

**LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN**  
**ORGANIZING OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM**  
**FROM THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY TO NOW**



original interview with Robyn Maynard  
No One Is Illegal Radio, montreal 2011

# INTRODUCTION

This zine is based on transcriptions of an interview conducted with Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin for No One Is Illegal Radio Montreal. It is the follow-up to my 2010 publication *Anarchists in the Black Panther Party & the Black Liberation Army*. It is the second piece of a project of documenting the voices of elders from the Black Liberation movement who believe in the principles of organizing autonomously from the state, and in sharing power in resistance movements.

In Winter 2011, I had the privilege of an hour-long phone interview with Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, mentor to many, elder, former Black Panther, life-long organizer, and author of 'Anarchism and the Black Revolution'. Ervin's famous work has inspired many of us. What is much less well-known, however, has been his impressive life history of organizing which has spawned numerous projects which are now institutions all over North America.

Young black people so often grow up hearing about heroes like Malcom X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks. They are the figureheads which often are the first to ground us in terms of our history of resistance, of trying to free ourselves from racist systems of oppression like slavery, segregation, and police oppression. We aren't as often reminded, though, of the huge amount of grassroots organizing that made it possible for massive political changes to have taken place: change is not the work of a few exceptional individuals, charismatic as they may be, but it comes from the sacrifice and labour of those countless unnamed individuals, communities, neighborhoods, and workplaces who had the strength to fight back. One of Ervin's most valuable contributions in this interview is his continual assertion that it is these mass tendencies of resistance that led to the circumstances that made these changes possible, and actual. This includes the struggle of those political prisoners who continue to live behind bars to this day.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin has been part of by-the-people, for-the-people organizations throughout his life. This interview spawns his nearly unbelievable life trajectory: his involvement as a youth doing grassroots organizing in then-segregated Chattanooga, Tennessee, his involvement in the Black Panther Party, his time spent in Cuba fleeing prosecution by the FBI, and his deportation and subsequent torture in Czechoslovakia. It also details his help in creating what are now considered institutions in North America. Ervin was part of forming the first Anarchist Black Cross in the United States, and played an integral role in the initial Cop Watch movement in the United

States. Anarchist Black Crosses continue to be integral to support of political prisoners in the United States and Canada, and Cop Watch programs exist in countless cities from New York, to New Haven, to Winnipeg, Manitoba, challenging police violence and impunity by asserting the right to keep tabs on police abuses by documenting them.

Ervin's life trajectory is a testament to the power of resistance and survival. Equally impressive is his commitment to distributing power in resistance movements, rather than centralizing it in political parties or in charismatic leaders. Throughout his life and works, including Anarchism and the Black Revolution, Ervin has continued to emphatically assert the importance of people power. In his own words, taken from the interview transcribed in this publication: "If we don't give voices to people who have never had voices before, then we can't be surprised if all we get is the same old spin and the same old people and the same system."

Though many things have changed since the 1960's, racial profiling, detention and deportation of 'illegal' immigrants, massive incarceration of people of colour, and the continued destruction of indigenous peoples lands continues to be our shared reality in both Canada and the United States. Hopefully by sharing these historical reflections, the words of elder freedom fighters can continue to inspire and drive our liberatory movements and ground us in the present.

-- Robyn Maynard, May 2011

This zine is a transcription of an interview that was originally conducted for No One Is Illegal Radio (CKUT Montreal), part of a continuing written and radio project focusing on anarcho-indigenists and anarchist people of colour.

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# INTERVIEW WITH LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN

**You grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, while it was still under segregation. The way that history from this time has been written generally emphasizes the household names of political organizers in those days: Martin Luther King, etc. During this period you were actually involved in smaller-scale, grassroots challenges. Could you talk about your early organizing during that time?**

Chattanooga was kind of different from a lot of the cities in the South, first of all. It was primarily a working-class black city, so when the protests came and were student led, there weren't any black preachers or anything holding them back. And also there wasn't anything holding them back in terms of tactics. The protests which started out with just a small bunch of students at the local high school spread, and soon we had downtown workers coming in to support, because downtown was where they had the major industrial plants and all that sort of thing.

So, as a youth in the middle of all this and my cousin being one of the student leaders, I got drawn in and politically educated, in a real sense seeing this for myself. I was seeing large numbers of people getting involved, first of all, who had never been active in anything before. And seeing young people my age, for the first time, actually setting the agenda for the protests. That was extremely empowering for me.

**And what drew you to become involved in the Black Panther movement?**

Well first I went through years of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the civil rights period that had gone on from '60 to '64, somewhere right in there. The early period was dominated by adults. Then SNCC got involved and in that earlier period was one of the major militant organizations. So I was thrown into that, and I also had a mentor called Willy Ricks. He was one of the main organizers. He came from Chattanooga but he was a travelling organizer for SNCC.

SNCC was organization that was different from, let's say, the movements led by Dr. Martin Luther King, which were based around King's charisma and leadership. This was a movement that was based around the masses and so was part of a mass tendency, as opposed to having a figurehead leader. That experience of seeing grassroots organizing left an indelible impression on me. Also then I was stuck here in Chattanooga, so I couldn't become a travelling organizer or that sort of thing because I was still in grade school when a lot of this stuff was going on. Still, I started doing organizing around Chattanooga and ultimately worked in the Black Panther Party there for several years. Out of that experience, I was radicalized and became a lifelong organizer.

**Speaking of being radicalized, could you talk a little about the political climate in Chattanooga that was part of your political education?**

Well, you know, back in those days, you could be killed, and many youth and organizers were killed by the police. The police often-times were hooked up with the Ku Klux Klan and many times were the Ku Klux Klan, and there were also racist civilians. A lynch mob could take you out and beat you to death. This was still going on in this part of the south. So we faced serious threats and oppression by the police and by the Ku Klux Klan, which was still very active. I received a great number of Klan threats, especially in the earlier period of the '60s, along with a lot of other youth. We were strong enough to resist all that.

I got railroaded to prison right around that time, in 1969, and did several years time. When I got out, I got involved in activism again.

Well, let me go back a little bit.

I was prosecuted in 1968, I think it was. I was prosecuted in state court. A police informer had penetrated the Black Panther Party there in Chattanooga, and he set us up. I was arrested and beaten severely by the local police and was put on trial. They claimed that we had kidnapped an informant. We faced

serious charges, but the informant didn't show up, for whatever reason, and then the cops could never get their story together. We wound up getting acquitted, but that marked me for very serious repression. The police followed me around, they parked police cars outside my house, in the front and back of my house all the time. I'd come out and they'd arrest me for all kinds of stupid stuff, misdemeanor incidents that would just keep me tied up in court. That went on for years, and it got more serious after Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. Then rebellions broke out in all the major cities in Tennessee and around the United States.

They tried to then railroad me to prison and tried to make me an informer to snitch out other people so that they could break up the group, break up the movement in Chattanooga. That's when I had to go on the run and ultimately hijack the plane to Cuba for political asylum, and that's a story in and of itself.

**Could you tell us a little bit about your experience in Cuba and Eastern Germany and how this also informed your larger politics?**

The time that I was in Cuba was also the time when one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver, was there, and he was having a great number of difficulties with the Cuban government. While he was there, he was trying to organize Black Cubans into what they saw as an anti-government Black Panther Party. They were scared of that, because the Black people there were some of the strongest supporters of the revolution against Batista, and they were afraid that they could lead another revolution if anyone could. So they came down harshly on the Black Panther Party. Also, Cleaver did some things that were provocative and they also took offence to that.

They couldn't arrest Cleaver or do anything to him at all, because he was an international figure, but with the rest of us who they identified as Black militants or in the Black Panther Party, they actually locked us up and put us in jail and deported several of us. I was ultimately deported myself. But I stayed there locked up in a jail for about six months, and then they shipped me off the Czechoslovakia. When I got to Czechoslovakia, I was supposed to be set up to be either killed or sent back to the United States. With the help

of some African students and other student activists who had been involved in liberation movements in Africa, I was able to go on the run and hide from the United States government which was seeking me at this time. This went on for several months, but eventually I was captured and tortured and brought back to the United States.

### **So you were tortured in Czechoslovakia?**

They had me in custody, but I managed to escape with the help of the students. I was supposed to go to East Germany and then from there I was supposed to have gotten transported to Algeria or someplace else in Africa. What wound up happening, unfortunately, was that that was the worst place on Earth for me to go to. Because every spy and agency in the world had their people there, and so as soon as I showed up there, it was easy for them to run me down and actually capture me and smuggle me across the border in to West Germany.

First I was taken to military security headquarters in Berlin, and there I was tortured. And then eventually I was taken back to the United States aboard a flight with two armed guards and given to the FBI.

### **Could you talk a little about the support you received from the Anarchist Black Cross while you were in prison and how this affected you and the way that your politics evolved?**

You have to remember that at the time when I was first in prison, the original Anarchist Black Cross was dead, it had been destroyed. It was moribund for a long time. Then there were some young guys out of Scotland that had reorganized it. I hooked up with them, and I became the first American prisoner that they adopted. I tried to then do what I could to encourage them to form an Anarchist Black Cross chapter in the United States, and eventually a number of them were created. The Anarchist Black Cross, what it did, is it became part of a mass tendency and was able to create a real international base of support. There was also a group in Holland called the Help a Prisoner Oppose Torture Committee, which was also an anarchist organization and affiliated with the Anarchist Black Cross out of Scotland.

The Anarchist Black Cross worked together with other groups of individuals that were sympathetic to this movement, and from this were able to create the Free Lorenzo Movement. This Free Lorenzo Movement put tremendous pressure on the United States government. Remember this was at a time when Jimmy Carter was going all over the world talking about human rights all this kind of crap, lecturing the rest of the world about human rights. So what we did was that we said, 'Well alright, you want to talk about human rights, what about human rights in the United States? There are political prisoners in the United States.' So his representatives would be speaking somewhere, at the United Nations or another location. Someone would jump up and call my name and call the name of other political prisoners.

This pressure continued for years, and eventually it led to a broader campaign that the government really felt, and that was one of the things that really pushed me out of prison.

**You are coming from the Black Panther movement, which was heavily policed and resulted in hardline political repression, including incarcerations which are still ongoing. Could you talk a little bit about why prisoner support is so important to social movements, both from your own experience as well as from your own political convictions?**

You've got to realize that I wouldn't be here without prisoner support. I became an anarchist in prison. It would be incorrect to say just because of the Anarchist Black Cross, but I became an anarchist in prison because I began reading and thinking about my own political past. I started doing that, and I also started getting anarchist literature. That was really important, it was the literature from these groups that made me rethink my views.

What the Anarchist Black Cross did was that they created a mass base, and it also allowed me to become one of the best known anarchists in the world at that time, and certainly in the prison movement. You know, this was at a time when there was a primarily black-led prisoner movement. This movement was being recognized not only in the United States but it all over the world.



So you know this was a distinct time in history when all the movements on the outside were folding, and at this time they started recognizing the importance of the prisoners' struggle.

So the Anarchist Black Cross, and me being a representative of the Anarchist Black Cross, was extremely important during that period. It was the Anarchist Black Cross that was actually behind the campaign to create prisoner unions in the United States. We were the first ones to actually raise the issue. We tried to get the Industrial Workers of the World and other unions to adopt it and support the rights of prisoners to unionize.

It was the Anarchist Black Cross that even raised a lot of the issues of political prisoners in the United States effectively. There were a lot of us that weren't given any sort of real publicity. And you've got to realize now that there are groups who claim that they always have supported political prisoners, like Amnesty International. In those days though, they wouldn't support you if your case involved so-called violence. You couldn't get any support. They only supported people who were non-violent, those who were going along with the government line that the only people who had a right to struggle were those who used so-called peaceful methods.

So it was really important for me to help create, the Anarchist Black Cross, which was just coming into existence in the United States. They had a newsletter that went all over the world and was in something like 16, 17 languages. It gave massive publicity to political prisoners, and it brought in a lot of people that were in support of the struggle.

Of course, by '71, when the Attica Rebellion takes place and all these prisoners are killed, it created even more support for the prisoners. But there was a long stage of struggle before that took place that we need to remember, you know what I'm saying?

**I'd like to ask you in a little more detail what experiences and influences led to you becoming an anarchist while you were in prison and how this related to your relationship with the Black Liberation movement? How are black liberation and anarchism to**

## you two things that are mutually compatible in your own ideals?

It's always been problematical. Because there wasn't, to be quite honest, a racial consciousness or I should say perhaps, an anti-racist consciousness, inside of the anarchist movement at the time. And it was a lot of struggle on my part to even point out to people how important it was to have anti-racist politics. People act now like it's always been there, but that isn't true, I can tell you as a fact. I had to go through all kinds of struggle to educate large sections of the anarchist movement. That's the whole reason I wrote *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*. It was really to educate the anarchist movement about racial politics as best I could. I was no expert or anything, but I just raised the issues as best I could.

My other objective was to have a method of educating a class of political prisoners, and activists in the street if I could reach them, around what anarchism was and what its utility could be in terms of revolutionary politics. And of course that hasn't really changed. I still do the same thing, in that sense, try to on some level educate young black people, usually, or even veteran activists around issues of how anarchism can be used for political theory in the black movement.

That process continues. I suppose it will continue after I'm gone, at least I'd like to believe that.

**Anarchism and Black Revolution was written over 30 years ago. It's 2011 now. What would you add now, if anything, or what would you change having the knowledge that you do now?**

What I'm doing now is called *Let's Organize the Hood: Volume 3 of Anarchism and the Black Revolution*. I'm making more of an appeal to people that do community based organizing, making more of an appeal to anarchists to understand that whole question of organizing peoples of colour is not just to get Black people or Asians or whoever to join white anarchist movements but to be able to define how that movement relates to them and to be able to build tendencies that reflect their own histories and realities.

My whole reason for doing this third volume is less focused on speaking to anarchists, but to get ordinary people in the black community, in communities of colour, involved in community-based organizing with anarchist principles. Another purpose is to get people of colour who are already anarchists to get involved in going into their communities and doing work. That has not been the case up to this point. Up to this point, it's been the leftist approach, of raising political issues and hope that people unite around those issues. What that has usually led to is movements that are mostly whites, or movements made up of middle-class people of colour who have no connection to street people or to communities.

And so I'm trying to break through that trying to let people know how to do organizing, and why you should do organizing. I've been doing that for quite some time, but this is more overt. I'm writing it in terms of in terms of how hip-hop politics can be used with anarchism.

**Could you talk a little bit more about how you incorporate your anarchist ideals into on the ground organizing in a context where people of colour often don't identify as anarchists at least not en masse?**

Well they won't identify unless it's named a leftist issues that they are acquainted with. For instance unemployment. Right now, in the black community, the levels of unemployment are depression levels. But neither the anarchist movement or any other wing of the labor movement has yet to take up this reality of concentrated unemployment in the black community. The prison system is another example. We're faced with a massive number of peoples of colour going to prison. You have yet to see the Anarchist Black Cross raise that as a political issue. You can go on and on and on: if the movement doesn't stick to the people, the people aren't interested in the movement. That's what I'm saying. The reality is, unless we're able to build programs that people in communities of colour can be part of, we should not expect them to be sympathetic to anarchists, it simply won't happen. A simple thing like putting anarchist literature in black bookstores where people can get access to it, read it as so forth, instead of having to just read Marxist and communist literature exclusively, even that would be a step forward. You hardly ever see

that even happening. There's no sympathy and there's no consciousness about doing this stuff.

But to me what's more important is to reach directly people in communities of colour. To reach them with a program, based around day to day issues and also based around what we call transitional issues. You can take an issue like unemployment and use that to build a mass campaign that would threaten the government, where poor people are essentially organized to take on the government themselves without the filter of unions without the filter of the church, without the filter of any of this stuff.

That's a step towards anarchism, and we haven't even gotten that stage yet. So for me, what I try to do when I become part of campaigns, is that I couldn't overtly call them an anarchist tendency and so forth, but we could say that we raised the consciousness of the people by doing anti-authoritarian politics. And how we sell that to the people is an important question. Clearly they're not ready to fall behind what they see as white kids, immature white kids, that all they do is spike their hair and get drunk. They're not ready to fall in behind that, so if it's going to be sold to us, it's going to be sold to them, it's got to be sold to them based on their actual social circumstances, their real conditions and the level of oppression facing them.

In terms of really fusing hip-hop and anarchism ideals, I'd say that you don't have to be some special leader to do some organizing in the community. You don't have to have some big, important NGO either. It comes down to this whole question of representing, speaking to the masses of people and having the masses of people speak for themselves. These are very simple things, but they can be made more overtly political.

This whole thing about direct democracy, we should mainstream that. I don't mean mainstream in terms of selling it out, but we should have it in a form that builds some sort of formation that people can connect themselves to it, instead of just electoral politics as the only option for people. Even radicals talk about electoral politics as their only option. We need to build something else, you know, we need to build some kind of organization, in this country especially, in North America period, that allows the masses of people to take

part in it and have an alternative to the political structure, including the electoral system.

**I'm glad that you brought this up because you saw so many people, even on the left, the far left, in the United States, rallying behind Obama because they were saying that this was grassroots organizing even if they didn't believe in electoral politics, they saw it as strategic engagement. Some anarchists actually do believe a strategic engagement makes sense, whereas many others just believe that the electoral system will never lead to any sort of mutual liberation. Could you give your opinion on strategic engagement, voting and the electoral system?**

I don't believe there's ever going to be a progressive avenue inside the democratic party or inside the electoral system for the most part. I think people get so dogmatic and so steeped in history that they don't think creatively about building something new and taking ideas we've got right now and reshaping those ideas. They're afraid to do that. So I think that the whole idea of taking, for instance, direct democracy and putting that not only as just an alternative but as a confrontation with electoral politics and representative democracy and all this other garbage, and I mean garbage ideologically and politically. I think that if we could do that, we may be able to build some kind of formation that can involve millions of people.

My wife and I were highly critical of Obama being elected. We called our article "Black Faces in High Places" and we talked about his whole concept of having a Black face that's the face of imperialism in the 21st century. Maybe even the face of fascism in the 21st century, in that he speaks for the corporations. His whole role in being elected president is to save capitalism, first of all, and to give power to the corporations. Now he'll try to pacify certain elements of his constituency, to some extent, but his real role is not to worry about us.

I didn't vote for him, I would not vote for him, I don't vote anyway. They're in a crisis. The only reason he got elected is they're in a deep crisis, economically, politically and socially. And they put him in to give the crisis a new face and a new style. What we have to understand is that with Obama being president.

whatever little scraps we win, if we win anything at all, we're going to have to fight him for it. He said as much, that you'll have to fight me for accountability.

So if somebody tells you that you've got to fight me for what I'm not going to give you, then clearly we need to be organized into fighting. I'm not saying that I believe like some people believe that the head of state, removing the head of state like they did with Bush and all that is really the issue. That was never really the issue. The issue is to win whatever rights and victories we can for the masses of common people, and to fight off these austerity programs in the United States. I don't see any mass movement that's fighting the austerity programs other than these people in Wisconsin. These people, all people will likely have to fight like hell just to stay alive.

Obama is not the answer for us, he never was anyway, for poor people, for people of colour, and certainly not for anarchists. Anybody who supports anybody like him is a sellout, that's a sellout position. We should be trying to build forces in the streets that oppose these austerity policies that Obama himself is going to sign onto from the extreme right. We should be trying to win whatever rights we can and victories in this period when labour and all this is so weak anyway. Even the labour movement has sold out pretty much, and now its on its last legs fighting to even stay alive.

We should be trying to build a grassroots movement of a new type based on community organizing, based upon the poor, because ain't no revolution gonna take place without the poor no way. We've got to give voices to people ain't never had voices before. That's my belief. If we don't give voices to people who have never had voices before, the we can't be surprised if all we get is the same old spin and the same old people and the same system.

My belief is that we need to build from the bottom up and we need to empower people that have never had power before. And that ain't coming from the government and it ain't coming from Obama.

**You helped found Cop Watch in Tennessee. Can you talk about what Cop Watch means to you and how challenging systemic police**

## violence and impunity relates to your political goals?

Well, you know, you've got to realize that the ideas behind Cop Watch really came out of the Black Panther Party. The Panthers started the idea of monitoring the police, challenging the police and letting people know when they were being arrested that they had certain rights. It was part of the original Black Panther programming. Cop Watch was a natural extension to support that idea. There have been various iterations of Cop Watch, you've got to realize. There were some more radical than others. You've got some that were liberals who just wanted certain kinds of fundamental democratic rights. There has never been any one unitary movement. I think it's important nonetheless that you have this kind of break, trying to force accountability upon the police.

We're not strong enough to push the government out the way and push the police out of the way at this moment, but we can keep them from committing genocide and mass murder, shooting and killing people in the street and so on and nobody says anything. That's a very dangerous precedent if a community allows people to get killed and doesn't say anything.

In Chattanooga, Cop Watch came out of Black Autonomy. We formed Black Autonomy in the late '80s-early '90s. The idea was to build a youth-based movement. It started out as a Black social and political tendency.

From this we started building the Black Autonomy Cop Watch. That was the main group of Black Autonomy at the time. We managed to have a protest at City Hall in 1990 to protest the shooting deaths of two young Black men there. A hundred some people came in there and took up the space where the business men and all the others usually sat and ran them out of there. And we took over the facilities and we spoke and everything against police terrorism. I was arrested, and two other comrades with me. We were arrested and that became the case of the Chattanooga Three. We were charged with disruption of a government meeting and so forth. First it was an attempt to charge me personally with inciting a riot, which is a felony, and that was very serious for me because if I was convicted of that, I could have been given a life sentence, because I had two other convictions earlier in my life.

To continue, Black Autonomy created the Cop Watch, which was meant to be some kind of accountability mechanism on police terrorism, using mass organizing, using community-based organizing. We had people in the projects and different places giving reports on what the police were doing over in their neighborhoods. People with video cameras went out videotaping the police. In one case, a guy used a tape recorder to record the police beating this guy to death in jail. He smuggled the thing in. They were beating this guy, basically beating him to death. He smuggled it in and got that to us, and we put it on the radio. This all comes out of a long-established campaign already against police brutality, and Black Autonomy Cop Watch was just a follow-up on that.

**The G20 that just took place in Toronto in July 2010 resulted in massive protests which included property destruction. There is a large debate on the left every time that property destruction is included as a protest tactic. From your own life context, what is your take on property destruction and sort of this debate that we see on-going in the Left?**

My answer would change depending on the context. One is the mass movements I was part of, many of them were led by preachers and all this other kind of thing, but on the outskirts of those movements they did have in many instances armed force protecting the marchers. Where it was the Deacons for Defense and Justice, whether it was the SNCC militia or whatever it was, in later periods of the Black Power period especially, you had people with arms protecting the marchers. Dr. King used to talk, you know, and a lot of the other preachers used to talk about pacifism and this and that and that was their primary tactic. But the reality was, in some instances they would have been killed if nobody had been there with arms to protect their lives. They won't ever say that, but it's a fact. This was also in Tennessee, right at the same time that pacifist tendencies were going on.

The question is whether or not a movement which is part of a mass tendency or a mass protest resorts to property violence and if that property violence is, does it further the goal of the movement as a whole. It all depends. Property violence, I never saw that as a tactic anytime we were organizing. One thing was, it would leave the officials, in a majority black march and somebody



started breaking windows, because to kill somebody or to mess somebody up in the street. Here in Memphis, that instance when Dr. King was having a march here in 1968, before he was murdered, the youth and the street people jumped up and started attacking the downtown stores and so forth. And the police used that to, one, try to discredit Dr. King, but they also used it to create, essentially, martial law.

Offhand I can't say that in every instance, it would be great to have property violence and so forth and it should be part of the movement, on the other hand I won't say it's something that should be stopped. I don't agree with the right-wing elements in the protest movement either who want to make it out like everybody who engages black bloc protests is in fact a police agent or police provocateur, because that's a lie, a straight out lie.

But I do think that a lot of this stuff is sophmoric, this breaking windows to be doing it and not having any kind of plan or program or anything. I don't know, for me, it's not something I want to engage in unless I can see some political benefits out of it, you know what I'm saying. How it's going to advance the movement, how's it's going to put the state up against the wall.

**Are you saying that it can't stand in for, and needs to be part of, on-the-ground organizing in communities?**

Yeah, that's what I'm saying. You see people are taking and putting one against the other. "Oh, if you're not doing black bloc, you're not doing anything." Which I think hurts the movement as a whole because you can do some of all of that, you know. I don't think the movement should allow itself to have any hard and fast principle about it, and it should be based on the circumstances at the time of the protest thing itself. Because each city's going to be different, each region's going to be different. You can't do something in the South that you could do in Canada or you could do in New York somewhere. That's one of the realities. If you're not going to have the numbers, if you're going to have a more conservative population, they're not going to understand it, even people who would be supporters of the movement, you know what I'm saying?

It depends on who you've got as your base. If you've got young people as your base, they want it, then they going to participate in it, put 'em out there! If you don't have that, if you don't have that support, if it's just a small group, then they're easily discredited and could be put in a position that they get hurt. So that's my spin on it.

**I've heard you say before that fighting racism always has to mean fighting against capitalism at the same time. Could you elaborate a little bit on this?**

Fighting racism should be a fight against capitalism, but one thing is black folks can't sit and wait for white folks to decide that they going to get it. I think that there should be political education of white activists in part of the movement, but I don't think that should be the primary thing. I think the primary thing is that people who are subjected to oppression need to throw it off. And they try to get their allies to understand why they're doing and what they're doing and become part of it, but they can't wait around for white folks to decide that "we understand this, this is an essential part of the struggle against capitalism." That's ridiculous. People are going to fight against every form and every vestige of oppression. So in terms of racial oppression, this country was founded on chattel slavery, on racial slavery. That's what founded this country. That was the forerunner of capitalism in the first place, so if you've got any kind of an analysis that doesn't include the fact that this country was founded on slavery, you're lost. The economic backbone of this country, was racial slavery and the maintenance of this capitalist system is a form of structural racism. If people don't recognize this as part of fighting capitalism, then it's a bankrupt ideology and a bankrupt movement and it can't help but to fail.

On the other hand, I don't agree with what we used to call these narrow nationalists or porkchop nationalists who take the perspective that all white people are the devil and they have no good in them and they're scoundrels and they're this and that. I don't accept that either, but it's a tricky situation. White people have certain privileges, including a superiority of resources, and they can't pop up one day at a Black mass meeting or in a Black movement and say, "well, we want to be part of this and we're here to help you.

Go ahead, we'll free you," or something like that. I've heard some people say that.

It has to be a situation where the people who are doing this organizing have to recognize these people are allies. It isn't incumbent upon the white people to say, "well, we're gonna go ahead and show them we're allies. We're going to be their allies whether they like it or not." I think the mistake of anarchists and leftists period is this idea that we have the right ideology, we've got the right program. All these Blacks and so forth, they're going to recognize it and they're just going to join. They're not going to do any such thing! And you're going to continue to have conflict if you take that kind of approach.

What is happening, unfortunately, what I've experienced, is this dogmatic assertion that "this is our anarchism. You've got to conform to it." And I think that that's a very big mistake, that that is a kind of hostile politics. I've seen a lot of that, I've experience some of that as well. I've tried to get a number of organizations to create within their own ranks some type of organization that could bring in, organize and recruit people of colour and have these kinds of politics I'm talking about. A lot of that's been rejected out of ignorance and some of it out of fear and who knows what else. But it's a mistake that is going to ultimately lead this movement to obsolescence if it's not addressed.

In every problem, there's also an opportunity, and the opportunity is that they need to understand that they're not leading people. If there's going to be a revolution in this country, it's not going to be by white, middle-class kids or somebody that dropped out of one of these rich homes or something. I had this argument with people inside of Love and Rage some years ago. They essentially come from very upper-crust families and so forth, they never really suffered the kind of oppression I'm talking about. You can't go out and preach to people on the streets.

The streets are not over going to bow down to intellectuals, that ain't gonna happen. The street ain't gonna bow down to the academy. It's not going to bow down to some disconnected white kids that drop out, come around and just talk crap to 'em, you know, something they don't even understand anyway.

Until people understand that they got to reach out to people and not think that they're just going to have people march in and want to become part of their crap. Until that happens, you're going to continue to have a divide on racial and ethnic grounds within the anarchist movement itself.

**Finally, from your own lived historical experience, what advice would you like offer to the liberation movements in the present, including from your own current plans? Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share?**

I want to let people know that I'm still alive and I'm still organizing, still thinking.

One thing I did learn in the Black Panther Party is important for what I want to do now. There was a phase where the serve-the-people organizations became more important than the Party central for a time, you know what I'm saying? I learned that the whole idea of mass organizing and grassroots organizing with people who are concerned about issues and concerned about survival, real survival, those are people who you can't shake off with a stick, who you can't run off with a gun. And many times when the Party would have been done in, long time ago, it was those people that protected the Party.

One example right quick is that in '71, the Detroit police department came down with a tank to destroy the Black Panther Party. I'm serious now, a tank! To destroy the Black Panther Party. And the only thing that stopped the cops and all them from destroying the Black Panther Party, from blowing it up to bits, was that there were people from those organizations that are parallel with the Black Panther Party, you know, serve-the-people organizations, who came out and marched and held hands around the building and kept them from coming in with a military force. That was the only thing. That the people were out there in large numbers to prevent them from doing that, otherwise they would have destroyed the building and who knows how many people would have been killed?

A lot of things can go through your life and that's one of the things you don't forget. And it makes you understand the relevance of the mass struggle. It

doesn't matter what period of history we're talking about, because it can happen now, actually. People say, "Oh, it can't happen now, that was back in the sixties." Well it's true, there were some things that came about at that time because of the because of the earlier civil rights period. But right now, right now, something can be organized. It won't be exactly like in the sixties, but something can be organized right now with youth and with community folks, ordinary community folks, and they can organize things right now.

So we're trying to make that happen. We're trying to politically educate and train people and all that so that they can organize themselves. I'm not going to be here, I might not even live long enough to see it happen. If I can get it started, and somebody else can pick up on it and finish it, that's what it's about. Because then when the youth pick up on it, the youth can take it. They don't need me as a personal leader or something or other. They don't need me to show them everything. I've shown you something. You ain't got to see it no more, you can do it for yourself.

Give the people the tools so that they can organize themselves. That's something that hasn't happened in a long, long time.



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