

Debt

& the Movement That Is Challenging it

Alex Knight

2015

a review of

The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual, Strike Debt, PM Press, 2014, 256pp. Available online from strikedebt.org or PMpress.org

The good people of Strike Debt have revised and expanded their very popular “Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual,” (DROM) into a full-length book. It is half political and historical analysis of how indebtedness has come to define so many aspects of our lives and half a practical how-to guide for people struggling with various forms of debt to seek individual relief and collective action.

Strike Debt defines itself as “a nationwide movement of debt resisters fighting for economic justice and democratic freedom.”

As an ideological and practical tool, the DROM is highly valuable and appropriate to our time of crisis. What remains to be seen is how to transform the growing distress of the millions affected by debt into a grassroots mass movement, which is the only vehicle that can ultimately overthrow the debt system (capitalism) and liberate the future. Organizing campaigns against more focused targets, such as the student loan industry, may be the best way to cohere the analysis and outrage of Strike Debt into national (or global) upheaval.

The *Manual* is very comprehensive in its survey of the pillars of debt. The original chapters from the old pamphlet version of the DROM are still here, in slightly updated form: Credit Card and Automobile Debt, Medical Debt, Student Debt, Housing Debt, Municipal and State Debt, as well as “Fringe Finance” products and services which primarily take advantage of the “unbanked” through such extortionate avenues as payday loans and check-cashing services.

In addition, the new DROM also includes chapters on Tax Debt, National Debt, Climate Debt, as well as Credit Scores, Debt Collection and Bankruptcy. Each chapter, written by different anonymous authors, is detailed in its approach yet broad enough to remain accessible to the general reader. The clear purpose is for those who suffer from a particular form of indebtedness to be able to understand the political significance of that debt as an institution, and therefore to politicize the personal and remove the veil of shame that tends to surround those of us who happen to be stuck with it.

This politicization of the personal is one of the great successes of the book. Rather than viewing one’s own debt as a mark of individual failure which sets one apart, the book argues, “[Debt] is quite typically the outcome of people and families just trying to survive under capitalism.” Seeing this as a unifying, political force is what leads to Strike Debt’s brilliant slogan, “You Are Not a Loan.”

However, the challenge is how to turn theory into strategic action with the capacity to involve large numbers of people in a process of organizing for liberation. In this regard, the *Manual* offers only modest value. While the book’s historical/political framework is educational for those seeking social change, it comes up short in suggesting effective routes for people to apply those lessons in the practice of grassroots organizing.

Most of the practical, how-to sections of the book are focused on individual tactics for debt relief or avoidance. These are worthy of being included and not insignificant. Understanding how to contest one's debt with collection agencies, or in court, could provide tangible relief and allow greater freedom for many individuals.

However, the book's last chapter, "Prospects for Change" (subtitle: "Join the Resistance!"), which is one of the few sections dealing explicitly with collective action, is only seven pages long. Even the majority of that is taken up by historical review of past debt resistance movements rather than proposals for what can be done now and how ordinary people can work together to challenge the existing paradigm.

This deficit is unfortunate, but understandable. No one yet knows how to build a debt resistance movement today, or they would be doing it already. Strike Debt has shown in its actions to date that it is at least willing to experiment and be bold in its attempts to spark interest and participation.

Rolling Jubilee, one of their projects, buys bad debt from creditors for pennies on the dollar with funds contributed by supporters, but instead of collecting it, abolishes it. Their site, rollingjubilee.org, states, "Together we can liberate debtors at random through a campaign of mutual support, good will, and collective refusal."

The effort has attracted major media attention to the debt system's oppressive nature and that there are people standing up to it. But capitalism will not be defeated by spectacular theatre alone.

More inspiring was a recent disruption and takeover of a U.S. Department of Education meeting by Everest Avengers, a new group made up of present and former students of Everest College and other for-profit colleges in the Corinthian Colleges network. This action was led by working class women and people of color, demographics preyed upon by for-profit colleges that offer the illusion of an education but saddle many less fortunate young Americans with debt that will last their entire lives.

It is hopeful to see those most affected by student debt taking the lead to challenge it, since of the six million Americans currently in default on their student loans, 60 percent are women and a disproportionate 57 percent are people of color. Perhaps this new direction of organizing for-profit college students, facilitated by the Debt Collective, also part of Strike Debt, will lead to greater numbers of young people participating in their own liberation.

In Philadelphia, I have joined with other student debtors to initiate a campaign called Strike Student Debt, which aims to accomplish exactly that. Youth are always on the forefront of movements for liberation, and the student debt crisis in this country has reached epic proportions, such that 70 percent of college graduates in 2012 owed an average of almost \$30,000 upon graduation.

Understanding that, we've decided to take Strike Debt's excellent theoretical framework and attempt to construct an organizing framework that aims to mobilize large numbers of Americans through the principles of direct democracy and direct action. To this point, we've focused primarily on research and education, outreach, and a few local actions, but we aim to expand the campaign to other cities in the near future.

The question for us in Strike Student Debt, and for everyone concerned about debt in general, is how do you organize a mass movement against debt? Direct action campaigns have historically been very effective in targeting a localized source of evil, such as a factory or racially segregated facility, but where exactly does the production of debt occur? Can we throw our bodies on "the gears and the levers," to quote Berkeley's Mario Savio, by attempting to shut down private lenders or banks, which legally have no public obligation other than to make profit?

It is similarly difficult to imagine a student strike on campuses being effective enough to force universities across the board (some public, some private, some explicitly for-profit) to collectively agree to slash tuition. When something like this happened in the Maple Spring of Quebec two years ago, students merely prevented a potential tuition hike from about \$1,000 to \$2,000 at public universities.

Or, in Germany recently when students forced the government to remove all university fees, those fees had only existed since 2006. Unlike Canada, or Europe, the U.S. has gone much further down this disastrous road, and it may take mass confrontation with all the centers of power in this country, from Wall St. to Washington, to produce real change.

As the authors of the Manual point out, "Debt is a profoundly effective form of social control," and so breaking the shackles of debt will not be a simple task of mobilization.

It also must involve regular people beginning to see themselves as unwilling to be controlled in the old ways.

This is a possibility that becomes more real each time we discuss it or take action that prefigures such a vision, and for that reason we all owe Strike Debt our gratitude for producing this substantial literary contribution.

Alex Knight is the editor of EndOfCapitalism.com. He is active in many social movements attempting to build new democratic pathways. Reach him at: alex AT endofcapitalism DOT com

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