

# The Interregnum

## *The George Floyd Uprising, the Coronavirus Pandemic, and the Emerging Social Revolution*

We believe that 2020-21 is a period of generalized social struggle that, for the first time in at least five decades, has pushed the so-called United States to the brink of revolutionary transformation. We have been thinking of this struggle as 'The Great Refusal\*'. We offer these theses as provocations and building blocks for further elaboration and action.

**01.** After more than a decade of increasingly militant and intensive struggles, both the scope and the imaginative power of the George Floyd Rebellion was such that the movement didn't simply *leave* the streets, but *translated* itself from the streets into workplaces, homes, schools, prisons, families, social gatherings, in other words, into proletarian everyday life. While these previous struggles—Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, prison strike, Occupy ICE, antifascism, Metoo etc—had remained overwhelmingly political, despite many insurrectionary and anti-political tendencies within them (refusal of demands, assertion of the value of Black and indigenous lives full stop), the George Floyd rebellion spilled fully over into a totalizing social struggle, the only kind of struggle capable of destroying this world.

**02.** The most visible aspect of this social struggle has been generalized labor refusal, what economists are calling The Great Resignation, which has seen over 30 million Americans quit their jobs in 2021 alone. But The Great Refusal can also be seen in a huge increase in more traditional labor action and organizing; in instances of mass looting divorced from more obvious movement and riot contexts; in the breakdown of school grading and testing regimes; in a broad expansion of mutual aid; in an even broader recognition of the psychic violence and alienation of everyday life intensified and made painfully visible by the pandemic, and a concomitant acceptance of mental health care, laziness and pleasure seeking; in a general open hatred of work.

**03.** The emergence of the social revolution reflects a qualitative, rather than simply quantitative, shift in the struggle. Whereas previous waves were driven by tactical innovations in response to state and capitalist attack, The Great Refusal represents a distributed, class-wide *offensive* against state, capital, white supremacy and property. The qualitative shift seen in the Great Refusal phase of the George Floyd rebellion expanded the target: from confronting direct domination and its antiblack origins (police, prisons, courts) to confronting indirect domination (work and all it entails). Where the first phase of the rebellion launched a deep questioning of policing, incarceration and what justice could mean in the US, this second phase calls into question the destructive place of work in the lives of proletarians struggling to make ends meet, as well as the threat to the entire world ecologically. This is a deepening of the lived critique of life under the racial regime of Capital.

**04.** Because of its offensive and distributed character, The Great Refusal has been almost entirely invisible to the organizer and activist left ("the left" here will be used in its most broad definition, as people of any tendency who engage in the struggle for liberation as a way of life). For the left, the period after 2020's summer rebellion has seemed a lull like any other. Ever generals fighting the last war, this milieu resigns itself to the depressing planned-obsolescence rhythms of political movement waves at the very moment that rhythm is being superseded. Further, the Electoral Left has taken this moment to return to their admonishment of proletarian self-activity that does not fit into their antiquated frameworks, an admonishment that was briefly put on pause when the George Floyd rebellion showed itself to be much more powerful and enduring than their campaign efforts.

**05.** The social revolution is significantly harder to reduce to data points, stirring and heroic scenes, organizations and causes, slogans and demands, in other words, into images, than the political revolution. In the topsy-turvy world of the Spectacle, anything whose material and tangible character can't be reduced to images feels less real. The more the real movement to abolish the state of things shies away from images of struggle toward the transformation of everyday life, the more the left shies away from that movement. This shying away from becoming more reproducible Spectacle is one of the key strengths of this phase, not because becoming clandestine is a value in and of itself, but because Left politicians have nothing to stand in front of and claim as their own. The very content of this phase is one that the Left has no real use for, and if anything they would like to see it disappear.

**06.** Despite this seeming opposition between political and social struggle, the George Floyd rebellion must be understood as the culmination of the previous decade's political struggle. This can be seen in the return of all of that decade's tactics—the blockade, the riot, the occupation, the mass march, the call-out, the prison strike, the anti-fascist mobilization, the highway shutdown—during the months of the rebellion's heights. The *supersession* of the political into the social would not have been possible without the reinvigoration of the political through the previous decade of struggle. The only way out is *through*.

**07.** At the moment of greatest achievement for the Left, its own supersession through the generalization of the struggle, it has, melancholic, turned inward. Seeing itself 'reduced' from the moral high ground of vanguardish leadership to the simple equality of participation by the mass character of events, and having learned to only look at its own organizing efforts as the marker and measure of class strength, it attempts, deflated, to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

**08.** The Great Refusal is a crucial hinge point for the revolutionaries: we can accept the collapse of the classical workers movement and its forms and (continue to) develop and experiment with new ways to move and analyze, or we can double down on the impoverished image of past victories and, in our desire for power, recognition and leadership, become the cutting edge of counterrevolution. This latter tendency was seen in the streets during the uprising, when "revolutionary" organizations pushed their way to the heads of marches and crowds, only to lead them in circular parades until everyone's legs gave out, to route them onto freeways with no plans of evasion or escape, or to push them toward purely symbolic conflict with the police, typified by non-resisted arrest of demonstrators.

**09.** If we instead take inspiration from the struggle *itself*, we might join The Great Refusal by withdrawal from any leftist formations we may have helped build and constitute up until now—and here we don't simply refer to organizations but to milieus, projects, social scenes or methods of practice—that are proving themselves *unsuitable* to events. Proto-revolutionary scenarios emerge very rarely, and we have to move away from our own dogmas and certainties if we want to act and move with effectiveness.

**10.** The novel coronavirus pandemic was a necessary but insufficient condition for the George Floyd Rebellion and The Great Refusal. Anti-blackness, ableism and xenophobia were also necessary but they are not *novel*, though the pandemic saw a deepening of these societal codes. The deep biopolitical, social, psychic and economic disruption of the pandemic and its management offered many impetuses for revolt, but the global pandemic did not lead to uprising everywhere on the globe.

**11.** The factors provided specifically by the pandemic were many: the experiences of mass death, illness and unemployment; the relief thrown on the nature of school and work as some experiences and tasks remained 'essential' while others disappeared without fanfare; a questioning of domestic and gendered life created by partially enforced house arrest; the lack of sports, TV, bars, clubs and other bread and circuses to give us something to talk and think about beyond our liberation; the un-even burden of pandemic sickness & death in Black, Native and nonwhite populations; the fury at the active acceleration of the pandemic by far right leaders acting on behalf of petit-bourgeois landlords and small business owners who wanted us 'back to work'; extra cash in hand from the sudden windfalls of unemployment increase and stimulus; eviction moratoria; deep frustration, boredom and alienation from the collapse of even the simplest modes of social reproduction like friendship, religious services, parties, family gathering; etc. etc. All of these factors were brought to bear in the United States on a society already buckling under the Black revolution in motion, increasingly powerful Indigenous resistance, staggering inequality, debt, gentrification and poverty, a deep hatred for the president and the Republican party, accelerating ecological catastrophe, healthcare system failure, broadly abhorred mass-incarceration, and the many smaller morbid symptoms of this collapsing empire. These social, affective and economic winds created the perfect storm of The Great Refusal.

**12.** While The Great Refusal is not totally global, it is also not limited to the United States: its contours are visible in Vietnam, Chile, Germany, and much of the Caribbean. Of particular note is a similar explosion of antiwork consciousness and antisocial action among younger workers in China.

**13.** In the US this mass withdrawal of labor, this general strike, has led to a huge improvement in wages, benefits and working conditions, including the largest year-on-year national wage increase in decades. However, these concessions are not satisfying the working class, who in October continued to leave their jobs at an accelerating rate. It seems, therefore, that the question is not the kind of work, or the level of remuneration, but rather *work itself*.

**14.** This antiwork action and consciousness represents a *continuation* of the anti-police action and consciousness of the George Floyd Rebellion. The police, the boss and the landlord form the unholy trinity of proletarian oppression. Without having to pay rent we wouldn't go to work for a boss, without a wage offered by a boss the landlord couldn't extract wealth by hoarding dwellings, without the police we would tell boss and landlord alike to fuck off. But with eviction moratoria and cash in hand, and having recently told the police to fuck off, up to and including burning down their pig pens, workers are increasingly recognizing the parasitic nature of the boss and the workplace, and are duly refusing it.

**15.** It is in connecting this antiwork consciousness with the abolitionist and decolonial struggles into a total refusal of this society where we see the most hope of our efforts bearing fruit.

**16.** All of these events have occurred without the massive financial collapse which everyone seems to agree has been lingering, just out of sight over the horizon, for the last three or four years. The real economy has been facing severe contraction, from infrastructural and logistical failure emptying shelves in Imperial heartlands to sudden fluctuations in energy costs to inflation beyond the control and management of the central financial institutions. And yet financial and housing markets rise, in no small part thanks to pandemic stimulus and seemingly unperturbed by the social and economic strife defining our everyday lives. Some revolutionaries have argued that debt and financialization have fully divorced the upper echelons of the economy from the material processes of work and commodity production, in which case we are no longer living under capitalism per

se but a kind of techno-feudalism, and so the collapse might be permanently deferred. But the crypto myth is simply the affirmative side of this coin: preceding every epochal crisis, many convince themselves that the problem of the social nature of value has been solved once and for all. On this one fact we are inclined to agree with the economists: this is unsustainable and a collapse approaches. If workers bring this collapse about themselves, we will have actively entered a revolutionary period.

**17.** Global leadership responded to the pandemic emergency with the same greed, apathy and utter disregard for our lives they've always shown. Looked at as a trial run for increasingly drastic medical and ecological catastrophes, capitalist democracy has indicated its total willingness to sacrifice us and everything we hold dear to the death head of profit. No one is coming to save us.

**18.** In the United States, the Democratic Party has decisively failed its historic role of coopting and containing movement. Too acclimated to working as the left hand of the Republican party, they failed to see that Bernie Sanders represented their best hope of heading off this revolutionary conjecture, despite the dogged efforts of the social democratic left to show them.

**19.** The ignoble defeat of the electoral social democratic movement by the Democratic Party pulled the rug out from under the right wing of the left, sending their media leadership into a spiral of navel gazing irrelevance and pushing most of the on-the-ground organizers either out of movement activity or toward more actively confrontational and revolutionary projects, at the exact moment the state needs all the dampers on revolutionary movement it can get.

**20.** Joe Biden is the prototypical example of a leader about whom historians gravely intone that, had a more decisive, popular or crafty leader been at the helm of state, the crises to follow could have been averted. He would make an excellent last president.

**21.** The failed fascist coup on January 6th, 2021, marks an important watershed in the level of right-wing political movement in the United States. While the particular organizational forms represented by the alt-right were largely defeated by antifascist organizing, the persistence of the fascist movement reflects a global reactionary response to trends away from nation-states and liberal democracy (trends driven, we should underline, by capitalism itself, in particular its drive for totally free-flowing globalized logistics and labor markets), the outcome of four years of Trumpist power, and the culmination of decades of ideological and political work by the right in the US.

**22.** However, as the street-right is always tactically three steps behind the proletarian movement, the right now finds itself in a *movement lull* of the same kind we found ourselves in across the 2010s. Their coup was only half-heartedly routed by the state, and they have been given plenty of time, space, and media opportunities to lick their wounds. This is, perhaps, the first movement lull of this type this generation of fascists have faced.

**23.** In this lull they have returned to the culture war patterns and local political capture to which they have been acclimated *since at least Reconstruction*, a pattern they engage in in periods of liberal federal power as they bide their time and try to push things ever rightward before their next grasp of the reins.

**24.** They will achieve, as ever, many horrifying and violent victories in this period of retrenchment. However, the lesson they seem to have learned from the coup is that, increased calls for secession and "independence" notwithstanding, their best chance for power is the 2024 election of Donald Trump. There is therefore something of a three way race between the proletarian movement, the 2024 election cycle, and Donald Trump's physical health. The death or incapacitation of Donald Trump would represent a blow to the American fascist movement as currently constituted that would require at least another election cycle for them to recover from.

**25.** Because of the distributed and non-imagistic nature of The Great Refusal, the right has managed to seem more active, powerful, loud and successful over the last year than the left. Indeed, they have been, to the extent that the left represents the directly political side of the liberation movement. The greatest victories of the left this year have been in the rising tide of union organization, strike and recognition, a powerful trend, though one that is dwarfed by the Great Resignation. Liberals have successfully shut the rest of the left, particularly in its anti-racist and abolitionist tendencies, out of the duel for control of governmental institutions as it attempts a (pathetically ineffective) reformation of centrist passivity and non-politics. The Great Refusal represents an attack not in this duel but beneath and against it. While right, liberal and left battle for the deed to the house, the termites burrow through the foundations.

**26.** Everything feels poised on a knife's edge, ready to pounce or fall, to explode into action or implode into catastrophe. We should pay close attention to this feeling of unease, anticipation and anxiety. It is not the sure sign of an uprising to come, but is a definite sign of the conditions of possibility for an uprising.

**27.** In the current balance of forces, it is the proletarian movement that is the most organized, active and capable. Were an uprising to emerge in the near future, the revolution must shatter the chrysalis of the Left in which it has grown, and take flight. Otherwise the dead weight of politics will once again drag us down to defeat.

\* In 2016, a collection of essays about New Left philosopher Herbert Marcuse was released under this title. We have not read it, and claim neither affinity nor antagonism to it.