The Year 2000 for Revolutionaries

Destroy Market Capitalism In Six Easy Steps (or Catastrophe?)

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1999

The present society produces an ever-increasing series of disasters, from stock market crashes to mass starvation. Most of this chaos winds up hurting the most dispossessed while the capitalists laugh all the way to the bank. Knowing this, as a revolutionary and professional programmer, I want to outline why the Man will get hit worse than he is anticipating by the particular crisis known as the Year 2000 or Y2K problem.

The historical irony of this "small technical problem" is that it illustrates how the computer has more power over American peoples' lives than any so-called democratic choices, such as voting. Because the production system's serious machinery must be programmed so as to very quickly heed the absolute orders of the world market, this process has more real power than all the screams of media shills or the ideologies cooked up by politicians.

This matters

Modern bureaucracy organizes existence to make its citizens live like children dependent on systems they barely understand. Most people don't know where their water, electricity, gas or food come from. Most people don't understand credit systems, tax systems, or telephone systems even though they depend on them. All these are managed by mega-capitalist interests closely tied to the government. As the products of vast bureaucracies, each of these systems is vulnerable to computer failure at the start of 2000.

Secret life of programmers

Y2K starts from a situation that appears to be simple, yet it illustrates the irrationality of those running the present world. Programs are not written by bosses and the bosses don't usually know any details about programs. Programs are written by highly paid information professionals—computer programmers. While computer programmers' salaries may exceed four times the average, their condition of work is essentially that of other laborers— constant toil to maintain their existence.

The logic of the programmers' bosses, like all bosses, is to scrimp as much on programming labor as possible to fatten next month's profits.

In the larger world of work, bosses remove as much decision-making power as possible from workers and transfer it to their computers. They constantly attempt to reduce workers to low-paid, replaceable parts. Cashiers or bank-clerks become data inputs for computers. Bosses pretend that it is their bureaucratic orders controlling the process of work.

Indeed, creating and imposing mindless orders is the job of all bureaucracies. A bureaucracy can never allow its orders to be influenced by the details of how they will be carried out. Computer programming should be viewed

no differently than ditch digging. All bureaucratic importance is concentrated in the man who says "dig here" or "program this" and none in those who actually do the work.

The de-skilled computer programmer uses random methods. Each time a computer receives an instruction, it is arrived at by the seat of the programmer's pants. This adds up to the world of today where more and more of life is controlled by absurd, irrational computer programs written in the quickest, most half-assed way possible from failing satellites to wait-forever phone systems and check-out lines.

The Future of an Illusion

Computers are used for both crucial and unimportant tasks. Computers that control the key processes of capitalism are the ones where the important action will take place. From banks to oil rigs to nuclear missiles to supermarkets to factories to electric utilities, most large, complex systems today absolutely need computers to run their operations.

In the "get it done now" world of programming, being sure about the rules for dates was often thrown out with every other tricky or time-consuming activity. Like McDonald's, all that matters is giving the customer his lump of slop quickly enough. Thus, in a vast number of computer programs produced over the last thirty years, the logic around dates was created according to the rough idea the programmer had of how dates work. And these programs only had to work for the next week or year.

The Illusion of a Future

Any small error is not a small problem for a computer's operations. Computers can't figure their way out of the simplest error if they haven't been programmed for it. Instead, they will stop completely or behave unpredictably. Programs often make some errors in their logic ("have bugs"). The complexity of programs makes bugs inevitable since computer programs are the most complex things ever constructed by humans.

As computer programs become the controlling factor in large enterprises, working around the "quirks" of a system becomes just part of everyone's job. Breakdown bugs appear most often in computer systems when the system encounters a new situation—something that hasn't been tested for or thought of.

This is always happening somewhere—phone failures, electrical power failures, cash registers going out, etc. Indeed, nearly every large computer system is kept together today by a few "Mr. Scots" who've figured out how to make the anti-matter not collide with the matter (to use the analogy of *Star Trek*). These are the fire fighters who can take a system back from the brink.

However, Year 2000 errors are different. Unlike the constant stream of errors that systems shrug off today, the special property of time is that all of the year 2000 bugs will appear at nearly the same time. When the clock strikes twelve in every digital alley, the machines will dutifully turn over all their counters and their halfassed programming to decide what this means.

But the masters cheated on the few extra counters. So, every computer in the world will face a new situation at the same time. An uncountable number of bugs will appear in predictable and unpredictable places, overwhelming the fire-fighters who normally take care of them. Mediocre time of capitalism will have collided head-on with complex time of organic reality.

This adds up to a bug in the world-system. When enough complex systems are in the condition of not working, they start to interfere with all the other systems. Without transport, many machines break down. Without telephones, fixing broken machines gets harder. If electricity fails, many buildings are unusable. If buildings are unusable, the programs can't be fixed. If card-key security features fail, emergency personnel can't get into headquarters to fight the other problems. And many, many other things happen next.

Chips Ahoy

It's important to realize that the year 2000 isn't just about computers. Many "embedded chips" have the same problems. Embedded chips are silicon chips which are used to control most complicated machinery today. These have programs written directly in the silicon that often rely on time and date. These programs have Y2K problems for the same reason that other programs have them, but cannot be examined.

These programs cannot be changed without pulling out the chip and putting in a new one. Generally, that means buying an entire new machine or using an unpredictable "work around" for the problem. Just determining which machines have Y2K problems is as complex as finding them in computers.

From electrical power to water to food distribution to smelting plants, many large industrial enterprises have their pants down on this one. The center cannot hold; anarchy will reign.

The possibilities

Today is not a period of "great prosperity," but a time when vast bubbles of speculation are manipulated by banks to maintain a fragile economy. This could best be seen in Fall 1997 when the world stock markets lost 25 percent of their value. The present management of capital already faces problems like the insurrection in Indonesia (the world's seventh largest nation in population).

Revolutionary moments, when the proletariat made serious attempts to create a world beyond the present world of capital, have virtually all come in periods of considerable uncertainty and crisis. These might be crises of managing the state or in the economy. The Paris Commune, the Russian and Spanish Revolutions, May 1968 in France, the "Unknown Insurrection" in Iraq after the Gulf War, are all examples of this.

Y2K will produce such a moment of chaos, confusion and indecision for the capitalist class. Rather than proving that it has solved its problems, capital will show that it has combined its many problems into a single unsolvable mess.

What could happen

We cannot predict exactly how much of a disaster the year 2000 will be. We do predict disaster, in general, because we know a machine generally stops working when a single part is removed. And many, many parts will collapse on January 1, 2000. Electrical power, water, food, telephones, banks, the stock market, the oil industry, large factories, air traffic control, large corporate and governmental bureaucracies are the most likely and critical points we expect will shut down for various periods.

The highly probable outcome of this will be a nation-wide crisis on the order of each city being hit by an earthquake combined with 75 percent of the workforce being fired. The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and other dictatorial government agencies are quite likely dusting off their plans for martial law—originally planned for implementation after a nuclear war (of course, the Internet was also planned to survive a nuclear war, but won't last long without phone lines).

What we can do

The Chinese symbol for crisis combines danger and opportunity. For those of us who imagine a new world built on a human scale for human needs and desires, this may be a great opportunity. If the dispossessed accept the orders of this society of crisis management, it will only mean a horrific acceleration of the present horrors and dictatorship of money. If not, they can begin to create the world they desire.

Revolutionaries must begin now to create the consciousness and the possibilities for a revolutionary nucleus around the year 2000. We should spread the idea to working and poor people of self-consciously controlling society on a permanent basis.

Some measures that people can take are:

1) Store several months supply of food and water; purchase an electrical generator or solar cells.

2) Get to know your neighbors; talk about the year 2000 problem and discuss actions around various disaster scenarios.

3) Consider there may be martial law in your neighborhood.

4) Spread the idea of a debt moratorium for the year 2000. Do not pay credit card bills or mortgages in the year 2000. Withdraw cash several months before January 1.

5) Consider what steps you can take to spread political ideas and education. One likely scenario is that groups of average people will keep the bare functions needed for life in the cities running, while the government moves to establish official control over this autonomous action. We should urge people to transform autonomous organization by necessity into autonomous organization by choice and desire.

6) Open as many channels of communication as possible to avoid a single one being closed. Capitalism produces idiots who cannot act unless they have ideas and instructions handed to them. This gives us considerable leverage if we escape being one of those idiots.

The complete text of this essay is available at **worldonfire@hotmail.com**.

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