

MAST

Revolutionary Politics for Medium and Small Towns (no. 1)



Isolation is a major problem facing the medium and small towns where we live. Obviously, most smaller places never have large cultural events like concerts, exhibitions, or festivals, so we have to interpret what is meant by “mass” when we hear about social movements and mobilizations in New York, Seattle, or Los Angeles. Combine that with little to no access to state resources and a general lack of medical care, and you wouldn’t be wrong to say “there’s nothing to do” outside of big cities. The isolation felt by people in medium and small towns is a symptom of class society. It’s similar to and overlaps with the experiences of other marginalized groups, also excluded from the centers of power.

Most of the work that people used to do in medium and small towns has disappeared. Some places have been able to benefit from tourism and the outdoor industry, but these too have abandoned communities, time and time again, as trends and development have moved on. In places that still have a large employer like a hospital, a university, or a factory, everyone lives at the whims of the bosses that run the town.

Typically, the local political bodies, like the city council or the mayor’s office, are made up of white homeowners, regardless of whether renters or people that aren’t white make up the majority of the population. And since medium and small towns are less likely to be ethnically diverse, de-facto segregation and cultural isolation are really common.

Food deserts are everywhere, and they add to the cost of living by requiring people to “commute” just to get essentials. Grocery stores tend to be concentrated in one area, so those who live on the edges of towns or in surrounding communities, like mobile home parks, have to drive really far, making it practically impossible for people with disabilities or who don’t have cars.

Most of us also live in a “mental health desert” where resources for addiction or depression

are non-existent. The situation is especially bad for Native people and anyone living in the most rural areas. And while it’s common for people from small towns to have to go to a slightly larger town just to see a doctor, pretty much all of us have to go to major cities to access specialized care.

Nowadays, families and groups of roommates regularly combine different kinds of income to pay the rent, the mortgage, or the hospital bills. So, we need political theories that make sense to households where people do different jobs. Isolation also affects people who do white-collar work from home, but there’s been no revolutionary political program that effectively connects them to the rest of the workers who are mostly part of the service industry. This kind of unifying politics is especially needed in college towns where students may be workers and tenants but might not share the local culture or have long-term commitments to the community.

In many places, affordable housing hasn’t existed for a while. For tenants, moving is expensive and complicated, and you usually lose your security deposit to your old landlord in the process. Sometimes, elderly and disabled tenants have what seem like affordable rents, but they’ve usually been stuck in the same place for several years or even decades. People living on fixed incomes can’t afford to move and definitely can’t afford rent increases. So, “low rents” are ticking time bombs, threatening to strand more and more people in isolation. These are the same people who end up living on the streets in the medium and small towns of America.

It’s no secret that unemployment is a huge problem in the smallest towns in this country.

So, gentrification, debt, and unemployment drive homelessness, while isolation and lack of resources fuel not only alcoholism and drug addiction but also racism and xenophobia, as workers are forced to compete for fewer and fewer jobs. These divisions are even more stark in border towns along state, national, and tribal boundaries where the term “local” is weaponized as a dominant

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identity. But when small-town culture forces us into the private sphere, and there aren't any social spaces where different people can intermingle, what do we do?

Most people, if they think about politics at all, only really consider elections, ignoring their own immediate needs as well as those of other isolated and excluded people. Too many of us are focused on campaigns or which team someone's rooting for. We need to be more concerned with understanding our own situations and organizing what we learn into a program that unites us together against our common opponents.

Landlords, local politicians, and both the Republican and Democratic parties are all antagonists to a project of Popular Power. On the local level, these forces can morph into an almost cult-like monolith, allowing those who run the town to exploit and take advantage of the small, repressed, and desperate population. They divide us geographically, practically, and strategically. And they dominate our lives with rent, rising costs of living, stagnant wages, medical debt, criminalization of homelessness, criminalization of drugs, the local police, as well as the endless legal processes and fees.

As things stand, in medium and small towns, all the power is in the hands of the local chamber of commerce, developers, and corporations. Local politicians also represent these interests, so it's no surprise that city councils always side with the "business community" over the actual community. We aren't really their constituents; we're their workers and their tenants.

Obviously, the limited number of radicals, revolutionaries, and activists organizing to combat these forces can't keep this up forever on their own. They need strategy, theory, and popular support from the broader community. In a lot of these places, it isn't safe to organize radical study groups, rank-and-file unions, or self-organized neighborhood assemblies. This is why MAST aims to produce analysis of these places from a revolutionary perspective. We think it's still possible to effectively work with an active minority, especially if we have a shared political program that connects

our local struggles to those taking place in other medium and small towns. Through regular questionnaires and publications, we can address our small size in a way that strengthens our political unity and continues to build Popular Power beyond just the places where we live.

Medium and small towns need a revolutionary political program that recognizes and connects the struggles of the exploited, dominated, and oppressed people, locally and around the country.

When MAST says medium and small-sized towns, we mean the boring places no one wants to be... we mean the failed economic centers with abandoned factories; we mean the mass of one street towns across the country; we mean the small college towns with their steady flow of residents in and out every year; we mean border towns, places that straddle the lines between cultures. These towns aren't the commercial or cultural centers of their states. They're second or even third tier economically. But this only highlights why we need radical ideas and political analysis that comes from medium and small towns themselves.

We're not suggesting bypassing or ignoring the economic, political, and cultural power of big cities. But by focusing on what we have in common, our limited local knowledge can be turned into an actionable program for social revolution. If we communicate and learn from each other, the class struggle in medium and small towns can become a revolutionary catalyst. In this process, MAST aims to be a small motor encouraging the flow of revolutionary ideas and practices between medium and small towns.

Next time: What do mass movements in big cities look like to people in medium and small towns?

