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The left is remaking the world

‘Defund the police’ and ‘cancel rent’ aren’t reforms, but paths to revolution

The uprisings in response to the killing of George Floyd are far different from anything that has come before. Not just because they may be the largest in our history, or that seven weeks in, people are still in the streets (even if the news media has largely moved on). But also because, for the last few years, organisers have been thinking boldly.

They have been pushing demands — from ‘defund the police’ to ‘cancel rent’ to ‘pass the Green New Deal’ — that would upend the status quo and redistribute power from elites to the working class. And now ordinary people are, too; social movements have helped spread these demands to a public mobilised by the pandemic and the protests.

These movements are in conversation with one another, cross-endorsing demands as they expand their grass-roots bases. Cancel the rent campaigns have joined the call to defund the police. This month, racial, climate and economic justice organisations are hosting a four-day crash course on defunding the police.

Demands for a new society

Each demand demonstrates a new attitude among leftist social movements. They don’t want to reduce police violence, or sidestep our environmentally unsustainable global supply chain, or create grace periods for late rent. These are the responses of reformers and policy elites.

Instead, the people making these demands want a new society. They want a break from prisons and the police, from carbon and rent. They want counselors in place of cops, housing for all and a jobs guarantee. While many may find this naïve, polls, participation in protests and growing membership in social movement organisations show these demands are drawing larger and larger parts of the public toward a fundamental critique of the status quo and a radical vision for the future.

Consider the appeal to defund and dismantle the police, championed by almost every major social movement organisation on the left, from the Black Visions Collective to Mijente to the Sunrise Movement, and echoed on the streets.

The call to defund the police is often accompanied by a call to shift resources elsewhere, to education, housing and health care.

Defunding, part of a strategy to eventually abolish the police, challenges the prevailing logic of police reform: the idea that police brutality is caused by individual bad apples acting without sufficient oversight and training. This idea undergirds the familiar panoply of reforms: body cameras, community policing, implicit bias workshops. If officers are properly equipped and controlled, there will be less violence, its proponents argue — despite no significant evidence to back that up.

Defunding suggests the problem is not isolated, nor is it a result of a few officers' attitudes. It challenges the power, the resources and the enormous scope of the police. Whether they are responding to a mental health emergency or deployed to a protest, their training and tools are geared toward violence.

The demand for defunding suggests, as the police and prison abolitionist Rachel Herzing often says, that the only way to reduce police violence is to reduce police officers' opportunities for contact with the public. The protests have forced us to rethink state-sanctioned violence as our default response to social problems, to reconsider the hundreds of billions of dollars we have spent on prisons and the salaries of more than 800,000 sworn law enforcement officers.

Shifting resources elsewhere

The uprisings have also expanded the space for a reckoning with the failures of liberal reforms and with the possibility of doing things in radically different ways. Tinkering and training cannot fix our reliance on police officers to deal with routine social problems through violence and the threat of it.

The demand for defunding calls into question the fundamental premise of policing: that it produces safety. It urges us to take collective responsibility for collective care, repair and redress. It shifts our vantage point on persistent problems: for example, to guarantee housing for all rather than to continue to arrest and cage this country's more than 567,000 homeless people.

The call to defund the police is often accompanied by a call to shift resources elsewhere, to education, housing and health care. The pandemic has put on display the spectacular contradiction such appeals reveal. We have no guaranteed health care, wages, housing or food; we can't even provide personal protective equipment. These failures have devastated Black communities in particular.

But then, in response to Black Lives Matter protests, the police show up in high-tech gear and military-style vehicles to arrest, gas and bludgeon protesters, demonstrating where our tax dollars have gone instead. The demand for defunding shifts power and our imaginations away from the police and toward a society rooted in collective care for ordinary people. It brings into sharp relief who we have allowed ourselves to become and offers a vision for who we could be.

Cancel rent and implement a Green New Deal

Taking money away from the police is not the sole demand. Consider the push to cancel rent. It asks the state to abolish tenants' obligations to pay their landlords each month. But rent is the product of a private contract about private property: the foundation of our social, economic and political order.

So when organisers make the demand to cancel rent, they are conjuring up a state whose primary allegiance is to people's needs instead of profit. The demand raises the possibility of a world where housing is an entitlement rather than a commodity. It aims to shift power from landlords to tenants, in the service of visions of housing for all.

Leftist movements today see our crises as intersectional.

Or consider the environment. The Green New Deal does not merely call for less pollution. It requires that we restructure our economy so we can move to clean, renewable energy sources and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

To get there, the Green New Deal calls for enormous investments in public transit, universal health care, free public college tuition and millions of high-wage green jobs. It emphasises that everyone ought to carry out its projects, with a central role for working-class people of colour. The bill's vision is so counter to the actual practices of the state, and to the talking points of the Democratic and Republican Parties, you have to stretch your imagination to understand it. And that is the point.

A multiracial mass movement

Organisers often call these demands 'non-reformist reforms,' a term coined in the 1960s by the French socialist André Gorz. Reform on its own is a tired continuation of liberal politics and legalism, expert-driven and elite-centred. Even now, policing experts are grasping to turn the energy around 'defund' toward the same old reforms, and mayors are endorsing superficial budget cuts, diluting the bold demands.

The way to respond is to stay focused on building mass movements of ordinary people who are serious about restoring and redistributing social wealth, as the Red Nation's Red Deal puts it, to those who created it: 'workers, the poor, Indigenous peoples, the global South, women, migrants, caretakers of the land, and the land itself.' Here, too, you see the connections — among Indigenous resistance, environmental justice and more.

Leftist movements today see our crises as intersectional. Police violence, global warming and unaffordable housing are not disconnected, discrete problems; instead, they emerge from colonialism and capitalism. Organisers recall these histories, and tell stories of freedom struggles.

And whatever you think of their demands, you have to be in awe of how they inaugurate a new political moment, as the left offers not just a searing critique, but practical ladders to radical visions. These capacious demands create the grounds for multiracial mass movements, our only hope for a more just future.

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