The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we’ve been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC). We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humors) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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The Final Straw Radio / Merced Hunger Strike & Eric King
S: Sometimes I feel like I want so bad to be around people that I just assume we know and share something. So with anarchists, it’s a version of that. Same with queer/trans people or punks or whatever. Yeah, we know something. We don’t have to say it. But then, I want my anarchist friends to like, I want to hear what they have to say and think about something because they have really good ways of thinking about stuff. I need to parse it out with them. That piece was a nugget in my head and so talking it through is really helpful and bringing things together and I appreciate it.

Scott: Yeah, this is Scott and I thought I’d start by giving a quick little summary overview of the piece. The pieces written in points, but I’m going to kind of bring them all together. I thought this piece was really helpful and interesting because it ties together a bunch of different important phenomena, especially like recent ones. Not just the pandemic, the George Floyd uprisings and the great resignation, which this piece says we should rename the great refusal, but also the longer arc of rebellion over the last 10 years. Basically, there’s this claim in the piece that the insurrection that we saw from George Floyd uprisings has been translated into daily life. So the struggle has left the realm of the political and now is possibly moving towards a social revolution. I think that’s good to kind of set us up for a conversation.

Vicky: Yeah, totally. First of all, thank you so much. It’s so nice to be back here with y’all, on one of my favorite shows. It’s such a pleasure just to chat, especially under these circumstances. When we scheduled this... things have changed globally. So it’s exciting to sit and think, reground ourselves in thinking through our local contexts and what that looks like. It’s really valuable. So I appreciate you and appreciate the audience, too.

I think one of the things about this piece that I found really sort of activating I guess is the way in which it talks about the great resignation, which has been this wave of quitting. Mass wave of quitting jobs that has gone on now, basically, since the beginning of
the pandemic, but it accelerated really dramatically in 2021. I haven’t seen January numbers, but I know that even through December, it continued to accelerate, people are quitting their jobs more and more. Some of that is almost certainly due to the pandemic and the conditions of work that that produces. Some people have, when I’ve talked to comrades about this piece some of them have sort of said, “oh, well, you know, I think the quitting is just about the conditions getting worse or people having to care for each other.” That might be true, but that’s also still a recognition that it’s not possible to do work under those circumstances.

I think it’s really interesting because I think we have gotten into this habit over the last 10 years that this piece talks about, sort of these movement waves where this big movement blows up in the streets. In 2009 there’s Oscar Grant and you have the student strikes, but it was really occupy in 2011 that really sort of starts the cycle. Those sort of would be defined by tactical innovation: the squares, or the riot in the case of Ferguson in Baltimore, holding a space with with rioting. Once that tactic was outflanked or defeated by a combination of the left/liberals and the police then we would sort of go back into a moment of waiting.

I think what’s been really interesting about the last year and a half that this piece sort of points out, really sharpened for me, is that in fact 2020 was so big and so consequential, the George Floyd rebellion, that we have this explosion of basically autonomous but not fully disorganized job-leaving. We’ve seen memes about it, people sharing those signs of a Burger King, “we’re all closed, sorry, everyone quit” but also the explosion of the Reddit r/antiwork which became such a thing that they ended up on Fox News and Reddit shut them down. They splintered into all these more reformist subreddits. But it was the fastest growing subreddit in years. There were 1000s of people posting about how much they hated work. I spent a lot of time watching it as well. It had a very anti-recuperative tendency that was really strong. People tried to bring it into democratic politics or party politics and they would get shot down. It was really like, “No, no, no, the focus is on how our jobs suck and how our labor conditions suck and we have to destroy work.” That was really interesting that that space sort of developed spontaneously in this way that’s very similar to what the movement looks like, which is just people quitting their jobs and then millions. This piece brings that as like an attack, as opposed to a sort of tactical defense, which all those other sort of moments where, as opposed to like a political moment.

These are all interesting questions. This distinction between the political and the social and the attack versus the reactive or defensive movement I think is the stuff that’s really interesting for me.

A: I can relate to that Vicky. I also was having trouble finishing anything. Finishing movies or TV shows or just not having this sort of sustained focus. That’s so interesting. I don’t think I’ve ever heard folk talk about that much.

V: That’s so funny because I bring it up and then I hear very similar. I hear something like, “oh, yeah, actually I couldn’t do that either and I haven’t really thought about that.” I think it was a collective condition.

S: Yeah. I’m in this queer book club and people have said that in the book club. That last year they didn’t read books at all. It’s that was exceptional for them.

V: What a time we’ve been living through.

S: Yeah, it’s fucked.

V: Jeez! I mean, personally, I think 2016 year six is the worst one yet. The worst 2016 yet.

S: Yeah, I feel that. I’m sorry that you’ve been bearing all that in. But thank you for also talking with us now.

V: Oh, my God. Literally I have to keep marking that for myself. But it’s been such a pleasure. I wasn’t sure. I had this long day. But this has been so delightful and given me so much life and I feel so held and among friends and comrades and it’s beautiful. Thank you both so much for organizing this and having it happen.

S: Yeah, thanks for being willing.

A: Thanks for being willing. This was definitely medicinal for me as well. It just feels like it’s getting to talk to y’all. Sometimes I think that anarchists fall into this trap where we don’t really talk about politics, as weird as that might sound, delving down into sort of nitty gritty and I really love that that happened here.

V: You just made me realize when saying that how often my interlocutors on that call themselves communists. Like when I want to talk about politics with someone it’s mostly with people who call themselves communists. I mean like anti-State, Left-Communists or whatever, but it’s interesting how few anarchists comrades I have who I get into that broad strategic political questions because that has so
S: I feel like this could be a place to wrap it up. I keep thinking about going into the horrible policy stuff that’s going on. But I’m like, “No, let’s not bring that back in.”

V: Yeah, I mean, I’m really loving talking to you both. So it’s tempting to just keep going. But I think probably. Yeah.

A: This is so lovely. It’s really lovely to get to talk to y’all two.

S: I love doing this. It’s really helpful to me as a person who likes to think in dialogue in real time. Dialogue is really nice.

V: That’s a really nice thing in the Graber book, actually, they talk about that as a critique of Descartes.

S: I have it. I haven’t cracked yet.

V: Sorry. I’m literally reading it to my partner because they just never think spontaneously to read books by men. So whenever there’s one that I think is going to be interesting, I’m like, “Okay, I’m gonna read this one to you.” Otherwise, it’s never gonna happen.

S: I love that. It seems appropriate.

A: Having distance for books by man is really reasonable.

V: It’s not even conscious. I don’t think they’re even aware of it.

A: That’s even better.

V: It’s incredibly charming. I’m obsessed. Honestly.

S: I’m actually reading a book by man and I’m regretting it, so.

V: Often the case.

A: I’m now I’m reading a book by a man, but it’s about it’s about the Amazon strikes, and it’s mostly interviews. At least I think this person’s a man. I’m actually not sure. We’ll see how it goes. It’s good so far. What are you reading Scott?

S: I just started reading the most recent Jeff VanderMeer science fiction novel for reading at night and I don’t like it. I might not finish it, I don’t know. I was just reading a bunch of really awesome queer and trans stuff. Then Jeff VanderMeer. Like why did I do that?

V: I had that experiences in 2021. I think it’s literally the first year in my entire life since I’ve been able to read. I didn’t finish a single book. That question that always comes up because often a lot of anarchist organizing or anarchist action comes in spontaneous waves in reaction to things and then we’re always left scratching our heads, “how do we move ahead of the things that get thrown at us?” But yeah, Amar, I’ll pass to you.

A: Oh, Amar is fine. The whole Reddit /antiwork phenomenon is really interesting. I heard a little bit about it, because like I’m not a redditor. I know of it sort of nominally. But I gather that it was started by two anarchists. I gather that those two anarchists are also trans people. I don’t know if either of those folks are still involved in it. But for me and as an older millennial, the role of the internet and all of this is just fascinating. It’s just fascinating to see how this sort of not truly global because it’s still not yet accessible in all corners of the world, but this more global platform than I’ve actually seen in my lifetime has really furthered the anti-work sentiment, the great refusal sentiments, and it’s just super fascinating to see that.

V: Yeah, exactly. And the other thing that happened last year, I mean, obviously most of the news attention went to the far right or right wing anti-Vax protests and obviously the more recent up in so-called Canada, the caravan. They were doing occupy again, like 10 years later. We couldn’t do occupy if we wanted. We would need 10,000 people rioting to hold a square. We needed that in 2020 to hold the square for a few days, but they needed like 100 people in trucks and they go to do occupy again. Whatever. It’s still scary, obviously, but the State is giving them a lot of tactical latitude. Anyway, that’s been where all the attention has been. That has been the “politics of resistance” during this period after the rebellion.

But there were also those moments of spontaneous looting, and the student walkouts. I think one of the things that the piece tries to pull towards is that a lot of these things that have been happening have been less visible. I write about this in my book about how during the Great Depression, there was this mass wave of looting that store owners wouldn’t even report it to the police for fear of it entering the news and people getting ideas. So we have no idea historically how much it was, except that it was widespread enough that we know that many people didn’t want to talk about it. That’s all we know about it and that’s from contemporaneous reports.

The collapse of like school grading... I know a bunch of teachers, both at the university and primary and high school level. School discipline has completely collapsed. Work discipline has largely collapsed. One of the things about all these people quitting their jobs is that the bad jobs... nominal wages, and again wages are very hard to determine, there’s debate about this, but nominal wages have gone up year over year in 2021. Faster than they had anytime since the 70’s. It led to this immediate wage increase. I think that that stuff is really interesting in this period when there’s a lot of demand from the left that we focus on organizing the workplace. Like, “Oh, you gotta organize...
the workplace." Actually, we’re seeing all this workers struggle, but it’s not really being seen as that because it’s not taking this visible political form.

**A:** Do you think that... because I’ve seen that too. I used to drive to work every day and there was a McDonald’s on my drive and one week it was “now hiring $15 and up” and then it just went up and up every single week. Like 16, 17, 18 and now it’s a $21 an hour, which is just incredible. I wonder too, with the public perception of the refusal or anti-work generally, is that you see a lot of it coalescing in lower wage or fast food or jobs that are seen as unskilled or disposable. Do y’all think that that’s affecting how folks are thinking about it a little bit? Because I’ve definitely seen that. It’s not really seen as a general strike. It’s not really seen as workers organizing each other and I wonder if there’s some endemic classism in there?

**S:** Oh, yeah. Well, I mean when the pandemic first hit the hierarchy of jobs, I feel, became so apparent based on who was able to work from home and then who was an essential worker, which was unless you are a nurse or doctor, a devalued worker, right? Typically in the service industry or in the supermarket or something like that. So I think that stuff became kind of pretty clear right away. And listening to what you were just saying. I was thinking about how the people forced to work in service industry during the pandemic were also being forced to risk their health in ways that other people were removed from if they had these other options. That continues even now with the people in service industry being put into these positions that they can’t really say no to.

I think that one of the things that’s interesting about thinking about the wages going up is that this happened without workers making demands, and this piece really talks about how there’s a nostalgia on the Left for the traditional workers movement, for like labor organizing. Which is this kind of organized way to go in this particular workplace typically, not in a general way, and make specific demands within that instance. This is spreading in a very different way, not through the typical ways of organizing. I think that is another interesting phenomenon of social media and internet.

I think it’s interesting how this piece ties that together, also with the way that the discourse around police abolition and prison abolition sort of spread all of a sudden through the George Floyd uprisings. It shows us something like that we can’t go and lecture people to believe these things and hope that they’ll just take them on. There’s something else that is causing this spread. It’s not the Vanguard party going and doing political lessons for people.

**V:** Yeah, it’s really happening and it doesn’t fit any of our theories very deeply. That doesn’t mean that we therefore have to jettison every previous theory, but it means we have to think and act differently in some ways. That means being unknowing. I always get into trouble with that literally with my friends and relationships. I’m always getting into trouble pretending to know shit. Then people are like, “you’re bullshitting.” You are right. It’s a real problem. It’s such a problem for everyone. It’s really hard to embrace unknowing. It’s really, really hard. But as your expert guest here on this podcast I would like to give my expertise to say, “I don’t know shit, and you don’t either and that’s kind of a beautiful place to start.”

**A:** Yeah, I love that. And I think the popular narrative is very slowly skewing toward that. So that’s also really nice to see.
to be convinced that wearing a mask is not a big deal and that it helps people, that just doesn’t seem to be the place that we should be putting our effort and time into.

This was just helping me think about that, because it’s something I’ve been wondering about for a while. Why did that space go to the right when it’s typically an anti-state stance?

A: This is reminding me of... did y’all read that piece Against the Liberal Creep?

S: I did.

V: I flipped through it. I didn’t read the whole thing.

A: I couldn’t really tell like how much of it was a shitpost. Like, really couldn’t tell, but I feel like, Scott, it was really going in that direction of being like, “the right got this anti-state mandate thing and we should have jumped on that and pivoted the narrative.” Among many other things I’m not doing really doing this piece justice. I’m like honestly not sure if I would recommend it. But it’s interesting as a thought exercise. I guess.

S: I actually read this piece and the Interregnum piece around the same time, and I really didn’t like Against the Liberal Creep and what it was trying to say and then and then I think I went to Interregnum and I was like, “oh, okay, here’s a more helpful analysis” for me at least, than the Against the Liberal Creep one.

V: Yeah. One of the things that happens, and that really infuriates me, as someone who tends to think historically is how much people are happy to forget our very, very immediate recent history. In 2016, 2017, 2018, a lot of people said, “we got to try and pull out from the right, we got to try and organize, we got to get in front of their talking points, or whatever.” Most of those people have gone to the right. Most of those people are now on the right. They didn’t pull anyone to the left, they’re on the right now. I think people will have their own particular example of who I’m talking about because there were a lot of them. They were mostly grifters.

I think there’s this idea that we have to convince people, [that] it’s our job as revolutionaries who are enlightened to convince people and obviously I’m here on a radio show. I think education and discussion and ideas are really important. I write not quite for a living, but I get paid to write sometimes. I do not make a living doing it. So I think that stuff is important. But also, it’s the wrong idea of the relationship to it. The thing that Marxists have often gotten right historically is the conditions of people’s exploitation and lives is sufficient to educate them about what’s wrong. Anarchists are good at that too, often. People know, and yes, there will be edge cases where someone gets radicalized the wrong way. Maybe you encounter them

Black Reconstruction, they’re starting to see the general strike of the enslaved as a real thing, as a thing that happened as he as he describes it. But every year, even before the Civil War, 50,000 enslaved people, obviously, most of them illiterate, in many ways, facing incredibly difficult modes of communication between separate plantations, even within plantations, although, as more and more scholars are demonstrating, they were very good at communicating and there was a very dense communication network that famously Harriet Tubman used to spy on Confederate soldiers.

In any case there was also in response to Jim Crow in the fascist regime in the South, the post-slavery fascist regime in the South or post reconstruction, you have the great migrations. Which I think don’t get talked about as labor action in the same way. Even though people like Idia B. Wells at the time understood them as such. The nostalgia for the classical workers movement isn’t just a Marxist, although it is often sort of worshipping of a particular industrial proletariat, which again lots of Marxist don’t do, but a lot of them do as well. It’s not just that. It’s also a refusal to recognize Black and indigenous forms of resistance historically in the country.

So I think it’s not surprising that in the wake of a Black uprising that spreads so widely to all of society that then we would be seeing these tactics that have a more historical echo with practices of maroonage, migration, mass networked action that aren’t necessarily organized into the “solidarity fist” of the union in exactly the same way. I don’t want to get all talking about Deleuze or whatever the hell... But I think there’s a real opportunity here. And the reason that I want to have this conversation, and I think we all did is because we are actually in a moment when things really feel like they’re at stake. Obviously, the war, and the murder, and all the events of the last few weeks have have increased that feeling that there’s high stakes. I also think what the piece says and I agree with is the proletariat, the class is on the move. I didn’t do it.

V: This is reminding me of... did y’all read that piece Against the Liberal Creep?...
comfortable saying that on the radio and feeling like that's real. You know what I mean?

A: Absolutely. This is the first time in my life that I’ve seen a lot of these things happen. It’s incredible, not to parrot myself a little bit, but it's incredible to see the things that are happening right now. And thank you also for bringing a historical context to the point of the general strike and all of that stuff. Because I think that that's history that people are speaking of, but is a parallel that, I think is very well drawn, and needs to be drawn now.

S: I think, and there’s something in the piece and then the history that you just brought up, Vicky, too, there’s something about what gets seen and understood and what doesn’t get seen or comprehended in various ways. There’s a particular racialized and colonial history to that, that we know when we talk about US history in particular, there’s a uniform narrative that’s given that tries to fit things into progress, or sort of like a immiseration of particular groups of people as part of our collective history that leaves out all of these multifarious ways that people have resisted. If we don’t tell those stories we can’t learn that that happened. First of all, which is inspiring for today, but also learn that there’s flexible ways to do it.

So the most visible things that are also whitened, right? Or like the labor strikes. I think for us as anarchists recently, it’s a certain kind of uprising. Those things are interesting because I think maybe one of the reasons that they get so much play and are so compelling is because they do play, like the piece says, into the spectacle, the image of politics. They also tend to have an end. I think sometimes in my anarchist thinking. I really get into this idea of the eruption of moments of liberation that we formed that are temporary and then they dissolve. But there’s something else in this piece that’s gesturing towards, “how do we not just wait for those untimely moments to come and echo across the years or whatever,” but like, “how do we sustain things in the meantime.” There’s these threads of sustained resistance throughout history that fly under the radar.

One of the things that the piece talks about, which I would love to hear what you all think, to what extent do we want things to be like clandestine and not talked about so that they can keep happening in a way that allows for spaces of freedom? And not either recuperation or violence from the State? And to what extent is that just a failure from the analyst or whatever to see that there’s really strong resistance going on?

V: So for that final question, I think one of the things I’ve heard, a close comrade, a friend of mine when I was tweeting about this piece who has slightly different politics from me was sort of saying, “Oh, well, I think this movement of quitting will lead to mass repression.” I think that’s sort of the question you’re saying, when we make a struggle like this legible do we risk damaging it? First of all, yes, of

start moving in these other directions, because we can see this other thing that is perhaps further in our history for many of us, for all of us, in fact, who have been forced to live under this white supremacist, settler, colonialist, European regime for as long as we have.

There are deep, deep roots to the extent in our history, and I want to call it our history, not our nature, or whatever, in our history that are very different. I think as things start to break down, or continue to break down, rather, as this stuff all breaks down, we can make gestures and movements together to take care of one another, that push against that, and that can radiate out, in much the same way that the sort of political tactics of struggle were imitated and radiated out over our movements over the last 10 years.

A: One great thing about the mutual aid sphere that’s been being fostered through institutions at this point, like Food Not Bombs, and Prison Books and related stuff, I think it has provided a really, not gentle, but easily accessible entry point for people who are just getting radicalized. There are just a lot of people who are getting radicalized in all sorts of different directions right now. I’ve seen the mutual aid be really... anarchism historically not the greatest or most accessible thing to come to.

I can remember being a baby anarchist and being like, “can I hang out with you guys?” People were just like, “actually, no. Keep coming to prison books for about a year and then maybe we’ll invite you to the potluck as well.” In a way that was really nice to hear, because I love rules, I love parameters. So there’s a parameter here, “okay, I’ll come to the prison books for a year.” But it’s been nice to see that people can go do the mutual aid and then have society through that and have like anarchist community through that and it’s just wonderful. That’s giving me a lot of hope right now.

S: One thing that’s been in the back of my mind during this conversation, so a lot of people will say, “why did the anarchists or the left or whatever allow the fascist and right wing people to come out in front in this anti state demonstration against mandates, when we could have like articulated a different version of that that wasn’t about business and people dying?” I’m talking about anti-vaccine and anti-mask stuff. For a while I was hitting my head against that this was an opportunity and what is the anarchists response. Maybe that’s the wrong question and picking apart this piece is kind of helping me think that a very visible left/anarchists movement around State control and surveillance through the pandemic, I don’t think would have been the right direction anyway.

What we see with the right wing demonstrations and the fascist demonstrations around this, we see them making their own beds in a way and we don’t need to participate in and then the anarchist stuff that’s happening is more clandestine, right? It’s like these relationships that are being formed through mutual aid, it’s the relationships that are being formed in the streets that I think do a lot more. If you really need
whom life had become cheap and meaningless right, in the trenches. There was no commensurate experience in the United States until the pandemic. So we have this now, this population that I think is going to be capable of accepting very radical answers, and I don’t necessarily think that those are going to be good. Because trauma, as anyone who knows, doesn’t make you a better person. It’s about how you respond to it. Which is part of why it’s so vital right now that we respond to that trauma seriously, and that grief seriously. It’s so funny that we’ve ended up here from starting in this conversation about like the social revolution. It feels telling also, you know?

A: I think that’s such an important point, Vicky. Traumatized populaces are more readily accepting of increasingly radical or fringe or whatever solutions to stuff. I think that that’s something I’m gonna be sitting with for a while.

S: I’m thinking about more news recently about how much worse than expected climate catastrophe is going to be, and how much quicker. We get something like that every year, I guess, or more frequently. That’s the stuff that we’re facing in the next decade. We get inundated with the narratives of ‘lone wolf’ survivalist competition over resources stuff to steal us for this horrible catastrophe that we’re facing and you put that with the kind of trauma... It almost stacks the deck for just a horrific response. I’m hoping that somewhere in there, the caring for each other that people are doing will create some other possibilities. The caring, not just like intimately or in kinship and family and whatever... I do agree that mutual aid stuff has been not necessarily as radical or politicized or however you want to call it as it could be, but the knowledge of that that’s something that you do that you’re that you have resources and spread them rather than hoard them and save up for the future that’s not going to happen, or whatever. I hope that that is something that will hopefully stave off a really violent trauma response.

V: Yeah. And one thing that’s been weirdly giving me a lot of hope lately, I’ve been reading David Graeber, rest in peace, and David Wengrow, The Dawn of Everything. Which is a book about prehistory. It’s a book about an anthropological overview of prehistory. Just the extent to which so few societies have ever been organized on these bases of exclusion and then private property and hierarchy, like exclusively on those things. Those things have all existed, but they’ve rarely been coalesced in authority like in the way that this current social system has, is sort of what that book is about. So I think that, well, I obviously brought up the specter of mass fascist movement. It’s already happening, it’s already here. Obviously, it’s not at the specter anymore. Alas.

I also do think that the reason I bring it up is because that’s a possible future. But I do also think that that’s precisely why it’s so important to think about how to care for each other now, and how to course. I think that’s really important and that’s true. Also, though, particularly the great resignation is and anti-work is a trend that the right and the capitalists have noticed. They brought it to many of our attention, because this is happening at a scale that none of us can necessarily really see beyond sort of a meme of an image or whatever. But when millions of people are quitting the capitalists are scared, and that’s how we know it’s happening because they’re talking about it in Business Insider and the Economist or whatever.

So like on that level, the question I think is right. I think it’s right to think about, “do we try to wrench these things into politics?” When we do so we do so at great grave danger to their potential. But also, we do want to be able to speak to each other, and to have a context in which we can sort of organize and start to answer some of these questions. To speak to the first half of your point, though, if that’s okay. Unless you have something you want to sort of jump on on that?

A: No, no, go ahead.

V: This is to veer away from the piece of it and get a little personal, but I’ve now been organizing in various capacities and writing and fighting for like 12, 13 years now. Maybe since 2009. What time is it? 2008? So yeah, for ages now, right? It’s been a long time. One of the things that has happened is that I have grown really dissatisfied with the waiting for the change to come and happen spontaneously. At the same time that I recognize that over the last decade none of us have really been able to predict how this stuff was going to break down and it hasn’t really been driven by political radicals either. I don’t think that’s going to suddenly start happening either. But we have these one lives. These one precious, increasingly threatened life.

I’ve always loved the anarchists tendency to say we have to try and build that world in the present in our own worlds to the extent that we can. I think we can apply that to bigger scales without it being dangerous to our goals. Do you know what I mean by that? There’s this really hard line to thread and we haven’t come up with the answers. I certainly and anyone who tells you they have is full of shit. Myself, even, I don’t have the answer I’m also full of shit.

But I think there is this tension right now with this real desire to have enough power, for lack of a better word, to act in a really in a way that increases those possibilities and opportunities, while recognizing what’s going on right now. Which is that on a sort of spontaneous, which isn’t a great concept, but on a class wide scale some of these attacks are happening now. They’re happening and can we intervene? Because I think there’s also a desire and the piece does talk to this. Sorry, I’m just rambling now. I guess that’s the point, right? We’re having a conversation.

But the piece speaks to the leftist desire to get out and be the leaders to be the vanguard. We saw that in the uprising where revolutionary organizations, I heard about this in every city with there were big things, would get to the front of a march and lead it
in a circle, or lead it directly into trap. Or all these terrible things, all
the swooping and stuff. So I think without wanting to be a vanguard
and being satisfied to be participants in events, and nothing more than
participants in events, how can we be the most effective participants
in events possible? In a way that both makes our lives better and
increases the chances for other people to reach for those things. That’s
such a hard question because it’s about power and organization, but
our terms for those are so limited.

A: Yeah, yeah, I think about this, too. And we saw, I think anybody
who had two eyes and was paying attention saw the orgs get out
in front of stuff in the George Floyd uprisings. I think that it was
just such a typical tactic on the part of the orgs as a part of power
accumulation and optics and all of these things. How do we not do
that? And how do we participate as anarchists in a way that is anti-
authoritarian, or anti-vanguardist, or anti-optics or whatever, if we
can say that. I think that’s such an important question. I think that to
answer that would maybe be to do something of a disservice to the
scope of the question itself. Because it’s so important and it’s less of a
question and more of a provocation for me. Just challenging folks to be
like, “this is a moment, this is happening.” I remember back in the day
people were really invested in this idea of a revolution and I’m just like,
“Y’all, it’s here and what do we do with it?”

S: That’s like the thing that I really loved about this piece, because
I’ve been reading other interesting pieces that are pessimistic or
nihilistic. This one is saying we’re in the midst of at least a proto-
revolution, if not a revolution. In thinking about this question about
how we can be participants within it without trying to get out in
front, which is so important. Thinking about the last decade and
the anarchists involvement in all these uprisings, not to credit it to
anarchists, and I don’t even mean a particular person who says they’re
an anarchist, but tactics learned from anarchist uprisings or uprisings
that have elements of anarchism within it. They’ve been accumulating
over this time. I think the anarchism, more than in my lifetime, you
can talk about it and people are like, “oh, yeah, I have some ideas
about this.” It’s less unheard of. It gets mentioned even in mainstream
aspects.

I feel like, again, some of this spreading of knowledge or
information, some of the ways that anarchists have shown up in the
streets or organized mutual aid is becoming more baseline knowledge
for people about how to defend yourself in this situation. I think that
might be a way to think about it. Again, this is to say that anarchists
aren’t leading things, anarchists are showing up and doing things and
those things are getting innovated over and over again throughout all
these events.

V: But I think you didn’t lose the thread. I think the thread is right
there. This is in the piece too. The pandemic demonstrated this total
disregard for us, even at a basic “we are necessary for the economy to
function” it’s better if we’re healthy. Even at that level, even just using
us as workers, they’re not even willing to do. They’re like, “well, maybe
we could force you back to work and some of you will die, whatever.”
There’s just the total disdain and hatred. And the way that that reflects
on the future of ecological catastrophe, obviously, and war...

I don’t know about you two, but I have found it absolutely
horrifying to see the world governments, and media, and politicians,
and leadership, and Economy act as one so decisively against Russia.
Not because I want to defend Russia, but because they had this power
all along. They could have been doing this to the pandemic, they had
operated so fast and so thoroughly against Russia, and whatever,
Russia is literally engaging in an imperialist war of aggression, fuck
them. But they could have done this two years ago against Coronavirus
and they’ve shown us all that. And they’ve shown us that what they’ve
done for us instead is told us to get COVID and die. And that is
horrible, but it also is really “mask off” no pun intended. I think things
are really clear right now and the clarity is gained at to great expense,
and it’s not worth it, but I think we might be able to make use of that
clarity.

S: You know, it’s interesting, because I teach young people, mostly
late teens and early 20’s, and this maybe connects back also to the grief
but I have found over the last two years of teaching that students are
just in crisis after crisis after crisis of their own health, they’re caring
for a family member, they’re losing their housing or losing their job,
they’re working too much. All the time, I’m just making space for them
to just have the crisis and not worry about repercussions from me. But
I’m just thinking about how that generalized panic and scramble and
care work and grief that is happening, how that’s going to affect a mass
population moving forward.

To me that is what I was expecting to happen when the
pandemic hit, which is the contradictions become clear and everyone
refuses. But we’re being put through it in this horrible, torturous way. I
think that’s going to change people’s outlooks. Obviously, when I come
talk to these students I’m saying a lot of these kinds of things. This
is happening to you and you don’t deserve it. But just thinking about
that, I don’t know what we’re coming out of this or what that would
ever look like at this point. But people are carrying along with them
this experience of unprecedented struggle in their “personal lives” is
going to have a strange ripple effect, I think. Hopefully one that allows
more people that keep unplugging from this system.

V: Yeah. And I think, not to be too pessimistic, but one of the things
that gave me a little bit of strength and historical analysis under the
Trump regime was thinking about how the historical fascist regimes
and indeed the regime in India right now and in Turkey to a large
extent, they drew on a huge body of traumatized war veterans for
I do think that like the mutual aid in its less formal ways that it has appeared, which I think has been cool, but have looked a lot like charity or social services to me. The spreading of the concept of mutual aid among everyone as an organizing principle for people’s lives has seemed really powerful to me. We’re all at such low capacity. We tend to think everyone’s going through it, “Well, that’s just life, buddy.” If you have a very specific tragedy, “oh, that’s really sad” but if everyone’s going through it, “Buck up!” No! When everyone’s going through it, it’s so much harder because no one has capacity to help each other.

That stuff’s all really important and serious. As we talked about tactics and what we can do to move forward we also do need to be able to hold each other in this horrible, horrible time. It’s been seven years of this. There have been these glimpses of hope that have been beautiful, but for the most part it’s just been awful.

S: I love that you brought that up, in terms of feeling the feelings. In the last two years during the pandemic, it’s been really hard to know, because of so much isolation, you don’t have the same kind of benchmarks to know how off you’re feeling in relation to any kind of normalcy. So it’s just like, “oh, there’s something wrong with me, but I don’t quite understand it.” Just like losing your kind of orientation has been hard. I’m also thinking, and maybe this is like my psychoanalytic… or just the fact that I’ve read Hamlet so many times, but thinking about how mourning is also a refusal, right? If you let yourself mourn, you’re refusing to do the things of a productive life, right? You’re like, “I’m not going to play the role. I’m like so immersed in my grief that I refuse to work.” I think it would be interesting to kind of think about some of those emotions and affects and feelings that we have, and how they could relate to this social revolution of how they withdraw us, or allow us to refuse the wages that we are bribed with.

A: Which are just paltry. Not even scraping the bottom edge of inadequate for maintaining any kind of life.

For me, in relation to the government and in relation to sort of political power systems at large, what the COVID pandemic really showed me was how little those structures think of the populace. They hold us in such deep, abiding disdain and that to me, is one of the reasons why people are like, “No, fuck this, anti-work. I'm gonna walk out of my job.” It’s amazing to me, too, that a lot of folks who are entrenched, to call back to the Arrested Development meme and those fuckers who think that a banana cost $10, they still think that people are quitting their jobs because of the pandemic money. Which is incredible. Because that was not all that much money really, right? I mean, prices have gone up. Every single time I go to the grocery store, I'm like, Oh, this should be $25 and comes out to like, $55 or $70. That’s maybe a whole other conversation but perhaps related. I don’t know, I kind of lost my thread.

V: Yeah, I think that’s that’s exactly right. I mean, as someone who has been doing police in prison abolition stuff for almost a decade now, I remember having a conversation with a friend and we were talking about how for years it just felt like bashing your head against a brick wall. Then suddenly in 2020 you were just nodding and everyone was nodding along with you like, “yeah, abolish the police, abolish prisons!” I think there’s probably a tendency among people who identify as anarchists, especially who sort of form online to want sectarian identification as anarchist to be really present and stuff. There’s this counter tendency that I think, Scott, you just really well summed up, which is that, in fact, the tactics and the ideas are spreading.

I think that that’s also valuable in terms of attempting to the best of our ability to decolonize and abolish the whiteness of the ways and the Europeanness of the ways that we think about this stuff. Maybe the movement has gotten anarchist enough that we no longer need anarchists. I don’t know. I’m in a weird place now. But I guess what the piece has me asking myself and questioning and what the last 10 years have as well is this great refusal moment, in some ways, the George Floyd rebellion was a summation, and intensifying, and generalizing of all of the struggles that had come before. We saw all those tactics repeated. It was incredible and beautiful, and really, really important. And now something has shifted and we have to move away from our dogmas in a real way that is scary.

Part of the reason I feel is partially scared, and I mean not just the state of the world, but because I don’t see my comrades, all of whom I love dearly in my local area, I don’t see any of us moving in a way that makes me feel like it’s the answer. Even during the uprising my comrades, who I really love and who I was in the street with and who I would do a lot in the street for, I didn’t see us moving in a way that I was like, “Okay, wow.” Myself included. I was among this we, right? We were participating, and that’s cool. But I want to think about, because it matters so much, I want to think about what we can do and how we can we distinguish sectarian tactical, ideological things that we rely on from things that are really important actually and it’s really good that they become core.

I think there can be a tendency that I think is actually kind of creepy and proto right wing to be like, “we must reject all of our previous knowledge.” Absolutely not. We have learned so much. We have to stay queer liberationists, trans liberationists, anti racist, these are all so crucial. But yeah, I don’t know. It’s a question. We’re in a moment where we can really start cutting back some of the stuff that isn’t serving us. As the piece says, in the spirit of the great refusal, you should think about how to leave those formations, whether they’re tactical or ideological, or just groups or whatever, that aren’t serving us right now in this moment.

A: I love that part of the article so much. The whole, “let’s think about how to translate a, not anti-work as sort of a hardline definition, but a
refusal on to our anarchist politics and praxis.” I thought that that was such a cool provocation. And Scott, I wonder if you have anything to say about that. I was just super sparked by it. I don’t really have a lot to say about it. I mean, seeing folk and seeing how folk were moving in the streets, or like moving in the midst of the uprising. I didn’t see a whole hell of a lot of it, but I definitely was just like, “Hmmm, we did that,” or like, “that happened.” There’s a question there, too.

S: Yeah, I’m thinking in current anarchists discourse that I’m finding most interesting right now is the stuff that William C. Anderson’s Nation on no Map, where he’s been elaborating a Black anarchism that isn’t about self identification as an anarchist. He looks at the history of Black people in the US and sees anarchistic, or anarchist, or whatever, aspects of community self-defense and mutual aid and says that there’s conditions that create this, and that there’s histories and knowledges of these ways of being and doing that sort of exceed the limited definition of anarchism that can be tied back to a particular European historical context.

That kind of stuff, alongside a lot of care work, accountability transformative justice, and disability justice work that I read that’s in an abolitionist vein tends to me to do this kind of loosening up of anarchism into something that’s not like who you are, but it’s the things that you do and the way that you do them. It can be in all these moments. I think when we take this into struggle, we get so caught up in being a thing and showing up to do thing as a kind of person all the time. I think protest is often, because it’s captured by the political, this is where I want to get right? Back to the idea of moving out of the political into the social. When it remains in the realm of the politics and we’re just announcing we’re anarchists and we’re here to fuck shit up or whatever.

One of the things reading this, it made me think. I had been translating Guy Hocquenghem and his writings on gay liberation after ‘68 people. And the May ’68 people were saying a similar thing about the social, they were calling a cultural revolution, because they were still a little bit enthralled by Mao. But they were like, “the revolution has to touch every part of life.” It’s not just the realm of politics. It’s not the labor movement. This is where you get the beginnings of gay liberation in France too. I think that’s really an interesting thing. In that moment, in the 60’s, late 60’s and early 70’s, that dovetailed with the hippies and a counterculture that wasn’t really politicized. I think the material conditions for a lot of the people who were involved in that were such that they could do a kind of subversive thing and still kind of be part of the system. So it didn’t translate into this social revolution that they were calling for.

But I think we’re in a totally different scenario. We don’t have the opportunities and all the kinds of props that were holding up the state and the market at that time have been thrown away at this point. The pandemic has just made it even starker. So to me, that explains a little bit why a political thing can translate more generally day. Maybe some listeners were not alive in 2001. But we saw that precipitated the formations of two extremely fascist institutions and those were the Department of Homeland Security and ICE. Ever since then, in my consciousness, it’s been an ever encroaching upon fascist creep or whatever. We’re seeing that really explicitly, and I think to react to that with fear and anxiety is really normal. And to react to it in a way that’s just like, “oh, I need to not have fear about this,” is to react in a way that’s maybe a bit rooted in survival. That is something we should honor, or one could honor. But I think its really healthy to acknowledge that kind of thing.

V: Yeah, I really appreciate that point from both of y’all. I think two years into this pandemic when all of our forms of comfortable social reproduction and making ourselves feel better and hanging out... all of them have been disrupted for years now and we have watched as world governments have utterly refused to try and fix that. The thing they claim to be good for is something like a pandemic or whatever, right? And they just have literally no interest in helping us at all. Some countries are more brazen in that than others and that has to do with their internal political and domestic stuff.

But in any case, I think even without that 2015 to 2020 the rise of street fascism was traumatic. I don’t know if y’all had this experience, but there was a lot of movement, but also everyone was hyper-vigilant all the time. Everyone was in a fight or flight constantly. That was utterly unsustainable and we didn’t get to rest from that because the pandemic dovetailed with that perfectly. I think we have not had an opportunity to grieve. One of the things that I think about a lot with regard to what you were saying a while ago, Scott, about this classical Workers Movement is that I actually think that there has been a real repression of grief among revolutionaries for the 20th century in general, the experience of that in general.

I hate “Don’t Mourn, Organize!”, which was a thing Joe Hill said about his own death, it was not a slogan. When someone asked him what they should do to honor him. He said, “Don’t mourn, organize.” That is an individual’s request and the fact that’s been asked him what they should do to honor him. He said, “Don’t mourn, organize.” That is an individual’s request and the fact that’s been...
“The lesson they seem to have learned from the coup is that increased calls for secession and the independence notwithstanding, their best chance for power is the 2024 election of Donald Trump. There is therefore something of a three way race between the proletarian movement, the 2024 election cycle, and Donald Trump’s physical death. The death or incapacitation of Donald Trump would represent a blow to the American fascist movement as currently constituted that would require at least another election cycle for them to recover from.”

I really liked this bullet point. I think that it relates somewhat to perceptions and fear and the anxieties of the Democrat institution. I wonder if you’ll have thoughts on this point.

S: So, I’m actively frightened by the far right and everything they’re doing. And maybe we can talk a little bit about all the kinds of State policies that are being proposed and passed that are incredibly frightening. But while there is a street movement and January 6 was a thing. It was a debacle. It’s kind of confusing and hard to really, totally understand. This point is saying that in the end, the far right is still attached to an election of a particular person. So, in a way that that gives me a little bit of a feeling of optimism that it’s so narrowly focused on this one thing that just seemed to limit it in a way or help contain it from me. Because in my mind all the time I’m surrounded constantly by Nazis, basically. Like walking down the street in my neighborhood, you know? And so thinking about how they’re still grasping at the old orders of power, and obviously that power still kills and hurts and degrades us all. But something about that was interesting to me.

A: Yeah. I mean, there’s been just an immense amount of things that have at least hit the newsstands. I had a text from a person that I hadn’t heard from in a while, and the text was just like, “I’m thinking of you. I hope you’re okay.” And I like genuinely didn’t know what they were referring to because there’s been so many things that have happened. It turns out that they were referencing the anti-trans stuff that was happening in the news with parents of trans kids now being liable for child abuse or some horrifying shit in Texas.

But yeah, there was a point on our notes that we were talking about fear and talking about anxiety and being like, “Am I coming out of left field being fearful right now?” I don’t think that anybody is. I think that there are a lot of oppression fantasies that are spinning themselves out. I’m thinking specifically of like QAnon, and COVID-denialism, and stuff that’s on the far right, that I like obviously have no sympathy for. I do name it as like an oppression or colonization fantasy, basically, that people are like, “Oh, I’m being genocided. I’m being colonized.” It’s just like, guys, I don’t know. It bears no spinning out here. There’s no reason we need to debunk that shit.

But I do think that we’re seeing sort of a creep into various things. I mean, we saw it in fucking September 11, back in the

and pervasively through all the strands of life the way that this piece is arguing that it is or is starting to or can continue to do.

Just one more thought... So when the pandemic hit, this was my thinking, and this is almost accelerationist or something, I guess, but I was like, “oh my god, everyone is gonna just suddenly become a revolutionary because we’re just faced with the contradictions of you can’t work but you need to pay for rent and you need to pay for food, but you can’t get any of these things.” I was trying to do organizing just being like, “look like we have to do something! We can’t... this is ridiculous.” I got caught up in my organizing with people who are really stuck on old models for me. A lot of going back to, “we need to be clandestine, and we can’t say anything to anyone because then we will be known.” But I was like, at some point we just need to act right and do something. But in the immediate lockdown, those conditions did not create the kind of uprising that I had hoped for, at least, and didn’t really expect.

This piece says something really interesting that I would like to parse out about this. It says “the novel Coronavirus pandemic was a necessary but insufficient condition for the George Floyd rebellion and the great refusal.” So I was like this is going to do it. This piece is saying that this set some things up but then something else happened. Then the next line is “Anti-Blackness, ableism, and xenophobia were also necessary, but they are not novel, though the pandemic’s deepening of these societal codes.” In that kind of weird Interplay that something new happen that we weren’t expecting. I think that’s really interesting. Because again, it scrambles our ability and even our desire to predict things which is I think, where we fall into traps, often.

V: Yeah. God, there’s so much there. There’s so many different things. I’m all over the place.

S: Sorry I rambled.

V: No, no, it’s literally my favorite feeling. Too much to respond to is the best. But yeah, I think there’s this question of the Coronavirus and the pandemic. One of the things that actually I think is so scary, not to shift too much about the Ukraine situation is that, the Democrats seem malicious and out of touch enough to me to want to go to war to distract from the virus, right? The handling of the virus has been so bad internationally that I do think a lot of state leaders see, and it’s working as far as I can tell, in a public opinion way. There’s not a sort of 2001 Old Glory flags everywhere fascism coming back, exactly, but people have stopped talking about the pandemic, largely. This is the thing that is on people’s minds. I think the failure of the Biden administration’s response to the pandemic, should be understood in terms of the Great Refusal and the Great Resignation.

One thing that happened was that Trump gave us a bunch of money, and clearly the $600 for unemployment a week was like the Arrested Development meme: “It’s one banana, Michael, how much
could it cost? $10?" Clearly a bunch of rich people were like, "how much do poor people make a week? $600?" And everyone got this crazy raise. We didn’t have to work, got on this huge raise, and an eviction moratorium. So there’s all this cash on hand and what people did with that extra space as well as the extra anger; alienation, the mass death, it’s not a silver lining. There’s no silver lining to the pandemic. These are just the conditions, and we can’t describe it that way. This is this is an absolute utter catastrophe of a global scale that will never be forgotten, at least not for generations. It’s an utter disaster. But it produced both negative and positive conditions that gave people space to rise up, right? And people were like, “Okay, I don’t have to go to work. I can’t go party, I don’t have to pay my rent, I’ve got nothing to do. Fuck it, let’s get rid of these pigs!” That was this spontaneous feeling and tactic and desire that emerged.

I think part of what the Democrats have been doing is like, “Oh God, we can’t reproduce those conditions.” We can’t reproduce the conditions where people aren’t struggling enough that they can fight us. They also, I think, to some extent think that the uprising was all about Trump. What they classically failed to do is to recognize that the uprising happened. So many of us participated and we all remember. We all remember what it felt like and we were all changed by it. You can’t put that back into a bag with punishment, although they are trying.

I don’t know if that’s happening in y’all’s cities, but here in Philly rents have gone up way faster than housing costs. They’ve started instituting credit checks to even get a rental, which I’ve never seen anywhere. Not even in New York when I lived there. It’s wild. And that seems to me an at least slightly coordinated punishment of the working class. Not just for the uprising, but also for the Great Resignation. There’s all this repression happening and now the war is a piece of that as well.

But to be a sort of classic, “whatever,” as I am, all of this repression is in response to real movement that’s happening on the ground now and real fight that we’re giving. We’re on the offensive. I don’t know, I keep just circling back to that. Because Scott, as you pointed out, in the 60’s, even in the 50’s, the insurrectionary movement got kind of bought off by the New Deal. Then the depression got funneled into war production. It’s not clear how anyone can do that. In fact, the financial collapse still hasn’t quite happened. We’ve never recovered from 2009, the stock market has fully divested itself from our daily lives. It doesn’t feel like they have carrot to give us and it doesn’t feel like they can wield the stick well enough. So it feels like we’re chomping at the bit to overextend the metaphor. We have some capacity right now to move.

**S:** There’s another part of this piece to build off of that, that I find interesting. Thinking about how the Democrats have failed to play their historical role of siphoning off the energy of movements and recuperating them in electoral politics. You’re kind of talking about that. But it seems like such a an opportunity for the Democratic Party to take stuff. They keep having things thrown at them that they can totally wrapped up into their shtick and use it. But they’re not doing it. I mean, maybe it’s like you’re saying that they’re scared of the threat that they’ve seen and therefore grasping at straws. But I wonder if either of you had thoughts about why are they so doggedly going in this other direction than what they’ve typically done, which is to try to water down our movements with tokenism and naming policies that don’t do anything?

**A:** And recuperation.

**V:** Do you want to join take a swing at it?

**A:** I’m uniquely ill-equipped to talk about party politics.

**S:** That’s a good trait.

**V:** Alas, alas, I have some ideas. Bernie Sanders was a slam dunk for them. Medicare For All. I mean, if they weren’t good historians they would know that in 1945 in the UK when the Labour Party, the NHS, ran the government for 30 years. The Dems could do it. They’ve got a bunch of slam dunks that are pretty easy. The ball is in the air. Why am I choosing all these bad metaphors? They have these opportunities. I think part of it is that they just are genuinely an imperial court. DC is truly divided from reality on the ground. The pandemic has somehow made that worse. They don’t even get in cabs anymore to talk to cabbies or whatever they do in their op eds.

So I think it’s that and also they are increasingly happy to be the left wing to the extent that they are the left to the Republicans, not as the recuperators of social movement. So I think that now that the Republicans are like, “you know what? We should be fascist because otherwise we’ll never win an election again.” The Democrats can just be like, “yeah, we’re just like utterly greedy, right wing capitalists, like, that’s all we are.” So I don’t know. I think it’s some combination of those things and fear of the uprising. I think in their heart of hearts, Democrats, liberals in general, not just Democrats, if you ask them “which is scarier a fascist uprising or an anarchistic/communist one?”, they think it’s scarier from the left. Because the fascists, maybe they kill them or their friends but probably they get to keep all their property and their nation. Whereas the anarchists, they lose their whole worldview. Like, that’s a lot scarier.

**A:** Yeah, indeed. I really likes this part in the article, and it’s skipping to the end a little bit. The article is written somewhat chronologically, but there’s a lot to sort of unpack in it. And it talks about sort of the right and the coup. This is bullet point 24: