

# Quiet Resistance: The Workers' Union Underground

High Priest Wombat, KSC

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I've heard many references to "quiet resistance", which mimics past underclass resistance forms and the current methods of working class resistance outside of unions. I don't think I've ever worked a job and not engaged in some form of quiet resistance, which many workers are down for and can often be agitated towards.

According to "Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance" on page 33-34:

"It is reasonably clear that the success of de facto resistance is often directly proportional to the symbolic conformity with which it is masked. Open insubordination in almost any context will provoke a more rapid and ferocious response than an insubordination that may be as pervasive but never ventures to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy or power. For most subordinate classes which, as a matter of sheer history, have had little prospect of improving their status, this form of resistance is the only option. What may be accomplished within this symbolic straitjacket is nonetheless something of a testament to human persistence and inventiveness.."

"..They could intentionally or unconsciously feign illness, ignorance or incompetence, driving their masters to distraction."

"..The slaves themselves appear to have realized that in most circumstances their resistance could succeed only to the extent that it hid behind the mask of public compliance.."

"..the nature of resistance is greatly influenced by the existing forms of labor control and by beliefs about the probability and severity of retaliation. Where the consequences of an open strike are likely to be catastrophic in terms of permanent dismissal or jail, the work force may resort to a slowdown or to shoddy work on the job."

I've been paging through multiple google books on pre-capitalist and current forms of underclass revolt recently, though I am still reading this one. George Woodcock had a good one that exposed to some detail the activities of the Russian anarchists and the differences between them and the People's Will. Rosa Luxemburg has a good article on the same subject, I feel much more informed on the latter activities during the Russian nihilist period.

I would argue that we in fact do have an atomized workers' resistance, the fires just need to be fanned to make it visible. I think there are multiple catalysts that can open this up, the most drastic is an increase in economic disparity and/or national decline. I am arguing we have the conditions today to create a marginal heroic movement through a strategic use of small tactics, aiming towards intensifying quiet resistance and making people conscious of this resistance and breaking

this consciousness into connected visibility during periods when it benefits us to display group power, if only for brief moments.

These actions can target workplaces using the “quiet resistance” method, as well as the “street propaganda” method for strategy and tactics, both of which have shown real effect during our age of struggle. Obviously, if your expression of the refusal of work is not to put yourself in the direct path of exploitation, a broader emphasis on street propaganda and attacking as an exterior force might make more sense.

Well, disparity is a descriptive word for inequality, so I think economic disparity would lead to a deepening of inequality. By catalyst, I’m just being general. The material conditions are part of the equation in defining strategy and tactics, but there are lots of other catalysts that can play a role, culture and history are others, as are exemplary activities.

Wolfgang Ivers talks of “minor ruptures” and “major ruptures”. I don’t know how to get to a major rupture, but minor ruptures are achievable and satisfying to accomplish. Do I think anything else about this? Well, historically this has been part of activities you could find in any social movement that has turned into an insurrection in all eras of civilization. It is also the everyday activities of exploited people that aren’t spoken about. We aren’t dealing with a society of drones that “wake up” and snap into action, but rather with people already struggling daily, but quietly.

They are struggling with the idea that they don’t really want to work, they perceive they are coerced into an exploitive relationship. While paths of work refusal can mean a complete rejection of work, for most, this reality doesn’t exist to them, except for brief periods of joblessness. A complete refusal of work and creating activities that can prolong activities outside of work are also possibilities for brief periods, but I wouldn’t fetish permanent refusal, which has its own exploitive features and could lose momentum with a demand for permanent refusal among the general class.

When workers are forced into a precarious position, they realize they are excluded from power and often it is because of objective conditions, but just as often, they are subjected to these conditions out of business attempts at maximizing profit. Fights for reforms ultimately will have a breaking point, which might be the point of pro-union labor struggle (but ultimately contrary to the continuance of work and the power of union bureaucracy), but because we live in an abundant society, people are satisfied with less than the breaking point (in the United States) and selfishness won’t drive past contentment (home of the last man). Selfishness and the desire for a less empty existence are always factors in individual motivation, be it in a primitive society or in a civilized one or anything in between. Understanding and appealing to class selfishness can create common intermediate

aims and objectives. Creative myths, such as the “minor rupture” which have been historically achievable in our era can be spoken of with certainty of their existence and provoke others to dream of how to achieve what others are achieving now. Exposing the coercive and exploitive features of daily life, even at the workplace, has real results if resistance is desired.

The problems with today’s revolutionary minority is we don’t have a concentrated effort in any arena of struggle and thus can’t experiment these ideas together and create a dialog that is directly informed on the nuances of what is occurring today. We really can’t speak of an existence of movement or momentum among a general class we have little direct understanding of. Or perhaps some understand it, but don’t realize its historic significance. We report it and all others outside of this direct connection receive under-inspiring stories abstract from the life that created it.

Fetish is apt as long as capitalism exists. Showing that permanent refusal is possible is different than demanding a strict permanent refusal. Refusal is part of the beginning offensive of any struggle against an upper class. I can agree that permanent refusal can present some form of challenge as well, I am mainly concerned about the amount that “permanent refusal” is emphasized and workplaces rejected as having any potential among anti-authoritarians, especially for expressing anti-work desires. My argument is that the workplace offers an environment where work can be challenged. Outside of work, everyone has a thousand different priorities and bringing together something in this environment is an accomplishment. Inside of work, we are stuck together in a situation we don’t want to be in and are open to methods of agitation because of this situation. I’d also say that other things can be agitated at work besides workplace attack. It also should be noted that 8 hours of incessant agitation, 5 days a week is a longer period than most people watch T.V. or go to church to be informed about religion. I don’t think anyone would really want to listen that long outside of a work environment.

Does not working under capitalism, that is, permanent refusal, have exploitive features? Did I speak too quick? Because the economy is based on exchange, there is no gifting.

Here’s a part of the Marxian definition according to Wikipedia

In the Marxist view, “normal” exploitation is based in three structural characteristics of capitalist society:

1. the ownership of the means of production by a small minority in society, the capitalists;
2. the inability of non-property-owners (the workers, proletarians) to survive without selling their labor-power to the capitalists (in other words, without being employed as wage laborers);

3. the state, which uses its strength to protect the unequal distribution of power and property in society.

The key point is point 2, this is how fetishizing permanent refusal is exploitive. Just to play with this definition and “super exploitation” when people do attempt to refuse work, they often can only perceive of doing it for brief periods and/or they suffer hardships and difficulties. We have to work for welfare or workmen’s compensation, we can donate our plasma, which is still investing 4 hours of time to get 20–40 bucks, twice a week. We can eat out of dumpsters, educate ourselves on urban survival and how to live homeless comfortably in all weather conditions. We can also suffer from a lack of solidarity, the homeless are often victims of [other’s] boredom, according to many stories of violence towards the homeless in town, not to mention police harassment. If you are privileged enough to refuse work, but have a social network that supports you fully, in all cases I’ve observed, couch surfing eventually wears thin if someone is contributing labor for someone else’s survival or relations experience some form of inequality. Independent wealth can be stretched, physical, mental and social difficulties (or feigning them) can get a government check, but this is not really an option open to most (not to discourage the practice). Then there is all the other expropriation strategies and all the consequences of prison and sometimes violence. Ultimately there is old age and social security, but this doesn’t promise a life outside of an old folks home.

I don’t think of general strikes, America has never seen general strikes. We’ve had wildcat strikes though. I’m not suggesting actions of movements either, but rather actions towards the creation of a movement, using the historic methods of quiet resistance, which has existed in all ages of class rule and is part of all underclass movements of resistance to class rule. We can’t conceive of intensifying mass strategies that don’t exist in our circumstances, but we can conceive of intensifying the struggles within our individual lives towards minor ruptures, which can often occur at the workplace, if the workplace is already engaged in or open to quiet resistance. This is taking our current circumstances as they are and recognizing that we are in control of our individual lives and that we can effect those we have contact with if we make sense to them.

We have a total objective. But radical transformation is seen as impossible in the present conditions because of total dominance. But why always make it about the whole pie, or even a large event, like an insurrection, or even a riot? It is clear we are dealing with us (the radical exploited, we who have chosen to define ourselves or feel forced to define ourselves) having desires and them (the exploited that don’t seek to defined themselves) not having those same desires, but we want them to. We can group with ourselves and fight a losing political war against the capitalists,

a winning political war to become capitalists or we can adapt as the exploited adapt to capitalism, only attempting to raise the potential of what exists now.

As I was stating before about “quiet resistance”, this exists in all ages of civilization and is part of the historic battle against the present. Capitalism has largely absorbed other rebellions, but quiet resistance remains from what resistances existed before capitalism. Its success can be nothing but harmful for capitalism. Banditry could be reinterpreted into most forms of robbery and its success becomes part of the ruling order. Our own rebellion as radicals comes from the intellectuals, who have become satisfied with the ability to openly discuss and disseminate information, as our rebellion is over, the intellectuals won and continue to win under capitalism, getting paid well for it too, woo hoo. The oppressed also engage in quiet resistance once they have become a part of the greater system (even if it is as a second class). Exterior forces, like autonomous cultures, can fight guerrilla war like the political radical, but unlike the political radical, they can be satisfied with marginal concessions because they aren’t seeking more than a marginal recognition of power. I would argue that the demands for political autonomy in the age of capitalism is an expansion of capitalism and promotes self-policing, keeping what could be a rebellious segment of the population docile.

Where is capitalism inflexible? Isn’t gentrification a civil war being fought by the petite-bourgeois (backed by capitalist developers) on the poor? Isn’t it the educated radical that opposes violence against the petite bourgeois, even when it is often in the self interest of the poor to strike violently at the stratum that defines itself above the poor, the status of the professionals, the academics and managers in their exploitation? They are the ones that capitalism is flexible with, they are the ones that capitalism is lenient to and yet we act as if the poor don’t benefit from acting against the petite bourgeois as if they were the bourgeois. We have seen how little New Orleans has helped the poor and oppressed, turning Hurricane Katrina into a blessed event for the petite bourgeois, accelerating the gentrification process as generation rather than crippling the city. Our labor is so abundant that I can say such a thing. Chicago also benefited in a similar way with its great fire (and the plague gave us the renaissance). Such disasters smooth out contradictions and resistances to change. Are there any good theories on this by others?

Here’s something that nobody liked the first time around, maybe within this context it makes more sense.

## A Union against Unions: The Insurrectionary Manifesto of the *Workers' Union Underground*

The *Workers' Union Underground* has no official existence. There isn't a way to count membership. There isn't a bureaucracy to file grievances to. It exists only as long as we the workers understand that we can only rely on ourselves to protect our own interests. Workers' interests cannot be protected through the negotiation room, where compromise finds a home. It cannot be done by pleading for the boss to agree to our terms. It cannot be done through processes that require specialists. Workers' interests simply cannot be realized when workers put themselves in the position of passivity, where we are not in the steering wheel.

The *Workers' Union Underground* uses education, agitation, propaganda and direct action to push our workplaces and all of society towards the greatest autonomy possible and towards the realization that revolution is possible and necessary. When we act, it is because we are guided by an understanding of what is desired.

The *Workers' Union Underground* recognizes the necessity of collective action, and supports the secret interaction of workers and workplaces, under the cover of the bosses, under the cover of institutional unions.

We support all extra-legal means to support the movement for workers' emancipation from the binds of class society. Be it by sabotage, arson, street fighting, robbery, murder or anything else that society deems to rid itself of. Yet society cannot rid itself of these methods because they are perpetuated through class division and the enforcement of the state.

It is understood by the *Workers' Union Underground* that capitalism is an historic event that is to last until the final blow by the proletariat to bring an end to the centuries that people have been separated along class lines.

The *Workers' Union Underground* expands from previous manifestos that have exposed the centuries that lead worker's to the position they are in now. The *Workers' Union Underground* pushes forward that the proletariat as a class, working and non-working, young and old, skilled and unskilled, hard-working and extremely lazy, industrial and agricultural, pink collar and white collar, must smash capitalism in a violent revolution where capitalism is given no quarters to hide, and no room to breed anew.

The *Workers' Union Underground* only organizes itself secretly and informally. It understands that the natural revolutionary organs that rises from class struggle must be the controlling agent, and thus organizes itself only to bring about its own dissolution.

The *Workers' Union Underground* is opposed to alliances with Counter-Institutions. While the rank and file may be proletarian, the bureaucracies of these

institutions have proven and will continue to prove that they will only stand in the way of revolution, dividing people between the perpetuation of the institution and the revolutionary destruction of all institutions. The most a counter-institution can offer is political revolution, which the counterrevolutionaries, the Zapatistas, defend in their own 'autonomous struggles'. The Zapatistas have failed because they have no desire to fight for revolution, but instead they fight for dual power, and they acknowledge it, almost proudly.

The *Workers' Union Underground* does not give this kind of ground to capitalism. The *Workers' Union Underground* is against dual power relationships. The dual power in the dual power relationship is really the political conflict between authoritarians and demagogues.

The *Workers' Union Underground*, recognizes that all institutions, whether they claim to represent the proletariat or not, whether they be an industrial or trade union, whether they claim to be top down or bottom up, are the opposition that the proletariat must overcome to arrive at total revolution, and thus organizes itself invisibly and without any personality other than the personality presented in this manifesto.

The cry 'all power to the workers!' shall be the cry of the *Workers' Union Underground*, giving capitalism no quarter and giving false opposition no loyalty. We are the controllers of the future and we are what makes a free society possible. The Revolution is nearer than you think.

## **In the Mean Time**

Something that bothers me about many radical social theories out there is their emphasis on the worker. I can accept that capitalism defines the worker in relation to their power as part of a greater analysis of society. However, when we organize, we aren't organizing workers, we are organizing individuals. If you are looking for areas of tension and choose the workplace, the dialog will probably be based on work and how individuals conflict with work.

This is where I'll step back a little. Anarchists generally have two methods if they are approaching a workplace struggle. Both can be interchangeable, but there is an emphasis for developing the workplace as a method to provide economic security and support to the individuals so they don't have to live on the edge of poverty. This takes on the same face as old labor and striking for reforms. The extra security is very subjective in how it provides for individuals in the workplace. These types of struggles help provide income that can be used to help the individuals, their families and friends live with or above poverty as well as assist propaganda and resistance efforts .

The extra security does have its failings. It can provide a person who is working poor an elevation to the lower middle class or maybe even lower middle to damn near rich. This promotes unnecessary material accumulation and compliance to the social order in exchange for the continuation of the good job and its economic security. This creates different interests as has historically been shown with the expansion of the middle class, giving us only a repetition of what has already occurred with the general elevation of most of the working class into the middle. This isn't essentially true, but what has occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests this to be true.

New initiatives by working individuals in poverty towards "friendly" insurance can be more effective at creating economic security. This type of insurance would help with medical bills, funeral bills, strike stipends and so on. This is a reduction from what unions can offer and is deliberately divorced for the idea of unions. I do this because union bureaucrats and officials are typically separated from their workers through varying degrees of hierarchy and specialization and have been known to be less than supportive of all forms of workplace resistance. The friendly insurance acts as an alternative service for the working poor by the working poor. This type of insurance would not be based on accumulation and workers participating in its creation would share the hard decisions on who and how people are to be covered by the friendly. Networking with doctors and other professionals that can reduce costs can be beneficial and doctors that accept a life of poverty can be more helpful and fully involved in poverty support. This insurance can be expanded as a professional assistance insurance so that home repairs, plumbing, carpentry, and so on can be included in coverage with medical coverage.

The second method anarchists promote is not based on relieving poverty or creating more economic security. Instead its based on the idea of attacking the workplace as a symbol of oppression, in some cases it is based on causing affects on the general economy and in other cases its based on seizing or shutting down the workplace as an expression of power. The above friendly insurance would be able to function in both examples of workplace struggle as long as it isn't so large that it has to operate as a separate body from its membership. The friendly insurance can be held together by small clusters of informal independent and worker associations to ensure it remains part of what these individuals are doing and not a separate entity.

This is just a brief outline and much more can go into any method of resistance. I feel anarchists push themselves into a false dichotomy over work because the nuances between attack and reform have become too rigid and absolute while questions of what is necessary to live socially while we resist have moved more in the direction of interests not based on socializing and relieving poverty but accumulating more security and material power. I will continue looking into these

kind of issues because I feel that the growth of anarchy would benefit from emphasizing poverty intervention in workplace struggles rather than accepting the current methods of labor struggle. This also makes arguments for ending certain workplaces more possible if we already have a functioning practice for poverty relief and support.

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Clean up by original author (typos fixed).

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