

BOONE W. SHEAR: Kali, thanks for doing this interview, and happy Father's Day to you.

KALI AKUNO: Thank you, yeah.

SHEAR: When we first approached you about a month ago to do this interview, we were interested in focusing on the pandemic as part of the current conjuncture, in the United States in particular. A lot has happened since then. And responses to both the antiracist rebellion and the pandemic made me think of some short commentary that you wrote in summer of 2016 heading into the presidential election that I think maybe can help bring some context to where we are now:

The US left must get prepared to fight on two fronts simultaneously from here on out. On the one hand, we must get prepared to fight the advance of an emergent white supremacy in its fascist form, which might in fact be even more virulent and violent if Trump doesn't win. And on the other hand we better get prepared to fight the most aggressive and malicious form of neo-liberal and neo-conservative governance Wall Street can buy, which

will be fiercely averse to any resistance from the left.¹

So I'm wondering if we might start by talking a little bit about that two-front dynamic in this current moment; how are these fronts functioning and what is the Left up against?

AKUNO: Yeah. Both of those tendencies are kicking hard right now. The latter, the neoliberal option, is much more subtle. It appears in the

form of Biden and the Democratic Party—and it's part of the electoral apparatus. It's posing as both a friend of the people, but also, you have no other place to go. It's walking a fine line between trying to hold a multiclass, multiracial coalition intact while recognizing that it has some clear and obvious weaknesses based on their 2016 performance. They have to reconstitute, as they call it, the Obama coalition in order to have the faintest chance of winning because they not only have to win

the popular vote, just like they did in 2016, but they also have to win the electoral college, and that is not necessarily guaranteed. They may overwhelmingly win the popular vote, just on the basis of the domination of the two coastal areas, but lose everything in between. In which case the Republican Party would still be able to retain the presidency.

Conjunctural Politics, Cultural Struggle, and Solidarity Economy: An Interview with Kali Akuno

Boone Shear

¹K. Akuno, "Short Commentary Reflections on the 2016 RNC/DNC and Electoral Politics," Navigating the Storm, 30 July 2016, <http://navigatingthestorm.blogspot.com/2016/07/short-commentary-reflections-on-2016.html>.

But here's a clear dilemma that they're posing to the people. Up to this point, in the face of a pandemic that has clearly brought out the contradictions in their health-care approach—the DNC's health-care approach—they have fundamentally denied the aspiration and demand for universal health care—given expression best by Bernie's campaign, but that's been an issue that he picked up from grassroots activists, really. So in the midst of a pandemic in April and May, the neoliberals stuck to their guns and said, "No, we're not going to offer universal health care." If anything, Biden, their representative, has been very much focused on saying we are going to fix the Obamacare plan. But there is no way of saving it, particularly in the midst of close to 50 million people newly unemployed. There's no way of salvaging it because people don't have the money to pay the premiums. And they're automatically not in the system because for most of us, our health care is tied to our employment. So you're unemployed, and you can't pay. There's no way for the math that they set up to even cover that.

But they're sticking to their guns. It's the market or die. And you see the same logic playing out in the face of the Floyd Rebellion and in what has probably become the central demand, around defunding the police. In the face of that popular demand, their core leadership says: "We're not defunding the police in any form or fashion, and in fact, we want to give them more money." This is the option which has been put clearly on the table by Pelosi, by Biden, and by Clyburn—remember the role that Clyburn played in the elevation of Biden, in saving Biden, I should say.

And so they've made it clear that they're not going to bend on two core things that are at the heart of what the vast majority of their constituency are objectively demanding and objectively need. And if they don't bend—which I don't think in this period they really can—if they don't bend, then they're still leaving the door open for an extremely hobbled and extremely weakened and increasingly more isolated Donald Trump, representing a neofascist option—just acting very openly and blatantly, now, the last couple of months, and the last couple of weeks in particular. The neoliberals are giving him life and breath because, with their approach and with a program that anemic, it's no guarantee that the vast majority of folks who are considered the kind of captured audience of the neoliberals are going to turn out for a program that doesn't speak to any of the fundamental demands or aspirations of the working class.

This is the pincer move that we are really in. And it's not just that these folks are entrenched, or these sets of interests are entrenched. They are very clear. They are much more clear than the general population, unfortunately. They are clear that the only way they're going to continue on is through more austerity and more of a squeeze on the working class. There really are very few material options for a break from this to happen unless everything is changed. So that section of the ruling class is very clear: either everything changes or fundamentally nothing changes.

And they are not with the program of everything changing, in no form or fashion. And that puts them in this real weird bind, and this weird place

where they can only speak to what is in their view the kind of amoral nature of the Trump administration. And the best that they really have to offer is, “We rule, more gently. We will rule, more civilly.”

SHEAR: “We will be less openly vicious.”

AKUNO: Right! The program remains the same. They’ve offered no alternative. And I think too many people see through that. So we really are at a conjuncture where the center cannot hold. I think they’re going to do everything they can between now and November to pull out all the stops to make sure that they can get back in office and try to sustain not only the country but the world economy as it was pre-COVID-19. But fundamentally there’s no way to do that.

And that really leaves the door open, both here and internationally, for the fascist option. And I’m not saying that just tongue and cheek. If the neoliberals and what they represent are not able to really corral and contain—particularly the energy that’s been unleashed around the Floyd Rebellion—if they’re not able to channel that in some very particular ways which gets people off the streets, which tones down the demands, which waters down the expectations, then you could very well see a sce-

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nario in which Trump and the forces that are allied with him are able—in the midst of continued unrest, or even an escalating unrest, which I think is a real possibility and which would provide a legitimacy—to cancel the elections. And to institute a program of law and order, which he’s clearly invoked.

And in some respects they [liberals] have suggested that they would support aspects of this as part of a getting back to normal: “This is all well and good, we’ll make a few tweaks here and there, but we got to get the show back on the road.” I mean, the Democrats, particularly Pelosi and Schumer, even more so than Biden, have given I think the greatest expression to this desire, if folks really listen to what they’ve been saying, as they’re trying to push through concrete relief programs, through the House and Senate right now.

At the same time, we have had police forces all throughout the country who, during the first two weeks of the uprising, were kind of flat-footed. It wasn’t clear whose orders to follow and who was giving the orders. It wasn’t clear what they would do. They were very much on the defensive rhetorically and positionally. But it seems since Atlanta in particular, they’ve kind of regained their footing. You started to see it, I think ini-

²“75-Year-Old Protester Shoved to Ground by Buffalo Police Has Skull Fracture: Lawyer,” *CBC*, 17 June 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/gugino-fractured-skull-1.5615718>.

³S. Cohen, “As Atlanta Police Protest, Is ‘Blue Flu’ the Next Pandemic?,” *Forbes*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/06/18/as-atlanta-police-protest-is-blue-flu-the-next-pandemic/#20e80661638f>.

⁴“Fear Grows of Modern-Day Lynchings as Five People of Color Are Found Hanged,” *Democracy Now*, 18 June 2020, https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/18/headlines/fear_grows_of_modern_day_lynchings_as_six_people_of_color_are_found_hanged.

tially, in Buffalo where they pushed an elder to the ground and cracked his skull,² and how the first kind of concrete action was, “Hey, if we’re going to be limited in the types of force we’re allowed to use, we’re just going to step down off of this unit.”² That was the first kind of clear action, and it’s been cascading since then, these kinds of symbolic actions.

But it’s being met on the streets, increasingly, particularly in small towns, but also midsize towns. You know, this open fascist violence is occurring, as we’ve seen. In the last two weeks, you know we’ve seen the kind of autonomous-zones experiments, the largest of which is the CHAZ, the Capital Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle. But its outskirts have been raided the last two or three weeks, by Proud Boys and other kinds of neofascist forces. That’s also happened in Portland, and it’s also happened on a major scale in Philly in defense of the Columbus statue and other statues.

So it’s not just happening in the outskirts of society or just in Trump country—that’s actually not true. And we can’t prove it yet, but in following the right-wing rhetoric—which is something I have to study in my political context to understand what the other side is thinking and moving, given the current proximity of forces—they’re speaking of this lynching that’s happening and folks being found hung, as an active lynching campaign.⁴ And there’ve been some things that have been stated at least on the radio here, kind of instructions on how to go about doing that and pursuing that.

So I see this as an active campaign. I see it as part

of the kind of right-wing ideology which has been built up in particular since the 1980s. And the level of just open reception of forces in Oakland, in New Mexico, in Phoenix, and in Seattle where they’ve described the armed fascist vigilantes, they’ve been heard and recorded in many cases. Over the channels they’ve described them as “friendlies.”

The counter rebellion is in motion now, and I think it’s gaining steam. And it is my fear for those of us on the left, to be honest with you, that, in the euphoria of the moment, in seeing the kind of major actions of the Floyd Rebellion taking place now for three, almost four weeks straight, that folks are being blinded by what they want to see and are not seeing the counter-motion, the counterinsurgency that is developing kind of underneath it or alongside it.

And then there’s the undecided middle, which I think the vast majority of the working class in this country really falls into. And I don’t think we know quite yet what their appetite really is for sustained action in the midst of both a pandemic and in the midst of this uprising. It’s not quite clear yet. This is not a 1968 moment; this is different. Trump has tried to invoke that. And what makes it different is that a good portion of this “middle,” I would say, are black petty-bourgeois forces and other kinds of petty-bourgeois forces that have arisen over the course of the last fifty years, who very much feel that they are part of the system and who have something to lose, both in position and access, by a more militant hard-left orientation emerging. So it’s not quite clear where they’re going to bend and where they’re going to break, and how long or how much of

this kind of program they're willing to go with.

So the future is wide open. It's unknown. It is very hard to kind of imagine where things are going to go. But the one thing is clear: almost anything can trigger events to go on in any kind of direction. And so we need to be mindful of that. Relative to the initial question, the fascist option is clear. And I think also the neoliberal option is clear. And I think the interplay between them in the course of the next four months to a year is really going to define what the future looks like, I think, for many years to come.

White Supremacy and Disposability

SHEAR: I want to make sure that we further explore this struggle between neoliberals and the Far Right, and in particular what this might mean for openings for the Left. And I am wondering if we can dig in a bit towards understanding some of the forces that are not only shaping political orientations but are also implicated in the concrete violence that's being experienced, exacerbated, and further exposed by the impacts and responses to the pandemic as well as the Floyd Rebellion and that, perhaps, are shifting consciousness and relationships. The pandemic, for example, has been talked about as a sort of great unveiling that reveals the depths of inequality and oppression

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in our system. Between the elite and the masses but also within the working class itself.

Frontline and care workers, black communities, indigenous communities, Latinx communities, incarcerated folks, the elderly, poor people and people without homes are much more at risk than the general population, and seemingly deemed more disposable.

For example, a study done by researchers at Harvard that was recently released found that: Among folks aged 25–34, black people had a COVID mortality rate 7.3 *times* as high as whites. Among folks aged 35–44, black people had a COVID mortality rate 9 *times* as high as whites. And for those aged 45–54, black people had a COVID mortality rate 6.9 *times* as high as whites.⁵

Similar inequities were also seen for Latinx and indigenous populations, who had COVID-19 death rates that were 5 to 8 *times* as high as white folks (for age groups 25–54).

How do you understand what has produced these dramatically different unequal outcomes by race? And what might be done to alter these patterns of racialized violence?

AKUNO: At its roots, it's the settler bargain. I agree wholeheartedly that this is laying bare a

⁵ M. T. Bassett, J. T. Chen, and N. Krieger, "The Unequal Toll of COVID-19 Mortality by Age in the United States: Quantifying Racial/Ethnic Disparities" (HCPDS Working Papers vol. 19, no. 3, 12 June 2020), https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1266/2020/06/20_Bassett-Chen-Krieger_COVID-19_plus_age_working-paper_0612_Vol-19_No-3_with-cover.pdf.

lot of the fundamental contradictions in this society. That's what COVID-19, basically, laid out. There's something I think, which is perhaps even more revealing, that can get at your question. In the midst of the kind of the epicenter of the pandemic in April where, by that time, almost all the states had come to the conclusion that they had to shut down. And at this time—in relation to those who could work from home and those that couldn't—white people were significantly more likely to be able to work from home than black people. Which meant that the brunt of the unemployment went to black workers, latino/a workers, indigenous workers. And it speaks to clear fractures around who's doing what work and why in the society.

SHEAR: Who's doing certain service work and care work, particular occupations that were thought of as low status and expendable and are now being shown as, and rhetorically supported as, being essential ...

AKUNO: Who's really doing that work? And who was in a position to do that? Who couldn't afford to stay home, or by virtue of their occupation couldn't stay home because they were deemed essential? And I think we really need to understand those relations. It helps to understand not only who got infected, who got sick, and who died, but it also speaks to the very nature of, and the lack of imagination of, the health-care response.

And, again, it points to the very real limitations of what the system was willing to do and was willing to accept at that point in time. I think everybody needs to be clear: the total response

from the beginning was about saving the capitalist system. Point blank. Period. From both sides. And they were only going to bend enough to keep that system afloat. And I would argue that it was very clear from the beginning, in how they rolled out those stimulus checks and who they were rolling them out to, and the conditions that they put on them, that all of the racial factors of how this society is structured was baked into that very response. And then you saw it play out, particularly amongst the Right, who were saying, "We're not going to give more of a stimulus, particularly on the federal level, because it incentivizes people to stay at home, because they make more unemployment than they do making hourly wages in their quote-unquote 'essential work.'"

So if we want to peel this onion further, and to get at both the response and people's clear understanding from the beginning of who this was going to impact and why, I think we begin to understand why there's just no regard for the consequences of reopening the economy, because there's just not only a chronic belief but there are statistical facts and proven scientific fact. If *this* population gets it, *this* is what's going to happen. If *this* population gets it, then this is what's going to happen. Using their language, since "normal people" aren't dying ... *let's go*. Let's get back to work. Because these black folks, these Puerto Ricans, and these Mexicans, and Central Americans, you know, these Hondurans and Nicaraguans and El Salvadorans who are in our meat-packing factories, or are in auto plants, or who are working in these fields—if they die, fuck it. We can replace them. Let's go. Let's keep it moving.

If we want to peel this onion back, we can see it's not just, like, who is dying. We can see it's a very structured setup of *who will die*. That's the piece I'm getting at, the way in which this structure is channeled very clearly: *this is who's going to suffer from this, and we've calculated and surmised that we're willing to accept that*. And that's not just like the right-wing fanatics who are pushing that. Listen to Cuomo, he's just as eager to get the economy in New York going as Donald Trump is. Cuomo may be using a bit more, you know, sound medical reasoning and actually working in some stages and phases. But the imperative to get everything going to the point where we're not worried about eradicating COVID, we're just trying to get it to a manageable position—that's always what he's been arguing. Liberal leadership has put him out as kind of a front man, right, and help argue, "This is the best humane response, and this is how the Democrats would do it." It's not about eradicating the disease; it's about making it manageable. That's always been the aim and objectives on both sides to varying degrees.

And the other dimension to this response is that everything has been geared towards finding a cure. Now what does that mean? That means we're finding a way in which we can profit off of the response to this particular pandemic. Because the clearest, easiest, proven way

is to shut the shit down and let it trace itself out. That is a no brainer. That easily could have and should have been done. Nobody really wanted to do that. People want to talk about the contrast between Trump and the Democrats, but we've got to interrogate that further because, in some fundamental respects, they really aren't that different. We have to really tell the truth there, and really point out what the alternative is. And if we want something different, we have to be clear about how much structural change actually has

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to happen. Nowhere in the past couple of months, amidst these discussions of talking about them as "heroes," nowhere are there serious proposals to raise the wages of these "essential" workers. We are not extending them overtime pay or hazard pay. Nowhere has that really been offered. It's been rhetorically stated, but nowhere has it fundamentally been put out there by either one of these forces

and the politics that they represent that they're going to make a fundamental change.

And so for me, what this fundamentally gets at, it really speaks to what I've called the age of disposability,⁶ and we are starting right in the middle of it now in a way that's plain to see. I think if it wasn't for the Floyd Rebellion, we would be still very much in a deeper conversation about this. Unfortunately, I think there's some aspects of what's occurred in the last three or four weeks

⁶ K. Akuno, "Until We Win: Black Labor and Liberation in the Disposable Era," *Counter-Punch*, 4 September 2015, <https://www.counter-punch.org/2015/09/04/until-we-win-black-labor-and-liberation-in-the-disposable-era/>.

which has kind of pushed COVID-19 kind of way back in the background. I'm kind of holding my breath because, it's like, it's not like this wave ever stopped. If this is really like its cousin the flu, we know it's going to get worse as it gets colder. So we are in for one hell of a ride.

And I know COVID-19 is not necessarily completely off a lot of folks' minds, but it has been interesting, some things I've had to point out to some comrades. I've been doing work responding to extrajudicial terror from the police all of my life, but there's a way in which the movement still has to do some groundwork to get folks to understand these dynamics. We've lost 70,000 black folks to this pandemic, at least; we didn't have the same level of anger or systemic response as we did to when Floyd got murdered. And we have to figure out how to get people to not just respond to the visceral but respond to the structural. And that's a major challenge we still have ahead of us.

Hegemonic Struggle and War of Position

SHEAR: Despite these unveilings of violence over the past few months, capital accumulation continues unabated. On Friday, it was reported that another one-and-a-half million people filed for unemployment that week for a total of 45 million claims since the beginning of the pandemic, and during this same time the total wealth of the nation's billionaires has increased by almost 600 billion. The owning class seems to be doing just fine. One way to approach this challenge is by thinking through it in terms of a Gramscian "war of position." And this follows from some of what you have just described but even more so from a

recent essay that you wrote,⁷ in which you discussed the potential openings for the Left: what we are up against most immediately is a sort of narrative or cultural struggle against Democrats and liberals who stifle radical politics. We can see this in the moves calling for defunding the police rather than abolition, or the inability to give any sort of serious thought to increasing well-being of frontline workers that you were describing earlier, or in ridiculous and awful symbolic gestures like the congressional Democrats kneeling for the cameras, donned in kente cloth ...

⁷ K. Akuno, "From Rebellion to Revolution," *Viewpoint Magazine*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2020/06/11/from-rebellion-to-revolution/>.



AKUNO: [Laughing] That was a moment I will forever be grateful that I got a chance to witness. That was some of the most absurd shit I've ever seen.

Photograph from Getty Images

SHEAR: The architects and managers of the prison-industrial complex!

AKUNO: Right! Like, this is bizarro world. I've

lived to see bizarro world.

SHEAR: In addition to or as part of this struggle of ideas that the Left must engage in, you were earlier suggesting a kind of more fundamental ontological situation, a kind of reliance on or investment in the disposability of life that's just sort of baked into and our dominant reality. It makes me want to think about the importance of not just struggling over the ideas and contents of what has been exposed in the dominant social order but the importance of a politics that seeks to rupture or work outside the real in order to support or create or expand other possible modes of life—so people cannot only think and act critically within the world as it is but begin to actually imagine and practice how to be together differently, as part of a shift in reality or opening of realities.

I agree with you, it's pretty clear that liberals and progressives are winning the cultural struggle over the Left, for the moment. At the same time, it is still pretty remarkable how public discourse has changed in the past few weeks and then things like systemic racism, racial capitalism, abolition, and even defunding the police—these are all new narratives and discourses to struggle over in the broad public arena. And then things like mutual-aid relationships and projects have exploded, some movements have become quite militant, acts of solidarity large and small are widespread. How

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might the Left engage in a struggle that doesn't just create progressive reforms that shore up liberalism and white supremacy but that begins to work towards and assemble other ways of being in the world? I am thinking here a bit in terms of what you described as nonreformist reforms in the first essay in *Jackson Rising*, practices and policies that subvert the logic of the capitalist system, "up end its relations, and subvert its strength ... [and] seek to create new logics, new relations, and new imperatives."⁸ How to struggle in and against the violence of patriarchal

racist capitalist modernity and pull open and expand more fundamental ruptures or breaks so we can reorient and organize around life and relationality and autonomy?

AKUNO: I think that there is a path already in the present, I really do. I've been trying to look at what already exists, particu-

larly since COVID-19, in the level of mutual-aid response. We haven't seen that since the Great Depression. It's gotten hardly any attention. I think even in the movement, it hasn't received adequate attention. And it's a remarkable development. To me it's demonstrated that there is still something left of a deeper humanity in this empire, a humanity that neoliberalism as a cultural project has tried to do away with—this is actually the most successful dimension of the neoliberal project, but it hasn't broken that down completely. That's a deeply encouraging sign. And I think in some respects, mutual aid and

⁸ K. Akuno and A. Nangwaya, eds., *Jackson Rising* (Ottawa: Daraja, 2017), 17

care really are the bedrock on which we need to be thinking about how we construct the alternatives. I think that's it. We've seen mutual aid play out almost everywhere in kind of a spontaneous motion—there's been medics, there's been food pantries, and other care. And it's set up everywhere quickly.

Now why am I saying this? Because I think it speaks to some of the work in the movement, and I think in particularly the solidarity economy. And it speaks to the success of some of our advocacy, even if we didn't necessarily see it borne out as we wanted to, before COVID-19, in practice. But beyond that advocacy, now the practice of cooperation and care is here on a level I think far faster, wider, and deeper than we imagined even six months ago. It's here now. The question I think is to what degree can it be politicized, and to what end?

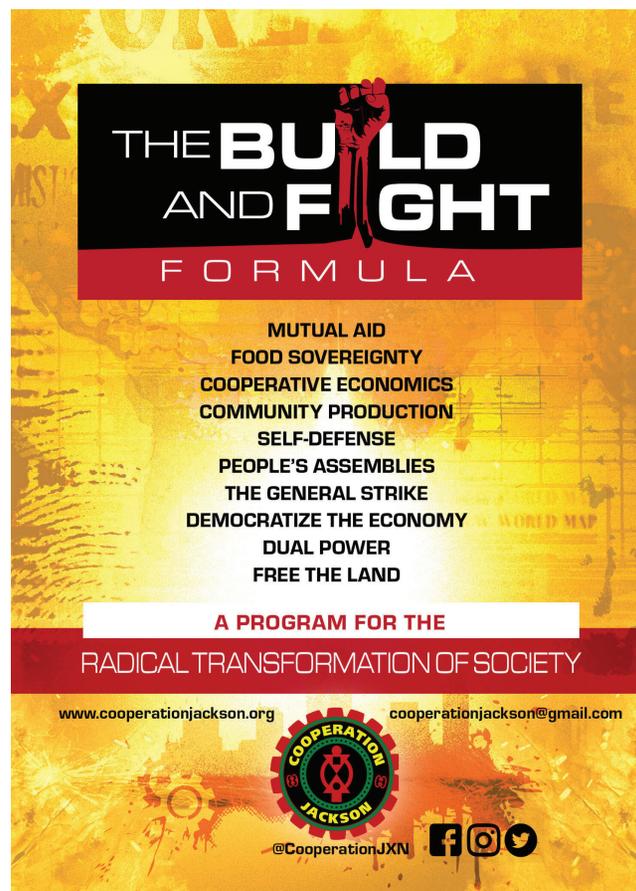
I think other practices and structures have to be coupled with it. Cooperation Jackson has been putting out what we are calling a "Build and Fight" program.⁹

And, you know, as fate would have it, it's broken

out into a ten-point program. But we started out with that mutual-aid piece, very deliberately and on purpose, in order to say: "This is what's already objectively happening in the world." We can work on politicizing that and then linking it with the work around food sovereignty that's

already happening, been emerging and deepening in a lot of our communities over the past fifteen or twenty years. And we could then tie that into all of the solidarity economy work and have this all move in a concerted political direction. The seeds of a new world are then there, and that gives us not only the social dimension of production that will be needed in a sustained conflict but the democratic, not only production, but distribution of the goods and resources that are then produced through the food sovereignty efforts, through the community production, through the cooperative piece,

and with—the mutual aid is already there: you're laying a material foundation to be able to express a different politics. If we're able to politicize this and then organize it to reach 40 or 50 or 60 million people, if we do that, we can take the best practices of the Unemployed Councils



⁹ "The Build and Fight Formula," *Cooperation Jackson Announcements*, 24 June 2020, <https://cooperationjackson.org/announcements-blog/2020/6/24/the-build-and-fight-formula>.

work, and, you know, there are people out there talking about a Poor People's Army. And if we can do that, we have it. Like, we could objectively have it, and have it working in such a way that it is building the alternative outside of the state, outside the established capitalist market. And then it might be able to build enough strength to make a real go at it, a real challenge to not just make demands on the state, which are set up in a way in which we're asking the businesses and the managers to implement some things on our behalf, but are really chipping away and building direct governance and control.

We have that ability to get us there.

I think it is going to take some hard and uncomfortable politics. And this is where a battle of ideas is really important. I do think it's not a disjuncture to say that we got to conquer this fundamental reality of disposability head on. Because that's only going to increase, particularly as—as the capitalist market economy continues to worsen. And we know now already that a good chunk of jobs are never coming back. You know, most of them are “bullshit jobs”—to use that phrase—anyway. They are never coming back.

I think we have a basic recipe to do something profoundly different, but it is going to take some serious struggles with a lot of the liberal forces who want to channel things back into a position where they can manage and supervise as part of this rush to get things back to normal. So, for example, it's going to be hard having a real conversation between the *defund the police* folks and the *abolish the police* folks. The folks that want to push the defund the police are going to push for

a “practical” solution and say, “Hey, this is the best that we can do given the limitations.” But that's going to be a real question, and so they'll have the phrasing, and they already do, that the “abolitionists are impractical. They are intransigent and they are impractical.” If we fall in and cave to that narrative and are unable to win over a critical component of the defund side, then that radical alternative will be halted, stunted, and I would argue repressed.

SHEAR: And then you'll have a situation where so many people are going to not be interested or energized in following a kind of middle-of-the-road liberal or progressive platform, and the Right gains momentum.

AKUNO: Right. What the liberals are offering is not gonna work.

This is the first part of an interview that will appear in Vol. 33, No. 1 of Rethinking Marxism.

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