. It does this by combining those older structures of domination with the most advanced technologies. The bourgeoisie's control of wealth and income have reached levels unseen in almost a century, spurred by the most innovative financial tools.<sup>4</sup> The ruling and managerial classes use the most advanced, post-Fordist production processes and the newest means of production, driving working hours well beyond the 40 hour limit that workers once forced upon bosses. Women are placed under more direct and more violent control through government attacks on *Roe v. Wade* and through laws that require invasive new ultrasound technologies be forced on women prior to abortions. Civil rights protections erode or crumble. Communities of color are more blatantly placed under direct, lethal police control, which offers the most technologically advanced form of lynching. The mass incarceration system targeting Black communities regenerates slave labor in prisons, making the roots of the police in slave patrols increasingly obvious. White supremacy serves once more as an unabashed political plank—as in the current administration—although now it is announced, among other means, via Twitter.

Rolling back the advances of radical struggles and decimating resistance, capital intensifies its extraction of surplus labor and its quest for control—in the home, in prisons, at work, and in the streets.

Capital's regression is, of course, international. The declining rates of profit that helped spur the neoliberal revolution at home laid the groundwork for a new wave of neocolonial expansion to exploit cheaper labor in the so-called “developing” world. Imperialist wars—including the longest war in American history—open up the Middle East and elsewhere to neoliberal economic expansion, a new colonialism. Trump is positioning America for a new round of imperial military expansion in Iran, a desperate move to relieve social unrest at home and open up new, decimated markets for investment. Conflicts at the “periphery” fuel domination at “home.” The advanced gear outfitting police for increasingly brutal, militarized repression—particularly of immigrants and people of color (as in Ferguson)—is the surplus cast off by war.

In capital's uneven regression, its apparently “backward” elements serve as reactionary vanguards of capital. Liberals see the KKK and neo-Nazis as bizarre holdovers from the past. These relics have no place in society; they represent no systemic forces; they must be tolerated, even given full police protection. But this liberal fantasy misses the fact that they are foot soldiers empowered by the police and the executive branch to test the limits of liberal tolerance. The Klan and resurgent white supremacists represent the essence of capitalist “law

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reasserts itself if there is no radical transformation of the material conditions that constitute neoliberal capitalism.

<sup>4</sup> On neoliberalism's massive redistribution of wealth upwards, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.

and order.” They are essential to the state as it exerts the fascistic control needed to protect capitalism.

### **Forces and relations of revolt**

But the shattering of radical power was not only a result of *external* pressure. It was rooted in *internal* causes as well. In the radical struggles of the 60s and 70s, the *forces* of revolt ruptured and went far beyond their *social relations*—the organizational structures that were supposed to house and channel them.

A vast array of radical, socially destabilizing, overlapping struggles exploded onto the scene—revolutionary feminists of color, radical queer movements, the American Indian Movement, student-worker movements, the Black Panthers, revolutionary ecological movements, and well beyond—rejecting classical ways of organizing. Both the Old and New Lefts mimicked the hierarchical party in various ways, reproducing precisely the bureaucratic, white, male, and upper-class domination that new struggles were fighting against. And where the established forms of struggle tended to see domination as monocausal—a problem of class alone—groups like the Combahee River Collective revealed the *interconnected* nature of domination, calling for *intersectional* revolution.

The radical left proved unable to create durable, mass revolutionary structures adequate to these developing forces. It fractured from within as it was being repressed from without.

A newly dominant model of mass struggle did emerge—for instance, in the student struggles in the late 60s and in the massive 1971 May Day anti-war protest that shut down Washington, DC. This model addressed the problem of organization through decentralization: the coordination of independent groups, often in reaction to some event (a war or a capitalist summit). Since those years, the reigning “common sense” of radical mass mobilizing on the left (though by no means of all radical groups) has been the horizontal organizing of largely independent groups. But such a model is a fragile one. Reactive, it struggles to survive when its external stimulus (the summit or war) disappears. And since it starts and ends with separated, even “siloes” groups and movements, it tends to fracture and dissipate quickly under state pressure.<sup>5</sup>

Capital's regression, then, is accompanied by a regression of struggle. Radicals cannot rely on traditional organizational models. The pioneering, essential work of women of color feminists, anarchists, and others has shown how exclusionary and repressive the old top-down modes of organizing are. More than this, the leftist hierarchical parties emerging within neoliberalism—Syriza and Podemos, e.g.—repeat the lessons taught by social democratic parties in the early 20th century. They either bend to the rules of capital, or their apparent radical power quickly evaporates. For huge swaths of the radical left, the idea of building a new hierarchical party or

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<sup>5</sup> For this account I draw heavily on L.A. Kauffmann, *Direct Action: Protests and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (London: Verso, 2017).

group is justly discredited. This is an important part of the growing appeal of anarchism for the radical left today.

And yet neoliberal capital lays the foundations for mass revolutionary struggle. Unleashed finance and corporate capital are deeply unstable. Riven by contradictions—the chaotic, fragile nature of speculative finance, value accumulation beyond ecosystem limits, and an underlying, declining rate of profit, etc.—capital pushes the social system inevitably towards ecological and economic crises. The aftermath of the 2008 crisis revealed that systemic crisis does not result (as it did in the 1930s and 1940s) in semi-socialist compromises. This is the result of a weak left. The contradictions are not ameliorated but gather strength. At the same time, capital increasingly removes the humane mask it was made to wear by past struggles. The repression by which capital overcame its enemies leads to the increasing polarization and concentration of radical struggle, as in anti-white supremacy explosions in Ferguson and Baltimore; the Global Justice Movement; Occupy; wildcat worker struggles beyond compromised union leadership; and so on.

Our situation resembles much earlier struggles against industrial capital as the working class was only beginning to learn how to create organs of revolutionary power. Then as now, powerful revolutionary forces are emerging and connecting. But we lack the organizational forms we would need to capture and channel those forces in mass, revolutionary, intersectional, and *durable* struggle.



### **Neoliberalism, regression, fascism**

State fascism is capital's response to the instability and unrest it generates. The Trump administration's fascism—its rabid militarism, authoritarian propaganda machine, embrace of extralegal violence, pursuit of a white ethno-state, and its fetish of police and military power—is no aberration. It is rooted in the deep and broad fascistic social forces that characterize neoliberal regression. "Trumpism" is simply a more aggressive and obvious combination of the state structure with neoliberal capital's class domination, white supremacy, patriarchy, and militarism. It offers a vision of a threatened national, white, masculine identity whose "restoration" in a white ethnostate it pursues via the police and military.

In this way, Trumpism uses the reactionary forces of neoliberalism to rechannel the discontent *generated by* neoliberalism. Through Trump, the capitalist system responds to the danger of radical struggle. Trump rose to political power after the failure of the two major political parties to manage the mass discontent created by the 2008 crisis, which exploded in the struggles of Ferguson against white supremacist policing and economics and Occupy against the "1%". We must not forget that Trump ran on a platform of extralegal violence against protesters; that the police were key supporters; and that he ran advocating the kind of police violence that inevitably targets people of color (a direct response to Black Lives Matter). The new American fascism assumes the threat of radical social change and it exists to violently repress it.

The goal is typical of historical fascism. The project of racial domination is meant to unify, in the wake of economic crisis and social unrest, the petite bourgeoisie threatened by globalizing corporate capital with segments of the squeezed working classes, precisely to rally them behind corporate and financial interests. Trump's fig leaf nationalism and his lovers' quarrels with CEOs do not hide the fact that the administration is little more than a puppet of the bourgeoisie. It is no surprise, then, that his administration—overwhelmingly made up of millionaires and billionaires—championed a tax plan tailor-made for the ruling class. Even his seemingly nationalist push for tariffs was a play to the base that couldn't be sustained. Trump quickly abandoned the idea of tariffs for almost any country but China—and this stance itself was an attempt to further open Chinese markets to international competition.

For too long, though, the theory of fascism has seen ideologies of racial and male domination merely as convenient tools capitalism uses to protect itself. Racial and gender domination are not simply means put to cynical use by the ruling class. Capitalism is white supremacist and patriarchal. Its class rule generates and regenerates hyper-exploited and expandable populations through internal and external colonies—in the home, in prisons, abroad. Capitalism creates the basic conditions through which the white supremacy and patriarchy essential to the American social system can flourish. It is thrown into crisis when these systems are radically challenged; its panic in the face of the Black Panthers and terror at the prospect of women's autonomy is proof enough of this.

But fascism, like capital, does not develop evenly. A state structure does not become fascist overnight, like turning off a light. Fascism "creeps." To pursue fascistic policies, the executive

branch mostly draws on arms of the state subject to greater executive control and already oriented around white supremacist ideals—like ICE. Other parts of the state are sluggish or resist. The judicial system limited the rollout of Trump’s immigration policies, for instance. Such friction is one reason Trump so often appeals to vigilantism. He “privitizes” fascist violence in order to avoid the complications of state machinery. Intra-state “resistance” is no cause for hope. That the FBI challenges Trump does not erase its fascistic purpose and history. The state will not save us from the capitalist forces that control it, the very forces that generated fascism.

Radicals face a moment of danger and opportunity, then. Fascism is on the rise, but unevenly; its power hasn’t yet found a firm foothold in the state. It may be that political fascism gains a greater foothold—for example, if it is able to more successfully target activists for extreme punishments (as it means to do in the J20 trials). That hasn’t happened yet. Now is the time to build mass, revolutionary struggle that can attack Trump—and, more importantly, the social forces that spawned him.



## PART II Insurrectionary Councilism

How should anarchists respond to this situation? Below I offer one possibility. But organization for a radical mass movement can only be discovered collectively and through continuous dialogue and experiment. I suggest the following model to spur further conversation and experiment as we forge a radical mass movement together.

“Insurrectionary councilism” offers a potentially powerful tool for anarchists to help build a revolutionary, broad-based struggle. It is rooted in a variety of traditions, from anarchosyndicalism’s federative vision of organizing to the powerful coalition work informing Antifa, the Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Committee, the Steel City Autonomous Movement, Zapatista *encuentros*, and beyond.

The following sketches the outlines of this idea.

### ***Movement councils***

Insurrectionary councilism calls for councils of members from radical groups—both anarchist *and* non-anarchist. Councils would aim to coordinate, concentrate, and train radical struggles against multiple fronts of domination. This spokes-model, then, emphasizes connecting delegates from social movements, rather than attempting to enter and influence existing struggles or to work within explicitly anarchist groups. There are several reasons for this.

First: the urgency of the situation—the uneven rise of political fascism—calls for a rapid response before fascism can gain a stronger foothold within the state. Focusing primarily on coordinating those already radicalized, rather than on the important but slower work of base-building, offers a way of addressing this urgency.

Second: the left was shattered by capital, and as a result, many of us have been working in activist “silos.” Connecting groups and movements within radical councils, then, puts powerful new resources at the hands of activists, allowing previously divided struggles to learn from one another’s accumulated experience, theory, and strategy. Says Chris Crass: “I think that when broader left/radical forces come together there is an enormous opportunity for us to share and learn politics and organizing that can take all of our work to the next level.” This strategy has been powerfully illustrated in Antifa. To shut down a Richard Spencer event at the University of Michigan and to counter fascists in Charlottesville, radicals drew upon a wide range of leftist struggles, creating a broad and forceful coalitional base to resist.

Third: members of radical groups are the “leading edge” of the social groups from which they come—that is, the most energized, the most conscious of social domination and its structures, and the most experienced in organizing. Tapping into and connecting delegates of movement *groups*, then, means building a base among people that are, in turn, already organically

connected to various dominated communities. This approach has the potential to help mobilize large and intersectional bases of support *out of* such communities. An intersectional revolutionary strategy is absolutely essential to counter the broad and intersectional nature of capitalist domination: its simultaneous class, racial, and gender domination.

Among the most important social groups from which to recruit delegates, I suggest, are (though this list is very far from comprehensive):

- Movements of the downwardly mobile lower edge of the petit bourgeoisie—students, recent graduates, etc.—like Occupy
- Revolution-oriented unions (like the IWW) that stand at a distance from more reformist labor unions; especially important are those organizing precarious service employees, perhaps the largest and potentially among the most politically powerful workers in the United States
- Prison and police abolitionist groups and coalitions, and more broadly, revolutionary struggles against white supremacy (such as the Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement)
- Radical queer and feminist struggles like Nightshade
- Radical anarchist groups and coalitions like Black Rose/Rosa Negra and the Steel City Autonomous Movement
- Radical groups and coalitions against xenophobia like No One Is Illegal
- Radical student groups and coalitions, especially those linking on-campus and off-campus struggle (against gentrification, e.g.)
- Revolutionary ecological groups like Earth First!

### **Shared revolutionary culture**

Because the left is shattered, a key task becomes “congealing” the left, developing a shared revolutionary “culture” of solidarity and connection. Councils are to be places to not only educate ourselves about systems of social domination but also prepare ourselves for the collective task of self-determination.

Similar work in building a radical culture has been essential to Zapatismo, whose *encuentros* gave birth to the Global Justice Movement, and survived in Occupy in the form of educational working groups. A council of delegates offers a unique opportunity for such work. Since it would mobilize members of the most radical groups in a city, it would allow those movements a venue to forge a collective revolutionary identity together and within “parent” groups, strengthening the radical culture of a city.

### **Direct action and “emergent strategy”**

The left hasn’t yet discovered durable ways to connect the diversity of radical struggles. Insurrectionary councilism is not itself the answer to this problem. But it aims to help create the conditions in which to solve it.

Insurrectionary councilism stresses an *experimental* method that constantly learns and develops, trying out new theories, tactics, and strategies for how diverse groups can combine. What organizational structures are required and most effective? What tactics and strategies are appropriate given the goals and nature of a radical council? What institutions and problems should be targeted, and in what order? And so on.

I call this an “insurrectionary” councilism to emphasize the need for an *active* and *exploratory*—rather than reactive—focus. Again and again, anarchists and anarchosyndicalists have rightly pointed out the central importance of direct actions that are not simply responses to the status quo. Direct action develops self-determination at the same time that it reveals first-hand the possibilities and limits that face radical struggles. In an *insurrectionary* councilism, councils would embrace the hostile, experimental direct action that tests the powers that be to develop strength and knowledge—a crucial means to radicalize, educate, and connect delegates and member groups.

The goal of insurrectionary councilism, then, is to create the conditions for what adrienne marie brown theorizes as “emergent strategy”. In other words, the aim is to create the conditions for generating the revolutionary theory, strategy, and tactics we lack today. Councils would be laboratories. When actions and projects don’t achieve the desired goal, they nonetheless succeed. The knowledge and experience gained is essential to the next phase of radical work. The goal, then, is to build an organizing structure that contains conduits for gathering and disseminating the experience of radicals.

### **Federation**

Insurrectionary councilism is rooted in part in Occupy’s legacy, but it is also a response to the latter’s limits. Occupy, too, was a kind of experimental system of councils, but it was extremely unstable. This was not just a result of violent and direct state repression. Among a long list of other problems, Occupy was a platform for the organization of individuals, not groups; it suffered from an inability to connect and coordinate existing struggles in the cities it emerged in. Moreover, it often became reactionary, directing nearly all of its energies to defending a public space against attack. It failed to create an adequate structure to not only survive its inevitable destruction but also to save and transmit its ideas, practices, and lessons in an orderly way to ensure the struggle could continue elsewhere.

Against this parochialism, insurrectionary councilism calls for a *federative* system that borrows heavily from the anarchosyndicalist tradition. The aim is not simply the creation of movement councils, but their connection across regions and even nations, via a central (elected, immediately revocable, and purely administrative) body managing large-scale communication and support. Such loose centralization *and* federation would be a way to disseminate and coordinate the accumulated radical work produced by connecting groups.

A federative model also offers a tool for more durable struggle. We live in a counter-revolutionary rather than a revolutionary moment. While capitalism’s uneven, combined

regression is preparing more crises and revolutionary opportunities, conditions are by no means ideal. It is probably not possible to generate truly revolutionary mass struggle now; such attempts will be destroyed or co-opted. The goal is intermediate: to generate mass, revolutionary experiments that can “fail well”—leaving behind a maximum of accumulated strategy, tactics, theory, energy, and organizing infrastructures, ensuring that the next effort will start at a higher level. The federative structure outlined here offers a tool to gather up and transmit our experiments to other councils and groups as well as to the future, laying the groundwork from which a revolutionary movement can again spring at the right moment.

This proposal tends to focus on the national context, but this is the reflection of the weakness of international radical solidarity. The project of building a radical federalism *must* stretch beyond and challenge national boundaries. Capital is international. Wherever possible it is essential to connect and coordinate radical groups, struggles, movements, coalitions, and councils across borders to challenge capital on its own terrain.

### ***Non-dogmatic radicalism***

The Global Justice Movement, like Occupy, tried to create a very broad ideological tent to gather opposition to capital, mistaking numbers for strength. This is perhaps a difficult mistake to avoid as the radical left reassembles itself. But as a result, general assemblies and working groups became endless battles between radicals, liberals, and libertarians.

Radical movement councils, to avoid ideological deadlock, should be both *open to non-anarchists* and *closed to non-radicals*. One tool for achieving this is already put to use by many radical coalitions: a “minimum radical platform” that serves as a foundation of membership—for example, anti-capitalism; the recognition and rejection of all intersecting forms of domination; and an openness to strategic, radical direct action (if only in the form of an agreement on a “diversity of tactics”) as a key route to radical consciousness and organization. Organizing in this way, the council itself becomes a place to hammer out—in common with a range of radical groups—the theories of domination, resistance, and revolution needed to organize against neoliberal capital. This is not to exclude groups pursuing radical reformism like No One Is Illegal, which works within the legal system to help undocumented workers. But such groups distinguish themselves by refusing to stop at the level of reform, pushing beyond towards more radical social change.

## **OUTRO**

Insurrectionary councilism is designed to be both open and experimental, to help spark “emergent strategies” for a mass, revolutionary, and durable movement. It must be tested through critique, debate, and practice. The goal is preparation for the next revolutionary moment. That moment is already taking shape inside neoliberal capital.

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