

# BUILDING POWER & ADVANCING

## FOR REFORMS, NOT REFORMISM

by Thomas Giovanni



[www.blackrosefed.org](http://www.blackrosefed.org)



Produced by Black Rose Anarchist Federation

How should anarchist communists relate to the question of improvements to the condition of our class, short of social revolution?

In this article, Thomas Giovanni argues that reforms can play an important role in revolutionary strategy. But this is only the case, Giovanni asserts, when concessions are won using direct action and collective power.



Read more at [www.blackrosefed.org](http://www.blackrosefed.org)

*“We shall carry out all possible reforms in the spirit in which an army advances ever forwards by snatching the enemy occupied territory in its path.”<sup>1</sup>*

— Errico Malatesta

As anarchist communists, we are against reformism. However, we are for reforms. We believe that fundamentally the entire system of capitalism, the state and all systems of hierarchy, domination, oppression and exploitation of humans over humans must be abolished and replaced with a direct democracy, egalitarian social relations and a classless economy that bases contribution according to ability and distribution according to need. However, such a social revolution can only occur through the power of the popular classes themselves from the bottom-up. In advancing towards such a social revolution and a free and equal society, we must build our power in preparation for this fundamental transformation of the world, building on struggles along the way. Ultimately our demands will be too threatening to the elite classes for them to bear; and their resistance to our drive for freedom will be too much for us to tolerate any longer.

to effectively carry-out revolution: the abolition of the state and all forms of government that dictate from above, and the replacement of this with directly democratic popular decision-making; the expropriation of the land and means of production from the capitalist class and its bottom-up socialized self-management by the workers and communities; the establishment of classless, egalitarian and cooperative global economies in which economic contribution is according to ability and economic distribution is according to need; the abolition of all systems of oppression and their replacement with social systems, cultural practices and relations that value and respect all people in their full humanity and individuality; the abolition of national systems that value one people over another and their replacement that gives dignity, self-determination and freedom to all human beings and values them equally as human beings across the globe; the end of environmental devastation and its replacement with practices of environmental sustainability and stewardship.

## Advancing

In short, we must reject the mentality—reformism—that sees any given reform, or even series of reforms, as the final objective in our struggles. We also must reject the mentality—purism—that rejects all reforms as reformism, and as counterproductive and useless. Instead, we must engage in struggles for reforms in the short-term.

These reform struggles must be the means by which we build bottom-up and horizontal popular power—and the corresponding consciousness, skills, solidarity, capacity and organization—in the medium-term. We must not stop building this power, but continue grow, develop and advance—even if we falter or are defeated temporarily at times—towards the possibility of a revolutionary situation in which we destroy the fundamental causes of exploitation, domination and oppression themselves, not just their symptoms.

---

### Endnotes

1. Malatesta, Errico. *The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Articles 1924- 1931*, Pg 81.
2. Kropotkin, Peter. *The Conquest of Bread*, Chapter 1: Our Riches.
3. “Especifismo in Brazil: An Interview with the Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro (FARJ)” by Johnathan Payn.

3. Always reflecting, always acknowledging areas to improve and always attempting to improve these things together. If we aren't basing our struggle in praxis—the combination of action and reflection—then we're either engaging in empty, ungrounded theory from the sidelines, or thoughtless, ineffective activism.

In the medium term, we want to build power. Of course we want to lessen exploitation, oppression, and domination where possible; but in the medium term—regardless of whether any given reform is won or lost—the struggle itself must serve to strengthen the social movements and class-based organizations so that they are able to grow and be more effective in future struggles.

We want to create a dynamic in which bottom-up, directly democratic, anti-hierarchical, collective and anti-oppressive class-based power grows stronger and stronger over time. This power is the result of increased and shared consciousness of the causes of exploitation, domination and oppression and of the ways to fight and eventually end them. It's the result of better functioning organizations; more solidarity; less internal oppression between members and a shared commitment of all to centrally challenge different manifestations of institutional, systemic and cultural oppression; more skill development and more equal distribution of skill development; greater commitment to struggle; a realization of more effective ways to struggle; and so on.

In the long-term, we want this popular bottom-up power to grow to the point where it can effectively end all systems of oppression, domination and exploitation, and replace them with directly democratic, egalitarian, anti-hierarchical and cooperative political, economic and social systems.

We see this revolutionary situation coming about after decades of battles—wins and losses—in which the popular classes steadily increase their power and continue to demand more and more until the demands of the popular classes are too much to concede for the dominant classes; and the power of the popular classes is enough

## Against Reformism

We are against reformism. Reformism is the belief that the system as it currently exists can remain, but just needs to be slightly improved. For reformists, reform is the end goal. They are not against the system; they are against what they see as the “excesses” of the system. We don't see the harm that the system does as excesses of the system, but expressions of the fundamental nature of the system. We see the reformists trying to hold down the lid of a boiling pot of water, or letting steam go from that boiling pot now and then; but they do not address the fundamental problem.

For example, the problems under capitalism aren't because some capitalists are greedy or unfair— which they are; but rather that capitalism itself is the problem. Our global wealth has been historically created from the labor, resources and land from around the world. While the genius of human technology, innovation and hard work have been a factor; so slavery, exploitation, monopolization and theft have been a factor. But regardless of the degrees to which oppression or human genius played their respective roles in the creation of wealth, there can be no doubt that every advance is completely rooted in social relations and circumstance, as well as historical processes. Kropotkin describes this from one perspective in *The Conquest of Bread*.<sup>2</sup>

If this is so, why are some allowed to own and control the land, wealth and the means of production? Shouldn't these be the common property of all as the inheritance of all that has been contributed by human history and the complex social processes that interacted to bring us to, and maintain the wealth that we have today? So how can we justify maintaining a system where some benefit more than others from the historically developed and socially maintained wealth? And how can we call only for reform of that system? It'd be like sitting at a family dinner where your brother claims to own the kitchen even though you're cooking dinner with your parents. Your brother then receives all of the food produced and gives you and your parents each 10% of the food while he keeps 70% of it as the owner. A reformist response would be to say that if only each mem-

ber of the family were able to get a 15% or 20% portion each (leaving your brother with a 55% or 40% share for being the “owner”), everyone would be alright and less hungry.

Our response would be that it’s not about redistribution, the original distribution itself is flawed, and so is the system of ownership and work responsibility of the family. We must create a completely new system in which people share the common products of labor, which is carried out according to each person’s ability.

## **Against Purism**

So if we’re against reformism, or reforms as the only goal, shouldn’t we be against reforms themselves? No. We want to make gains, and we are against the position that gains are pointless. Purism is the tendency of some to try to be so pure in their ideological position that they are unable to deal with the sloppiness of reality. It wrongly equates reforms with reformism itself. It rejects any position that doesn’t exactly mirror its ideological position. It leaves little room for dialogue and building with others, and instead is trapped in a position of constantly calling for the long-term vision without a clear proposal as to how to get there, or a clear way to build with people along the way. Purism often leads little room for activity besides ungrounded agitational writing and abstract theorizing from the sidelines. This “all or nothing” approach leaves little room for development towards a revolutionary situation. It ignores how the short and medium-term can connect to a long-term vision, and instead only focuses on the long term.

## **For Building Power and Advancing**

So what is the solution for anarchist communists? We seek to build power towards a revolution. We feel that only the mass movements of the oppressed, exploited and dominated classes will be able to end oppression, exploitation and domination. As members of these classes, we seek to contribute to these movements. In the short-term, we seek to make gains in consciousness, capacity, skills, solidarity, and organization. From a revolutionary perspective this involves

what the Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro (FARJ) calls social work and social insertion.<sup>3</sup> At first we are participating in the social movements—*social work*—often times without being able to have our views gain traction. Through consistent, principled and effective participation, we are able to build relationships with others; establish trust and respect; and dialogue with others about our views and positions. After a while, we hope to achieve some degree of *social insertion*: the influencing of social movements in the direction of being more directly democratic, more combative, more class-conscious, more anti-hierarchical, more infused with a long-term revolutionary consciousness, and so on.

In the short-term, we also want to win reforms. Losing in a reform struggle can demoralize participants around the possibility of struggle achieving gains; and winning in a reform struggle can demobilize participation and energy as people feel that they have succeed. But likewise, winning in reform struggles can build confidence, organization, capacity, solidarity, skills, and power; and losing in a reform struggle, can strengthen resolve and sharpen strategy. The point is that although we want reforms because they improve the lives of the oppressed and popular classes of which we are a part; even more fundamental to struggle—whether we win or lose—is developing the strength of the movement, which can come out of both wins and gains in reform struggles.

A revolutionary approach to reform struggles requires us to:

1. Fight for reforms directly using bottom-up and direct action oriented means instead of legalistic, electoral, or other top-down “solutions.” This will build power rather than reinforcing institutional dependencies.
2. Always acknowledge before the end of the struggle the risks of losing—and being prepared to deal with this—as well as emphasizing the importance of struggle beyond the particular reform. Whether reforms are won or lost, the struggle continues until the unjust situation is changed.