



# IN DEFENSE OF FIRE & SMOKE

Sean Swain

Originally published in **WILDFIRE** no. 4, an anarchist prison solidarity newsletter. This essay is part of an ongoing conversation between anarchist prisoners on tactics.

*wildfire.noblogs.org*

Sean Swain is an anarchist held captive in the Ohio prison system. For more information, check out his support site.

*seanswain.org*

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ANOTHER RESPONSE IN THE  
ONGOING DEBATE ON WHAT  
CONSTITUTES REFORMIST TÁCTIC

UNTIL ISSUE NO. 3 OF WILDFIRE CAME OUT, I intended to write on a new topic, expecting the debate over reformism versus revolutionary action to have run its course. But from the lively debate in the last issue, I think would be remiss not to address the topic one more time, in light of all the responses.

As I have used the terms, “revolutionary action” seeks to topple the existing system rather than change the way it operates. “Reformist action” on the other hand does not seek to topple the system but is geared to modifying or “reforming” the way the existing power operates.

To make an analogy, a hammer is a tool that pounds nails. A screwdriver is a tool that installs screws. Hammers and screwdrivers are not interchangeable but perform different jobs. Same with revolutionary and reformist actions.

So the question regarding hungerstrikes is: Does the act of hungerstriking seek to topple power or does it seek to establish new terms as to how power operates? However I may feel about hungerstrikes, and however anyone else may feel about them, hungerstrikes seek to leverage the existing powers to exercise authority differently, to give concessions. With a hungerstrike, no matter how many of us do it, and no matter how long we do it, a hungerstrike will never bring down the power structure.

If your goal is to topple power, a hungerstrike is never the tool you can use to accomplish that job, any more than you can effectively use a hammer to insert screws. The hungerstrike is a tool from the reformist toolbox.

Now, I have had to alter my position on work stoppages a bit. Michael Kimble has presented a scenario where work stoppages could be used for a revolutionary outcome—that is, that rebels who seek no compromise with the power structure could employ a work stoppage, not with the goal of making demands or gaining concessions, but with the goal of never going back to work, with the goal of shutting down the system all together. Such a scenario is clearly revolutionary. But, having said that, every work stoppage in history has devolved into reformism. This is due to the fact that not every single rebel is dead-set to bring the system down, and will instead return to work for the promise of concessions, for a handful of rewards.

Sad, but true.

It occurs to me that particularly in a prison setting, for practical reasons, it would probably make sense not to begin any rebellion by proposing a statewide work stoppage, one designed to continue forever until the system collapses and we all go home. I don't see that working. Probably, that would be something to build up to, through other actions that develop the practice of rebellion.

That's why I maintain that hungerstrikes are a tool in the reformist toolbox and work stoppages, until they prove to be used for a revolutionary outcome, are also, unfortunately, a reformist tool. Now, having said all of that, others have made points that employing reformist tools like hungerstrikes serve to (1) raise consciousness, (2) broaden participation in struggle, and (3) build solidarity. All of these points are true. But, engaging in reformist tactics will only lead to raising reformist consciousness, broaden participation in reformist struggle, and build solidarity with reformists who are only seeking to alter the way the system works, not destroy it.

Back to the analogy, teaching someone to use a screwdriver does not make them proficient with a hammer.

Practicing reformist tactics "raises consciousness" that we can struggle and get the system to change and accommodate us. Someone under that false consciousness can never be motivated to topple the system that they falsely believe to be responsive (if only enough of us sign a petition to vote or march or hungerstrike). So, building "reformist consciousness" arrests "revolutionary consciousness" and detracts from the potential for revolution.

Employing reformist tactics also broadens participation in the struggle—in the reformist struggle. It creates greater numbers of folks who believe that they can

devote their energies to getting the existing system to work for them. It does not, however, pull more people into the revolutionary struggle of attempting to topple the system.

Also, let's keep in mind that no revolution in history ever secured more than 5% of the population's participation. In every revolution in history, 95% of the population sat on the sidelines and watched. So, that being the case, attempting to broaden participation is a reformist approach in itself. I would gladly trade a million committed reformists for just a dozen die-hard revolutionaries dedicated to bringing the system down. The numbers argument is a reformist red herring.

Lastly, reformist action increases solidarity with other reformists and gets more folks intellectually oriented into running on that same hamster wheel, increasing the number of people who are deluded into thinking that the answer is not to topple the system but to strive to fix it, to achieve a kinder, gentler slavery complex.

Let's not pretend reformism corners the market on consciousness-raising or on broadening the movement or on increasing solidarity. Direct action strategies do that too, only direct action strategies inspire others to direct action. Tactics like sabotage and rioting and insurrection do not result in concessions or improvement in conditions. Revolutionary tactics are not geared for such outcomes, just as hammers are not geared for installing screws.

In the case of the 12 Monkey rebellion, the 12 Monkeys promoted sabotage like clogging drains and jamming locks, and the rebellion began with an incredibly small number of rebels. It grew quickly and escalated to smashing windows and lighting fires—which are *tactics the 12 Monkeys never promoted*. That is,

with mass participation in direct action rebellion, the action quickly went beyond the designs of those who had issued the initial invitation. So, direct action can promote revolutionary consciousness, broaden participation, and strengthen solidarity.

Prisoners can employ tactics that throw the prison complex into a constant state of conflict and crisis that builds and spreads. And contrary to the criticism that prison rebellion alone cannot take down the larger system of control, the fact is that no state can exist for long without the power to punish, and if the prisons are taken away from the state, the state cannot remain the state for long. But, the point is immaterial because widespread prison rebellion would spread and would consume so much of the state's energy and resources and personnel that nobody would be guarding the proverbial hen-house. Then rebels beyond the fences would have an open invitation to get just as rowdy.

The death of the hierarch program will not come about as a consequence of reformist actions or a series of reformist actions, not even a million reformist actions involving a million participants. The system will only be toppled by rebels who dedicate themselves to actions that are designed to topple the system. We are not excused from participation just because we're locked in cages. It does not absolve us, but provides us an even greater incentive, a stronger motive, a deeper resolve.

**Our love and fury cannot be expressed through the lexicon of the reformist but need to be articulated in blood and smoke. Since the privileged few of the world have relegated us to butchered lives, have made it clear that in the final analysis it is us or them, I say let the smoke rise now and let the blood be theirs.**

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