

# ABOUT THE BLACK ORCHID COLLECTIVE

<http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/>

We are a multi-gendered, multiracial revolutionary collective attempting to develop an effective relationship between theory and practice. We are against capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, imperialism, ableism and the state. We are fighting for a direct democratic, ecologically sustainable society in which we as workers can creatively produce to fulfill human needs, not for the sake of profit. Our aims are to learn from the successes and failures of past revolutions and social movements, rebuilding and re-imagining forms of organization and developing ourselves as working class revolutionaries. A major part of this involves reviving the Marxist method as a tool for combining the best of feminist, anti-colonial, anarchist, ecological, anti-racist, and queer liberation perspectives, while discarding all that holds us back.

# BETWEEN THE ZEAL OF THE YOUNG AND THE PATIENCE OF THE OLD

Reflections on Seattle's Recent Upheavals Against Police Brutality

By the Black Orchid Collective



# “Between the zeal of the young and the patience of the old:” Reflections on Seattle’s Recent Upheavals Against Police Brutality

By the Black Orchid Collective  
April 2011

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We’ll end with some lines from the rapper Amir Sulaiman which can provide some guidance for how to move forward. His words express the essence of the political tendency we are a part of building. We need to build a movement that is independent of the “tailists” who always caution patience, legality, and peace on the one hand, and the “adventurists” who advocate revenge and immediate military struggle without any vision for how to build a broad-based revolutionary movement that can shut the city down, or even better, successfully take it back from the bourgeoisie. Sulaiman’s words cut like a razor between these twin pitfalls:

*Justice is somewhere between reading sad poems  
and 40 ounces of gasoline crashing through windows  
Justice is between plans and action  
between writing letters to Congressmen and clapping the captain  
between raising legal defense funds  
and putting a gun on the bailiff and taking the judge captive  
it is between prayer and fasting  
between burning and blasting  
Freedom is between the mind and the soul  
it is between the lock and the load  
between the zeal of the young and the patience of the old  
Freedom is between the finger and the trigger  
it is between the page and the pen  
between the grenade and the pin  
between righteous anger and keeping one in the chamber [41]*



41. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-b5nAzzXdc%E2%80%9D>

For those of us who think that the 500 year resistance to the capitalist system needs to continue and expand, the past few months have been a modest step forward. We all have a lot to learn — from each other, from our elders, from the youth, and from the developing situation. But most importantly, many of us got a taste of what it was like to be a part of something we ourselves can and must take responsibility for. It is that taste the cops are trying to smack out of our mouths right now.

We need to change up our tactics, build deeper bases in our neighborhoods, schools and workplaces, and not just rally at Westlake downtown where the cops have the upper hand. We need to discuss how to build concrete alternatives to the police in our neighborhoods. We need to avoid cycles of nonstop demonstration-hopping, arrests, and jail solidarity. That will just burn us out. We need to reach out and bring more people into this mix. We need to organize, analyze, and publicize, not just mobilize.

90's Upheaval has begun that, holding a community forum in West Seattle; 90's Upheaval, Black Orchid, Autonomia, and Copwatch members also organized flyering and picketing in the South End to confront a bunch of prop cop demonstrators who had brazenly come into the 'hood chanting "no justice no peace without the police". These are small beginnings that need to grow.

But as we move into all of that, let's not let their repression divide us or squash that taste for freedom many of us had begun to acquire in the streets this February.



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, August 21, 1971, offset lithograph, Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough, Los Angeles, © Emory Douglas, digital imaging by Echelon

## i) Introduction

On February 15 2011, Seattle Police officer Ian Birk was let off the hook for the murder of Native carver J. T. Williams. [1] On August 30 2010, officer Ian Birk had shot the partially deaf woodcarver 5 times within 4 seconds of ordering him to put down what was a closed, legal 3 inch carving knife that Williams used to produce his art. [2] While Ian Birk wisely resigned from office, he will not be charged with murder. The news spread fast among the people of Seattle reaching network after network, individual after individual. Two rallies were planned for the following day (February 16); one was held at 4pm at Seattle's city hall, the other at 6pm at the busy Westlake shopping center. The former was called by the Oct. 22nd Coalition Against Police Brutality and the JT Williams Organizing Committee, the latter by a diverse group of everyday people. [3, 4]

The 6 pm rally Facebook call was initiated by an anonymous individual, but it soon went viral with thousands of people invited. When someone asked who was leading it, an organizer responded, "At this point, everyone." Hundreds of organizers noticed how fast spontaneous anger spread in Egypt and attempted to seize the moment and catalyze struggle here through similar methods – a mix of social networking and old-fashioned flyering and community mobilization. The 6pm march would bring out over 800 people. On Fri February 18, another rally/march was advertised that brought out at least 200 people. These events and their aftermath have triggered important debates about how to proceed in the struggle against state oppression.

Questions run the gamut: Should we organize multi- racially and if so, how? Is leadership necessary, and if so what kind? What is the role of organization(s), if any? How do we build and maintain movements that can ensure killer cops don't get away scot-free, and how does this relate to goals of bringing about revolutionary change? Should our actions be violent or non-violent? No one has perfect answers, but we are all learning fast by struggling with these questions.

We are the Black Orchid Collective, a new, multiracial and multi-gendered revolutionary collective that just started in Seattle. We are also learning and growing with you all, and we contribute this piece to the discussion in the hopes that it will help advance the struggle against police terror.

Our criticism and analysis of political tendencies in this piece are intended to be professional and clear. We are not interested in smearing campaigns. The left is divided enough. Our goal is to clarify questions, understand the conditions in Seattle that we are struggling in, so we can move forward together. In that light, we accept and engage in discussion and criticism on our points here.

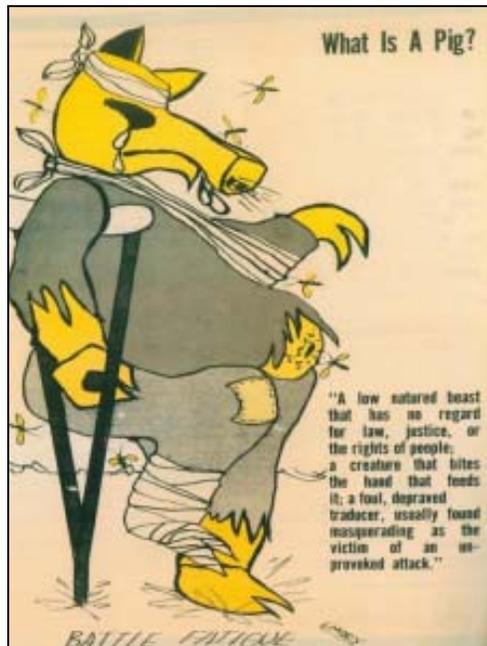
1. <http://socialistworker.org/2011/01/27/four-seconds-to-his-death>
2. <http://www.komonews.com/news/local/112097619.html>
3. <http://www.october22.org/>
4. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/JT-Williams-Organizing-Committee/164277430263459>

## ii) No Police on Stolen Native Land

The late JT Williams is only one of the many indigenous (native) people to be slain by the state. The history of the Pacific Northwest, and of the Americas in general, is full of conflict between indigenous peoples and state power.

The state is an armed set of institutions which enforce the rule of dominant classes over those whose land they plunder and labor they exploit; states emerged when modes of economic production developed based on the division of society into the haves and the have-nots. They are the bodyguards of ruling elites and they keep oppressed classes from rising up against our masters. Police forces are one particular form of state power that emerged as modern capitalist states became more refined in their methods of control, when the sheriff and his posse were no longer enough to keep us in our places.

Before the arrival of Columbus and the Pilgrims, many indigenous societies did not have police forces, and in some cases they didn't have states at all. They were self-governing in judicial, economic, cultural, and military affairs without cops or courts or prisons. In fact, Karl Marx thought that workers worldwide should learn from Native American societies in order to understand what aspects of a democratic communist society might look like. As Franklin Rosemont writes in "Karl Marx and the Iroquois", Marx was impressed with "Iroquois democracy as expressed in the Council of the Gens, that 'democratic assembly where every adult male and female member had a voice upon all questions brought before it,' and he made special note of details regarding the active participation of women in tribal affairs." [4] Not all indigenous societies are the same; they have complex histories, including more or less democratic and more or less authoritarian political systems. But quite a few indigenous societies were far more equal and far less repressive than the capitalist system which white settlers imposed on them.



One of the most significant aspects of the capitalist mode of production lies in the fact that it is based on the production of commodities for sale. The means of production are used to make profit and not to improve the human condition. All things that become commodities to be bought or sold are seen in this respect.

In capitalism, a small minority, the capitalist class, has gained private ownership of the means of production through systemic coercive measures facilitated by the state over a five hundred year span. The manner in which the majority have carried out production has been dictated by those who control the means of production. The exception has been when workers have revolted and have taken over the means of production and democratically decided how to produce. This is essential. How we produce as human beings effects how we relate to each other socially. When a minority has complete control of the tools, technology, land, etc, that are needed to sustain the majority, it goes without saying that the workplace, where we produce, is going to be oppressive, and the rest of society will become oppressive as well, requiring police to hold it all together. The capitalist class keeps control of the masses through dividing us by race, gender and sexual orientation, and the police reinforce these divisions. Capitalism spreads ideologies that pit the oppressed against each other.

It is for this reason that we cannot lose sight of the need to fight police terrorism in relation to struggles that undermine the legitimacy and perpetuation of the capitalist economic system as a whole.

Challenging the police without the recognition of the need to relate to struggles against heterosexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, and struggles for worker's power is limiting and can only stifle the possibility of ridding ourselves of the perpetual danger of being harassed and murdered by the police. The police, the government, and the oppressed conditions we find ourselves in are products an economic system which holds profit above all else. We cannot believe for an instant that the police can be reformed if the nature of the economic system they protect and are products of does not value human life to begin with. In that sense the police are doing what they are supposed to do when they gun down innocent persons.

Since the police serve the interests of a capitalist system based on the exploitation of workers, workers have tremendous potential to disrupt the power of the police by destabilizing this process of exploitation. We have the power to shut the city down if we go on strike. We have the power to disrupt the profits of the capitalists who the police serve as loyal bodyguards. In the second half of the piece some of us previously wrote for *Gathering Forces* [38] we explore concretely how Seattle militants could organize toward such a mass political strike against state terror, beginning by building working class power in groups like For a Democratic University [39] and the Seattle Solidarity Network. [40]

4. <http://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-iroquois-franklin-rosemont>

38. <http://gatheringforces.org/2010/12/24/how-can-we-advance-the-anti-police-brutality-struggle/>

39. <http://www.forademocraticuniversity.blogspot.com/>

40. <http://seattlesolidarity.net/>

So now they are using a mix of co-optation and violent repression. They are providing concessions to the JT Williams Organizing Committee such as declaring one day of the year JT Williams Day [37]. The city government and the media are holding the JT Williams Organizing Committee up as the “responsible” activists. The rest of us, whether anarchist, pro- indigenous sovereignty, communist, anti-racist, nationalist, independent, hopeful, Marxist, militant, angry, or just generally uncontrollable, are being labeled the “dangerous anarchists” and we are now getting threatened with random beat downs, surveillance, and harassment from the cops. Even a guy wearing an American flag hat and talking about peace got beaten and arrested, showing that declaring peace with the American system does not mean the system wants peace with you.

This is classic carrot and stick tactics: divide and conquer, selective co-optation, and selective repression. They’ve been doing this since 1492 – it’s the only way they can colonize Native land and continue to occupy that land in the face of widespread, global resistance to the capitalist system which springs from and drives this colonization.

### **ix) Bigger Than The Police**

The struggle to rid ourselves of police brutality is a part of a broader movement of everyday people to take control of our lives. This broader struggle involves bringing democracy to the workplace, school, neighborhood, and all other facets of life. As aforementioned, law enforcement is apart of the many institutions that make up the state. The police enforce laws that have historically developed in the interest of the capitalist class, a class characterized and defined by the economic mode of capitalism. To understand the significance of capitalism we have to revisit Marxist theory.

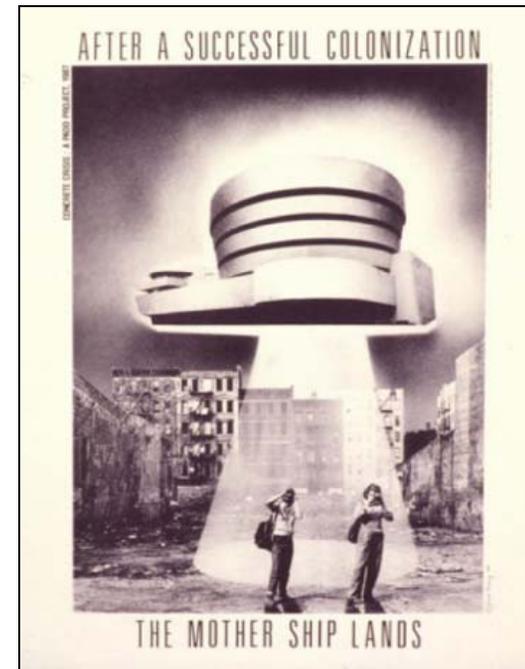
Marx developed multiple theoretical concepts that allowed him to contextualize the defining features of capitalism. One of these concepts was the mode of production which can be defined as, “The method of producing the necessities of life.” The mode of production consists of the forces of production and the relations of production. As explained by the Marxist historian E.K. Hunt in *Property and Prophets: The Evolution of Economic Institutions and Ideologies*,

The forces of production included tools, factories, equipment, production skills, the level of knowledge of the labor, natural resources, and the general level of technology. The relations of production were the social relationships amongst humans, particularly the relationship of each class of humans to the means of production. These relationships included the ownership of productive facilities and the division of the fruits of productive activity. (Hunt, 1986)

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37. <http://www.komonews.com/news/local/116947868.html>

From the Caribbean to Puget Sound, state power enabled European ruling elites to engage in colonial conquest and plunder, attacking more democratic societies such as the Iroquois. These conquests in turn reinforced the power of the state. In many ways, colonialism was a laboratory for new forms of repression that would eventually be used not only on indigenous people but on exploited working classes in the countries doing the colonizing. For example, some of the first police forces in the world were started in Britain by Robert Peel, a former military officer who had helped maintain Britain’s colonial occupation of Ireland and modeled his new police force in Britain off of his colonial occupation force. (Irish back then were considered people of color and suffered under a system of Anglo-Saxon supremacy). [5]



In the U.S., the state grew stronger and more ruthless as the rising capitalist class used it to commit genocide against native peoples and to turn their land over to colonial settlers. On this stolen land they set up plantations that exploited African slaves and factories that exploited immigrant workers. The first police forces in the US were created in the South to force escaped slaves to return to their masters, who would then torture them. In the North, the police forces expanded, modeled after the the private mercenaries called Pinkertons, whom big corporations hired to thug on workers who organized unions or went on strike.

Given this long history, we have to ask ourselves: “What exactly would justice for the late J.T. Williams look like?” Can there be any justice under a state system set up to colonize native people? Can there be any reform of a police system set up to keep Black folks enslaved, and keep immigrant workers in a state of extreme wage-slavery?

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5. Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*, page 33.

### **iii) Feb 16th: Moving past obstacles; Witnessing openings for militancy**

In mid-February, there was a convergence of different struggles that seemed to be on the upsurge. The revolts against dictatorships in the Middle East were popping off and seemed to be winning. Workers in Wisconsin were beginning to mobilize against union busting with dramatic rank and file energy. In this climate, the popular response to Ian Birk being let off seemed to open up possibilities for a more militant working class movement against state violence. In this piece, we wish to celebrate the self-activity that workers, students, youth, unemployed folks showed in the streets that week, but we also need to be honest about the limitations of this struggle. Our biggest obstacle is obviously the armed power of the state and its ability to crush opposition. However, we will also discuss other obstacles as well – the attempts of “community leaders” to clamp down on militancy, and our own limitations as militants (lack of organization, perspective, strategy, etc.).

#### ***The Rainbow Coalition***

The anti-police brutality struggle in Seattle has produced a contradiction which tends to surface in such struggles, echoing similar developments in the Justice for Oscar Grant movement in Oakland. [6] This is a contradiction between those who want a false peace and some sort of negotiated settlement with the police and the city government, and those who see clearly that the county prosecutor’s decision to let Birk go free shows that the system cannot reform itself, and needs to be confronted head on by everyday people. The former tend to see this struggle narrowly as only a matter of justice for JT Williams and his family. The latter recognize the importance of the Williams’ family struggle for justice, but also saw the murder of the late JT Williams as the last straw in a long and ongoing wave of police terror which needs to be stopped by any means necessary or else some of us could be next. Going into the week of February 16th and 18th, there was already a debate brewing between these forces, and this debate was forced to the forefront of public political discussion by the mobilizations in the streets.

In a piece on the blog *Gathering Forces* called “How can we advance the anti-police brutality struggle,” one of us identified leaders in our communities who are calling for reconciliation with the state as part of the “Rainbow Coalition.” [7] The Rainbow Coalition includes past leaders from movements such as the Chicano Liberation, American Indian Movement, Asian American, and Black Power movements, as well as labor bureaucracy leaders, who have now become key players in the non-profits and the left wing of the Democratic Party. The Rainbow Coalition is a national phenomenon – from groups like the Coalition Against Police Executions (CAPE) which tried to contain the Justice for Oscar Grant

woman saying “I know YOU like burritos, right?” Several male cops also tried to follow young women of color from the group into the restroom.

This is not happening because the anarchists “provoked the cops” or “put the rest of us in danger”. It is happening because MANY of us, from all backgrounds, started to act in ways that the system couldn’t predict or control, even though most of us never broke any windows. This is how the system shows that it hates our freedom. A multi-racial crowd, which at times was majority people of color, militantly confronted white supremacy, and THAT, more than anything, worries the cops and the elites they work for.

MANY of us took the streets in the snake marches described above, and became active in shaping the direction, tactics, and goals of these marches. Because of our relative inexperience, we may not have had the sharpest and most decisive goals and strategies worked out and at times we ended up marching around for hours with no clear direction. But at other times we had very precise goals we determined through collective discussion, such as the march to the jail.

This activation of new leaders in the cauldron of the streets has not happened at a large enough scale to turn this into a mass movement with coherence, goals, and direction from below. But it is still a HUGE advance over the typical rally dynamic where a bunch of people just sit there like sheep listening to leaders direct us around.

The simple fact that many people started to base our decisions on what we need to survive instead of what the capitalist system decides is legal or right or effective is a step forward. The past few weeks, dozens, possibly hundreds of people out of the thousands who marched became ACTIVE participants, co-leaders, people who want to determine the direction of our lives instead of just reacting to the most recent tragedy. This activation of more militants is exactly what the system fears. It is exactly what the cops exist to prevent. If the cops just let us keep doing our thing in the streets more and more of us would develop the capacity to take responsibility for our lives and our communities, as well as practical skills we can use to fight the system. We would turn this into a movement that could not easily be controlled by the cops or their friends.

So the cops are not afraid of the Black Block alone, they’re afraid of all of us, because literally, they fear our freedom. The crack down is not the anarchists’ fault – it is the cop’s fault, and it was coming soon enough, as soon as the cops could regroup and get their PR offensive together.

The cops are relying on repression because their preferred tactic, co-optation, isn’t working as well as they hoped. They failed to make it ONLY about the Williams family — for a growing minority of folks, it started to become about challenging the system as a whole.

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6. <http://advancethestruggle.wordpress.com/justice-for-oscar-grant/>

7. <http://gatheringforces.org/2010/12/24/how-can-we-advance-the-anti-police-brutality-struggle/>

through police lines can prevent cops from dividing protesters. While these tactics certainly aren't always possible, they're incredibly useful at times. Like any tactic, Black Blocks should be evaluated for their effectiveness in the broader context of their situation. We believe that there are many contexts that call for Black Block style tactics, both defensively and offensively, and this is why we are interested in building Seattle militants' fighting capacity with Seattle's Black Block.

#### **viii) March 4th: Closure of Mobilization**

On March 4th, the cops decided that they would try to forcibly close the political opening that had begun the week of February 16th. Clearly, some section of the Seattle ruling class had concluded that this situation of militant unpermitted street demonstrations was getting out of hand and they directed the cops to change up their tactics. The media collaborated, using a February 26th Black Block action as an excuse. In that action, the Black Block had smashed a luxury car and some businesses in Capitol Hill after painting "Fuck the pigs" in the middle of the intersection where the late JT Williams was killed. Clearly this was too much for the Seattle bourgeois. The media portrayed every single demonstration that had happened, including the ones described above, as "anarchist actions", giving the cops cover to crack down on any street demo in the name of "preventing riots."



Now that they are cracking down, they are not just going after the anarchists in the Black Block – they are going after any anti-police brutality demonstration that is not sanctioned by the JT Williams Organizing Committee (and they probably would beat down a demonstration called by the Williams family itself if Native folks there showed signs of uncontrollable resistance to their authority). They disrupted a legal rally on Fri March 4th called by Seattle Copwatch that involved no property destruction, beating and arresting people anyway, and they followed and harassed youth of color in 90's Upheaval and some of us for almost an hour afterwards, making racist and anti-immigrant statements. We repeatedly told the cops we were trying to disperse, but the cops followed us anyway. When we tried to seek refuge inside a restaurant the cops locked the doors behind us; a cop bought a burrito and sat down right next to us, turning to a young Mexican

movement in Oakland, to the JT Williams Organizing Committee here in Seattle. These folks used the credibility they've earned in past struggles to assert their leadership on the current struggles, and attempted to channel righteous anger in the Native Community and other communities of color into official channels of negotiation in order to win small reform demands. At one rally this fall some of Seattle's Rainbow Coalition leaders even gave a present to a city councilperson as a sign of peace. [8]

The JT Williams Organizing Committee organized many of the larger rallies against police brutality from the fall through the early winter. No doubt they sincerely wish to see reforms of the Seattle Police Department (SPD). They have called for changes in the SPD's officer trainings and for more input from communities of color in department policies. They also asked for Birk to be tried for homicide. While we are not opposed to these demands, we see two problems with this approach:

- 1) The police and politicians have made it clear that they are unwilling even to make small reforms without serious upheaval forcing them to do so, and the JT Williams Organizing Committee has not directly supported such upheavals. In some cases they have tried to limit or contain street militancy, or at the very least distance themselves from it. [9]
- 2) Even if the system does make reforms will this actually stop the systematic police terror directed against oppressed people or will it simply be the left wing of the city government's diversity management efforts?

We are not against reforms; we have consistently been organizing and mobilizing in the streets and communities demanding that Birk be tried for murder. However, the way we go about participating in reform struggles is important – it needs to be a real democratic and direct, participatory process from below that opens up revolutionary possibilities for self-government. In other words, the immediate struggle should open up possibilities of working class community autonomy in our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods.

The way we go about fighting for immediate goals also needs to expand beyond the narrow single-issue demands of the moment to generalize the struggle and make it relevant to folks struggling internationally. The chants in the streets the week of February 16th and 18th sounded like: "Seattle to Oakland, we ain't jokin' / Cairo to Greece, fuck the police." We see this as a major step forward, but many respectable community leaders wanted to delegitimize the actions which expressed this kind of militancy.

If groups like the JT Williams Organizing Committee are granted a seat at the table in the Seattle city government's policy making processes, will this make them

8. <http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2010/09/17/williams-protestors-march-on-city-hall-deliver-list-of-demands-to-mayor>

9. [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=203268553021174](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=203268553021174)

empowered representatives of communities of color, or will it simply make them the left wing of these diversity management efforts? By negotiating with the JT Williams Organizing Committee, is Seattle's Mayor McGinn saying: "I want your communities to help me confront systematic white supremacy in the police force through direct action in the streets?" Or is he simply saying something like: "You can practice your culture in nice safe demonstrations at City Hall as long as it helps you calm your people down so the angry natives don't get restless?"

In the 1960s, reforms were won through mass uprisings in hundreds of cities, and the threat of armed militant groups like the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement. Here in Seattle, Native militants engaged in heroic actions such as the occupation of the land that is now the Daybreak Star Cultural Center.

These movements made fundamental changes in American culture; after that, the "white man" can no longer govern multi-racial cities like Seattle by a combination of force and his cultural justifications alone. A multi-racial and multi-gender bureaucracy is crucial to maintain white supremacy today and without it the cops and the elites they serve would be in much more trouble right now. If the system were not able to co-opt so many of the last generation's Native, Black, Chicano, and Asian militants, then elders would have been able to mentor new generations of militants from these communities to take struggles like the Daybreak Star occupation much further, and the system of white supremacy today would be in serious trouble.

But in the aftermath of 40 years of retreats, we are left with community leaders who call on us to make peace with the state, to channel our grievances through the failed judicial system that is overseen by the same government which just let a killer cop walk free. The system failed to provide any type of meaningful "justice" for J.T. Williams and yet the JT Williams Organizing Committee does not seem to have any answer to the question: "what next?" besides telling people to stay calm and wait for the professionals to handle it.

When the cops get away with murder, intelligent people don't stay calm, and they certainly don't rely on lawyers and politicians. They fight back to make sure it doesn't happen again. The two rallies that took place immediately after Ian Birk's verdict was released (6 pm Feb 16th, and Fri Feb 18th), were small steps toward such intelligent self-defense. The system showed its true colors and let a murderer free. People knew they would have to up the ante and disrupt as much of the city as possible, or else other cops will think they can get away with murder too, and soon enough one of us, or one of our friends, family, or loved ones, could be joining the late JT Williams in the long and growing list of victims of police terror. People of color who have survived police terror, in one case through self-defense [10], have spoken repeatedly at these militant rallies and have reminded us this is

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10. <http://allpowertothepositive.blogspot.com/2009/12/how-i-survived-police-terrorism-and.html>

Issues with the Black Block's communication goes beyond media: they've also done a poor job of communicating and relating with folks who want to protest police terrorism but who, for a variety of reasons, aren't currently engaging in Black Block tactics. Some members of the Black Block seem to define militancy as the immediate escalation in intensity of tactics, and write off folks who don't follow them in this but who do show militancy in other ways, for example, by leading chants on the bullhorn and organizing in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces against the police.

In fact, Black Blocks in other cities have done just these sorts of things. During the protests of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, Black Block anarchists helped organize Tent Village, where they did security and assisted in *deescalation* with the police. [34] They also maintained communication with other organizers throughout the convergence, so that groups coordinated their efforts. The Black Block contributed to what many Olympic protesters considered a very successful event. Nevertheless, Vancouver's Black Block faced similar accusations from would-be movement cops as Seattle's Black Block has faced, which No One is Illegal member Harsha Walia counters in this video. [35]

Walia's statements indicate the potential power of Black Block tactics when folks who use them organize or keep communication with organizers. The Black Block can open up space for people who are bored or alienated by conventional rallies and ritualized civil disobedience. To those who worry that Black Bloc tactics alienate potential joiners-of-the-movement, Don Hamerquist has this reply

Can anyone think people choose to expend substantial money and effort just to walk docilely up some street, chant some simplistic stuff, obey the police and their little movement helpers, and, to cap the experience, be bored by speeches? No. People have opted out of the 'movement' or chosen not to get involved in it by the thousands in substantial part because they find this part of the experience ineffective and even embarrassing. It's way too similar to voting. Perhaps this is not entirely coincidental. (It would be interesting to make an assessment of how many have been turned off by this experience, and it's one of the better parts of the movement experience, compared to how many have opted out because of the "shenanigans" of the anarchists. I'd put it in the area of thousands to one.) [36]

Black Bloc tactics can not only effectively inspire and mobilize new militant organizers, but they can also win tangible victories in protest situations. Black Block tactics include dearresting comrades, which is not only a huge morale boost but also a great way to avoid getting derailed by legal battles. Similarly, breaking

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34. <http://olympictentvillage.wordpress.com/>

35. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oesjegD1-Vg>

36. <http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/don-hamerquist-on-the-black-block-in-seattle/>

aren't with the RCP we acted like them, in an authoritarian way, just because we brought the megaphones and played a leadership role in the rally.

What these folks fail to realize is that if anti-authoritarian militants don't organize ourselves and provide organic, accountable leadership, then authoritarian or reformist forces will intervene and will provide inorganic, unaccountable leadership. Something like an open-mic speak out does not always just spontaneously emerge, sometimes some people need to consciously open up space for it. If we don't, then some "boring leader", as the anarchists like to put it, will take over and start preaching. We brought megaphones and organized ourselves into a block to support the organic leaders that were emerging in the crowd, so that liberal nonprofit reformists from the JT Williams Organizing Committee or authoritarian parties like the RCP would not be able to dominate the march.

We worked with a variety of political tendencies in the crowd to build and defend the autonomy of the crowd as it took over the streets. With many others, we helped hold the crowd together when the cops tried to disperse us. This allowed the Black Block members to pursue their tactics. These are all crucial leadership tasks – relating to militant people in the crowd, working with them to communicate a clear, militant political message rooted in the working class composition of the crowd. Unlike dogmatic vanguard party politicians, we don't think we are the only ones capable of playing such a leadership role. In fact, we think anyone can, and our entire goal as organizers is to help activate and support the development of other leaders so that everyone can be leaders.

### **vii) The Black Block**

Seattle's Black Block's lack of organization and leadership development creates other problems for themselves. The Black Block didn't do the PR work, such as sending out a press release, to get their perspective out in the media. When the police finally cracked down on us on March 4 (discussed below), the media portrayed it as a necessary measure to control anarchists with an outside agenda. To be sure, corporate media's coverage of the Black Block is bound to be negative, but it doesn't seem that the Black Block — or anyone else — took any measures to preempt the media's spin that legitimized the police's response. We are not saying that the police crackdown on protesters on March 4 was the Black Block's fault. The cops were doing what they do. But the Black Block appeared to make no attempt to counter the narrative in the mainstream press that promoted just this idea. We recognize that such attempts might not have gotten the Black Block very far, and media control is a major issue for the entire left. This is why some of us have started collaborating to make our own media. The video linked earlier is our first project. [33]

about more than just the Williams family, and they have been met by energetic support from a growing, multiracial, and militant political community.

### **February 16th: How it went down**

The rally at 4pm on Feb 16th was lead by the JT Williams Organizing Committee. This event was a drum circle and speak-out in Seattle's City Hall. Speakers evoked radical movements of the past, native culture/tradition, and the essentially liberal calls for human rights and reform. The Native drum circles are powerful and are an inspiring message of cultural resistance in the face of 500 years of genocide. Seeing Native youth and elders expressing their culture and memories of resistance in protest gave us all hope.



However, it also felt ironic to have a drum circle inside City Hall, the office of an illegitimate government founded through that same genocide, on land stolen from the Duwamish people, right after that government just announced that protecting white cop Ian Birk is more important than honoring and respecting the stolen life of a Native artist. It would be one thing if the JT Williams Organizing Committee were organizing a militant sit-in confronting the mayor and police chief saying "we'll keep drumming till Birk is in jail". If that were their plan, they should have publicly announced it to all who were present, and we would have tried to rally the 6 pm crowd to back them up and to up the ante against city hall. Instead we just heard them telling people not to go to the 6 pm rally and when we tried to negotiate with them, we were met with a combination of hostility and silence.

At the 4 pm rally, members of the JT Williams Organizing Committee criticized and preempted movement outside of their control by warning of outside agitators with agendas, often pointing to anarchists and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) as the culprits of co-optation. In fact, the anarchists and RCP had very little influence in the room, and when one RCP leader tried to do a breakaway march no one followed her. Those who did want to move without the committee's control included quite a few Native folks and youth of color who wanted action. We think that some of the liberals lumped us and our friends in with the RCP as an attempt to dismiss and silence us. We are not with the RCP; we are independent workers and students who have strong disagreements with the RCP's methods. But we also don't think it's right for liberals to try to red-bait and silence the RCP or any other group.

33. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEcufBRooMY>

Some were content with a drum circle and speak out as a form of resistance, mourning, and a way to pay respect to the late Williams. Others wanted to express their anger in another manner and handed out leaflets for the rally at 6pm. They were met with hostility by liberals and rainbow coalition leaders, who paid homage to the heroic Native militant Leonard Peltier and then in their next breath tried to tell people to watch out for divisive militants today. Immediately after that, a young working class Black woman stepped into the fray. She is not with the RCP, but she grabbed their megaphone and called for unity against police brutality. She announced the 6pm rally aloud and united the crowd. Immediately crowds began to form by the door, chanting while leaving the building. For a moment the hold of the Rainbow coalition was broken. For a moment, the crowd was able to see through their coded language and limited tactics.



The Black woman leading this walkout is a friend of ours, and she later became a member of the youth organization 90's Upheaval, which we describe in more detail below. She was assaulted by a few Native "leaders" while exiting. One man tried to slam the door on her and shouted at her, "you know nothing about Native sovereignty." He would be right to intervene if this were a self-determining Native Power event reclaiming colonized land and attacking the white supremacist state which keeps Native people down. If that were the case all of us would have opposed a walk-out like this and would have supported the Native action in solidarity. But in reality this self-proclaimed leader was using the door of the colonial master's house as a weapon to attack an ally from another oppressed community who is also facing police terror; far from reviving the spirit of A.I.M, this man was undermining efforts to build multi-racial, independent people-of-color-led militancy against police terror.

The crowd voted with its feet and left him behind. A multiracial crowd including many militant Native folks flooded the streets chanting and expressing our anger, weaving through stalled rush hour traffic, passing out fliers to groups of youth of color who were enthusiastically asking for info. Some were quickly trying to find a place to park so they could come join. There was an electrifying, energetic feeling in the air.

Many of us have been policed and self-policed by the prim and proper facade of downtown Seattle streets with its pervasive police presence, whether in the form of biker cops or baby-blue SPD cars. Many of us huddle in our neighborhoods, knowing "the town" is not safe for everyone. There was a momentary sense of

take the streets and hold them in the face of the cops' attempts to pick people off and arrest them.

We heard a lot of people in the crowd saying they hoped the anarchists would engage in property destruction to show the cops that if Birk is not tried, there will be serious consequences. This crowd seemed to have lost faith in the idea of obeying laws made by a system set up to oppress us. But the crowd was not yet confident about its own ability to engage in illegal action, and many people were hoping that the professional revolutionaries in black would do it for them. They got their wish when someone smashed a cop car window and the cop, panicking, let the car run right into the police van in front of it and lot of people in the crowd laughed.

90's Upheaval members and the rest of our bloc did not participate in this action but we did help the crowd regroup in the chaos that followed, and we tried to hold our ground when the cops reacted by pushing us around with horses and batons. This set the tone for the rest of the night, where the cops would let us march in the streets but then would try to pick people off and arrest them. At one point they tried to block us from marching and they maced a bunch of us when the crowd almost squeezed through a hole in their lines.

90's Upheaval decided to lead the crowd to the King County Jail in downtown Seattle, where many peoples' friends and family members have been unfairly incarcerated. Our common bloc used the megaphones to open up an open-mic session where survivors of police brutality from a variety of working class communities spoke out. The political message exploded clearly from the crowd the minute we came up on the jail – people were furious that their loved ones are/have been trapped in there, often without cause, while killer cop Ian Birk goes free. We shouted loud enough for our captive neighbors inside to hear us, and we could see the silhouettes of hands pounding on the windows. This is also an example of good tactical collaboration with the Black Block, who had initiated the tactic of doing a "noise demonstration" outside the jail after a few prominent community organizers had been arrested and brutalized by the cops a few weeks earlier (when a cop arrested one of them, he told him "I'm gonna Ian Birk your ass motherfucker.")

We have respect for the role the Black Block played on Fri the 18th. However, our political tendency did have tension with one of the multiple political tendencies within the Black Block. This tendency seems to oppose all forms of leadership, and feels that even having megaphones in the crowd was authoritarian because it amplified some people's voices over others. Someone, presumably from this tendency, grabbed one of our megaphones, made a speech with it, then smashed it on the ground. Afterwards, several anarchists from this tendency claimed they smashed our megaphone because they thought we were all with the Revolutionary Communist Party, which is ironic since we had opposed the anti-Black Block interventions of the RCP just a two days before. Some said even if we

to make sure that if the RCP or any other forces tried to divide the crowd again we'd be able to respond more effectively.

Our goal was to build a multi-racial crew of adults who could back up 90's Upheaval, a youth-of-color-led anti-police brutality organization that had just emerged a few weeks earlier. We wanted to support these new young leaders so their messages and leadership would not be drowned out in the political crossfire between established political tendencies.

The name 90's Upheaval reflects that its members were born in the 90's and are now rising up against oppression. 90's Upheaval had called a small but energetic school walkout in January to put pressure on the King County prosecutor to hold Ian Birk accountable for Williams' murder. Some of us had been mentoring the youth involved in the organization. On the night of the 18th, we gave them two of our bullhorns and they led the crowd through the streets in an energetic and militant unpermitted march. This kind of march is called a "snake march" because it weaves unpredictably through the street, making it harder for the cops to control. In a march like this there is more possibility for people to participate and play a leadership role because it is not scripted ahead of time by leaders, and lots of people can collaborate to make decisions and to take responsibility for the direction of the march. Our friends and us encouraged this direct democratic spirit by passing our other megaphone through the crowd so people could agitate and participate. Over and over again we have seen participation like this change people; far from just "blowing off steam", these are sometimes moments where oppressed people decide to become long-term organizers and revolutionaries.

Some of the 90's Upheaval youth wore masks at this march to lessen the possibility of personalized police retaliation. Although not all members of the group are affiliated with gangs, they chose a variety of colored bandannas to symbolize how people from various neighborhoods and past or present gang affiliations were overcoming their divisions to unite against police brutality. We see this as the best hope for overcoming gang violence. The main gang conflicts in Seattle are between South End, West Seattle and Central District neighborhoods. During their organizing for the walkout, and their mobilization the night of February 18th, 90's Upheaval brought together people from these different neighborhoods to march in unity. Their message has consistently been that these divisions play into the hands of the cops who love to see people of color fighting each other because it prevents a unified rebellion and gives the pigs an excuse to occupy working class neighborhoods, backed up by possible gang injunctions, gang databases, and gang unit terror squads.

Because they wore bandannas, the media suggested that the 90's Upheaval members were anarchists or were part of the Black Block who all wear black bandannas. In fact they are distinct and separate political tendencies, though there was some collaboration between the two tendencies on the night of the 18th. The Black Block played a positive role through most of the march, helping the crowd

freedom that many of us felt, to be able to fill the busy, regulated streets of downtown Seattle, with our numbers, with our loud passions for justice, with our exasperation with the failures of everything that's been done in our name, yet outside of our control.

When we got to Westlake Center, energy mounted to a boiling point and a passionate speak-out started. Speakers shared a variety of views but the dominant theme was that the murder and harassment of people of color and working class people by the police is systemic and the only solution is fundamental change. The Revolutionary Communist Party wasn't the only group calling for revolution and in fact they were in the minority; homeless folks, workers, displaced refugees from occupied New Orleans, all joined the chorus of calls for an uprising, calls to "revolt like the Egyptians." The crowd began to grow and soon hundreds filled the streets of Seattle in a mass unpermitted march, blocking traffic and chanting militant slogans.

The energetic, multiracial and multi-generational crowd proceeded to march toward the corner of Boren and Howell, the site where the late JT Williams had been shot and killed. Along our way there, we took over the streets with our sheer numbers, talked to one another about how we were feeling in conversations held amid the loud chants that surrounded us, filling the streets with moments of community, shared anger and purpose.

When we reached Howell and Boren, we gathered for a moment of silence to show respect for the late JT Williams. After that, there were discussions on whether we should head back to Westlake, the downtown area where the rally had originated, or toward the police precinct in Capitol Hill, where Ian Birk had worked. Divisions within the crowd began to surface around this question.

Here, we go into some detail about what we believed was the politically divisive role of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). We want to acknowledge though that they have since apologized for their actions, and us bringing them up here is not to rekindle the tensions, but more so to ask ourselves what lessons we can learn out of this experience. The dynamics described here are not unique to Seattle, and is something we need to struggle with here to build a stronger movement against police brutality.

A member of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), spoke into the bullhorn, one of the few bullhorns in the crowd that night. She warned the crowd that there were groups of people who were going to do things that would put people's safety at risk. She was referencing the group of people in the crowd who were wearing black masks, otherwise known as the Black Block. A member of the Black Block had smashed the window of a parked cop car outside the East precinct at a rally the week before. The RCP member warned the crowd that if they did not want to jeopardize their safety, then they should not head toward the police

precinct. With other members of the RCP, she agitated for the crowd to head back down to Westlake.

Many people, including ourselves, who were not associated with the Black Block, agitated instead that we should head toward the police precinct because it is a concrete institution of power worth confronting. We believed that heading back to Westlake would demobilize and demoralize the crowd. It would present this rally as one that was the same old tired route, which was simply a symbolic expression of anger, but not a confrontation with the authorities. We were close to a 1000-strong. If with these numbers we could not even try to approach a police precinct, then when could we? We recognize that even with 1,000 people, most of whom do not have experience or skills in street fighting, going to the precinct would only be a symbolic confrontation; we would not be able to occupy it or actually shut it down. But we felt this would be a higher level symbolic confrontation which could help us learn together, helping us all grow both in our confidence and in our collective consciousness that we need to develop ourselves further so we can take it to the next level in the future. We felt this would be better than another round of Westlake speeches by a self-proclaimed vanguard party that would limit the direct participation of people in the crowd.

The RCP began to lead a large group of people down to Westlake, many of them confused about what was going on and demoralized about the crowd splitting into two. The Black Block, in response, was headed in the other direction, drawing its supporters. Later on a writer named SwanEagle would accuse the Black Block of “hijacking” the rally because they ran up to the front together to lead the march up toward the precinct [11]. She accused them of being a bunch of white folks taking over a Native-led rally. What she missed was the fact that some members of the Black Block were trying to hold the crowd together and prevent the RCP from hijacking the rally. There were few Native leaders intervening at this point, and the RCP was the only faction with megaphones (except for members of the International Socialist Organization, who were further back in the crowd).

Together with like-minded comrades, we approached the groups of people that stood confused at the crossroads and talked to many people about the need for us to stay together and not pander to the fear-mongering and scapegoating that we felt the RCP was doing. Once we said that the precinct was where Ian Birk had been stationed the day of the murder, many people did not hesitate to head toward the precinct. By presenting the Black Block as the only militants, the RCP had failed to recognize the organic militancy that was also present in the crowd among those who were not affiliated with either political blocks. At that point, despite having lost a lot of people in the confusion, the majority of the crowd began to proceed up toward the police precinct. The RCP, seeing that so many of its supporters were now headed in a different direction, was also pushed to follow the crowd toward the precinct.

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11. <http://swaneagle.weebly.com/1/post/2011/02/bullies-takeover-john-t-williams-memorial-march.html>

12. <http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/introducing-from-the-streets-productions/>

## **Infiltration**

Other tactics that the SPD employed that evening may not have been new, but are also worth stating. As the Puget Sound anarchists have identified [31], there were police infiltrators in the crowd, acting as media reporters, taking pictures of those of us who were present. [32] The knowledge of their presence was destructive for a new, diverse crowd that was coming together for the first time. It exacerbated the wariness people felt toward one another.

## **The Rainbow Coalition “managing” the movement**

The *Seattle Weekly* states that “the buildup was too gradual,” which led to the demobilization of the rage around the acquittal of Ian Birk. They are right in saying that

It’s been six months since Birk gunned down Williams at the corner of Boren and Howell, enough time for the city to ponder what happened and vent its fury at the mayor and police chief at community forums. And because state law sets such a high bar for charges in an officer-involved shooting (see below), no one was really surprised that Birk escaped prosecution. Most everyone had steadied themselves for the result long ago.

However, the article failed to point out *how* the community forums were able to demobilize the rage around the shooting. This is where our critiques of the Rainbow Coalition [see above], represented by the JT Williams Committee, are important. It was the willingness of such organizations to partner with the state to help drag out the process of prosecuting Ian Birk by respecting legalistic procedures, to help channel the rage of the city toward forums with police officers, to contain the rebellion within such sanctioned spaces rather than organize the large numbers of restless and disenfranchised youth, that made the demobilization of the public anger around police terrorism successful. There was an absence of anti-statist, anti-authoritarian, majority people of color organizations that were able to play a strong alternative role to the rainbow coalition, to put out politics that fore-fronted direct action and street mobilizations to empower all of us who are survivors of police terrorism. In that absence, the Rainbow Coalition monopolized the political terrain and spoke for all of us. This is one more reason why such militant multiracial organizations need to be built as soon as possible.

## **vi) February 18th: More militants start to get organized**

We saw the first glimpses of militant multiracial organization at the second large rally, the night of February 18th. We and some people we have organized with decided to come together to form a bloc at that rally, and we brought bullhorns

expect from one another. The sprawl of the city, the geographic distance that separates oppressed communities from one another, the experience of having been acculturated into being an embattled minority in a sea of rich white liberals, in a culture monopolized by their racism, created a scenario where we were slow to warm up to one another, slow to trust one another. We did not trust that if we took militant action, the other person next to us would get our back. This sort of trust arises from common experiences, identities and struggles. We did not yet have dominant, coherent working-class based narratives that could explain our varied, though similar experiences of the many facets of the current economic crisis.



In Seattle, our divisions based on race, gang territorial beefs, class and geography have erased common experiences forged in past struggles. On the 16th we were a motley crew: families with children, homeless youth, older workers of color, gang members from different hoods, students, etc. We were a diverse group of people brought together by the rage we all felt at the acquittal of Ian Birk. What prevented us from operating like a militant street force was not the presumably innate “passive aggressiveness” of Seattle. It was, in part, the distance, the splintering of our common identities and experiences, and lack of trust that had built up among different communities divided by geographic sprawl, segregation, and recent memories of displacement and gentrification, that made us unable to predict what the person next to us would do.

How do we break down these institutionalized divisions that the ruling class has so carefully nurtured, and build instead strong multiracial, multi-gender, multi-neighborhood, anti-racist, feminist class struggle contingents that have trust in each other, that can get each others’ back? We have to work with large numbers of similar-minded militants and put time and energy into creating spaces and struggles that can begin to bridge these distances.

Like a comrade argues in a video we co-produced [12], we reject the accusations from Swaneagle and other critics that the anarchists are all outside agitators or “white boys” who don’t know their privilege and put other people at risk. These are all tired accusations that only serve the interests of the police and more bourgeois people of color who are scared that the militancy the anarchists represent could also erupt in their own communities and cause them to lose credibility and power.

We recognize that there are multiple political tendencies within the Black Block. In fact, the Black Block is a tactic, not a political perspective. It is simply a group of people who wear all Black so that the cops can’t tell them apart as easily, expressing solidarity with those in their midst who might choose to engage in illegal tactics. Not everyone in the Black Block is necessarily an anarchist. Likewise there are anarchists who weren’t in the Black Block, and there are anarchists both in and out of the Black Block who engage in some of the most important community and labor organizing in the city. This fluidity between overlapping organizational forms is difficult for media and bourgeois analysts to understand but it is how politics is currently conducted at the Seattle grassroots, among the most vibrant and young organizations that are growing in response to the ongoing economic crisis.

As we marched toward 12th and Pine in Capitol Hill, we were blocked off by a line of riot police. Moments like these would become more common in the next few weeks, and our inability to deal with them demoralized many in the emerging movement.

In face of the huge line of riot police, the crowd was at a standstill. We did not clearly have a plan for what to do. This would obviously be the response that we’d get from the state if we were going toward one of their assets, and we should have had a plan for what to do. Some people advocated pushing forward in a line against the cops, others advocated doing a sit-in, while others pushed for turning around and reaching the precinct through other means. Small groups of people were trying out each of these tactics, and when each one didn’t work they would try another one. Since this trial and error was not being done together as a whole crowd, each tactic did not have the numbers of people necessary to make it effective. There was a lack of organic democratic leadership emerging out of the crowd and accountable to it; something like this would have been necessary to rally a significant militant minority of the crowd into a disciplined confrontation with the cops. Instead, there were just multiple voices pulling in different directions and no coordinated confrontation against the authorities.

Notably, a lot of people at this moment were looking to the Black Block for leadership. Some of us were expecting them to lead a coordinated charge against the police lines. Instead they seemed unsure of their own strategy and unwilling to lead the crowd. They themselves split into smaller groups and pulled in different directions, as did the rest of the crowd. This created an atmosphere of confusion.

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31. <http://pugetsoundanarchists.org/node/226>

32. <http://pugetsoundanarchists.org/node/265>

We do think that some Black Block members' hardcore ideological criticism of all leadership prevented them from effectively focusing the energy of the crowd they had helped assemble. Like it or not, the collection of autonomous individuals and affinity groups that make up the Black Block were functioning as a vanguard of the crowd, merging with, and forming a spontaneous block with other militants out there who were not masked up and might not consider themselves anarchists. But when the crowd faced state power, this vanguard dissipated.

We are against trying to build a self-proclaimed vanguard party that attempts to seize leadership like the RCP did that night; usually, such "vanguards" end up holding back the self-activity of everyday people instead of helping to open space where people can deepen their participation. However, we recognize that within any group of oppressed people, whether a workplace, a crowd, etc. there is uneven development in consciousness, confidence, and preparation for struggle, and a layer of people who are most ready, willing, and able to act often move to the forefront, or the "vanguard" of a struggle. In this case the anarchists were a part, but not all, of that vanguard. We believe it is important to organize and cohere this organic leadership instead of attempting to deny its existence or attempting to present it as simply a group of individuals acting on their own with no relation to the rest of the crowd.

However, we feel that just criticizing the Black Block is a cop-out. The reality was *none* of us was ready to take on these tasks of leadership ourselves, and if we want to really confront state power, we can't just wait for other folks to make a move, we need to train and prepare ourselves to lead in these situations and others like them. We all have to learn how to take responsibility for all sorts of tricky questions, like how to cohere the section of the crowd that does want to push forward and how to create a safe way for those who do not, or those who can't risk arrest, to pull out of harms way.

It was not just the limitations of "activists" like us, the anarchists, or the RCP that prevented a coordinated advance against state power that night. The rest of the crowd, new to such immediate collective encounters with the police, was also not confident enough to push through the police lines. Perhaps it was something that could have been done, but many people stopped short at hurling insults at the police, or individually pushing the police line, and not finding the strength and unity for us to push through those lines collectively. This is what happens when there is a long period of relative quiet in a city like this, followed by a relatively spontaneous explosion of energy – people don't have recent experiences working together in struggle on the streets.

Subsequently, the crowd divided, each group trying to get to the precinct via a different route, and being met with yet another cop line on yet another intersection. With smaller numbers at each confrontation, we were unable to move forward decisively.

those networks in material reality, not in virtual reality. The media spectacle about Facebook activism contributed to a somewhat idealist conception of struggle here in the streets of Seattle– it encouraged a lot of us to have our heads in the clouds, with ungrounded expectations that the struggle would just pop off spontaneously and then spread. It led to lack of situational awareness; we didn't pay enough attention to the material geography of the city.

In reality, as important as Tahrir square was to the Egyptian revolution, it was where the revolution peaked, not where it started. Clandestine organizations had called several other marches beginning in neighborhoods around the city, which served as decoys to distract the cops. Then, with the police spread out, they converged in one working class neighborhood for an unannounced march. [30] When the neighbors saw that a critical mass of people were assembling safely without interference by the cops, they poured out of their houses and joined the march. This created a force large enough to break through police lines and force its way into Tahrir Square and other downtown areas. Although we don't face nearly the same level of police repression here as in Cairo, these lessons are important for us to learn: we need to organize in our communities, not just mobilize downtown.

Our future organizing attempts need to take these realities into consideration. We cannot escalate on our enemy's territory first. The capitalists and the police dedicate large amounts of energy and time to remodel the city to their advantage. We need to counter that with as much dedication and commitment. The working class communities that still exist in places like High Point, White Center, Delridge, South Park, the South End, and parts of the CD need to unite with the emerging suburban ghettos and working class neighborhoods south of the city as well as north along Aurora. Since all these places are spread out we will need a serious organizing effort with sophisticated strategies to bring everyone together across these divisions. For example, instead of spontaneous riots, maybe we need roving "flying squad" pickets of protesters in cars and trucks that can mobilize at key points through the sprawling proletarian areas, spreading the word, and bringing people together to confront key ruling class institutions. This would require developing resources and capacities that most militant organizations don't currently have, but could build over time.

When we get organized we will show everyone that Seattle is not nearly as white and bourgeois as the masters of downtown want it to be.

### **A diverse Seattle, slow to warm up to one another**

The diversity of the crowd that the night of Feb 16th was as much its strength as its weakness. Brought together across this sprawl that is now Seattle, we had not seen each other struggling on the streets before. We did not know what to

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30. [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704132204576135882356532702.html?mod=WSJ\\_hp\\_LEFTTopStories](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704132204576135882356532702.html?mod=WSJ_hp_LEFTTopStories)

Workers of Seattle should keep this in mind. They might have kicked us out of our historic neighborhoods but they can't get rid of us entirely — the city would not be able to run without our labor! They have moved us into South King County, into areas such as Renton, Burien, and Seatac [27]. These are the places where future uprisings will emerge, descending on downtown Seattle only when we have the strength to break through the guarded perimeters of their little waterfront Disneyland.

### ***Beyond Facebookology: How virtual proximity doesn't translate into physical proximity***

The fact that the rallies on the 16th and 18th started and ended downtown is predominantly due to habit and a lack of imagination on the part of the left. However, it can also be attributed partly to the media distortion of the Egyptian revolution, which was still going on as we rallied. Activists in Seattle thought that we could replicate the Egyptian dynamics here — folks heard about the rallies through calls on Facebook and imagined that Westlake Center could be like Seattle's version of Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, the nerve center or the Egyptian movement.

In reality, the movement in Egypt was not simply the product of spontaneous calls to action on Facebook. Facebook played a key role, but the calls for “days of rage” were actually the culmination of decades of smaller insurgencies and ruptures, including Palestine solidarity rallies that became anti-Mubarak rallies [28], as well as strikes led by women workers at the Mahalla textile factories which gave birth to networks of militant workers and students who would later lead the revolution. [29]

By saying this, we are not claiming that revolution is the culmination of years of slow patient organizing around small winnable demands alone. Many of the demands people had rallied around through the years were not winnable. In fact, there were moments and events, ruptures where all of the sudden a lot more became possible. It was possible in these moments, to go far beyond the limitations of what folks just thought was winnable yesterday.

We also recognize that in the right moment, successful struggle can spread fast through communication networks and folks can replicate this struggle over and over again, creating a convergence where the ensemble of all these actions is greater than the sum of its parts. The Tunisian uprising was replicated in Egypt, and then spread to Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain.

However, we can't attribute this process of exploding collective consciousness to Facebook! Facebook is a great tool for coordinating social networks, but to do that, we need to have social networks in the first place. We need to actually build

Eventually, many of us convened on Broadway in Capitol Hill. The crowd had diminished to about 250-300 people, from a height of 800-1000. Even as the height of the tension and confrontation dissipated, a good number of people had remained, wanting to make a point of their anger, their frustration with Ian Birk's acquittal. Capitol Hill is traditionally the queer district in Seattle, where a lot of political struggle went down before the neighborhood was gentrified. Now it is filled with bars and expensive condos. We marched up and down along Broadway, calling out the bar customers to join us, “Out of the bars, and into the streets!” a refrain from the Stonewall riots. [13] We were met with a mixed response — some people joined, most kept partying.

### **iv) A Ruling Class ideology: “Why Seattle Didn't Riot”**

In the next few weeks, *Seattle Weekly*, a popular weekly publication, put out a cynical piece called “Why Seattle Didn't Riot”. [14] The piece rightly observes that the SPD, unlike the Oakland Police Department, did less overt advertisement for the rallies through a less heavy and visible presence. It is likely that SPD has learned this the hard way, through the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization rebellion. Since then, the SPD had grown more savvy with managing



political rallies and gatherings. This sophistication was evident the nights of February 16th and 18th. Rather than creating a spectacle through their heavy presence, as was done in Oakland around the Oscar Grant mobilization, the SPD followed the rallies and only came into the fore when there were gaps in the crowd so they could corner people or arrest them with snatch-squads; they would also wait to intervene until we were in less busy junctions, blocking our route toward more crowded and populated parts of the city.

Besides this accurate assessment of police tactics, the cynical *Seattle Weekly* article peddled a bunch of fictions. It presented Seattle as a liberal lily white city that is known only for passive aggressiveness, with an insignificant presence of people of color or oppressed people. The effect of this kind of writing can be even worse than the mace the cops sprayed in some our eyes Fri the 18th, and it has the same purpose: to demoralize and humiliate any segment of Seattle that is enraged by police brutality by making us feel like an extreme minority up against a sophisticated and powerful enemy.

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27. <http://crosscut.com/2010/11/10/seattle/20351/How-Seattle-is-exporting-its-poor-people/>

28. <http://blip.tv/file/4699784>

29. <http://gatheringforces.org/2009/10/16/labor-movement-egypt/>

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13. <http://socialistalternative.org/literature/stonewall.html>

14. <http://www.seattleweekly.com/2011-02-23/news/why-seattle-didn-t-riot/>

We recall Marx's analysis of the many facets in which ruling class domination occurs:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance...[The ruling classes] regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. [15]

The *Seattle Weekly*, placing a veneer of counter-culture coolness over what is yet another tiring, echo piece of cynical, conformist, ruling class politics played its appropriate role as the mouthpiece of the white, liberally racist, middle class segment of Seattle. It plays its role in the systematic demoralization and repression of Seattle's oppressed communities, to have us believe that we have nothing to fight for, no space to fight for, no message to express, and whatever efforts we put in will ultimately fail because of the city's demographics and the overpowering intelligence of the state and the police force.

The *Seattle Weekly* article is part of a broader problem: the Seattle working class is losing the culture war. Ever since Bill Gates, Paul Allen, and their layer of the ruling class took over Seattle in the 90s, earlier traditions of working class struggle have been erased. In the increasingly repressive Seattle public schools, we don't learn that the working class shut down this city in a general strike in 1919; that labor unions engaged in militant political confrontations, sometimes armed, with those who tried to attack them; that Seattle had the first Black Panther branch outside of California; that some of our ancestors were fighting US imperialism in Southeast Asia while others were shutting down the I-5 freeway in protest against the U.S. occupation there. All of this has been erased and forgotten by the majority. Meanwhile, the vibrant, living working class cultures of Seattle get little recognition in the local media, let alone in the national media. For example, people sleep on Seattle's dynamic hip hop scene.

This monopoly of Seattle's culture and identity by the liberal white middle class establishment, and the erasure of people of color and workers in this city and region, make us feel that any resistance on our part is innately, naturally futile. This is infuriating and demoralizing for those of us who are working class, people of color and face our oppression be it through workplace authoritarianism, or everyday police brutality and harassment. We have to recognize that these "ruling ideas," these harsh and preemptive judgments of our militancy, are simply "the

needs to take on the struggles of queer communities as an integral part of its politics.

During the march through Capitol Hill, many people in the crowd were discussing moving into the Central District. The Central District (CD) had been predominantly a Black working class neighborhood located next to Capitol Hill. With gentrification, the neighborhood became whiter and more middle class. Real estate replaced real people and community. The attacks on one of the CD's vibrant community spaces [22], the Hidmo [23], is the most recent of a long string of institutionalized pressure to gentrify the neighborhood. In the recent 2010 census, this historically culturally rich Black neighborhood turned out to be more than 50 % white. [24]

The roads between Capitol Hill and the Central District are mostly dark, quiet streets filled with apartment blocs that have been gentrified. If we had taken the route, we would easily have been attacked by the SPD. As we will describe later in our recount of the Feb 18th rally, the police were waiting for us to walk into dark streets and less populated spaces to mace and attack us.

However, since we knew we couldn't march into the Central District, this left us with one option – to march in circles in Capitol Hill, trying to draw people out of the bars. This was not that successful and was demoralizing for some folks. We tried to politicize the moment by laying out the analysis we're making here, calling for more organizing and actions outside downtown.

Seattle's ruling classes have systematically created a city that exists for their class purposes. What used to be thriving working class Black and Asian neighborhoods, with high population density have since been displaced to make way for high rises, apartment blocks and fancy bars. This has had its precedents in history. Paris in 1848 erupted in rebellion against the elite, with workers setting up barricades to aid in street fighting [25]. After the rulers squashed the uprising, the architect Baron Haussman reconstructed the city, creating broad streets that would be more difficult to barricade and where police and state forces could easily march through. They displaced working class communities and removed rebellious populations, attempting to move working people further away from each other to prevent the concentration necessary to riot.

This ultimately did not work. Paris erupted again in the Paris Commune of 1876 [26]. The workers of Paris figured out ways to come back together after they had been separated and spread out by Haussman's gentrification efforts. They rose up and took over the city.

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15. *German Ideology*

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22. <http://bcplanningblog.blogspot.com/2010/03/hidmo-gentrification-in-seattle-central.html>

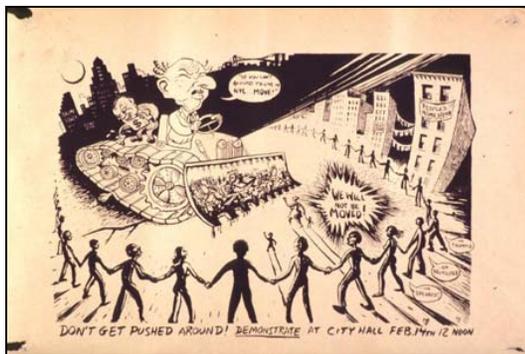
23. <http://www.hidmo.org/>

24. [http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2014421589\\_censusimmaculate07m.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2014421589_censusimmaculate07m.html)

25. <http://worksep.org/blog/2011/02/this-week-in-history/>

26. <http://worksep.org/blog/2011/03/this-week-in-history-the-paris-commune/>

thousands of people who can eradicate several successful barricades to effectively block traffic and shut down the area, we will not be able to tap into the spontaneous rage of the city. We will simply be a media spectacle, doing the routine street blockage. Cops will reroute the cars, we will be surrounded. We will feel demoralized. In the mobilizations we were a part of, this happened several times. In fact it seems to happen every time any movement has gained ground recently – the highest stage ends up being a street blockade which the cops leave alone and traffic simply takes a 2 block detour.



The rally that night moved across downtown into the next neighborhood, Capitol Hill. Due to gentrification, Capitol Hill has gone from being a gritty queer neighborhood of rebels and outcasts, into a neighborhood that has been dominated by the glitzy, elitist, predominantly white middle class. While homeless folks and street queers still live here, their voices and presence have been attacked and made invisible through police violence and anti-pan handling practices. The image of Capitol Hill peddled by tourist Seattle, willingly subscribed to by its liberal, classy clientele, is a bubble of comfortable rebellion expressed only in culture and mockery, poking fun at real rage, real passion, real emotions. Too many well-off hipsters and yuppies have taken over this neighborhood and made politics into an irony. They watched our rallies from inside their bars and took snapshots to upload onto Facebook. That's the extent of their involvement. Those we want to reach have no money to chill in bars like "The Elite."

There is another dimension to how Capitol Hill residents responded to the marches. In its mobilizations, the anti-police upsurge failed to integrate the daily experiences that queers and gender non-conforming people face in relation to police violence. Police brutality and the oppression of the criminal justice system are forms of state repression that many queer folks have been exposed to. The criminalization of sex workers, a form of labor that many street queers also engage in, as well as the systematic transphobia and homophobia within the police department and criminal justice system, has led to disproportionate targeting of such communities by the police. Further organizing around police brutality also

ideal expression of the dominant material relationships." These are ideas that are meant to put us down.

We cannot echo these ideas by dismissing all our fellow workers and people of color here as whitewashed, bourgeois, or soft people who will never rebel. That just plays into the system's attacks on us. We cannot simply sit back and wish that we were somewhere else, like Oakland or L.A. where the real action is. We need to see that there is still a working class Seattle seething in the shadows of gentrified high rises. As the Blue Scholars put it, "new homes, new stores, still a hood underneath, no good how we chillin' in the gut of the beast." [16]

The media failed consistently to interview people from this "other Seattle" who are at the point where they want to rebel.

The main people of color they interviewed were JT Williams Organizing Committee members who emphasized in the media that the murder of Williams was a tragic mistake [17] and not part of a systematic problem of white supremacy in the Seattle Police Department. [18] Thus, the voices of other victims of police brutality across the city were de-emphasized. When other folks with legitimate grievances against the cops took militant action, the media and the JT Williams Organizing Committee were able to present this as something that went against the wishes of the Williams family for peace with the city government, and therefore illegitimate. The media suggested that all militants were anarchists, and many people in the movement assumed that all the anarchists are young white men, which is not true. The voices of anarchist people of color, and non-anarchist militants of color were silenced.

To confront this media narrative, one member of Black Orchid Collective collaborated with a friend of ours named Matt, a well-known Black militant who has played a key role throughout this entire struggle, to create an independent media project called From the Streets Productions. For our first video, called "Police State Amerikkka", we interviewed people of color in Seattle about their experiences with police brutality and their analysis of the role of police in society. [19] These interviews show clearly the oppression that working class Seattleites face on a daily basis, and the uncompromising rage that many of us feel every day.

To go from rage to real power, we need to continue recognizing and recording the self-activity of our working class neighbors and coworkers through media projects like this. However, we also need to intervene, to help cohere a powerful social and political bloc out of the scattered but large and angry working class and oppressed communities in the Puget Sound region.

16. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKLgaLBhx68>

17. [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=203268553021174%E2%80%9D](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=203268553021174%E2%80%9D)

18. <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/what-some-seattle-cops-think-the-problem-is/Content?oid=6266406>

19. <http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/introducing-from-the-streets-productions/>

We need to recognize that our communities are a sleeping giant and when we do make moves together, the image of the Starbucks-latte-sipping-Microsoft-Emerald city will be shattered forever. We are the people behind the curtain who keep that emerald city running and if we get organized we can shut it down, leaving the rest of the country saying “Damn, I didn’t know there were so many working class people and people of color in Seattle!”

Also, many working class communities here have immediate family ties to working classes in other countries that are more actively fighting imperialism and capitalism today. If the scattered but large working class communities of Puget Sound could team up with the working class communities that produce the goods shipped through the Seattle port every day, we’d be part of an impressive global majority that could take matters into our own hands.

But how do we do that? To imagine ways to advance the struggle, it is important for us to lay out our own reasons for “Why Seattle didn’t riot,” and discuss ways of escalating our struggles here that take into consideration the changing demographics and realities of our city and region.

Riots have been the most visible and easily imaginable form of resistance to police brutality. When they beat Rodney King, LA rioted. When they killed Oscar Grant, Oakland rioted. In our recent urban imaginations, riots have been immediate responses to state violence. The dominance of riots in popular imagination arises in part from their real, though temporary effectiveness in making a strong statement about a community’s rejection of the state, injecting genuine fear into the powers that be. The high visibility of riots, however, also stem from the lack of other imaginable alternative ways of struggling. Our generation has had to choose between reformism represented by the non-profit industrial complex, or other such collaborations with law enforcement or the state on the one hand, and spontaneous action in the form of riots on the other. We have lacked the vocabulary and experience to imagine organized and militant ways to change the status quo, such as militant political strikes, walkouts, etc. We give props to our comrades in Advance the Struggle in the Bay Area, who helped their fellow workers in Oakland collectively imagine these modes of struggle during the middle of the Oscar Grant uprisings. [20] When some of us were in the group Unity and Struggle, we tried to make similar interventions here. [21]

The purpose of Black Orchid Collective is to revive a history of militant class struggle, to draw from our pasts and combine it with current analyses and realities, so we can imagine other ways of sustainable, militant, fierce, long term resistance that has the goal of overthrowing capitalism and all its violent chains.

Capitalism wasn’t built in a day. It took generations of dedicated, sustained, attacks on the part of the emerging bourgeoisie, against the pre-capitalist formations and

institutions to erode the resistances of pre-colonial and pre-capitalist communities. In our world today, a free, communist society that can take down capitalism to bring forth a new world, will similarly take dedication and commitment, intelligent analyses and actions by millions of working class revolutionaries. As our world crumbles before our eyes, this work of imagination coupled with organizational building to realize these visions for a more sustainable, less violent society, is more important now than ever.

### **v) Why We Think Seattle Didn’t Riot**

We do not fetishize riots, or think that a new society will emerge in one grand riot. However, we think riots can be effective at getting cops tried for murder — the establishment in Oakland only tried killer cop Johannes Mehserle because Oakland rioted. So it is a reasonable question to ask, why didn’t Seattle riot that night of Feb 16th? Tensions were high, emotions were raw, and anger was flooding the streets. How come something more drastic did not happen in this city?

Here is our attempt to account for this:

#### ***Gentrification and Displacement in Seattle: Lack of a Concentrated Population of Oppressed People***

The rallies convened in downtown Seattle and in Capitol Hill. There was talk about taking the rally also to Central District, which is the predominantly Black neighborhood in Seattle, though it has become increasingly gentrified. Riots draw from their ability to bring in large numbers of people in spontaneous action, tapping into their rage and frustration of the system. These people are not only people of color, oppressed minorities, homeless folks, they are also debt-ridden working class students, young workers and adults who are inspired by the opening allowed to them in a riot situation, to come out, and join in the fun, the anger and the rebellion.

Downtown is a heavily-policed shoppers’ island, more specifically, a tourist and middle- and upper-class shoppers’ island. It is the territory of the rich, which explains their constant fears about the presence of youth of color, homeless folks, and gangs in the area. Just stand at the bus stop on 3rd and Pike in front of the McDonald’s and you can see the dramatic clash that goes on everyday between the liberal elite who work and live 15 floors above the street, and the various groups of people at the street level who they attempt to contain and suppress by hiring the cops and private yellow-jacket security forces.

Downtown is the territory of the capitalists and the police. They have everything downtown memorized to a tee. They have put down many rallies and resistances downtown. Short of thousands of people who can thwart the cops’ decade-long manuals on distracting, rerouting, repressing struggles downtown; short of

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20. <http://advancethestruggle.wordpress.com/2009/07/15/justice-for-oscar-grant-a-lost-opportunity>

21. <http://gatheringforces.org/2010/12/24/how-can-we-advance-the-anti-police-brutality-struggle/>