

The World Crisis and an Anarchist Response

Wayne Price

2008

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What Next?

Facing an economic crisis of world historical proportions, the worst since the Great Depression, the United States has already responded with striking political changes, particularly the election of the first African-American president. What is likely to happen in the future and what should be the response of revolutionary class-struggle anarchists?

The Crisis

Economically, what has begun is either a deep, lengthy, world-wide, recession — or a collapse into a second Great Depression, possibly worse than the first.

Either way, large numbers of workers and their families are suffering and will face more suffering, from unemployment, underemployment, losses of their homes, the loss of the equity they had in their homes, and an inability to afford healthcare (a life and death matter). Meanwhile the economic downturn has had a disastrous effect on the budgets of cities, states, and federal agencies, with cuts in public services on all levels. This directly affects the jobs of public employees. But it also affects everyone who relies on public services (that is, everyone), especially since social needs increase in bad times. Some cities are already asking for their own federal bailouts. U.S. deindustrialization continues.

In his regular column for the New York Times, the liberal economist and Nobel Prize winner, Paul Krugman, writes, “The economic news...keeps getting worse...I don’t expect another Great Depression...We are, however, well into the realm of what I call depression economics. By that I mean a state of affairs like that of the 1930s in which the usual tools of economic policy — above all, the Federal Reserve’s ability to pump up the economy by cutting interest rates — have lost all traction...There’s nothing to stop the economy’s downward momentum. Rising unemployment will lead to further cuts in consumer spending, which Best Buy warned this week has already suffered a ‘seismic’ decline. Weak consumer spending will lead to cutbacks in business investment plans. And the weakening economy will lead to more job cuts, provoking a further cycle of contraction.” (NYTimes, 11/14/08; p. A33) He advocates a quick “major stimulus package...on the order of \$600 billion” on top of the previous bailout, and wonders, uncertainly, “Will the Obama people dare to propose something on that scale?” (ibid)

The deeper causes behind the crisis go well beyond this liberal analysis. They require a Marxist analysis, as developed by libertarian Marxism and other trends. Essentially the system is unable to produce enough real wealth (value) to maintain profitability (surplus value). It has hidden this difficulty by “producing” masses of (what Marx called) “fictitious capital,” claims on wealth which do not correspond with any real wealth (actual commodities and services). These include mountains of debt, profits made on unproductive labor (such as making missiles and other armaments, which, unlike cars and steel production, do not re-enter the cycle of production, being like digging holes and filling them up again), and various forms of speculation, as well as using up the environment without replenishing it (a form of “primitive accumulation,” also called “looting the future”). At some point the bill was sure to come due. (For further, see L. Goldner, home.earthlink.net; R. Tabor, *The Utopian No. 7*, www.utopianmag.com; LRP, www.lrp-cofi.org.)

The economic crisis is therefore not distinct from the ecological-energy-environmental crisis. Essentially they are just two aspects of the decay of industrial capitalism. NASA’s chief climate

scientist, James Hansen, has testified to Congress (for whatever good it did) that we are rapidly approaching a tipping point, with irreversible, cataclysmic, climate change, involving “mass extinction, ecosystem collapse and dramatic sea level rises.” (quoted in *The Nation*, 11/17/08; p. 7) This week, the UN released a report that there is a brownish cloud of toxic chemicals, soot, and smog which is covering large swaths of Asia, from the Arabian peninsula to Japan, at times, poisoning the lungs of millions of people and damaging agriculture. (*NYTimes*, 11/14/08; p. A6)

Reactions to the Crisis: Liberalism and Reformist Socialism

The election of Obama was a turn to the left by the U.S. population, not only as the election of an oppressed racial “minority”, but also as the rejection of decades of far-right Republican policies (not only on the economy, healthcare, and the environment, but also on the Iraq war). This is in spite of Obama’s explicit moderation, and that he includes, as part of his program for “change,” a “bipartisan” rejection of left-right/Democratic-Republican disputes. The workers’ turn to the left does not mean that they have become opposed to capitalism — what is referred to as “the market.” They are against the apparent bad parts of capitalism, not the system as a whole. To be sure, the distinction between Democratic and Republican parties pretty much distorts any real left-right debate. For example, the (justified) popular outrage at the \$700 billion bailout of bankers was mostly channeled through the right wing of the Republican party, while the bailout was championed by Obama and the Democrats.

What has been popularly rejected is the conservative idea that “the market” should function without government supervision and regulation, not to mention intervention. Instead there is the liberal program of state regulation and subsidization of corporations. The left wing of the liberals call for a “new New Deal,” meaning a lot of regulation, bailouts of corporations, plus government-sponsored projects, such as the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) and/or the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The WPA paid unemployed workers to clean up public areas, to construct buildings, and to put on little theatrical productions — and it was fairly decentralized in organization. The CCC hired young men to do construction in the woodlands and parks, and was organized on a quasi-military basis (to prepare youth for the next war, they said).

Undoubtedly there are many ways in which public works would be useful. The national infrastructure should be replaced. Ecological projects are desperately needed. Expanding public services would otherwise help people with medical, educational, and employment needs. Life would become less painful for many. This is not the same thing, however, as ending a deep recession, let alone another Great Depression. The last Great Depression was not cured by the New Deal. It lasted over a decade and only ended with the Second World War. This shows the limitations of a “new New Deal,” even if one were politically feasible.

Somewhat further out on the left are the reformist socialists (social democrats or “democratic socialists”, who are accurately regarded as gradualist state-socialists). They agree with the conservatives that government interventions are steps toward “socialism” — except that the right condemns it while the reformist socialists are glad of it. Actually, government interventions in the capitalist economy are best understood as “state capitalist” measures, not socialism. The economy would remain in the hands of a tiny minority of capitalists and bureaucrats, and is not publically (socially) owned by the members of society.

There will probably be an increase in reformist socialists, as capitalism becomes discredited among a significant minority of workers. Reformism is a category which overlaps with the Marxist-Leninists. While the M-Ls want a new state to replace the existing one, and a completely statified economy (that is, total state capitalism), many of them advocate a gradualist approach to this end and have historically supported the Democratic Party (which has been the main policy of the Communist Party USA).

Whether “democratic socialists” or Marxist-Leninists, there is likely to be a growth of a variety of reformist socialists. They will look to the Democratic Party in fact, while perhaps muttering about an eventual independent party or a union-based labor party, some day (as advocated by most of the Trotskyists). They are likely to build themselves within opposition movements, such as among People of Color or in antiwar organizations. Understanding the potential power of the organized working class, they will play important roles in the revival of the union movement. The pro-capitalist union bureaucrats will often be open to ally with them, valuing their dedication and activity, while knowing that they are no real threat to the bureaucrats. (When mine union leader, John L. Lewis was criticized for employing Communists in the thirties to help him organize the CIO unions, he answered, “Who gets the bird, the hunter or the bird dog?”) They have no real answer to the crisis of world capitalism — nothing but illusions in the state. But they can be roadblocks on the way to a radically democratic solution to humanity’s danger.

The liberal/reformist program will not work. At most it will ameliorate people’s suffering, for a time. Even that is questionable, given the “bipartisan” moderation of the Democrats. They will not turn around the decay of the environment. They will continue U.S. wars of aggression against poor countries; Obama campaigned on a promise to expand the war in Afghanistan.

As a result there will be mass disappointment and a rise in popular discontent. Significant minorities will eventually turn to fascism or to the far-left — including to class struggle anarchists (anarchist-communists).

Reactions to the Crisis: Fascism

“Fascism” is typically used as a cuss-word for disliked policies, such as increased authoritarianism in government. But, based on the experience of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, it means something specific. The Republican Party is not fascist, not even its “conservative “ (reactionary) ideologues. Its members still rely on bourgeois democracy and the system of elections (however corrupted) and its two-party system.

Fascism begins as a mass movement which aims to overthrow bourgeois democracy and end, for good, elections and multiple parties. Its members often think of themselves as revolutionaries. It uses populist, even anti-capitalist, rhetoric. If the crisis goes on long enough, the capitalist class may decide to hire the fascists and to try to put them in power. A many-membered fascist movement is capable of being far more repressive than is a military coup or police state. Once in power, the fascists do destroy bourgeois democracy, cancel elections, outlaw all parties besides their own (that would include the Democrats and Republicans), carry out racist policies (exterminating some minorities, such as Jews, and enslaving others such as African-Americans), outlaw labor unions, arresting and murdering their leaders and even members, prepare for bigger wars, and generally establish a capitalist totalitarian state. They would not overthrow the

capitalist class but would demand a cut of the profits. This is the history of European fascism in the thirties.

At present, the traditional fascists, such as the U.S. Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan, have almost no influence, although they are around. My wife did some Pennsylvania phonecalling for Obama (we share certain values but she is not an anarchist). Almost all those she called said they were voting for Obama. But one woman stated bluntly, "I'm KKK and I ain't voting for no n — ." So they are out there.

Instead, it is worth looking at elements of fascism which exist on the right . These are not yet fascism but they could coalesce into a genuine American fascist movement under the conditions of continuing recession. Many thousands of people believe the charges made by Republican politicians (who know better) that Obama and his administration is anti-American, secretly Muslim, socialist, Marxist, and/or pro-terrorist. Since the election, there has been an upsurge in white men buying guns due to their fear that Obama intends to set up a Marxist dictatorship, with a special armed force loyal only to him, and to take away people's guns.

It is more-or-less publically unacceptable to express overt racism, directed at traditional targets such as African-Americans or Jews. But it has been okay to express fears and hatred toward immigrants, particularly Latinos and Arabs and Muslims. This is often expressed in populist terms, as by Lou Dobbs, denouncing big business for bringing in Latinos to undermine the wages of U.S. workers (which has a tiny grain of truth — the capitalists are for "immigration reform" for the sake of their profits, not for the good of the immigrants). All kinds of sexual hysteria is worked up over homosexuals who want to get married or to adopt children and over women who want to control their reproduction (millions of "babies" are supposedly murdered by abortions). Since it is unacceptable to attack Jews, there are ravings against "secular humanists," who have supposedly been waging a "war on Christmas." Some, such as Terry Randall of the anti-choice Operation Rescue, have openly advocated a theocratic state, and others, such as Pat Robinson, have come very close to it. (Theocracy would not be so bad, provided it really was God who was ruling rather than some petty politician, and provided it is my idea of God rather than yours [joke].)

If these fears were combined, they could be a fascist movement (the Nazis and the KKKers would join). It would advocate the overthrow of capitalist democracy, if not (really) of capitalism itself, in favor of a Christian (their interpretation), anti-immigrant, anti-choice, anti-Gay, war-waging, dictatorship.

Reactions to the Crisis: The Far Left

Yet we can also expect a new radicalization. Many will come to reject capitalism altogether. The movement will include high school and college students, young workers, young women, and young People of Color. The movement will combine the issues of the 60s, such as anti-war, anti-racism, anti-sexism, and cultural transformation, with the issues of the 30s, namely economic demands, union drives, and anti-fascism. It will include the growth of various state socialist groupings, as I stated above, but also the continued expansion of anarchist trends.

Right now the radical left (including anarchists as well as state socialists in that term) is pretty marginal. Even with the upsurge of a mass radicalization, it will remain relatively small. But in periods of upheaval, small left groupings can have an enormous impact far out of proportion to their size. I need only mention the role of the abolitionists (including their extreme "no-government

men”) in the period leading up to and during the U.S. Civil War. During the Great Depression, the Communist Party played a big role in building the unions — and it channeled left movements into support for the Democratic New Deal. During the “60s” (from the mid-50s to the mid-70s, the period when I came in), the Civil Rights/Black Liberation movement was greatly affected by minority extremists such as pacifists, ex-Communists, and Black nationalists. The movement against the Vietnamese war was led and organized by Communists, Trotskyists, radical pacifists (who were sometimes anarchists), Maoists, and various other groupings with few members. The 60s radicals grew due to the failures and betrayals of the established liberals in the churches, politics, and the unions — which has not changed.

Our time is also coming. But it should be noted that it has been many decades since anarchists — libertarian socialists — have played any significant role. We have been repeatedly outorganized and defeated by Marxist-Leninists (often by violent repression). This time (given the way state-Communism was discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union and events in China) anarchism has revived. But this time the stakes are higher. The ecological-environmental crisis is worse than ever before. If a new depression ends in a Third World War, it will risk the nuclear extermination of all human life, as well as of our fellow inhabitants on the planet. We better not blow it this time.

It will be our job to combine clear and open revolutionary goals of freedom and cooperation with practical participation in people’s ordinary struggles. We must be willing to work with almost anyone while never forgetting who we are. We must never lie to the workers or try to trick them, but should be willing to work alongside them for goals they believe in. We should advocate goals which do not depend on what the capitalists can afford to give, but should base our program on what the people need to have. We must not surrender our opposition to capitalist politicians and the capitalist state, yet should be willing to work with others who do not (yet) agree with us, for limited gains.

We must continually look for ways to join in popular struggles, without giving up our principles. We need to be an essential part of the struggle for unionization, trying to make unions as democratic and as militant as possible. Instead of elections, we advocate the general strike as an effective method of struggle. We must be champions of true freedom and democracy, against all other political trends. We need to be on the side of the most oppressed sections of the population, and to expect their social leadership, especially when they overlap with the working class.

We demand of the new administration of Obama that it should not bail out the rich but should bail out the workers and the poor, by an indefinite moratorium on paying mortgages, by guaranteeing jobs for all who could work and incomes for those who cannot, by vastly expanding public services, including reorganizing technology to end the ecological catastrophe. Taxes should be raised on the corporate rich (far above what it was before the Bush tax cuts) and taxes cut drastically on all working people. Since the big capitalists cannot run the economy, they should be expropriated and their businesses be taken over by their employees and communities. Meanwhile the U.S. should abandon its overseas bases and armies and dismantle its nuclear missiles and anti-missiles. We should stand in solidarity with the oppressed people of the world, without giving any support to their oppressive states. We advocate helping the poor nations to develop themselves in accord to their own culture and standards, in an ecological and democratic way.

This is what the new administration would do if it meant what it said or at least if it meant what many working people believe it means. These are reasonable and workable proposals. Actually, they will not be carried out by this government, as we know, and we should say so, expressing

openly our belief that a revolution is needed to carry out this (or any similar) program. We propose class-wide demands to be made by the working class as a whole against the capitalist class as a whole (as represented by their state).

I end with a quotation from Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, not because I agree in the slightest with their general politics but because I like this particular statement: "What has to be accomplished at this stage of United States history is to transform people's consciousness in two fundamental respects: they must become convinced that the capitalist system is rotten and criminal, and that a better system is both conceivable and possible." (Monthly Review, 6/68; p. 2) History is working to do the first, and we must work to convince people of the second.

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Retrieved on May 7th, 2009 from www.anarkismo.net
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