

# Defending Society Against MAGA Tyranny: A Prospectus for Action

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The mission of the [Labor Network for Sustainability](#) is to be a relentless force for urgent, science-based climate action by building a powerful labor-climate movement to secure an ecologically sustainable and economically just future where everyone can make a living on a living planet.

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# 1. Prologue: Social Self-Defense Has Begun

The resistance to the MAGA juggernaut has already begun at community, city, and state levels.

- The governors of Illinois and Colorado announced a new coalition called Governors Safeguarding Democracy, designed to protect state-level institutions against the threat of authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup> It's reported that more than 20 states are involved.<sup>2</sup>
- Governor Gavin Newsom called a special session of the California legislature to fund the state's civil rights, climate action, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, disaster funding, and protections shielding undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children.<sup>3</sup> It's been referred to as "Trump-proofing" California.
- Less than a week after the election, 100,000 people registered for a call hosted by more than 200 organizations, including the Working Families Party, MoveOn, and Indivisible.<sup>4</sup>
- More than 40,000 people joined a call announcing a new version of the *Indivisible Guide*, which played a crucial role in mobilizing the first Trump Resistance.<sup>5</sup>
- Denver mayor Mike Johnston announced he will encourage people to protest mass immigrant deportations and that he would be willing to go to jail if necessary.<sup>6</sup>
- The Los Angeles city council passed a "sanctuary city" ordinance to bar using local resources to help federal immigration authorities. In emergency resolutions the city's public school system reaffirmed itself as a "sanctuary" for undocumented immigrants and LGBTQ students.<sup>7</sup> Denver, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities have also passed sanctuary ordinances.<sup>8</sup>
- The organizers of the largest one-day demonstration in US history, the 2017 Women's March, along with many other groups such as Planned Parenthood and the ACLU, are

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<sup>1</sup> "Governors Safeguarding Democracy," *GovAct.org*, November 2024. <https://govsfordemocracy.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Tim Dickinson, "The Battle Against Trump 2.0 Begins in the States," *Rolling Stone*, December 17, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Lauren Gambino, "Democratic leaders across US work to lead resistance against Trump's agenda," *The Guardian*,

November 16, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/16/democrats-resistance-trump-agenda>

<sup>4</sup> Sarah D. Wire, "The Donald Trump resistance is ready for when Democrats are done grieving," *USA Today*, November 22, 2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/22/trump-resistance-groups-democrat-movement/76414325007/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Helmore, "Denver Mayor says he will urge protests against Trump's mass deportations," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/23/denver-mayor-protests-against-trump-mass-deportations>

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Debusmann Jr, "Los Angeles declares itself an immigration 'sanctuary,'" *BBC*, November 19, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4gx7rd4nj7o>

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Carrasquillo, "Immigrant rights groups gear up to fight Trump mass deportation plan," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/13/trump-deportation-immigration>

organizing a feminist People's March for January 18, shortly before Trump's inauguration.<sup>9</sup>

- Chicago officials have instituted community trainings designed to teach people how to spot and respond to immigration enforcement actions. A local training in mid-November drew nearly 600 people.<sup>10</sup>
- San Diego county supervisors voted to prohibit its sheriff's department from working with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) on the federal agency's enforcement of civil immigration laws, including those that allow for deportations.<sup>11</sup>
- The ACLU laid out a program to help cities and states become a "Firewall for Freedom," blocking federal efforts to access private data, limiting cooperation with federal immigration authorities, banning federalization of state National Guard units, and funding abortion care and travel to get it.<sup>12</sup>
- The watchdog nonprofit the Congressional Integrity Project initiated a "Civic Defense Project" as a rapid response "war room" to debunk baseless attacks and defend those unfairly targeted.

Some predict this resistance will fizzle. Others expect it to burgeon. Neither of these predictions can be counted on. What happens with the resistance to the MAGA juggernaut will depend on what people decide to do and whether they create means for action that can accomplish their ends. The purpose of this Prospectus is to contribute to the search for those means of action.

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<sup>9</sup> Mimi Montgomery, "Women's March plans to protest Trump's second presidency in D.C.," *Axios*, November 8, 2024. <https://www.axios.com/local/washington-dc/2024/11/08/womens-march-protest-dc-trump-2024>

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Leingang, "Sanctuary cities respond to Trump deportation plans: 'We're preparing to defend our communities,'" *The Guardian*, November 29, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/29/trump-mass-deportation-plan-cities>

<sup>11</sup> "San Diego sheriff says she won't honor county's 'sanctuary' immigration policy," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/11/san-diego-sanctuary-immigration-deportation-policy>

<sup>12</sup> Anna Kutz, "ACLU: Officials should enact law 'firewall' ahead of Trump 2nd term," *News Nation*, December 13, 2024. [ACLU: Officials should enact &apos](https://www.news-nation.com/news/aclu-officials-should-enact-law-firewall-ahead-of-trump-2nd-term/)

## 2. Introduction: What Is Social Self-Defense?

Donald Trump and his MAGA supporters will soon control the presidency, the Congress, the administrative agencies of government, the Supreme Court, and the U.S. military, intelligence, and security apparatus. He will be able to call on support from a wide swath of the public and from a cadre of armed vigilantes and groups organized for violence and intimidation. He dominates much of the media and is in a position to intimidate much of the rest. He has the support of a large sector of corporations and the wealthy. He has a demonstrated willingness and ability to use not just the legal instruments of government but also violence and intimidation, criminal methods, and coups. The official opposition to him within the electoral arena is in many cases weak, feckless, and discredited. So how is it possible that his domination can ever be overcome? This prospectus tries to answer that question.

As we saw in the Prologue, there is a movement emerging in response to the MAGA threat. But is it even possible for this emerging movement to develop the power it will need to counter a Trump tyranny?

Gandhi once wrote, “Even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled.” A Trump tyranny will not be able to continue without the support and acquiescence of those whose lives and future it is destroying. It will only be able to pursue its destructive course if they enable or acquiesce in it. A movement can overcome the most powerful regime if it can withdraw that cooperation.

But how can that power be concretely realized? There are several ways that resistance to Trump’s MAGA regime can exercise significant power:

- *Constituent power*: the ability of a mobilized electorate to influence leaders whose own power depends on election.
- *Protest power*: the ability of masses of people to demonstrate the large numbers and willingness to act of those who share their views.
- *Disruptive power*: the ability to exact costs on powerful institutions by disrupting their functioning through civil disobedience, strikes, and other forms of direct action.
- *Social strikes*: the mobilization of an entire society to withdraw support from a regime in order to bring it to an end through a nonviolent uprising or “people power.”

There are no guarantees that such power can be mobilized in a way that will contain the Trumpian onslaught, let alone bring it to an end. Trump and his coterie appear to be committed to permanent rule by their followers and their ideology. To accomplish that they need to destroy all possible barriers to their domination. They must break down the institutions of democracy that might stand in their way, for example by restricting the right to vote. They need to eviscerate the institutions of law, medicine, civil service, journalism, and other relatively independent bases of potential opposition. They have to prevent economic actors, including corporations and unions, from pursuing their own self-interest rather than conforming to the regime’s demands.

They need to intimidate and silence those who might expose their lies and abuses. They must demolish political obstacles, not only from within the Democratic Party, but within the Republican Party as well. They need to paralyze the population with fear and entice it with the promise of a better life, or at least with bread and circuses.

While this program for MAGA domination promises enormous power, it also presents enormous risks to its perpetrators. By making almost every individual and constituency a potential victim of its onslaught, it is also likely to generate a vast, diverse, and potentially unified opposition. Its program is an attack not just on one or another group, but on society as a whole – on the very practices and relationships that allow us to live together in a peaceful and constructive way. They are undermining the foundations of a free and ordered society. They are dismantling the basic practices that make life something other than a war of all against all. And they are hell-bent on destroying the natural conditions on which our life on earth depends.

The MAGA regime threatens immigrants, African Americans, Muslims, workers, women, children, the elderly, the disabled, LGBTQ+ people, all who depend on government for their health and wellbeing, and the environment on which we all depend for our very existence. Indeed, it threatens all that holds us together as a society. The resistance to that onslaught is therefore not just the defense of one or another group, but a defense of society, indeed of the very possibility of society. We the people – society — need to defend ourselves against this threat and bring it to an end. We need what resisters to authoritarian regimes elsewhere have called “Social Self-Defense.”

The term “Social Self-Defense” is borrowed from the struggle against the authoritarian regime in Poland forty years ago. In the midst of harsh repression, Polish activists formed a loose network to provide financial, legal, medical, and other help to people who had been persecuted by the police or unjustly dismissed from their work. Calling themselves the Committee for Social Self-Defense (KOR), they aimed to “fight political, religious and ideological persecution”; to “oppose breaches of the law”; to “provide help for the persecuted”; to “safeguard civil liberties”; and to defend “human and civil rights.” KOR organized free trade unions to defend the rights of workers and citizens. Its members, who insisted on operating openly in public, were soon blacklisted, beaten, and imprisoned. They nonetheless persisted, and nurtured many of the networks, strategies, and ideas that came to fruition in Solidarity – and ultimately in the dissolution of repressive regimes in Poland and many other countries.

Social Self-Defense is the protection of that which makes our life together on earth possible. It includes the protection of the human rights of all people; protection of the conditions of our earth and its climate that make our life possible; the constitutional principle that government must be accountable to law; and global cooperation to provide a secure future for people and planet. In the face of MAGA assault, protecting individuals, groups, and society as a whole go hand in hand. The attacks on individuals and groups are a threat not only to those directly targeted, but to our ability to live together in our communities, our country, and our world. It is a threat to all of us as members of society. Protecting those specific constituencies who are most threatened is essential for protecting our common interests as people. Social Self-Defense means defending those who are threatened as a way both to defend them from injustice and to defend our common

interest as people – as members of society. Social Self-Defense means we’ve got each other’s backs.

Historians emphasize that there were great political divisions among the KOR activists who first developed the idea of Social Self-Defense. But they were able to act together around the agenda of resisting the Polish regime’s attacks on workers and society as a whole. The individuals and groups who oppose the Trump agenda are as diverse as the targets that agenda threatens. Trump and his supporters have the potential capacity to play them off against each other and to make deals with them one by one. There will be enormous pressures on advocacy organizations, movements, parties, and even activists themselves to sell each other out.

Social Self-Defense is a means to unify ourselves around mutual aid and around our common interests. It defines Trumpism not only as a series of separate threats to different sectors, constituencies, and policy agendas, but also as a unified – and therefore unifying — common threat. It allows us to use each action and campaign against one or another Trumpite abuse as a way to strike a blow against the MAGA project as a whole. Social Self-Defense does not annul but does transcend the rivalries of Democrats vs. Republicans and of Left vs. Right. It is a frame that can help unify those who should be acting in common to overcome the MAGA juggernaut. It thereby provides a basis for solidarity.

This prospectus draws on a range of historical experiences to explore possible modes of action for overcoming the MAGA assault on society – ways of implementing Social Self-Defense:

1. The Prologue, *Social Self-Defense Has Begun*, describes the initial stages of Social Self-Defense in the MAGA era.
2. This Introduction, *What is Social Self-Defense?*, presents an overview of Social Self-Defense against the coming Trump autocracy.
3. *What We Must Prepare For* describes some unpredictable but threatening possibilities for Trump’s rule.
4. *Social Self-Defense in the First Trump Regime* recounts the history of the first Trump Resistance and draws some positive and negative lessons for the future.
5. *Strategy for Social Self-Defense* lays out a strategic assessment and strategic guidelines for resisting and overcoming MAGA.
6. *Electoral Opposition* analyzes the opportunities for utilizing the remaining institutions of democracy for Social Self-Defense.
7. *Non-Electoral Opposition* explores the potentials for an opposition based in civil society that goes beyond the limited and sometimes ineffectual opposition that is likely to be provided in the electoral arena.
8. *The Social Strike* examines the role of and possibilities for civil resistance through “people power” to MAGA coups and other direct threats to democracy.
9. *A Constructive Program for Social Self-Defense* suggests the role that the Green New Deal from Below and other constructive programs at the grassroots can play in building Social Self-Defense and providing inspiration for defeating tyranny through social transformation.
10. *What Social Self-Defense Is Defending* lays out the fundamental principles that must be defended if our life together is to be anything but nasty, brutish, and short.



The future course of the MAGA juggernaut and the response to it are highly unpredictable. Strategies to address it must evolve rapidly to meet changing realities. They will be the work of many hands. This prospectus offers gleanings from historical experience that may be helpful for people doing that work.

### 3. What We Must Prepare For

It is impossible to know whether the Trump regime will rapidly self-destruct; successfully impose a reign of terror that dominates the U.S. for years or decades to come; or deadlock indefinitely with anti-MAGA forces. In the best case, we will face an exaggerated version of the first Trump administration combined with the broad right-wing program represented by *Project 2025*. In the worst case, we will face a violent full-scale fascist assault on every aspect of American life. We need to be prepared for either or for something in-between – and for how to survive and overcome them.

#### Unknowns: Known and Unknown

Trump will be inaugurated into a world order in polycrisis. Unipolar US hegemony has been replaced by multiplying wars, the rise of Great Power conflict, and the decline of international cooperation inside and outside the UN. The polycrisis has also been marked by fragmentation of the global economy and Great Power struggle to dominate global economic networks. International climate protection has become a transparent sham, and major political forces, including Trump himself, deny the reality of climate change. The remaining institutions of democratic rule have been shredded by a transition to transparent plutocracy on the one hand and the rise of movements, parties, and national leaders who resemble the classic fascists of a century ago – similarly the product of burgeoning global disorder. The probable course and effects of Trump and of MAGA must be considered in the light of the polycrisis.<sup>13</sup>

The past dozen years have witnessed the rise of movements in many of countries that resemble the fascism of 1920-1945. They manifest smashing of democratic institutions, contempt for constitutions and laws, utilization of violence for political purposes, scapegoating of racial, ethnic, gender, political, and other minorities, hostility to transnational cooperation and “globalism,” authoritarian dictatorship, and a variety of related characteristics. To include the many manifestations of this phenomenon, rather than exclusively those who proclaim themselves fascists, they may well be characterized as the new “para-fascists.” Donald Trump is a paragon of this new para-fascism. His rise to power has coincided with that of para-fascists around the world. He admires and imitates them, and his behavior in office may in many ways resemble theirs.

Notwithstanding his claims to fix the problems people are facing, Trump in power will only aggravate them. The rubbing of safeguards provided by democratic governance will amplify irrational policymaking and exacerbate popular feelings of powerlessness and alienation. Outlandish increases in military spending, designed to implement the fantasy of renewed US global domination, will lead instead to ruinous nuclear and conventional arms races. Trump’s style of provocation, deliberate unpredictability, bullying, and unrestrained folly will lead to intensified conflict, strange shifts in alliances, deliberately aggravated chaos, and wars. His

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<sup>13</sup> For further analysis of Trump and the polycrisis, see Jeremy Brecher, “Trump, Trumpism, and the Polycrisis,” *Labor Network for Sustainability*, November 23, 2024. <https://www.labor4sustainability.org/strike/trump-trumpism-and-the-polycrisis/>

energy policies will put climate catastrophe on steroids. This exacerbated polycrisis will produce a self-amplifying feedback loop that will increase the fear and anger that are prime sources – and prime resources -- of Trumpism.

Trump's behavior is consistently inconsistent. It is impulsive, disruptive, shameless, perfidious, and undeterred by predictably disastrous consequences. Trump's actions, far from achieving their purported objectives, will only compound the chaos of the polycrisis. Conversely, the polycrisis will only compound the irrationality, self-contradiction, and foolishness of Trump's actions. Trump may propose, but the polycrisis will dispose.

We simply can't know at this point what will be the balance between extravagant, flamboyant Trump gestures vs. the calculated, steadfast pursuit of the *Project 2025* program, largely centered in Congress.

The common assertion that the second Trump regime has been well planned and will be guided by experienced experts and executed has been made a mockery of long before inauguration day. As Karl Rove (of all people) put it in *The Wall Street Journal*, "Inadequate vetting, impatience, disregard for qualifications and a thirst for revenge have created chaos and controversy for Mr. Trump before he's even in office. The price for all this will be missed opportunities to shore up popular support for the incoming president."<sup>14</sup>

Fascist regimes historically have been marked by radically shifting social bases rather than stable interests. Their policies and actions gyrate opportunistically to court social sectors whose support they can recruit at least momentarily. Trump's whole political career illustrates this tendency. This unpredictability is aggravated by Trump's personal opportunism and erratically shifting passions and attention. In assembling his cabinet and other top officials, Trump has surrounded himself with yes-men and yes-women who guarantee folly.

A good deal of post-election commentary has aimed to determine why the electorate voted for Trump. Here, too, uncertainty reigns. Specific factors often listed include inflation, Democrats abandoning the working class, racism, sexism, generalized fear of immigration and other perceived threats, many of them rooted in the polycrisis, or simply gullibility to the Trumpian Big Lie. While all of these have some credibility, in a time of swirling emotions it may well be impossible to provide a valid explanation of the vote as a whole, let alone what it portends for elections in the future. But a crucial reality is highlighted by a post-election Reuters/Ipsos poll in mid-December: Barely 40 percent of Americans said their opinion of president-elect Trump was favorable. 55 percent stated that their opinion of him was unfavorable.<sup>15</sup> That indicates a great vulnerability in the Trump regime if its opponents are able to take advantage of his weaknesses. Trump's mental and physical health, such as they are, are likely to deteriorate further over the course of his term of office. There is a Constitutional process for removing incapacitated presidents from office, but such a scenario is hardly likely to be voluntarily accepted by Trump

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Rove, "Trump Sends Clowns to Cabinet Confirmation Circus," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 2024. [https://www.wsj.com/opinion/trump-sends-clowns-to-confirmation-circus-mishandled-nominations-gaetz-hegseth-gabbard-not-his-only-mistakes-c43df814?mod=hp\\_opin\\_pos\\_0](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/trump-sends-clowns-to-confirmation-circus-mishandled-nominations-gaetz-hegseth-gabbard-not-his-only-mistakes-c43df814?mod=hp_opin_pos_0)

<sup>15</sup> Tara Suter, "Less than half of Americans say opinion of Trump is favorable: Poll," *The Hill*, December 17, 2024. [Less than half of Americans say opinion of Trump is favorable: Poll](#)

or imposed against his will by his coterie as long as he is conscious. Were he replaced by J.D. Vance, unpredictability would only increase.

These known unknowns are likely to be aggravated by a plethora of unknown unknowns. Strategic assessment of the coming MAGA era must be made within this overall context of uncertainty.

## Expectables

Within the context of the larger unknowns, some things are highly probable. The election of Donald Trump will usher in a period of chaos, impoverishment, cruelty, and war. MAGA will attempt to intimidate and silence all who attempt to hold Trump and Trumpism accountable for the horrors they bring about. Like other efforts to impose tyranny, it will attempt to eliminate all potential barriers to the policies and whims of Trump and his followers.

We can reasonably expect that Donald Trump will continue to be a self-aggrandizing person pursuing his own wealth and power. We know that the Trump administration will continue to be filled with people pursuing their personal interests and those of a mélange of political cliques, corporations, industries, and foreign countries. Trumpism also incorporates a broader rightwing vision of restructuring the institutions of American society to eliminate all barriers to the self-aggrandizement of the rich and powerful. When Trump feels vulnerable, we can count on him to resort to “alarms and diversions” intended to distract from any tendency of the people to awaken to reality – witness, his ludicrous claim that Haitian immigrants in Springfield were eating their neighbor’s dogs and cats.

Based on the statements and records of Trump and those around him, we can expect four main foci of MAGA action: attacks on anything that might potentially limit their power; scapegoating and oppression of stigmatized groups; redistribution of wealth upward; and attacks on the world and its peoples, ostensibly designed to increase American wealth and power, but often in fact aiming to aggrandize Trump’s ego and political support and to create wealth for a favored few.

## Attacks on barriers to MAGA power

- *Democratic institutions* are likely to be under continuous attack in what will amount to a “creeping coup.” The plans for crippling and even dismantling all limits on presidential power have been laid out in detail in *The 2025 Project*, which Princeton professor Kim Lane Scheppele described as a blueprint for autocracy. “It’s a direct copy of the plan that Viktor Orban used to take over the Hungarian government in 2010.” It includes placing all independent government agencies, including the FBI and Department of Justice, under direct presidential control; purging government employees considered “disloyal” to the

president; and deploying the military against American citizens under the Insurrection Act.<sup>16</sup>

- *Republicans*, especially in the US Senate, have been one of the first targets of the incoming Trump administration. The unsuccessful attempt to appoint Matt Gaetz – scourge of Republican Senators – as Attorney General illustrates Trump’s preoccupation with bringing Republicans to heel, as well as their intermittent resistance to his doing so.
- *Congress*, as a Constitutionally mandated “check” on presidential power, is already a prime target, as indicated by Trump’s demand that cabinet appointments not be subject to Senatorial “advise and consent” or even subject to FBI background checks. There has been some initial effort to preserve some of the institutional prerogatives of Congress, indicated by the pushback against a few of Trump’s nominations; this is likely to be a continuing arena of contestation throughout the Trump regime.
- *The military* also is emerging as a prime Trump target, as indicated by his militarily-ludicrous appointment of a totally unqualified, virulent critic of the top brass as Secretary of Defense and the threat to fire and even court-martial top generals. (It is an intriguing historical parallel that Trump-foreshadowing Sen. Joseph McCarthy also made the US Army one of his leading targets.)
- *Civil servants and other government employees* have been identified as a primary target. *Project 2025* proposed to make thousands of civil servants subject to firing without just cause by the president. Trump nominees have threatened to fire as many as one-third of federal employees.
- *Organized labor* is a prime target for much of Trump World. Elon Musk is suing to have the National Labor Relations Act, the foundation of American labor law, declared unconstitutional. The *2025 Project* includes numerous proposals to weaken unions and make them easy prey for employers who wish to gut or eliminate them. Some conflict may ensue around these objectives, since organized workers have means of power rooted in their workplace organizations and Trump feels some need to curry favor with some labor leaders, as indicated by his designation of Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer as Secretary of Labor, in part on the recommendation of Teamsters’ president Sean O’Brien.
- *Science*, and rationality more broadly, has been and is likely to remain a prime target. The appointment of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and other advocates of bizarre anti-scientific doctrines and practices may seem merely ridiculous, but in fact a belief in science and reason is one of the greatest barriers to MAGA’s ultimate power. Flouting science, reason, and reality is likely to produce implausible weapons systems that are promoted as means of global domination but in fact will have as their primary achievement the enrichment of Trump’s cronies. Scientifically invalid responses to diseases may cause large numbers of deaths.
- *Limits on violence* have been a specific Trump target. Trump’s pledge to pardon the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionist criminals, his celebration of vigilante violence, and his appointments for Attorney General and FBI director give little indication that there will

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, “This Is What You Get When Fear Mixes With Money,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2024. [https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/10/opinion/trump-donors-project-2025.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.jU0.T48U.XULEfvvhlOeN&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&ugrp=u&sgrp=c-cb](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/10/opinion/trump-donors-project-2025.html?unlocked_article_code=1.jU0.T48U.XULEfvvhlOeN&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&ugrp=u&sgrp=c-cb)

be any attempt to maintain even a limited amount law and order, rather than “law enforcement” to enforce the will of a tyrant.

## Attacks scapegoating stigmatized groups

- Immigrants have been a consistent Trump target since his first rise to prominence. He says he will find and expel the 11 million undocumented immigrants who live in the US. While he says this will apply first to “criminals,” under MAGA doctrine all 11 million people living in the US without legal papers are in effect criminals. The cost and chaos of expelling even a few percent of those 11 million people, and the disruption to the US economy, the food chain, and employers’ profits, will undoubtedly lead to multifaceted conflict around any such policy. But Trump’s commitment to expulsions ensures that an effort will be made to expel tens of thousands if not millions of them.
- *LGBTQ+ people*, and above all transsexuals, have been another prime target. Notwithstanding claims to a religious basis, this is primarily just an appeal to bigotry against a denigrated group.
- *Women* have been a constant and particularly denigrated Trump target. The idea that women have no rights that men are bound to respect has been embodied in the denial of women’s right to control their own bodies, Trump’s flaunting of sexual abuse of women, and his many nominations of sexual abusers to high positions. New embodiments of female de-liberation may well be in the offing.
- *People of color* have been a Trump target from his first foray into the political arena with his false claims against the so-called “Central Park Five” to his asking why the military couldn’t just shoot Black Lives Matter demonstrators in the legs.
- *The Left* – or whatever Trump chooses to characterize as “the Left” – has been a continuous target for his entire political career. Vilification as “Leftists,” vigilante attacks, harassment, persecution, prosecution, and police and military violence are likely to be mobilized to a greater or lesser extent against any Trump opponents. Such actions are already being perpetrated against opponents of Israeli genocide in Palestine; top Trump nominees advocate even more extreme measures.
- *Not-yet-identified scapegoats* will predictably become the targets of future Trump assaults.

## Redistribution upward

- *Massive tax cuts for the wealthy* are likely to be among Trump’s first priorities, and they are likely to meet little resistance even from purportedly conservative Republican “budget hawks” in Congress.
- *Deregulation* will enrich the haves and impoverish the have-nots, as well as fomenting market chaos.
- *Government agencies and services*, ranging from the Weather Bureau’s forecasts, to public health measures like vaccinations, to provision of education, food, housing, healthcare, and many others have been singled out for cutting or elimination by *Project 2025* and Trump appointees, and are likely to also be targets for Congressional action.

- *Gutting of poverty reduction and healthcare programs* will lead to sickness and death.
- *Crony capitalism*, oligarchy, and kleptocracy will utilize innumerable opportunities to use autocratic government power to enrich those with access to it.
- *Economic chaos* is likely to result from Trump's incoherent, self-contradictory, and illusion-based economic policies, notably his obsession with tariffs. The result will be impoverishment for working and poor people, plus opportunities for vast kleptocratic enrichment by those close to power.

## War on the world

- *International institutions* that offer some degree, however fragile, of collective security and collective problem-solving are priority targets of Trump's wrath. His regime will attempt the disempower or even destroy the United Nations, the World Court, the International Court of Justice, the international climate protection regime, cooperative international public health efforts, international trade and financial agreements, and similar alleged impediments to "putting America first."
- *Unexpected verbal, economic, and military attacks* are a normal part of Trump's playbook, as his out-of-the-blue attacks on Mexico and Canada illustrate. Their motivation is rarely national wellbeing, but rather proving by intimidation and bullying that he is putting American first and making America great again. They enact short-term political, financial, and ego interests, not long-term national interests. This may be deeply harmful to American imperialism in the long run, but that is unlikely to deter them.
- *Weird shifts of alliances* are another Trump likelihood. His "tilt" away from NATO and the EU and toward Russia, and his support for territorial concessions to Russia by Ukraine, indicate the probable unreliability and perfidy of his international alignments.
- *Colossal military spending* is likely to be high on both the Trump and the Congressional Republican agendas. These are likely to include new weapons systems based on imaginary fantasies of global military domination. Far from establishing global US domination, they are likely instead to provoke unlimited arms races. Whatever its military futility, this will contribute substantially to the enrichment of military-industrial oligarchs on all sides.
- *Global redistribution upward* will no doubt be a hallmark of the Trump era. Even the very modest programs currently attempting to fight global poverty will be gutted. Perhaps even more seriously, aspects of the global economy that have made it possible for many nations (notably China) to "bootstrap" their way to economic wealth are likely to be undermined on the grounds that such countries are "robbing America."
- *Climate denialism* will continue to be a constant Trumpian theme – and his policies will both gut the modest current efforts to restrain climate destruction and radically expand the extraction and burning of climate-destroying fossil fuels. Escalating climate catastrophe will be the inevitable result.

Of course, what will happen in the MAGA era will be determined not just by what Trump does, but also by what various other actors do. That is crucial but also uncertain. Will lawyers, judges, corporate executives, doctors, civil servants, military brass and soldiers, union members, and

others simply go along with greater or less enthusiasm? Or will they at some point, out of social responsibility or self-interest or both, become impediments to the MAGA juggernaut?

Most important, what will those affected as individuals, as constituencies, and as members of society do -- and when? The key to defeating the MAGA juggernaut is popular mobilization. But when people will become disaffected and what actions they will be willing to take is not predictable. Some estimates are highly optimistic; others stress the fatigue and defeatism of Trump opponents. Strategy must be based on the developing movement of the people; tactics must recognize its real state at any one time while nourishing its future development.

We have no way to know how long it will take to overcome Trump and Trumpism. His regime and its successors could last for decades – consider Orban or Sisi. Alternatively, they could rapidly succumb to popular disenchantment and internal contradictions. While elections two and four years from now provide important milestones, the timeframe for the struggle against Trump will depend primarily on the gradual or rapid development of buyer's remorse – or even a Great Repudiation -- in which the American people decide to act decisively to eliminate him.



## 4. Social Self-Defense in the First Trump Regime

During the first Trump presidency there was an outpouring of resistance to his rule that was unique in U.S. history in the range of issues it addressed, the diverse constituencies it engaged, and the multiple forms of action it exhibited. In some ways it resembles the movements resisting dictators in eastern Europe and Latin America, which encouraged citizens to engage in every kind of resistance action available to them. It was, to borrow a term from the eastern European democracy movements of the 1980s, a form of “social self-defense.”<sup>17</sup>

Because the conditions prevailing in the second Trump regime differ in many ways from the first, the first Trump resistance is not something to be imitated today. But it can provide us with lessons, both positive and negative. And it can provide inspiration that social self-defense can blunt and eventually overcome Trumpian juggernauts.

There are three myths circulating about the resistance to the first Trump regime that are both false and deeply demobilizing.

- Demonstrations, marches, and other big national mobilizations detracted from a focus on local organizing. In reality, big national mobilizations like the Women’s March, the student gun control demonstrations, and Black Lives Matter saw a synergistic interaction between gatherings of millions of people and the formation of tens of thousands of local organizations.
- The resistance movements failed to wield power. In reality, they exercised enormous though often dispersed power through the expansion of participation in electoral politics, the definition of Trump’s policies, and direct actions like the government worker sickouts and the threatened general strike that halted Trump’s efforts to shut down the federal government.
- The resistance movements failed or were ineffective in countering Trump and ending his rule. In reality, they had a great impact on preserving Obamacare and limiting the expulsion of immigrants; containing and eventually dethroning Trump and Trumpism in the 2018 and 2020 elections; and laying the basis for blocking Trump’s attempted coup after his 2020 election defeat.

The Trump resistance had genuine weaknesses from which we need to learn. While it exhibited a great deal of cooperation among different movements and constituencies, it was unable to form a visible, unified opposition that could present a common alternative to Trumpism. Of necessity it initially emerged primarily as a spontaneous response to what people were feeling and the conditions they faced; but it did not develop from a series of spasmodic uprisings to a continuous visible opposition. And it remained primarily an expression of outrage more than a movement based on strategic foresight regarding future possibilities, such as Trump’s impending coup attempt.

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<sup>17</sup> For a fuller account of the first Trump Resistance, with references, see Jeremy Brecher, *Strike! 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Oakland, PM Press, 2020) Chapter 12.

From the day Donald Trump was elected president, millions of people began to resist his agenda. Demonstrations against Trump broke out in U.S. cities; police chiefs, mayors, and governors declared they would not implement his attack on immigrants; thousands signed up to accompany threatened immigrants, religious minorities, and women; and technical workers pledged that they would not build databases to facilitate discrimination and deportation. Discussion of how to resist the Trump regime broke out at dining room tables, in emails among friends, on social media, and in community gatherings. Resistance involved every level of society from grassroots to governors and judges.

These actions and others that followed may well represent the greatest outpouring of civil resistance in U.S. history. They targeted nearly every aspect of Trump's devastating and wide-ranging agenda—and succeeded in blocking much of it. Over the first years of the Trump presidency millions of people engaged in various forms of protest, including the Women's March, the March for Science, the People's Climate March, Black Lives Matter, the Fight for Fifteen, the March for Our Lives, the May Day immigrant rights marches, #MeToo, the red state teacher rebellions, and more. They constituted a mass popular intervention in the political arena.

A poll taken in early 2018 found that one American in five had protested in the streets or participated in a political rally since the start of 2016. The most prominent issues were women's rights, the environment, immigration, LGBT rights, the Affordable Care Act, abortion, police shootings, and gun laws. Fifty-two percent of the participants had rallied for "liberal causes" such as supporting the Affordable Care Act or opposing stricter immigration policies. Twelve percent had attended events to support "conservative positions."

From the day after Trump's inauguration, a public interest group led by social scientists called the Crowd Counting Consortium began collecting data on protests. The consortium estimated that in 2017 protesters numbered between 5.9 million and 9 million and that 89 percent were protesting Trump or his agenda. The largest single-day demonstrations in the first year of Trump's presidency, with tens of thousands joining each, included the airport protests against Trump's proposed immigration ban; the Day Without an Immigrant; the Day Without Women; the March for Science; the March for Truth; the LGBTQ pride marches; protests and rallies in support of the Affordable Care Act; gatherings to oppose white supremacist violence in Charlottesville; and protests against the Republican tax bill. The early months of 2018 saw three mobilizations with well over one million participants each—the second Women's March, the national student walkout on March 14, and the March for Our Lives on March 24. Between 2.5 million and 4 million people participated in 6,056 protests in March 2018 alone.

There was a widespread recognition of commonality among the diverse concerns that animated the Resistance. In the lead-up to Trump's inauguration, prominent environmental, trade union, civil rights, progressive, women's, gay, and other groups initiated a United Resistance Campaign based on a pledge of solidarity and resistance against Trump: "We pledge to stand together in support of racial, social, environmental, and economic justice for all, and against Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, sexism, and all those forces which would tear apart a democracy of, by, and for all the people." Signers pledged to "act together" in solidarity, whether in "the streets," in "the halls of power," or in "communities every day." They concluded, "When they come for one, they come for us all." Groups included CWA, Friends of the Earth,

Greenpeace, Indigenous Environmental Network, MoveOn, NAACP, NARAL, National Domestic Workers Alliance, People's Action, People for the American Way, Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Public Citizen, Sierra Club, and dozens of others.<sup>18</sup>

This tendency toward convergence persisted, and the actions around issues like gun control, abortion, and immigrant rights won wide “crossover” support. Such convergence did not, however, develop into a unified opposition outside the electoral arena. Rather, the elements of the Trump Resistance were rather like “mass strikes” as portrayed by Rosa Luxemburg, in which forms of struggle “all run together and run alongside each other, get in each other’s way, overlap each other; a perpetually moving and changing sea of phenomena.”

The Resistance helped block many Trump initiatives, ranging from the gutting of the Affordable Care Act, to the Muslim Ban, to the building of a wall on the Mexican border. Perhaps its most dramatic success was forcing an end to Trump’s shutdown of the government and using the threat of a general strike to keep the government open. When president Trump refused to sign any appropriations bill that did not fund his proposed Mexican border wall, nine federal agencies were forced to shut down, furloughing 400,000 government workers without pay, forcing 400,000 others deemed “essential” to work without pay, and putting over 500,000 federal contract workers out of work. It was the largest lockout in U.S. history. The shutdown continued for 35 days. Trump and the Republican Congress were forced to reopen the government when TSA screeners stopped showing up for work and air traffic controllers called in sick, closing major airports, and opponents of the shutdown mobilized to occupy airports and congressional offices. As the flight delays spread, President Trump unexpectedly reversed himself and agreed to a Congressional resolution to fund the government for three weeks—without his border wall.

When Trump threatened another shutdown, president of the flight attendants union Sara Nelson announced that her union would demonstrate at major airports around the country on February 16. She hoped that all airline workers and the public would take part. Airline flight attendants announced a new website called “generalstrike2019.org.” Its headline read, “Imagine the Power of Working People Standing Together to Demand That Our Government Work for Us.” It called on all Americans to “join us in protest at our nation’s airports to show what workers united can achieve.” At the last minute Trump backed down and allowed the government to remain open.

The Trump resistance helped expose the illegality, corruption, and antidemocratic intentions of Trump and his allies. It helped show the breadth and continuing power and conviction of those opposing the Trump regime. But it was unable to prevent military aggression, accelerated climate destruction, terrorization of immigrants, erosion of labor rights, and intensified injustice to women, people of color, and other disadvantaged and vulnerable people. It slowed though it did not halt or reverse the erosion of the right to vote and other democratic principles.

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<sup>18</sup> United Resistance Campaign, “Unstoppable Together,” *United Resistance Campaign*, January 2017. <http://www.unstoppabletogether.org> ; Nadia Prupis, “Groups Nationwide Create Campaign of 'United Resistance' to Trump,” *Common Dreams*, January 10, 2017. <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2017/01/10/groups-nationwide-create-campaign-united-resistance-trump>

In the Trump era, direct action and political action often became synergistic. People working inside and outside the system often worked together. The same people might vote one day and participate in a sit-in the next. As the 2018 congressional elections approached, much of the energy of the Trump Resistance flowed into electoral campaigns. That mobilization played a significant role in the election of a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives and the ending of one-party rule. It also contributed to the election of a new breed of Democratic representatives, primarily women and people of color, who viewed popular mobilization outside the conventional political arena as essential to countering the Trump agenda and establishing an alternative one.

According to an article in the *Guardian*, “The single most important player in the midterm elections may well have been the grassroots resistance to Trump.” The paper reported that there had been “more protests over the past two years than during any comparable period in U.S. history.” The Democratic sweep was due to “extraordinary and historic levels of volunteer engagement, for which the resistance can take much of the credit.” The millions who had marched in protest turned to “phone-banking, text-banking, and canvassing door-to-door in record numbers,” generating record voter turnout. “Local resistance groups” had formed “crucial nodes” and created “thousands of pop-up canvassing headquarters in homes and offices”—in what may have been the largest get-out-the-vote operation in U.S. history.

The momentum from the Trump resistance was ultimately successful in defeating him in the 2020 presidential election and, as we will see in “The Non-Electoral Opposition” below, in defeating his subsequent attempted coup.

Of course, today’s conditions are in many ways different from the first Trump regime.

- The polycrisis has deepened, exhibiting unrestrained Great Power conflict, proliferating wars, economic nationalism and trade wars, further gutting of democratic institutions, galloping para-fascism, and burgeoning climate catastrophe.
- It is widely noted that Trump is better prepared for the realities of politics, although his initial post-election behavior would indicate that any learning has been minimal.
- Trumpism has evolved from a generic right-wing program and a bundle of personal hobbyhorses toward a fully para-fascist program.
- There is now a committed, hardened, armed para-fascist movement.
- Trump and the Trumpians have a greater claim on legitimacy because they were legally elected by a majority of the enfranchised electorate.
- There has been a general rightward shift in popular attitudes, with increased sympathy for many of Trump’s themes, particularly anti-immigrant and anti-women sentiments.
- Trump is planning a far more radical attack on all obstacles to autocracy, including Republicans and Congress.
- Trump’s state of mental and physical health make a full term less likely.
- Trump appears even less sane and more out of touch.
- Trump has surrounded himself with an even weirder collection of accomplices.
- Media are more concentrated and more dominated by MAGA supporters.
- Many early accounts suggest that those who oppose Trump, however outraged they may be, are also discouraged about the prospects for action to counter or remove him.

Any strategy for Social Self-Defense will have to take these factors into account.

## 5. Strategy for Social Self-Defense

French Prime Minister George Clemenceau once warned that "generals always prepare to fight the last war, especially if they won it." Conditions in 2025 differ in many ways from those of 2021. Social Self-Defense in the new MAGA era will fail if it is simply a rerun of the first Trump Resistance. Its strategy will have to pay continuous attention to what Trump is doing, how people are reacting, and what opportunities for action those developments open or close.

Trump's action and popular response are highly unpredictable, so his opponent's strategies will have to be highly flexible. Further, Social Self-Defense will unfold in the context of the global polycrisis, which is likely to be marked by "unknown unknowns" like unanticipated wars and climate catastrophes. We can, however, look back at past experiences and see what examples might be worth drawing on and what pitfalls need to be avoided.

The first Trump Resistance was not based on an overall plan or strategy for the anti-MAGA movement as a whole. It largely grew out of diverse people's response to what was happening – their immediate feelings and needs. With benefit of hindsight, we may be able to be more intentional today, but we still must recognize that what arises spontaneously in response to people's lived reality will be critical.

### The Unfolding of Social Self-Defense

It is possible that Trump's actions and the broader MAGA agenda, despite the harm they are doing to individuals, constituencies, and society as a whole, will not provoke sufficient opposition to significantly undermine MAGA power. Induced fear and helplessness, combined with entertaining circuses and the promise of bread "just around the corner," may demobilize even a population being ravaged by Trumpian devastation. Other factors, known and unknown, may further help Trump to perpetuate his rule.

Trump's greatest vulnerability will be the harm he is doing to individuals, groups, the American people, and the global future. The cold reality of harm is the chink in the MAGA armor. In the abyss of Nazi rule, the exiled German writer Bertold Brecht wrote "In Times of Extreme Persecution":

Once you've been beaten  
What will remain?  
Hunger and sleet and  
Driving rain.

“Who’ll point the lesson?  
Just as of old  
Hunger and cold  
Will point the lesson.”<sup>19</sup>

It is up to those harmed by MAGA to create the means for translating the experience of harm to people and society into Social Self-Defense. Defeating Trump requires a shift in power away from him and his supporters to his opponents. That process depends on cumulative disillusion and repudiation. Social Self-Defense can play midwife to that process.

Social Self-Defense is not an organization – it is a set of practices to be engaged in by myriad organizations, hopefully in close cooperation with each other. It can draw on both established and newly emerging organizations, as the first Trump Resistance incorporated thousands of local self-organized groups, newly emerging national networks, and long-established national organizations. Social Self-Defense need not become a single organization or umbrella group. But it requires that issue- and constituency-based groups expand beyond siloed practices to act in concert with each other to resist the Trump agenda.

The success of Social Self-Defense will depend on combining civil resistance in social institutions and the streets with political resistance in the institutions of government. It will take months or years for the Trump regime to eviscerate, coopt, or eliminate the institutions that might resist it. There are still courts, legislatures, local and state governments, legal, educational, labor, media, and other civil society institutions. Social Self-Defense can be pursued in part through supporting and strengthening those institutions willing and able to resist Trumpian tyranny. While there is at present little possibility for an “inside game” that attempts to influence the Trump administration from within, cooperation with anti-Trump politicians and institutional leaders where they exist is essential to the success of Social Self-Defense.

The Trump regime is likely to start with a furious flurry of actions designed to provide red meat to followers and put opponents off-balance. Social Self-Defense will need to respond in ways that make it clear that Trump cannot simply have his way unopposed. Even if his initial moves can’t be halted, it is important to show that they cannot be imposed without opposition. As his intentions are manifested in actions, it is necessary to oppose them and show the harm they are wreaking, both through legislative action where possible and through action in the streets. It is necessary to pressure Democrats to expose and fight MAGA policies and to present an alternative to Trumpism that has wide popular appeal rather than just representing the interests of a different faction of the plutocratic class. Opponents based in civil society outside the electoral system can strengthen their performance of these tasks by drawing together a non-electoral opposition, as discussed in Section 7 below.

MAGA forces will undoubtedly continue and expand their longstanding efforts to cripple opposition in the electoral system through voter suppression, intimidation, gerrymandering, and similar anti-democratic techniques. These efforts will continue to be challenged in the electoral system, in the courts, and by direct action. The success of the two sides will be hanging in the

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<sup>19</sup> Bertold Brecht, “In Times of Extreme Persecution,” in *Poems 1913-1956* (New York: Methuen, 1976).

balance. The result of successful resistance may be a period of dual power, in which Trump remains in office but is unable to implement his agenda because of popular opposition.

In the event that the electoral system is still functioning as more than a rubber stamp for MAGA power, the 2026 elections will provide a major opportunity to end MAGA hegemony, as discussed in Section 6 below. Both direct and electoral action should aim to dramatize the harm MAGA is doing, expose the illusion of its invincibility, and project a positive alternative. The aim is a massive repudiation of Trump and the MAGA agenda. If the Republican Party loses its control of one or both houses of Congress, that will put a powerful brake on the MAGA juggernaut.

Conversely, if the Republican Party remains in control of the presidency, the Supreme Court, and both houses of Congress, it may be well on its way to establishing an authoritarian para-fascist regime led by an autocratic dictator. Under those circumstances, Social Self-Defense will depend primarily on action taken outside the electoral arena.

Sometimes those in power come to be despised by a large proportion of the population, but political repression and the gutting of the institutions of democracy make elections and other normal democratic procedures ineffective as vehicles for change. Under such conditions, people in many parts of the world have turned to mass nonviolent popular uprisings, sometimes referred to as “people power” or “social strikes.” These have removed authoritarian regimes and established democratic governance in such countries as Poland, the Philippines, Serbia, and most recently in South Korea, as discussed in Section 8 below. They represent the ultimate power of Social Self-Defense, with an entire society withdrawing cooperation and support from a regime and making its continued rule impossible. They often grow out of previous forms of Social Self-Defense. The developing resistance to MAGA para-fascism should aim to lay the groundwork for such action should it ultimately become necessary.

Sooner or later replacement of para-fascism by democracy will need to be ratified by free elections.

## Strategic Guidelines

This strategic perspective suggests a number of principles to guide Social Self-Defense against the MAGA juggernaut. The experience of past popular resistance to threats to democracy in the US and worldwide can help enrich those principles. The following guidelines are not offered as rules to be obeyed, but as hypotheses to be debated -- and tested in action.

### Broad strategic perspectives for Social Self-Defense

*Take tactical initiatives within a strategic retreat* We need to accept that Social Self-Defense will not be able to protect every immigrant, ensure a safe abortion for every pregnant woman, or halt the roll-back of all our rights. Unequal power makes it necessary to retreat where the power of the opponent is overwhelming, but still allows engagement where gains are possible. Acts like

taking food to a political prisoner or providing safe abortion pills are humanly productive and worthwhile. They are also exemplary actions that can inspire others because they embody the principle that we help each other and protect each other because we are part of one society and one humanity. And they show it is possible to take an initiative within the context of an overall retreat.

*Coordinate defense, pushback, and rollback.* Social Self-Defense requires coordinating three strategic objectives. First, minimize the damage Trump does to people and planet. Second, terminate the Trump regime ASAP. Third, lay the groundwork for expanding protection of people and planet. These are part of a continuous process: Slow the Trump assault by pushing back; then begin to roll it back; ultimately evacuate it from the stage of history.

*Engage in both a “war of position” and a “war of movement.”* Trump engages in lightning “blitzkrieg” type attacks and maneuvers designed to keep opponents off balance and achieve quick gains. Social Self-Defense must be prepared to deal with such a “war of movement,” both by rapid response measures to protect those endangered and by political jujitsu that reveals such actions as further examples of his depredations. Trump’s mistakes may also create sudden opportunities that should be rapidly taken advantage of. At the same time, we are engaged in a “war of position” designed to slowly but persistently seize new territory by turning the people against Trump and Trumpism, rebuilding the institutional structures of democracy and of society, and ultimately using them to eliminate the MAGA menace.

## Political objectives of Social Self-Defense

*Aim to win the hearts and minds of the American people.* Defeating MAGA requires winning, uniting, and activating the majority. They must be persuaded that Trumpism is bad for them personally; bad for the groups of which they are part; and bad for society as a whole. They must be able to see that better alternatives are possible and that their action can make a difference. Social Self-Defense may at times require actions that are currently unpopular, such as defending the rights of stigmatized groups or opposing criminal wars, but such actions should be conducted in ways that ultimately contribute to winning a majority.

*Reach beyond the initial anti-MAGA base.* For example, the large number of people who voted for Trump in response to inflation and inadequate wages can be appealed to by Fight for Fifteen-style minimum wage campaigns and debt-reduction initiatives. Those suffering denial of health care can be appealed to by programs like Medicare for All.

*Undermine Trump’s wobbly pillars of support.* Although some Trump supporters are motivated by para-fascist views on racism, sexism, and ethnic nationalism, others can be detached from his base. Trump won less than half the popular vote in the 2024 presidential election. His victory depended on contributions from billionaires on whom he may well turn; Republican politicians who hate him and will jump ship if they can do so without being smashed; workers who were protesting inflation, low wages, and poor economic conditions, but who will find things even worse under Trump; men whose real economic and social conditions will not be improved by



Trump; a substantial proportion of women and people of color whose conditions will be sharply deteriorated by the Trump regime; and government employees and military personnel who will be necessary to carry out Trump's policies but who will be severely harmed by them. High profile wealthy and powerful Trump supporters can be subject to exposé, public demonstrations, and demands that they withdraw support. People who supported Trump can be appealed to based on the harm that he is actually doing to them.

*Fight to win social institutions to Social Self-Defense.* To achieve permanent domination, MAGA must take over or eliminate the “secondary institutions” that can stand in its way, such as schools, religious congregations, trade unions, the medical system, and a host of others. These institutions and their networks, loyalties, and solidarities form the potential social base for either para-fascism or for Social Self-Defense. Many will be tempted to temporize with Trump. Most of them, however, will be subject to devastating attacks anyway. Unions, for example, may hope that they can escape Trump's wrath by not threatening his power, but in reality MAGA's goal is to break the power of unions and, if possible, eliminate them altogether. Unions and other institutions need to understand that they have no safety other than to join a broad movement for Social Self-Defense. Activists within those institutions need to persuade them that resistance, and resisting collusion, is their only road to self-preservation.

*Make Trump's actions increasingly ineffective.* Use direct action to block MAGA policies, like sanctuaries for immigrants and trans kids and strikes and slowdowns to block harmful actions the way government workers defeated Trump's government shutdown. Appeal to those who are in a position to impede implementation of Trump's orders.

*Show that Social Self-Defense can provide benefits here and now.* Some people may participate in Social Self-Defense in hopes of realizing goals that may be achieved only in some distant future. But for many others such efforts may seem futile “pie in the sky” unless they can also give people a better life in the here and now. Social Self-Defense needs to use whatever means are available, from local community organizations to city and state government, to provide food, shelter, healthcare, security, climate protection, and other vital necessities. An inspiration for such actions can be the hundreds of initiatives embodied in “The Green New Deal from Below.” Adapting and expanding these can provide an in-the-flesh vision of what Social Self-Defense aims to realize, as described in section 9, “A Constructive Program for Social Self-Defense” below.

## Techniques for Social Self-Defense

*Use “political jujitsu” to turn MAGA's power and aggressions against it.* Repressive action by ruling regimes often backfires to reveal the regime as cruel and illegitimate. Popular movements have often used this dynamic to gain support and counter repression. An example: When New York City police brutally attacked a march by labor and other supporters of the Occupy movement and then arrested those they had attacked, public support for Occupy Wall Street soared and the police became wary of using such tactics. Call it winning by losing.

*Project social self-defense as a benign, pro-social force.* Paint two portraits, one of Social Self-Defense as the party of law, order, and caring; the other of MAGA as the menacing party of chaos and disruption. This is crucial for effective political jujitsu, where each act of repression further undermines the support and legitimacy of those responsible for it. This generally requires a form of disciplined nonviolence in which the protestors present themselves to the public as the upholders of peace, order, and legitimate law and the authorities as out-of-control hooligans attempting to maintain their own power through illegitimate violence. This does not require a commitment to nonviolence as a universal principle, but it does require a commitment on the part of participants not to turn to violence no matter what the provocation. This is sometimes accomplished by a formal agreement by participants in an action to act nonviolently during protest actions. With such a commitment to nonviolence every act of repression and violence by the authorities can be highlighted as oppression, and even members of the public who do not fully support the goals of Social Self-Defense can be mobilized around opposition to its illegitimate repression.

*Make direct action and action inside the electoral system synergistic.* Neither one is likely to bring MAGA down without the other. While there are inevitably tensions among different organizations and strategies, the experience of the first Trump resistance shows that mass direct action can positively influence the political arena and that success of Trump opponents in elections is a crucial means to reduce and eventually overcome the power of Trumpism.

*Cherish small victories.* Every victory is valuable both for what it accomplishes in itself and as a building block for the ultimate defeat of Trumpism. Social Self-Defense can define its own criteria for success. Protecting one immigrant from attack or deportation is a victory. So is exposing one brutal act of repression or securing medical care for one person who has been denied it. The most important criteria for success are the growth of the movement and the expansion of public support.

*Fight stigmatization with inclusion.* MAGA builds power by defining and stigmatizing its opponents. The key to undermining this strategy lies in a visible commitment to protecting the rights of all people. The spirit of inclusion has wide appeal.

*Build unity and avoid splits.* The first Trump Resistance was highly cooperative but never really unified. The Women's March, for example, came to be riven by internal conflict -- eventually resolved through discussion and negotiation.<sup>20</sup> Trump, a master of playing one group off against another, will no doubt try to buy some of us off and drive the rest of us back into our silos. Social Self-Defense needs ways people can act together while agreeing to disagree in other arenas. Those not engaged in factional disputes need to influence those who are to act in ways that are constructive for the movement as a whole. If a further incentive to avoid destructive factionalism is necessary, keep in mind the fact that Communist vs. Social Democratic factionalism paved the way for Hitler.

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<sup>20</sup> For details on splits in the Women's March, see: Julyssa Lopez, "A Timeline of the Women's March Controversy," *Glamour*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.glamour.com/>; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Turning the Women's March into a Mass Movement Was Never Going to Be Simple," *The Nation*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/>

If Trump's election could have a silver lining, it might be the emergence of a Social Self-Defense strong enough not only to defeat Trump but to implement a long-term vision of how to protect and restore our planet and its people.

## 6. Electoral Opposition

Even when, as in Milosevich's Serbia or Bolsonaro's Brazil, democracy has been severely undermined, institutions of representative government can still play a major role in ending a tyranny. While Trump and the Republican party have already restricted voting rights and other democratic practices, the electoral arena remains crucial for Social Self-Defense.

Trump won less than 50% of the popular vote.<sup>21</sup> Republican margins in the House and Senate are extremely narrow. If the electoral system is not further corrupted, a very small shift would swing the House and/or the Senate to Democratic control in 2026 and elect a Democratic president in 2028. A very small swing to the Republicans, conversely, might solidify para-fascist governance for a very long time.

There are serious obstacles to defeating MAGA simply by electoral means. The first is that Trump has already used and will now augment the use of extralegal, violent, unconstitutional means that can't be countered just by voting. That will include further undermining the electoral system itself, repressing opponents, and using all the instruments of an authoritarian, plutocratic government to secure unlimited power.

The second is the inadequacy of the Democratic Party as a vehicle for countering MAGA power. Disillusion with Democrats played a major role in Trump's victory. Corporate and fossil fuel domination of the Democratic Party made it impossible to present a clear alternative to Trumpism that could appeal to the great majority of voters on the basis of their anger at the status quo. These weaknesses of the Democratic Party will facilitate Trump's march to permanent MAGA domination.

Overcoming these obstacles requires a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, the Democrats must be pressured to function as a real opposition party, to fight for Social Self-Defense, as discussed in this chapter. On the other hand, extra-electoral forms of action must help mobilize popular opposition and fight back against MAGA domination, as discussed in the next chapter.

Democratic elected officials retain significant power bases both in Congress and in states and cities. There are 15 states where Democrats control the governorship and both houses of the legislature. These states produce nearly half of the national gross domestic product. As of the 2024 elections, the mayors of 64 of the country's 100 largest cities are affiliated with the [Democratic Party](#), only 24 with the Republican party.<sup>22</sup>

Democratic politicians and elected officials can begin taking the steps that are necessary to resist Trump and defeat MAGA in the electoral arena. For example, they can do what is necessary to mobilize those currently unrepresented in the political system. According to Rev. William Barber, 30 million poor and low-wage people did not vote in 2020 because they said, "nobody

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<sup>21</sup> Domenico Montanaro, "Trump falls just below 50% in popular vote, but gets more than in past elections," *NPR*, December 3, 2024. <https://why.org/articles/2024-presidential-election-popular-vote-trump-kamala-harris/>

<sup>22</sup> Ballotpedia, "Party affiliation of the mayors of the 100 largest cities," *Ballotpedia*, November 2024. [https://ballotpedia.org/Party\\_affiliation\\_of\\_the\\_mayors\\_of\\_the\\_100\\_largest\\_cities](https://ballotpedia.org/Party_affiliation_of_the_mayors_of_the_100_largest_cities)

talked to their issues.” In the 2024 presidential and vice-presidential debates, not one candidate was asked “how would their policies affect the issues of people dying every day from poverty and low wages.” Not one candidate was asked whether they would they raise the minimum wage.

There’s not a battleground state where poor and low-wage people don’t make up more than 40% of the electorate. There’s not a battleground state where if just 10% of poor, low-wage people were to vote around an agenda that they wouldn’t fundamentally shift the outcome of the election.<sup>23</sup>

Democratic politicians and officeholders need to begin right now to highlight such issues. Where mainstream politicians fail to raise such issues in the Trump era, they will have to be raised by direct action highlighting policies and actions that hurt poor and working people – and alternatives that could help them.

Democratic politicians need to help defend society against Trump’s attacks. Although Democrats are in the minority in both houses of Congress, they still have significant powers. They can hold confrontational hearings on appointments, legislation, and executive policy; speak out and campaign around the country against Trump’s actions; in the Senate they can filibuster; if President Trump commits high crimes and misdemeanors that provoke public and congressional outrage they can move to impeach him. They need to use every available power to expose, condemn, slow down, weaken, and to the extent possible, halt Trumpism’s anti-social plans. They need to build a unified force to oppose Trump’s agenda and to hold each other accountable not to sell out.

An obvious objective is to take back the House and/or Senate in 2026. That requires driving down Trump’s public support. Anti-Trump representatives need to show the disastrous effects of Trump policies and expose Trump’s corruption and stupidity.

Some Democrats have already indicated that they are willing to work with Trump; some, like New York mayor Eric Adams, are already doing his bidding. There must be redlines for any such cooperation. There can be no compromise when it comes to human rights, protection of the climate, constitutional limits on the power of government, or global cooperation to protect the human future. Even Trump’s most “progressive” programs are laced with threats to equality for women and minorities, labor rights, and the environment – and so there can be no compromise with them. And any cooperation with Trump’s agenda – or even failure to oppose it – risks legitimating and normalizing his regime and offering him credit for winning bi-partisan cooperation.

Democrat officeholders can also begin laying out attractive alternatives that meet the needs of those to whom Trump appealed but who he is now dissing. Many Democrats have laid out

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<sup>23</sup> John Blake, “This fiery evangelical pastor offers a blueprint for Democrats’ revival in Trump’s second term,” *CNN*, November 24, 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/24/us/reverend-william-barber-democrats-ccc/index.html> ; Poor People’s Campaign, “Waking the Sleeping Giant: Poor and Low-Income Voters in the 2020 Elections,” *Poor People’s Campaign*, October 2021. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/waking-the-sleeping-giant-poor-and-low-income-voters-in-the-2020-elections/>

programs, including but not limited to the Green New Deal, that have wide support, not only within the Democratic Party but even among many people who eventually voted for Trump. Many aspects of these programs can be implemented right now by state and local governments.

What elected representatives do will depend heavily on what the people do. Social Self-Defense needs to define the Trump agenda not as a slight variation on “normal politics” but as an attack on society. We need to use petitions, letters, calls, and social media to urge government officials, the media, and institutional leaders to deny that Trump’s agenda is anything but an attack on human rights, the natural environment, constitutional government, and global survival. We need to protect the protectors, ensuring money and support for those in Congress, local and state government, and the political system more broadly who are demonstrably fighting Trump.

Finally, Democrats who may be tempted to compromise with Trump must be made to realize that they will be risking their own political future to do so. Advocates for Social Self-Defense need to pressure Democrats to find their backbone. For example, they can develop multi-issue ratings of courage vs. cowardice in standing up to Trump – with the obvious implication that money and support is more likely to flow to the resolute than to the wishy-washies.

How can the pressure to make elected officials fight for Social Self-Defense be generated? In the aftermath of Trump’s election in 2016, current and former congressional staff members created *Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda*, adapting the strategy of the Tea Party movement to the Trump Resistance. They called for targeting members of Congress by attending town hall sessions, calling congressional officials, visiting their offices, and showing up at public events. Within two weeks of Trump’s inauguration, more than thirty-eight hundred local groups identifying as “Indivisibles” had formed. These local groups held tens of thousands of actions—playing a major role, for example, in blocking Republican plans to gut the Affordable Care Act.

Shortly after Trump’s election in 2024, the same group issued *Indivisible: A Practical Guide to Democracy on the Brink*. Recognizing differences between the first and second Trump eras, it provides detailed recommendations for resisting the current MAGA onslaught in the electoral arena. The *Indivisible* plan is based on what it calls “constituent power.”

Your electeds care first and foremost about getting reelected and growing their own power. Some of the good ones care about doing good, and some of the bad ones care about doing bad, but regardless, they all know they can’t do anything unless they grow or maintain their base of support to win reelection or win higher office.

Elected representatives care about what makes them look good, responsive, and hardworking to the people of their district. By “making enough of a public ruckus” to endanger their local reputation as an upstanding elected, their constituents can “shift their behavior and/or soften them up” for the next election.

*Indivisible* says that the best vehicle for doing this is a local group, whether or not it is formally affiliated with *Indivisible*. Such groups are rooted in geographic communities - a neighborhood, a town, a congressional district. They are volunteer organizations that include multiple leaders

with different and overlapping roles. They can coordinate with neighboring communities and statewide. *Indivisible* includes detailed guidance for such local groups.

*Indivisible* focuses on undermining Trump’s coalition and building the opposing coalition over the two years leading up to the 2026 elections. Their “playbook” emphasizes three “plays”:

- Say no to Project 2025. Stop what we can and pick strategic fights to drive national backlash to win in 2026.
- Push Democrats in local, city, or state office to block, delay, and challenge MAGA’s attacks – and support them when they do.
- Protect and win elections by defending against election deniers in swing states and turning national backlash into an electoral majority coalition that delivers big wins in 2026.

State elected officials can be pressured to:

- Sign executive orders to protect residents under MAGA attack.
- Form alliances with other states on issues like climate change, data privacy, and healthcare.
- Use their economic leverage by setting procurement and contracting standards that prioritize civil rights, environmental responsibility, and fair labor practices, and by refusing to do business with companies that don’t uphold progressive values.
- File lawsuits against harmful federal actions.
- Decline to implement federal policies.
- Implement sanctuary policies for out-of-state visitors.
- Create legal funds to protect residents.
- Implement policies that make their state a thriving, healthy, and desirable place to live.

Similarly, city elected officials can be pressured to:

- Adopt sanctuary policies.
- Expand protections for vulnerable communities through policies and ordinances that protect housing rights, fund community health programs, and ensure that LGBTQ+ residents feel safe and supported.
- Invest in local environmental and climate policies like banning single-use plastics, promoting renewable energy, and creating green infrastructure projects.
- Partner with state and regional governments and other allies on issues like transportation, affordable housing, and voting rights.
- Make your city a thriving, healthy, and desirable place to live.

Republican state officials and federal officials may care more about Trump’s support than the wishes of their own constituents. But either to change them or to remove them they must be forced to answer for every single action the Trump administration takes that hurts their state and its people.

*Indivisible* recognizes the threat of what it calls “authoritarian creep.” Fighting this requires building volunteer local infrastructure for mutual aid and support for people under threat. This could include working with immigrant rights groups on deportation defense, raising money for, or volunteering with, local groups helping patients access abortions, or supporting a local teachers union in their fight against a new draconian education policy.

*Indivisible* observes that Trump has promised to prosecute his political opponents, weaponize the justice system, and unleash hell on his preferred targets, from immigrants to people of color to racial justice advocates to Muslims to people with disabilities to trans kids. It also notes the threats to shut down the pro-democracy side’s activists, institutions, and bases of power. Its prescriptions for dealing with these threats are more general than its concrete and well thought out approach to the electoral arena. It primarily points to lessons from global historical fights against fascism:

- Build broad coalitions
- Wage nonviolence, such as protests and civil disobedience
- Develop independent media and communications
- Strengthen community ties
- Document and publicize human rights violations

The next two chapters will discuss how Social Self-Defense can address both creeping and galloping authoritarianism when they cannot be stopped from within the electoral arena alone.



## 7. Non-Electoral Opposition

If the Democratic Party is too controlled by corporate and fossil fuel interests and American democracy is too eroded to effectively counter impending para-fascism, is Social-Self Defense powerless? Or are there means of action outside representative political institutions that can undermine the power of the Trump juggernaut?

As we saw in section 4, action outside the electoral system was often effective in limiting the damage of the first Trump regime. For example, mass protest helped preserve the Affordable Care Act. Direct action helped defeat Trump's Muslim Ban and his proposed wall on the Mexican border. An epidemic of "blue flu" among government employees and the threat of a general strike forced an end to one federal government shutdown and prevented another. The effects of the extra-electoral Trump Resistance have been widely credited with aiding Republican electoral defeats in 2016 and 2020.

These efforts constituted in effect a "non-electoral opposition." Indeed, movements based on non-violent direct action, like the labor movement in the 1930s and the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements of the 1960s, have often played much of the role of an "opposition party" in America.

A non-electoral opposition is a convergence of social movements that performs some of the classic functions of an opposition party without the goal of taking power in government. It draws diverse constituencies out of their silos to combine their power but uses direct action rather than electoral politics as its means to exercise that power. Like a political party, it can bring together different constituencies around common interests, expose existing leaders and institutions, and present alternatives.

Forty years ago, Poland's independent opposition -- contrasting with the sham opposition in the parliament -- played a critical role in the upheavals that led to the rise of Solidarity and the downfall of authoritarian regimes throughout Eastern Europe. The Polish independent opposition was developed to realize Social Self-Defense when the officially recognized parties failed to actually oppose the ruling authoritarian regime and when the regime exercised repressive powers that prevented genuine independent opposition within the purportedly representative system.

The formation of such a political force organized around a popular program to be implemented by mass direct action was very much the conception on which Martin Luther King, Jr. was developing the original Poor People's Campaign in 1968. The campaign used an encampment in Washington, DC, as the bastion for an ongoing interracial movement to challenge the distribution of power in America. Its "economic bill of rights" called for full employment, a guaranteed annual income, unemployment insurance, a higher minimum wage, low-income housing, and expanded education, all to be paid for by ending the war in Vietnam. The campaign won support from American Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and poor white communities; King's engagement in the Memphis sanitation workers strike was part of the coalition-building effort for the campaign. In a 1968 speech to the Poor People's Campaign King called for "opening of a bloodless war to final victory over racism and poverty." The campaign was cut short by King's assassination.

## Non-Electoral Opposition: A Successful American Example

What might a non-electoral opposition that draws together a wide coalition for Social Self-Defense by using direct action look like in Trump's America? Maybe a bit like North Carolina's Forward Together.

The story of what came to be called Forward Together is told by William Barber II, minister and leader of the North Carolina NAACP.<sup>24</sup> In 2007 the North Carolina NAACP convened a People's Assembly with what it called the "fourteen justice tribes in North Carolina." The assembly, held on Jones Street outside the statehouse, unanimously adopted a fourteen-point agenda representing the concerns of those fourteen tribes. It outlined eighty-one action steps. The People's Assembly became an annual event. The movement it spawned came to be known as Historic Thousands on Jones Street or HKonJ.

HKonJ chose as one of its first actions support of workers at the Smithfield hog-butcherer plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, who had struggled for a decade to win a union. The coalition decided to "change the narrative" by "making the workers' struggle a moral cause for our whole coalition." Barber wrote that conversations about "fair wages" or "civil rights" could not be reduced to the self-interest of separate groups: "We were engaged together in a conversation about what kind of economy builds up the common good." The coalition organized clergy and community leaders to make public statements at grocery stores across the state, asking them to stop carrying Smithfield meats. After months of struggle, Smithfield recognized the union and agreed to a contract. The HKonJ coalition's relationship to the state's beleaguered unions was solidified as well.

More direct political action followed. A right-wing takeover of the Wake County school board gutted guidelines promoting racial diversity and began to undermine public education. HKonJ held forums to alert the public to what the board was up to and spoke at school board meetings. "Our job was to shift the public conversation," Barber wrote.

In response, the board banned protesters from its meetings. Barber says, "Like Bull Connor in Birmingham, they set the perfect stage for civil disobedience." Coalition members were repeatedly arrested for trying to enter the meetings. At the same time, they mobilized voters for the next election. A year later every member of the school board who had tried to re-segregate the schools was voted out, and the right-wing candidate for state superintendent of schools was defeated.

HKonJ's research indicated that the biggest reason low-income people didn't vote was because they couldn't leave their jobs to do so. In 2007 the coalition pressured the Democratic legislature and governor to pass a voting rights law to allow early voting and same-day registration. Then it mobilized its partner organizations for a voter registration and education campaign that added at

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<sup>24</sup> Rev. William Barber II, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

least 185,000 new voters in the state. In 2008, all fifteen of North Carolina's electoral college votes went to Barack Obama.

In the 2012 election a well-organized right-wing backlash took control of the North Carolina legislature and elected Pat McCrory governor. It passed new restrictions on voting rights, gay rights, abortion rights, environmental protection, unemployment compensation, medical care, and education, as well as other elements of the right-wing agenda. It passed a redistricting plan so gerrymandered that it was eventually blocked by federal courts as "unjustifiably discriminating."

A group of college students with duct tape over their mouths filled the legislature's observation area to protest voting rights restrictions and were arrested. HKonJ decided to follow suit. On Monday, April 29, 2013, seventeen protesters were arrested in the legislative gallery. The movement, soon to be rechristened Forward Together, decided to return in a week. Thus began North Carolina's famous Moral Mondays. Over the next three months nearly a thousand protesters were arrested at the statehouse. Eighty thousand people joined the movement's culminating demonstration. Barber called it a "popular uprising." Many out-of-state organizations boycotted North Carolina; the NCAA banned holding national championships there.

As the Moral Mondays movement grew, Governor McCrory's poll numbers fell. Before the 2016 election, Republicans tried to divide the movement, targeting black Christians in particular, through the so-called "bathroom bill" requiring that people use public restrooms matching their "biological gender"—a clear appeal to anti-trans bigotry. Barber and other ministers spoke at church meetings throughout North Carolina, saying that "the fundamental principle of equal protection under the law" was a "constitutional and moral principle" that had to be upheld. They pointed out that the bill wasn't about bathrooms at all. In fact, it "attempted to codify discrimination, denied all North Carolinians the right to challenge employment discrimination in state court, and overrode the victories of municipal living-wage campaigns." Once they understood what the bill really did, "workers stood with preachers and LGBTQ activists stood with the business community to oppose the bill." At the next election McCrory became the first governor in North Carolina history to lose a bid for reelection.

Forward Together eventually became a coalition of 145 organizations representing Christians, Muslims, Jews, nonbelievers, blacks, Latinos, poor whites, unionists, civil rights activists, feminists and environmentalists, doctors and the uninsured, and businesspeople and the unemployed. It represented gay and straight, young and old, and documented and undocumented. This unity was based on a belief that "none of us would be free until all of us were free." One principle that shaped Forward Together's actions was simply "showing up to support any group in the state that was standing for justice." In 2013, Forward Together supported the fight of Planned Parenthood and NARAL against new abortion restrictions. A few years later a hundred people filled a Durham church to demonstrate solidarity with a Durham-raised asylum seeker fighting deportation.

Forward Together sought "powerful images of solidarity" manifested in "daily acts of justice and community building." Barber writes that "our most directly affected members would always

speak to the issue closest to their own hearts. But they would never speak alone.” The movement existed so preachers can “fight for fifteen” and workers can say “black lives matter”; so a white woman can “stand with her black sister for voting rights”; so a black man can “stand for a woman’s right to health care”; so L.G.B.T.Q. folk can “stand for religious liberty”; so straight people can “stand up for queer people”; and a Muslim imam can “stand with an undocumented worker.”

One journalist described the premise of the movement as a “universalist program” for health care, voting rights, reproductive choice, and higher wages, one beginning in “building coalitions among people whom politics have driven apart.” Amid a welter of issues, the defining common ground for Forward Together was a response to the needs of the poor and vulnerable. As Barber put it, “poor and hurting people were the capstone of our moral arch.”

Forward Together played some of the roles of an opposition political party, drawing together diverse constituencies around common interests, criticizing existing policies and institutions, and proposing alternatives. But it exercised power by direct rather than electoral action. Barber said that “effective work for justice in the real world” requires “real political power.” Yet “the battle, while deeply political, wasn’t fundamentally about campaigns and elections.” More than winning seats in the legislature, it was about “exposing the conspiracy of the governing elite to maintain absolute power through divide-and-conquer strategies” and reshaping “the stories that tell us who we are.” Unlike a political party or lobby, Forward Together eschewed running or supporting candidates for office. Yet it transformed North Carolina politics.

Such a movement is hard to recreate at a national level. But the need for Social Self-Defense against Trump’s assault on all such groups may be making its principles and strategies essential.

## How a Non-Electoral Opposition Defeated the First Trump Coup

Can a coalition anchored outside the electoral system preserve democracy by overcoming a coup? It happened in the US four years ago.

As the 2020 elections approached, the evidence grew that Donald Trump was planning to overturn the results if he lost. While the Democratic Party campaigned for Joe Biden, a Democracy Defense Coalition gradually assembled over 200 groups to prevent or overturn an anticipated Trump coup.<sup>25</sup>

In September 2020, four activist experts on civil resistance issued a manual called *Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy*.<sup>26</sup> Reminiscent of the *Indivisible* manual that helped launch the resistance to Trump in 2016, it presented a detailed plan for locally based resistance to a Trump coup. It laid out various scenarios in which Trump refused to leave office. It called for

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Burns, “How Democrats Planned for Doomsday,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/24/us/politics/democrats-trump-election-plan.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>

<sup>26</sup> Ankur Asthana, Hardy Merriman, Kifah Shah, Marium Navid, “Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy,” September 2020. <https://www.holdthelineguide.com>

forming community-based "election protection" groups. These could start immediately with meetings by a small core group to develop a response plan and recruits others to participate in it. These groups would "hold the line" that all votes must be counted; all irregularities must be investigated impartially and remedied; and election results must be respected, regardless of who wins. Public officials could be called on in advance to state their commitment to these principles. Violation of these "red lines" by Trump or others would trigger these groups into action.

The guide provided sample meeting agendas, templates for "power maps" of forces to influence, tactics "brainstorming sheets," and other planning tools. It outlined targeted action to "undermine the pillars of support" for an illegal Trump regime. It called for mass popular mobilization based on disciplined nonviolence because "violence will backfire badly against the side that uses it." It discussed tactics including displaying symbols of protest; engaging in demonstrations, marches, and nonviolent blockades; strikes of all kinds; deliberate work slowdowns; boycotts; divestment; tax refusal; and targeted disruption.

Trade unionists Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Jose La Luz made a related proposal for organized labor to establish "pro-democracy volunteer brigades" in preparation for the election.

We need volunteers who will assist with voter registration; mobilize in large numbers should law enforcement and right-wing militias show up at polling places in order to intimidate voters; block the right-wing from challenging legitimate voters and ballots; and lay the groundwork for massive civil disobedience should the Trump administration attempt to forestall the elections and/or refuse to recognize the results.

After Trump's coup attempt in January, 2021, an article by *Time* journalist Molly Ball gave a detailed account of "The Secret History of the Shadow Campaign That Saved the 2020 Election."<sup>27</sup> It described a "vast, cross-partisan campaign to protect the election—an extraordinary shadow effort dedicated not to winning the vote but to ensuring it would be free and fair, credible and uncorrupted." It was "separate from the Biden campaign and crossed ideological lines, with crucial contributions by nonpartisan and conservative actors."

While no one individual or organization led the effort to ensure a free and fair election, informal coordination emerged. The Fight Back Table, a coalition of "resistance" organizations, gathered activists at the local and national level into a Democracy Defense Coalition. In April Mike Podhorzer, senior adviser to the president of the AFL-CIO, began hosting a weekly 2½-hour Zoom call. That became the center for "a constellation of operatives across the left who shared overlapping goals but didn't usually work in concert." The group had "no name, no leaders and no hierarchy," but it kept its disparate participants in sync.

According to Ball, the effort "drew energy from the summer's racial-justice protests," many of whose leaders were a key part of the alliance. They wanted to "harness its momentum for the election without allowing it to be co-opted by politicians." Their focus became to protect people's ability to vote in the midst of the COVID pandemic. In Philadelphia, for example, advocates distributed "voting safety kits" containing masks, hand sanitizer, and informational

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<sup>27</sup> Molly Ball, "The Secret History of the Shadow Campaign That Saved the 2020 Election." *Time*, February 4, 2021. <https://time.com/5936036/secret-2020-election-campaign/>

brochures. “We had to get the message out that this is safe, reliable, and you can trust it,” said Hannah Fried of All Voting Is Local. Elsewhere activists recruited “election defenders” who were trained to use de-escalation techniques rather than calling the police. They surrounded lines of voters at urban polling places with a “joy to the polls” message that turned voting into a street party. Black organizers recruited thousands of poll workers to ensure polling places could stay open.

Black Lives Matter had shown that “people power could have a massive impact.” Activists prepared to revive that summer’s street demonstrations if Trump tried to steal the election. More than 150 groups, including the Women’s March, the Sierra Club, Color of Change, Democrats.com, and Democratic Socialists of America joined the “Protect the Results” coalition. The group’s website had a map listing 400 planned postelection demonstrations, to be activated via text message as soon as needed after the election.

Non-partisan election protection was not limited to the left. 22 Democrats and 22 Republicans formed the National Council on Election Integrity, met on Zoom once a week, and produced op eds, letters to the editor, and advertisements in battleground states and warned local officials about potential voting problems. Fearing “the potential for economy-disrupting civil disorder” in the wake of Black Lives Matter, The Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, other trade associations, the AFL-CIO, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National African American Clergy Network, and many other groups issued an election-day statement calling for election officials be given time to “count every vote in accordance with applicable law” without violence or intimidation.

When it became clear on election night that Trump would lose the election, Protect the Results announced it would “not be activating the entire national mobilization network today, but remains ready to activate if necessary.” Protect the Results then transformed the anticipated protests into a weekend of public celebration.

After the election came the count, the certification, the Electoral College, and the presidential transition. Again, popular action played a critical role in blocking Trump’s attempt at an electoral coup. In Michigan, for example, on election night a busload of Republican “election observers” arrived at Detroit’s TCF Center where votes were being counted. They crowded the vote-counting tables, refused to wear masks, and heckled the mostly Black workers. Within 45 minutes racial justice activists from Detroit Will Breathe, suburban women from Fems for Dems, and local elected officials arrived to protect the count.

As the election-certification process proceeded, Michigan election protectors flooded the Wayne County canvassing board’s certification meeting and testified at length on the right to vote; even the Republican board members voted to certify Detroit’s votes. When two Republican legislative leaders flew to Washington to meet with Trump to discuss having the legislature declaring him the winner, activists tracked down their flights and demonstrated at the airports to call attention to this devious plot. After the meeting, the legislators announced they’d pressed the President to deliver COVID relief for their constituents and informed him they saw no role for the legislature in the election process. When the state canvassing board met for the final step in certification, they were met by hours of testimony while Twitter and other media were flooded

with thousands of messages with the hashtag “alleyesonmi.” Both Democrats and one Republican voted to certify; the other Republican abstained.

When on the morning of January 6 Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol, the “activist left” was “strenuously discouraging counter activity.” Instead of a battle between Trump’s coup army and leftist militants, Trump was allowed to paint a picture of himself and his supporters as the pathetic perpetrators of a failed coup, fighting not the left but democracy itself.

According to Ian Bassin, co-founder of Protect Democracy, in the end “every attempt to interfere with the proper outcome of the election was defeated.” While the particular strategy and tactics of this successful defense of democracy were adapted to the particular threat faced then and there, this experience shows that non-electoral opposition can indeed provide Social Self-Defense against threats to democracy. That may prove even more necessary to block creeping or galloping coups in the new MAGA era.

## Building a Non-Electoral Opposition

As we saw in the Prologue, elements of a non-electoral opposition are already in play. To take just one example, the organizers of the largest one-day demonstration in US history, the 2017 Women’s March, along with many other groups such as Planned Parenthood and the ACLU, are organizing a feminist People’s March for January 18, shortly before Trump’s inauguration.

As described in “Social Self-Defense in the First Trump Regime” above, more than fifty prominent environmental, trade union, civil rights, progressive, women’s, gay, and other groups just before Trump’s 2016 inauguration initiated a United Resistance Campaign based on a pledge of solidarity and resistance against Trump: “We pledge to stand together in support of racial, social, environmental, and economic justice for all, and against Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, sexism, and all those forces which would tear apart a democracy of, by, and for all the people.”<sup>28</sup> This effort represented a potential starting point for drawing together a non-electoral opposition.

Although the United Resistance Campaign did not build an infrastructure for continuing cooperation, many of the organizations that initiated it, as well as millions of Trump Resistance activists, supported each other’s causes in very much the way it called for. Action around issues like gun control, abortion, and immigration rights won wide “crossover” support, as did the Women’s March, the March for Science, the People’s Climate March, Black Lives Matter, the Fight for Fifteen, the March for Our Lives, May Day immigrant rights marches, #MeToo, the Red-state Teacher Rebellion, and other actions. They established the rudiments, never fully developed, for a non-electoral opposition.

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<sup>28</sup> United Resistance Campaign, “Unstoppable Together,” *United Resistance Campaign*, January 2017. <http://www.unstoppabletogether.org> ; Nadia Prupis, “Groups Nationwide Create Campaign of 'United Resistance' to Trump,” *Common Dreams*, January 10, 2017. <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2017/01/10/groups-nationwide-create-campaign-united-resistance-trump>



There are similar nascent efforts today that could serve as starting points for a non-electoral opposition. The mass calls immediately following the 2024 election had 100,000 registrants and over 200 organizational co-sponsors.<sup>29</sup> They featured a spectrum of speakers including Maurice Mitchell of the Working Families Party, Rep. Pramila Jayapal, chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Leah Greenberg, co-founder of Indivisible, Rahna Epting, executive director of MoveOn, and Ash Lee Henderson, co-executive director of the Highlander Center. The upcoming People's March could provide another growth point. So could the national Poor People's Campaign. No doubt other potential growth points will emerge.

A non-electoral opposition can develop from the convergence of independent non-electoral initiatives. This can happen both nationally and at state and local levels. It does not require a single national organization, but its builders need a vision of a publicly visible non-electoral opposition and sustained cooperation to realize that vision.

A non-electoral opposition needs to build a shared infrastructure for communications networks, extensive training, and means for joint planning. An inspiration here might be the 2012 "99% Spring," largely inspired by Occupy Wall Street, in which organizations including National People's Action, Jobs with Justice, National Domestic Workers Alliance, MoveOn, and the UAW cooperated to train nearly 100,000 people in the history and practice of nonviolent direct action. Thousands of them poured into "99% Power" corporate accountability actions at corporate headquarters during the subsequent weeks. These shareholder actions expressed an embryonic common program, not by holding a convention and propounding a platform but by making the links among issues ranging from taxes and bank regulation to healthcare and housing to climate, militarization and imperialism. At the Wells Fargo action, for example, protesters demanded that the bank invest in green jobs and energy instead of financing payday lenders and private prisons. In the Chicago actions, National Nurses United's demand for a "Robin Hood tax" on financial transactions linked financial speculation with healthcare.<sup>30</sup>

One way to start bringing groups together for a non-party opposition could be through "bridging organizations" designed to connect two or more movements, institutions, or organizations. These do not have to be either large or powerful to be effective. They can just be a handful of people who are knowledgeable about and trusted by those they are trying to draw together and who understand the needs and problems of all sides. They can engage in on-going discussions both separately and together to explore areas of agreement and disagreement. They can promote actions that embody mutual support. Ultimately, they can help construct a common program that represents the real interests of all. Those within particular organizations and movements can similarly form networks and caucuses to push for such a collaborative approach.

A non-electoral opposition can include groups that also participate in the electoral process as long as they do not try to subordinate the non-electoral opposition to their electoral objectives. Even a disruptive non-electoral opposition can benefit those working in the electoral arena by awakening people from fear, isolation, complacency, and despair. King's vision was that the Poor

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<sup>29</sup> Working Families Party, "Making Meaning of the Moment: Post election mass calls," *Working Families Party*, December 2024. <https://www.mobilize.us/workingfamilies/event/342586/>

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Brecher, "Occupy and the 99% Opposition," *The Nation*, July 9, 2012. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/occupy-and-99-opposition/>



People's Campaign would inspire millions of poor people to vote. Some unions explicitly supported Occupy Wall Street because they presciently saw that it would help progressive Democrats in the upcoming elections.

It would be neither possible nor wise to lay out detailed plans for non-electoral opposition actions months or years in advance. They will have to be developed based on the ideas and practice of thousands of people responding to the realities of MAGA rule – as they did in the first Trump Resistance. Their coalitions can contest every element of the MAGA agenda. A watchword for such non-electoral opposition might be Adam Michnik's advice to Poland's independent opposition: "Be constantly and incessantly visible in public life, create political facts by organizing mass actions, and formulate alternative programs."<sup>31</sup>

Experiences like the first Trump Resistance, North Carolina's Forward Together, and the defeat of Trump's attempted 2020 coup show that, although fascism can indeed happen here, successful Social Self-Defense against fascism can also happen here.

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, (Oakland, University of California Press, 1987), p. 147-8.

## 8. The Social Strike

What about a worst-case scenario where neither electoral nor non-electoral opposition has prevented a MAGA tyranny? Where democratic procedures and the right to vote have been so denied that it is impossible to defeat MAGA at the polls? Where both official and vigilante violence are unrestrained by law? Where a substantial part of the population has been bamboozled by lies and distraction? Where those who don't go along with the program are subject to harassment, beating, jailing, and death? Where all dissent has been effectively branded as treason? And where much of the population has been driven by fear into silence and acquiescence? How is it possible to fight for and win Social Self-Defense under such conditions?

Tyrannical regimes from Serbia to the Philippines to Brazil and many other places have been brought down by "people power" -- nonviolent revolts that made society ungovernable and led to regime change. While the U.S. has a tradition of social and labor movements using mass action and local general strikes, it does not have a tradition of using people power for the defense of democracy. However, in other countries where democratic institutions have been so weakened or eliminated that they provide no alternative to tyranny, such methods have emerged and been used effectively. They go by such names as "nonviolent uprisings," "people power," and, as they will be called here, "social strikes."

A social strike in US would probably require a trigger as extreme as the events that just occurred in South Korea, a country with 40 years of firmly established democracy. Rightwing president Yoon Suk-yeol, facing plunging popularity, went on live TV and declared martial law. Yoon alleged that the Democratic Party, which had a majority in the National Assembly, was conducting "anti-state activities" and collaborating with "North Korean communists" to destroy the country. His martial law order prohibited political activities, including gatherings of the National Assembly and local legislatures, and suspended freedom of the press. Yoon reportedly ordered the arrest of various political opponents, including the leaders of the Democratic Party and his own Peoples Power Party.

Soldiers appeared at the parliament and attempted to arrest MPs. Workers, students, and ordinary people flooded the streets and rushed to Parliament where they faced martial law troops and broke through the military blockade. the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union declared a general strike and a series of strike rallies calling for the resignation of Yoon Suk-yeol and "Beyond Yoon" union demands of just working conditions and public policies that ensure quality public services for all Koreans. Railroad workers, subway workers, metalworkers, and other trade unionists announced they would join the strike. After the military blockade of parliament was broken, the National Assembly was able to vote and blocked the Martial Law order 190 to 0. After six hours, faced with near-universal condemnation, President Yoon rescinded the martial law order. A statement by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions said,

Our citizens, armed with nothing but conviction, rushed to Parliament and stood against the martial law troops. Through sheer determination, they broke through the blockade,

enabling Parliament to lift the martial law. Once again, it was our citizens who protected democracy.<sup>32</sup>

When Yoon refused to step down and his party refused to allow him to be impeached, hundreds of thousands of Koreans continued to demonstrate daily for a week. As 200,000 people marched outside, the parliament finally voted to impeach him. The crowd erupted in celebration as the result was announced. Young South Koreans danced, sang, exchanged hugs and waved K-pop light sticks, which had quickly become a symbol of resistance. Yoon was immediately suspended.<sup>33</sup>

An American equivalent might be if President Trump declared martial law and sent military forces to arrest members of Congress. While such a scenario might seem far-fetched, it is not so far out of line with things Trump and his nominees have previously threatened. Given South Korea's forty years of democratic stability, such a coup attempt seemed far-fetched to most South Koreans as well.

There is now an extensive literature analyzing popular resistance to subversion of elections and other forms of coup d'etat. The pioneer of such research was theorist and historian of nonviolence Gene Sharp. His *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* provides extensive analysis and many case studies of effective nonviolent resistance; his *The Anti-Coup* focuses in on the use of these methods against illegal seizures of government power.<sup>34</sup> It proposes such guidelines as:

- Repudiate the coup and denounce its leaders as illegitimate
- Regard all decrees and orders from the coup leaders contradicting established law as illegal and refuse to obey them
- Keep all resistance strictly nonviolent - refuse to be provoked into violence
- Noncooperate with the coup leaders in all ways

Stephen Zunes' *Civil Resistance Against Coups*<sup>35</sup> analyzes the resistance to twelve coups and provides an expanded theoretical framework. Sharp and Zunes provide invaluable background for anyone who contemplates resisting a possible Trump coup. Here are three examples of successful popular resistance to coups and other anti-democratic behavior by those in power:

In 1988, despite the circumvention of electoral laws, repression of universities, restriction of media, and ethnic cleansing, Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic was still holding elections of a sort. An activist group called Otpor formed around the goal of driving Milosevic from power. It initiated hundreds of small actions of resistance around the country to counter pervasive fear of

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<sup>32</sup> Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, "International solidarity with the Korean labour movement: General Strike and Workers' Power Beyond Yoon Seok-yeol's Resignation," *Trade Unions for Energy Democracy*, December 5, 2024. <https://www.tuedglobal.org/bulletins/all-power-to-the-korean-labour-movement-and-general-strike>

<sup>33</sup> Raphael Rachid, "South Korean parliament votes to impeach president," *The Guardian*, December 14, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/14/south-korean-parliament-votes-to-impeach-president>

<sup>34</sup> Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* (Boston: Extending Horizon Books, 2005); Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins, *The Anti-Coup* (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2003). <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/the-anti-coup/>

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Zunes, *Civil Resistance Against Coups* (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2018). <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/civil-resistance-coups-comparative-historical-perspective/>

the regime. Its plan was that activists would compel the regime to call elections; they would create massive turnout around a united opposition candidate; they would join other nongovernmental organizations in carefully monitoring election results so they could document their victory; and they would use mass noncompliance - leading up to a general strike - if and when Milosevic refused to step down.

In 2000, Otpor pushed 18 of Serbia's squabbling opposition parties to form a coalition to support a unity candidate, promising to deliver 500,000 votes to the unity candidate but threatening to put 100,000 protesters at the door of any politician who betrayed the coalition. As elections approached, the regime called Otpor an "illegal terrorist organization"; police raided its offices and shut down independent radio and TV stations; each day an average of seven activists were arrested.

Meanwhile, the opposition organized ten thousand election monitors. After the election they announced exit polls showing Milosevic had been defeated by a 50% to 35% margin. Instead of accepting the results, Milosevic refused to leave office and demanded a run-off election.

Otpor announced a deadline for Milosevic to concede and 200,000 people demonstrated in Belgrade. The opposition called on the population throughout the country to "perform any acts of civil disobedience they have at their disposal." Miners struck; TV and radio stations opened their airwaves to opposition voices. As the deadline approached, cars and trucks filled the highways heading toward Belgrade. Police put up roadblocks and were issued orders to shoot, but seeing the size of the convoys they abandoned their barricades. Half-a-million people gathered in Belgrade. Police fired tear gas, but when the crowd stood its ground riot police began running away or joining the crowd. The opposition candidate declared victory and Milosevic accepted his defeat.<sup>36</sup>

Another example: After the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Jr. in 1983, Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos met growing protests. Marcos called a presidential election for February 1986. Aquino's widow Corazon Aquino was backed by all major opposition parties. Marcos' campaign included vote-buying and the murder of more than 70 opposition workers. On election day casting of fake ballots and falsification of returns were widely witnessed.

Marcos claimed victory, but Mrs. Aquino met with opposition leaders and proposed a long nonviolent campaign of what she dubbed "people power." Top military officers resigned, withdrew support from Marcos, recognized Aquino as the legitimate winner, and fled to military camps in Manila. The leader of the city's Roman Catholic Church appealed on nationwide radio for people to nonviolently protect the officers and prevent bloodshed. By midnight 50,000 people surrounded the camps; two days later it was more than a million. Marcos ordered tanks and armored transports to attack. Nuns knelt in front of the tanks and priests climbed on them and led a million protesters - plus soldiers - in prayer. The troops turned back. Next day Marcos ordered another assault, but the commanding officer ordered his troops to return to their base. The military rebels announced that ninety percent of the Armed Forces had defected. Large crowds took over the government television station. The next day Marcos fled the country and Aquino

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<sup>36</sup> For a detailed account of Otpor and the defeat of Milosevic, see Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

was inaugurated president. Ever since, mass nonviolent direct action has been known around the world as "People power."

For a more recent example closer to home, consider the "People's Impeachment" of the governor of Puerto Rico. On July 13, 2019 a Puerto Rican public interest group, Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (Center for Investigative Journalism), released more than eight hundred pages of online chats between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and eleven of his closest cronies. The chat group members attacked and belittled disabled people, fat people, and gays, including Puerto Rican actor, writer, and pop star Ricky Martin. They made jokes about those who had died from Hurricane Maria. And they revealed corruption and toleration of corruption. Governor Rosselló criticized the Puerto Rican former speaker of the New York City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito, saying, "Our people" should "beat up that whore." When the island's chief fiscal officer wrote that he was 'salivating to shoot' the mayor of San Juan, Rosselló replied: 'You'd be doing me a grand favor.'

Dubbed "RickyLeaks," the revelations caused an immediate public outcry. Almost immediately Puerto Ricans began protesting outside the governor's mansion calling for Rosselló to resign. #RickyRenuncia (#RickyResign) became an instant hashtag and slogan. Protesters were described as including "unionists, students, socialist groups, unemployed youth, rainbow flag-waving queer and transgender folks, people with disabilities, and elders." Also spotlighted at marches were a committed group of radical feminists, Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, who had long been clamoring for Rosselló to acknowledge that there was a crisis of violence against women in Puerto Rico.

For three days the crowds swelled. They were overwhelmingly peaceful, but a few plastic bottles and other objects were thrown at the police—possibly by agents provocateurs. Eventually police began arresting protesters and attacking them with tear gas and rubber bullets. That further incited popular outrage.

Major newspapers and leading political figures from all parties joined the call for the governor's resignation. At eight every evening people throughout the island banged pots and pans from their balconies, windows, and streets in a traditional Latin American cacerolazo. The day after the first massive Monday march, three women went to the Department of Motor Vehicles office in a municipality of San Juan and removed the governor's portrait from the wall in protest, setting off a series of copycat takedowns in other governmental offices around the island.

Meanwhile, the crowds outside the governor's mansion continued to grow larger every day. Early on the morning of July 23, people from across the island boarded trains and cars bound for the capitol. Schools shut down, San Juan's largest mall shut down, and banks stayed closed in what was widely referred to as a general strike. A march shut down miles of the Las Américas highway. Protesters at the governor's mansion performed mass yoga and read aloud the 889 pages of chats. Eventually an estimated half million people demonstrated for the governor's ouster. One-third of the entire population of Puerto Rico participated in the movement.

Facing what appeared a nonviolent insurrection of virtually the entire Puerto Rican people and a threat of impeachment by the legislature, just before midnight Rosselló posted a resignation

message on Facebook. Celebrations across San Juan lasted all night. Rosselló was deposed as governor less than two weeks after RickyLeaks became public. These events became known as the “People’s Impeachment.”<sup>37</sup>

As these examples indicate, there is no off-the-shelf model for social strikes. The conditions that give rise to them are varied, although they usually include severe repression and growing popular discontent. Social strikes grow out of extreme grievances and deep anger at the regime. Sudden “trigger events” may kick them off.<sup>38</sup> While preparation can be helpful, sensitivity to the state of popular feeling is also crucial.

There are some guidelines we can draw from many past social strikes.<sup>39</sup> They apply where, as in the US today, most potential participants are not organized into unions or other formal labor organizations; the principal goal is to affect not just the immediate employer but the regime or social structure; and those in authority do not accept such actions as legitimate.

Social strikes express several different kinds of power, all rooted in the fundamental dependence of ruling groups on those they rule. They cause a problem for the owners and managers of the businesses and institutions that they shut down. They appeal to and mobilize a wide public by embodying its values and interests in opposition to the regime. They demonstrate to the authorities the potential withdrawal of consent to which they are vulnerable.

Several criteria must be coordinated in defining the goals of social strikes. Their demands need to represent broad objectives that appeal to a broad public. They need to unify different sectors, such as private employees, government employees, women, educated middle class, business owners, rural poor, urban poor, etc. They need to embody broadly accepted norms. These may be norms broadly held in the society, such as support for democracy; they often are embodied in the existing constitution but denied in practice by the regime. It is often possible in a social strike to combine such broad social goals with specific demands by more local groups that can be met by local officials and immediate employers – release of prisoners, permitting of demonstrations, shorter hours, wage increases, or whatever is important to the participants.

In a context of repression, multiple forms of communication within a movement are essential. Internet and social networking tools have proved themselves crucial in recent social strikes, but they need to be supplemented by a wide range of phone trees, personal networks, word-of-mouth communication, and other media beyond the reach of repressive authorities. Communication needs to perform two functions, each of which has its own requirements. Communication must allow for rapid formation of opinion and consensus. And it must make possible rapid coordination of action.

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<sup>37</sup> For more in Puerto Rico’s “People’s Impeachment,” see Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2020). “Puerto Rico’s Mass Strike for a ‘People’s Impeachment’ in Chapter 12, “Harbingers.”

<sup>38</sup> Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Brecher, “Discussion Points Regarding Social Strikes,” *Jeremy Brecher*, October 23, 2020. <https://www.jeremybrecher.org/discussion-points-re-social-strikes/>

Social strikes can involve quiet or disruptive street actions, or they can simply involve people staying quietly at home. Street actions allow social strikers and supporters to show their courage, confidence, and resistance to repression; they also provide easy targets for repression.

Social strikes have often involved occupation of workplaces (the Polish general strike that gave birth to the Solidarity union occurred when activists spread the word: Don't burn Party headquarters; occupy the factories.) Such occupations tend to make repressive violence more difficult. However, they are frequently perceived by the authorities as a fundamental, even revolutionary challenge to their power, making them less willing to compromise.

Social strike tactics need to be selected on the basis of such considerations as 1) what are people willing to do given the present state of the movement; 2) how will the wider public respond to different tactics; 3) what response are different tactics likely to provoke from the authorities; 4) what kinds of outcomes (e.g. showdowns, negotiations, shifts in public opinion, splits and shifts in attitude of authorities; etc.) are different tactics likely to generate.

The ability to shift tactics can be a great asset. When a movement is locked into a particular tactic, its opponents often try to break it by raising the cost and pain of continuing. This can be thwarted if the movement is able to shift tactics on its own initiative. When the authorities are willing to shoot down large numbers of people in the street, for example, occupying workplaces may be the best alternative to submission.

Social strikes often benefit from leadership by example. If one group is ready to take an action and face the risks it entails, their initiative is likely to encourage and inspire others to do the same. This can be the best way to escape the situation where everybody is waiting to act until they see whether others have the courage and commitment to act. Such exemplary actions can precede and lay the groundwork for a social strike. They can also introduce new themes and tactics into an on-going struggle.

Repressive authorities generally try a long string of tactics, including ridicule, ostracism, division, harassment, and repression, to suppress a movement. Only when all these have failed to quell the movement are the authorities forced to recognize that they will have to make concessions or face the threat of movement action indefinitely. Movements that are ultimately victorious often seem to suffer a long string of defeats – witness, for example, the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Movements need to be prepared to continue despite such defeats – that is what makes it possible for them to succeed in the end. They need to interpret such defeats as necessary steppingstones on the path to victory. And they need to master the art of strategic retreat, which, as Mao indicated, consists of conducting small offensives within the context of a broader pull-back. Successful retreats make an opponent's victories hollow. They establish that, despite repression, challenge from the movement will not go away. As Gene Sharp once wrote, "Massive stubbornness can have powerful political consequences."

Social Self-Defense against a creeping or galloping MAGA coup is most likely to succeed through a combination of electoral and social strike methods. The overcoming of Slobodan

Milosevic's authoritarian regime in Serbia – while accomplished under circumstances far different from those in the U.S. today — provides an example of how they can be combined.

Resisting the rise of tyranny will no doubt require sacrifice. After all, we are dealing with an aspiring tyrant who lionizes foreign leaders who shoot down demonstrators in the street. But that sacrifice will not be primarily on behalf of one political party vs. another, of Democrats vs. Republicans. It will be a defense of democracy - defense of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Beyond that, it is the protection of that which makes our life together on earth possible. It is defense of the human rights of all people; of the conditions of our earth and its climate that make our life possible; of the constitutional principle that government must be accountable to law; of global cooperation to provide a secure future for our people and planet; and of our ability to live together in our communities, our country, and our world. A MAGA tyranny is a threat to all of us as members of society. Overcoming a MAGA coup is Social Self-Defense.



## 9. A Constructive Program for Social Self-Defense

In the midst of the great civil disobedience campaigns for Indian freedom, Mahatma Gandhi simultaneously promoted what he called the “Constructive Program.” The program encouraged people from the village level on up to organize themselves to meet their needs on an egalitarian, democratic basis. Social Self-Defense likewise needs a positive program, both to meet the needs of those being hurt by the MAGA juggernaut and to demonstrate that there are alternatives to Trumpism worth fighting for.

For the past five years, the Green New Deal has provided a highly popular vision and program that would protect the climate in ways that would create good jobs for working people, end poverty, and alleviate injustice. While the Green New Deal has been bottled up in Washington, there has been a little noted groundswell of movements and programs that are implementing the principles and policies of the Green New Deal at community, municipal, state, tribal, and union levels.<sup>40</sup> This “Green New Deal from Below” can make a unique contribution to the fight to protect workers, vulnerable groups, society as a whole, and the climate in the coming era of Trump tyranny. Indeed, the Green New Deal from Below can provide a unifying constructive program for Social Self-Defense.

Some of these initiatives describe themselves as Green New Deals; others don’t use the name but pursue the same principles and policies, combining the necessity for climate protection with the need for jobs and justice. For example:

- In Seattle, a broad coalition including labor unions, advocates from low-income communities and communities of color, tribal nations, faith leaders, healthcare providers, businesses, environmental advocates, and clean energy experts launched a campaign for the city to create its own Green New Deal. The city council passed a Green New Deal resolution to eliminate all city greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 with a just transition for those affected. The council then established a Green New Deal Oversight Board, with most of its members from climate-affected communities, and passed a progressive payroll tax on employees making at least \$150,000 per year who worked for companies with at least \$7 million annual payrolls. By 2023 the Oversight Board had distributed \$27 million for climate resilience, electrification, and help for low-income homeowners to transition to electric heating.
- In Illinois, the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act promoted by a broad coalition of labor and community groups sets the state on a path to a carbon-free power sector by 2045 with the strongest in the nation labor and equity standards. The bill will slash emissions, create thousands of new clean energy union jobs, expand union apprenticeships for Black and Latinx communities, and increase energy efficiency for public schools. It also contains a transition program for families and communities currently reliant on jobs in the fossil fuel

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<sup>40</sup> More than a hundred Green New Deal initiatives in more than 40 states are described in Jeremy Brecher, *The Green New Deal from Below: How Ordinary People Are Building a Just and Climate-Safe Economy* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2024).

industry. Journalist Liza Featherstone called the legislation “A Green New Deal” for Illinois.

- In Sunset Park, a poor neighborhood in New York City devastated by Superstorm Sandy, residents organized a Sunset Park Climate Justice Center. They began do-it-yourself climate strategies like painting rooftops white to reflect the sun, creating a storm-water collection system, and starting small urban farms. They set up a system of block captains to prepare for future disasters. When developers proposed to rezone the area for upscale development, residents led by the community organization UPROSE demonstrated, rallied, lobbied, and forced them to withdraw the proposal. Then they launched New York’s first community-owned solar cooperative, Sunset Park Solar. It is collectively owned by all its energy consumers and serves 200 low-income residents. Next they developed a plan for a South Brooklyn offshore wind assembly and maintenance hub, part of their vision for a Green Resilient Industrial District, or GRID. The state of New York selected Sunset Park for a wind turbine assembly and maintenance hub, which is expected to provide 1,500 short-term and 500 long-term jobs. The hub will contract with minority- and women-owned business enterprises for at least 30 percent of its supply chain needs.
- In Kansas and Missouri a group of elected officials developed a plan for a Bi-State Sustainable Reinvestment Corridor to connect Kansas City, Kansas, Kansas City, Missouri, and Independence, Missouri with rapid transit integrated with a wide array of related community development programs, including Zero-emission transportation options; affordable housing; green infrastructure; broadband access; safety and security enhancement; economic development; and renewable energy and energy efficiency projects for public schools and libraries. Planning for the first segments of the plan are underway.
- In Holyoke, MA, local residents, many of them poor Latinx/Hispanics, suffering from asthma, campaigned to shut down the coal-burning Mount Tom power plant. But, concerned about the jobs of the workers in the plant, they demanded not only closure of the plant but also protections for the plant’s workers. The city and state teamed up on a “Mt. Tom Power Plant Reuse Study” with wide community input that called for conversion of the site to solar energy. 17,000 solar panels have been installed on the site of Mt. Tom’s closed coal-fired power plant. Holyoke’s city-owned utility company now runs almost completely on clean power. The city is continuing to seek job-and-revenue-generating investment for the site, ranging from manufacturing to cannabis production. *CBS News* headlined its account of Mount Tom’s transition, “How One Small City Sowed the Seeds for Its Own Green New Deal.”
- In DeKalb County, Georgia in the fall of 2024, the DeKalb Green New Deal presented a 100% clean energy and transportation transition plan. Since it started in 2020, the DeKalb Green New Deal has passed 20 climate action policies, resolutions and initiatives. A county official, Ted Terry, told a news outlet: “Our Green New Deal is specifically a DeKalb Green New Deal – it’s what we think we can do with our own resources, our own land, our own people.”

- On New York's Long Island, a co-op led by women of the Indigenous American Shinnecock Nation have fought for and are now exercising their traditional right to cultivate and harvest kelp in Long Island Sound. Their ocean farming extracts carbon and nitrogen from the polluted waters of Long Island Sound and produces an environmentally friendly alternative to fertilizer derived from fossil fuel. It is also producing jobs for impoverished tribal members. This and similar seacoast programs are often referred to as a "Blue New Deal."
- In Minneapolis, unionized workers who clean downtown commercial office high-rises struck to demand that their employers take action on climate change. The janitors, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) local 26 who are mostly immigrants and women, won a green education initiative that includes training in climate-friendly cleaning and building management, funded by their employers.

With Trump in the White House we can still form municipal agencies like Seattle's that fund climate-protecting programs that benefit low-income communities. We can still pass state legislation like Illinois's that embodies the principles and policies of the Green New Deal. We can still organize our neighborhoods the way Sunset Park did for do-it-yourself climate resiliency and jobs-and-justice-friendly development. We can cooperate across state lines like Kansas and Missouri to develop mass transit integrated with climate-friendly housing, education, and other needs. Like Holyoke, we can force the shutting of fossil fuel infrastructure and the develop and implement our own plans for jobs and justice in our communities. Like the DeKalb Green New Deal we can develop plans for a just transition to climate-safe energy and start implementing them with multiple concrete programs. Like the Shinnecock kelp farmers we can form cooperatives and start producing and selling climate-protecting products. And like the Minneapolis janitors, we can strike to force our employers to improve our jobs in ways that protect the climate.

Can the Green New Deal from Below contribute to outflanking an authoritarian national government? Probably not all by itself. But to resist and eventually overcome the Trump tyranny, we need to create bastions of Social Self-Defense. That will involve many methods, including mutual aid, on-the-ground protection of those under attack, intelligence sharing, and many other expressions of solidarity. Green New Deal from Below initiatives can be a critical component of this Social Self-Defense.

First, such initiatives can help meet the need for programs and activities that support individual survival and livable communities. Green New Deals from Below already do this, but the need will be far greater in the face of *Project 2025*-type cuts to social supports. People in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship turned to forms of self-help both to resist repression and to provide needed food, shelter, and healthcare for resisters and oppressed communities. The Green New Deal from Below can play a similar role under Trump's assault on the people's welfare.

Second, campaigns for Green New Deal from Below programs have proven to be an effective means for bringing together siloed constituencies and helping them unify objectives and actions. Its programs unify climate, jobs, and justice and their proponents. Playing off groups against one another is a regular part of Trump's playbook. Conversely, mutual aid among those he attacks

will be a central means to limit his depredations and ultimately bring them to an end. The Green New Deal from Below can play a significant role in bringing together the diverse groups threatened by Trump and creating cooperation and a sense of community among them.

Third, the resistance to Trump's authoritarianism will need something that goes beyond resistance to provide inspiration and a better and more attractive alternative. Polling shows that, five years after it first hit the headlines, the elements of the Green New Deal are still highly popular.<sup>41</sup> The Green New Deal from Below shows that it is possible to embody these elements right in the places where people live and work. And those embodiments provide a "proof of concept" demonstrating that the Green New Deal really works and could truly make a better country and a better world.

While Trump and his minions will no doubt try to crush many positive initiatives, Green New Deal from Below programs are in a relatively strong position to resist. Their initiatives are usually not dependent on the national government for support. They are also generally very popular on their home turf. While Trump and his henchfolk have shown that they will go after anyone, trying to smash popular Green New Deal from Below programs is likely to backfire, causing more political loss than gain. Call it a form of political jujitsu.

How can the Green New Deal from Below be strengthened to help resist Trump's ravages? To start with we can simply hold up its accomplishments as a demonstration that collective action can win things that people actually need. We can start new local projects around the country to protect people from the effects of Trump's tyrannical actions and to draw together constituencies around common projects. We can link up to form a concerted Green New Deal from Below that is more than the sum of its individual parts. And we can protect each other from attack.

One of the leading proponents of a Green New Deal from Below is Michelle Wu, the mayor of Boston. Her programs have included solarization and resilience in poor neighborhoods, a massive construction program called the Green New Deal for Boston Public Schools, a Youth Clean Jobs Corp, and provision of free, nutritious breakfasts and lunches to all of Boston's 50,000 public school students, prepared by an employee- and Black-owned food service company.

Wu has already shown how action by a Green New Deal from Below can resist the coming Trump onslaught. On November 12 she told the Boston *Globe* that the city's authorities will not assist federal law enforcement in any mass deportation efforts and pledged to fight the fear that might take hold among some Bostonians when President-elect Donald Trump takes office.

The role of the Green New Deal from Below in the Trump era can go beyond such defensive measures. To paraphrase Wu, the impact of the Green New Deal has been to "expand the sense of what is possible." A key objective of Trump and Trumpism is to obliterate that sense of possibility – the knowledge that through collective action people can improve their lives and

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<sup>41</sup> Grace Adcox and Catherine Fraser, "Five Years After Its Introduction, the Green New Deal Is Still Incredibly Popular," Data for Progress, February 6, 2024. <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2024/2/6/five-years-after-its-introduction-the-green-new-deal-is-still-incredibly-popular>

their world. The Green New Deal from Below resists that obliteration, with people organizing to build the blocks of possibility right in their own backyards.

Of course, the Green New Deal from Below by itself won't stymie the depredations of a national government tyranny. But it is part of a larger process of social self-defense. Its intent is not to abandon the national political arena, but to open a way to reshape it from below. The Green New Deal from Below can go ahead right now to start building parts of the world we want to see in ways that will be hard for the Trump tyranny to stop. It can bring the forces together that need to cooperate if the Trump regime is to be put to an end. And it can show that our individual and common needs can be met through collective action, even under highly adverse circumstances.

## 10. What Social Self-Defense Is Defending

While Trump and MAGA threaten specific individuals and groups, they also threaten the essential principles that make it possible for people to live a life that is not nasty, brutish, and short. Defending these principles is a common interest – indeed necessity — for all of us. Conversely, defending the rights and wellbeing of every individual and group is essential to preserving the rights and wellbeing of all.

As the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights points out, “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Similarly, the protection of the earth from devastating climate change and other environmental destruction is essential to the preservation of ourselves and our posterity. The fundamental principle of constitutionalism – that governments and their officials must be ruled by law – is necessary to prevent tyranny. The recognition that human beings are part of one species and must share one planet is necessary to prevent efforts to advance one nation, people, or group by destroying others.

These principles provide a basis for unifying the struggle against Trump and MAGA. They provide a way to ground the objectives of the anti-Trump movement on fundamental norms.

These principles can define not only what Social Self-Defense is fighting against, but what it is fighting for. They provide the ultimate grounding for the case against MAGA. They can serve as the basis and justification for alternatives proposed by Social Self-Defense. And they provide “red lines” that must not be crossed in any kind of cooperation with the Trump regime.

*Human rights:* Many of Trump’s and *Project 2025*’s proposals will result in deprivation of human rights. Their housing, education, healthcare, and other social welfare proposals will result in deprivation of the human rights to housing, education, and healthcare. Their proposals to dismantle labor law will eliminate the right of workers to organize, bargain collectively, and undertake concerted action — and their basic human rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and expression. Their proposals to further restrict the right to vote undermine the fundamental right to equality. The list could go on to include discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, women, racial and religious groups, and other infractions too numerous even to list. Social Self-Defense means protection of human rights.

*The earth:* Our individual and common life depend on our natural environment. Trump’s assault on every aspect of the environment has already begun. His proposals for expanding fossil fuel production and burning spell catastrophe for the earth’s climate. His nominees to head the EPA, Department of the Interior, Energy Department, State Department, and other agencies have dedicated their lives to destroying the environment in the interest of private enrichment. Social Self-Defense means protecting the natural world and a climate system capable of sustaining human life.

*Government under law:* Richard Nixon notoriously said, “When the president does it, that means it is not illegal.” This is the doctrine of tyranny, against which society has struggled since the era of the “divine right of kings.” Donald Trump propounds the same constitutional doctrine, saying for example that, “The law’s totally on my side, meaning, the president can’t have a conflict of

interest.” That terrifying doctrine has now been enshrined by Trump-appointed judges on the Supreme Court. While constitutional interpretations can differ, a doctrine of unlimited presidential power is tantamount to tyranny. Social Self-Defense means making governmental institutions and officials subject to law.

*One people, one planet:* Donald Trump’s bellicose threats and insults to other countries and their leaders pave the road to war. His threats of unilateral economic aggression pave the way to international conflict, trade wars, and downward global economic spirals. His repudiation of global efforts for climate protection paves the way for both American self-destruction and the destruction of the rest of humanity.

It is a truism that the world today is too interdependent for any one nation to provide for its own wellbeing unless it also assures the wellbeing of the rest of the world community. The problems of individual nations, races, and religions cannot be solved by making economic, military, or environmental war on others. Security and environmental wellbeing require global cooperation. Social Self-Defense means international cooperation to provide a secure future for people and planet.

At best, Trump and MAGA will do immense harm. They will expand warfare, destroy the climate, increase inequality, and bring mass impoverishment at home and abroad. At worst they will replace American democracy with a lasting tyranny.

A month after Trump was elected, a Reuters/Ipsos poll found that barely 40% of Americans said their opinion of Trump was favorable; 55% said it was unfavorable.<sup>42</sup> Trump and MAGA can be overcome if a substantial proportion of that majority – joined perhaps by later converts – shift from passive disapproval to active withdrawal of consent. This prospectus lays out many ways to implement that active withdrawal of consent.

Passive acquiescence is consent. The active withdrawal of consent is Social Self-Defense.

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<sup>42</sup> [Less than half of Americans say opinion of Trump is favorable: Poll](#)