Abolish All Mayors!

Notes on the necessity of community self-governance in PDX and beyond.

Symbiosis PDX
The City of Portland’s hierarchical government structure, legacy of white supremacy & exploitative development policies have all worked to dispossess hundreds of thousands of residents. In response a righteously angry urban underclass has developed. To manage this the neo-liberal capitalist’s have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into militarizing the police; however, the peoples long history of radical neighborhood organizing and revolutionary movements in the Middle East all point to a solution. The complete democratization and community control of all city bureaus and the abolition of the police.

Portland’s Mayoral Problem

Top down social structures that concentrate power into the hands of a few people typically lead to bad results. The rising violence of police departments across the country is directly linked to the increasingly anti-democratic structure of urban governments. Portland’s city commissioner system is one of the most regressive forms of ur-
ban governments in the country. In this system there is almost no representation of local voices in policy making. Four city commissioners and the mayor are appointed in city wide elections. While no cities in the United States have much room to brag in the democracy department, Portland remains the only one that doesn’t hold regional elections. Given the extreme financial and bureaucratic barriers to creating ballot initiatives, the average Port-lander has almost no power in policy making. Thus daily decisions that impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of people are left almost completely in the hands of five people. Additionally, the mayor has special powers to designate bureaus to city council people. Thus, council people must appease the mayor to get what they want to do done. The mayor also drafts the proposed annual budget.

Currently, Portland Police Bureau’s budget consumes over half of all city funds. Despite constant school closures and civil service cutbacks in other areas year after year. Because our city government gives so much power to the mayor while shutting everyone else out and because of the extreme financial barriers to be elected, it allows for the interests of the well resourced and privileged classes to dominate all others. This sort of concentration of power allows for the untethered use of the police department as a tool of class and cultural warfare.
According to Portland Copwatch since Mayor Ted Wheeler took office in 2016 there have been well over two dozen people killed by the Portland Police Department. To mark just a few of the most aggreviing incidents; In 2017 unarmed black teenager Quanice Hayes was killed by PPB as well as Terrell Johnson while running away from police. In 2018 Patrick Kimmons was shot over 19 times and Jason Washington was killed while attempting to break up a fight close to Portland State University. We need not remind readers about the long list of scandals involving police collaboration with local fascists, over the last four years, and their constant brutality directed at antifascist protesters.

All of this has received nothing more than tacit endorsement by the current mayor Ted Wheeler. While he likes
to style himself as a sort of moral authority capable of preaching to the public about the virtues of non-violence he allows his dogs in the PPB a long leash; however, he is just the latest stooge for the white supremacist capitalist class in a long line of succession.

Portland’s Racism Problem

White supremacy is a structural, systemic and material force; however, there has always been resistance. The history of our society is a dual narrative of the developing technologies of state repression alongside developing human tools of resistance and revolution. As the possibility of total state control is ever increasing, so too is our potential for total freedom. To begin living together beyond the destructive institutions of the state we must address the problems at the roots of our society. Through education and material redistribution we can heal these historical traumas. By developing political and economic autonomy and self-determination for our own federated communities we can ensure that it doesn’t
happen again.

At the state’s founding in 1857 black exclusion laws were written into the constitution that made it illegal for black people to move to Oregon. In the early 1900’s, the city’s beloved Rose Parade started as a KKK rally culminating with a cross burning on Mt. Tabor. Oregon was the state with the most KKK members north of the Mason-Dixie Line for most of the 20th century, with several mayors being open KKK members. One of the major enduring legacies of this racial oppression lies in the system of housing segregation called redlining. Redlining prevented people of color from purchasing housing outside of designated areas. This was made doubly destructive as it coincided with “blight clearance” policies.

Blight clearance was an urban development practice used in cities across the country. Typically, it targeted black communities for wholesale demolition in order to erect
major urban infrastructural projects. It of course was a top down affair that didn’t bother to consult the people living in the communities it was destroying. Highways, sports centers and housing projects across the country were built over the hard made homes and neighborhoods of historic black communities.

The practice began in the 1940’s and was heavily used throughout major U.S. cities until the 1970’s. It also became a popular tactic in French counterinsurgency warfare to maintain their brutal white supremacist colonial empire. The father of modern counterinsurgency doctrine, General David Galula, demolished huge swathes of indigenous Algerian architecture and replaced it with modern french buildings to destroy the connection people had to their homes, community and their identity. Ultimately, in the United States these policies displaced millions of Black people and ruined essential internal economies many relied upon for survival. In Portland, development projects such as the I-5, the Rose Quarter, and the Emanuel Hospital expansion all targeted black communities for wholesale destruction.

The center of Portland’s Black community before being demolished to make way for the Emmanual Hospital expansion. The dome pictured here can now be seen resting top a gazebo in the Dawson Park.
According to Karen Gibson, urban development policies of blight clearance were a major contributing factor to the uprisings of 1967 & 1969. Substandard housing, de facto segregation and continual economic devastation boiled over into major riots in the Albina District in both years. Sparked by police instigation, the rebellion lasted several days, causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage. In the midst militant black youth demanded the removal of the Portland Police and for the independence of Albina from the city of Portland.

The creation of the Portland Black Panther Party by founder Kent Ford later in 1969 marked the beginning of serious organizing efforts against the city’s discriminatory housing and urban development policy, in addition to their serve the people programs, and community self-defense projects.
To roll back the harmful impacts of urban renewal programs, The Portland Black Panther Party did their research. They knew that under federal law new urban renewal programs had to work with community groups to get input and approval before they could receive funding. So they worked hard to organize their community to build its own vision for the neighborhood and to block further development plans from the city.

The work of the Panthers began spreading the idea of neighborhood autonomy and self-determination. For many decades this mentality became the ideological backbone in Portland left politics. It propelled a massive cultural shift from a piney racist backwater to the iconic bastion of PortlandIFA it is today.
Neighborhood Revolution of the Past

The work of the Panthers was instrumental in kick-starting the “neighborhood revolution”. They set an example by creating the language around neighborhood self-determination and showing other groups how to fight urban renewal plans. The neighborhood revolution witnessed the creation of an independent grassroots network of neighborhood associations to resist socially and ecologically destructive development plans.

The movement kicked off in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s and was surprisingly diverse. To prevent the demolition of a beloved grove of trees to make room for the I-205, neighbors in the Maywood Park self-organized and incorporated as a city separate from Portland. Nestled within NE Portland, to this day it still remains independent. Organizations like Waterfront for the People successfully won a campaign to depave and dismantle the massive Harbor Drive highway. This gave us the Waterfront Park which we all now know and love today.

Harbor Drive Highway before being demolished to make way for Waterfront Park.
Squatters in Lair Hill, a small neighborhood south of downtown occupied houses to prevent the wholesale demolition of the area. They refused to leave and demanded the city recognize them as legitimate players and include them in any redevelopment plans. They were successful in delaying the plan long enough for it to be defunded. In the meantime they organized their own community vision for the area that was eventually adopted by the city. In the wake of these efforts, dozens of self-organized grassroots community associations began to form and cultivate their own vision of their neighborhoods.

To avail some of the pressure, the movement was eventually partially co-opted by progressive Mayor Neil Goldschmidt who made Neighborhood Associations an official entity within the city government. Goldshmidt created several agencies that opened up the city of Portland to an unprecedented level of civic inclusion. He founded the Office of Neighborhood Associations which was a well funded city bureau that trained community members in various civic engagement skills. Part of its work was in building community member operated budget advisory committees that oversaw almost every city bureau and agency. According to Charles Abbot,
by 1986, under ONA there were 23 Budget Advisory committees, where citizens mucked around in the everyday business of all the city bureaus…. The BACs were labor intensive and represented the epitome of the City's investment in citizen democracy during this period. As the decades wore on the city of Portland began defunding the program in favor of more closed off managerial style governance.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) phenomena took hold in Portland and most communities around America (*references). Instead of community members working together from a sense of
common collective goals or community vision, the period saw a rise in activists motivated by a sense of entitlement: “I’ve got mine, now pull up the ladder.”

The neighborhood system, established to provide the city with intermediary organizations, suddenly was challenged by outside groups. Conservative lobbies such as the Pacific Legal Foundation and Cascade Policy Institute adopted techniques first developed by progressive organizations, but applied them to protecting individual property rights and limiting Oregon’s land use laws. Even corporations took on the guise of citizen interest groups, forming their own “grassroots” - -or, as pundits referred to them, “Astroturf” organizations such as the Temperate Forest Foundation.

The neighborhood revolution was a groundbreaking moment in shattering the old conservative consensus that dominated city government until the 1970’s. Organizers found ways of communicating their shared social and environmental justice values and organizing society around them. Through relationship building and

Recent anti-quarantine protests were actually astroturf campaigns heavily funded by billionaire interest groups such as the Koch Foundation
developing long term community institutions they were able to transform the hearts and minds of thousands of Portlanders to see the need for a new way of organizing society. The movement demonstrated the power of grass-roots community institution building and the politics of community autonomy, self-determination and self-governance.

Unfortunately eventually the combination of corporate astro-turf campaigns, defunding and general right drift in american society in the post-Reagan neo-liberal era did a lot to diminish neighborhood associations as a bastion of leftist grassroots political life in Portland; however, Portland’s neighborhood association system remains unique from most others in the United States. It is the only major city that affords neighborhood associations an official role in the city charter and within city government. To this day neighborhood associations continue to have oversight power over development projects in their areas. Although, increasingly they received less and less support from the city government, they remain important community institutions with radical potential.

In 2018 Max Train stabbing survivior Micah Fletcher and a large number of other leftists were elected to the Montavilla Neighborhood Association on platforms of anti-racism, housing justice and neighborhood direct democracy.
From Rojava to PDX

Portland’s historic legacy of popular movements for community autonomy and direct democracy are reflected in the politics of libertrain municipalism and democratic confederalism sometimes called “communalism”. A political practice and perspective that emphasizes directly democratic self-governance. Rather than our top-down system which provides no voice or power for communities to participate, this system gives all power to the people.

Since 2012 a movement in Northern Syria has developed which has put these politics to practice for over 8 years. Millions of people everyday are involved in self-governing their own communities to great success. A living confederation of ethnically diverse self-governing communities exists in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria also known as Rojava. The parallels between this system and Portland’s “Neighborhood Revolution” in realizing the potential of directly democratic self-governance...
are hard to miss.

In Rojava society is self-organized into neighborhood groups known as communes. These communes are never more than a few hundred to a thousand people. They meet on a regular basis to make all of the decisions that impact local life. Usually they have their own sub-committees that meet community needs in everything from community health, housing, food and self-defense. These communes are then linked together through regional cantons. Communes send directly recallable delegates to these cantons, that only act on express orders from their communities, rather than making decisions on their behalf like our current unaccountable representative structure. The Cantons handle larger administrative tasks for the confederation of communes that are explicitly defined by the communities, so that they are not making decisions over the communities they serve. These regional Cantons are then linked together in a similar manner with delegates from each other. In this system there is no need for mayors, governors, presidents, senators or congressmen. Because these hierarchical positions are not necessary for the society to meet its own needs once communities are self-organized on a local level and linked through confederated structures.

Unlike anarchism or communism this approach does not see the wholesale revolutionary overthrow of the state as possible or the imposition of a new state as desirable. Instead, it advocates for working towards the political and economic autonomy of communities from the state
and promotes the necessity of community self-defense. It works to center efforts aimed at reinvigoration of civic and political life. As a first priority, we have to organize our communities! Change won’t come from above and freedom can never be given by someone else.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM IN ROJAVA

BASE
Commune
Can include a whole village or from 30 to 400+ households in a street of a city.

2ND LEVEL
Neighbourhood/Villages
People's Council
Comprised of the coordination boards of 7-30 communes, either in urban or in rural areas.

3RD LEVEL
District People's Council
Whole city & surrounding land.
Coordination boards of neighbourhood/villages councils form the district people's council.
Places are reserved for representatives of the organisations which are part of TEV-DEM, such as political parties, social movements and civil society organisations.

4TH LEVEL
People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK)
Made up of representatives of all district councils and of the organisations which are part of TEV-DEM.
Since 2013, MGRK could only meet canton-wide, but there is good co-operation between cantons.

Commissions
- Defence
- Political
- Economics
- Civil Society
- Free Society
- Ideology
- Women's Council
- Justice
- Democracy
- Autonomous Administration
- Legislative Council
- Executive Council
- Municipal Councils

Most of the work of the communes and people's councils is done through the commissions.
There is a separate Women's Council at every level. There are women-only commissions which work together with the general commissions, i.e. economics.

Democratic Federation of Rojava - Northern Syria

A Corporate Watch diagram, based on the work of Ercan Ayboğa in Revolution in Rojava (Pluto Press)
Democratic confederalism argues that underlying every society is a confederated network of interrelated tribal, cultural, subcultural and familial groupings. For states to survive it is essential for these various segments of society to be pulled into a supportive relation to the nation-state rather than maintaining cooperative relation with other elements within the society. And so, integral to the democratic confederalist project is the linking of various self-constituted communities who collaborate together around shared values of social and ecological justice, direct democracy, solidarity economy and gender freedom. While community organization is an essential first step. The politics of communalism sees interventions on a local municipal level as beneficial. It seeks to push for strategic reforms that dismantle the hierarchical structures of local governments in favor of directly democratic community control.
The state begins to weather away when local self-referential communities begin getting self-organized and confederating together. These communities can then take an active part in the self-administration of city bureaus, that once used to make decisions on their behalf, through a process of democratization. For example, the democratization and community control of Prosper Portland, (formerly Portland Development Commision) could mean that communities who were formerly marginalized in the process, now have the power in shaping the development priorities instead of just the capitalist class. This might look like building support for cooperative businesses or community controlled housing, rather than only investing in infrastructure that supports private businesses that exploit communities. It might look like complete community control over city budgets that lead to abolition of the police through cutting their funding and instead using resources for supporting the development of community based conflict resolution and restorative justice structures.

All of these steps are based on the grassroots self-organization of communities who win increasingly direct decision making power over their own lives from hierarchical institutions within the state and capitalism. The Neighborhood Revolution in Portland established legitimate system of neighborhood self-governance. As weak as these institutions have become, it provides both an institutional and historical precedent upon which further demands for directly democratic structures can be built and articulated. Given their many flaws, today’s neighborhood associations, may or may not play a huge part in building
this new movement; however, our first step is the deep self-organization of our own self-referential communities. The history of Portland’s progressive struggle for social change is in fact embedded within the rich tradition of community autonomy.

To build this movement, in any of our given fights and struggles, Portland would do well to focus on articulating demands that can help promote the democratization of hierarchical government structures. Demands that begin giving long-term institutional power and resources to communities we are embedded within. Through withering away of the remnants of the state on a local level, this processes we can build a truly grassroots dual-power, an empowered self-governing populace of hundreds of thousands of people in charge of their own communal destiny and whom can defend themselves against the ongoing destructiveness of the capitalist nation-state.

**What’s Next?**

As has been demonstrated the City of Portland’s autocratic city commission structure enables the white supremacist capitalist class to dominate economic and political life in the city. The problem with this hierarchical state formation has led to generations of culturally genocidal policies directed at black communities. In response, whole neighborhood revolutions have come and gone.

Today we are still dealing with the same underlying issues of hierarchy, white supremacy and capitalist exploitation.
We are at a crossroads, either we have systemic change now or deal with the increasingly destructive consequence of ecological catastrophe and global authoritarianism. The political strategy of communalism provides a unique path forward. But what can we realistically do to put the brakes on this runaway car to the apocalypse? The long-work of true social and political transformation is practiced day by day in building new community institutions and struggling through the hard realities of working together across differences. This only happens when each of us is involved in organizing our communities. We have to make life-long commitments to building the organizations our communities need to overcome the most powerful and destructive capitalist nation-state. Through collaboration we can put the breaks on of this runaway car to the apocalypse and change course to something much more humane.