

When power failed

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WHAT HAPPENED
WHEN NEW
YORK CITY
HAD
A
POWER
BLACKOUT?

PEOPLE ROSE
TO THE CRISIS,
ACTED
FRIENDLY
GAVE OF
THEMSELVES,
AND BEHAVED
BEAUTIFULLY!

EXACTLY! AND
WHAT HAPPENED
WHEN THE
LIGHTS
WENT
OUT
AGAIN?

ANGER, VIO-
LENCE, CRIME
IN THE
STREETS.

EXACTLY! NOW
WHAT HAP-
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NEW
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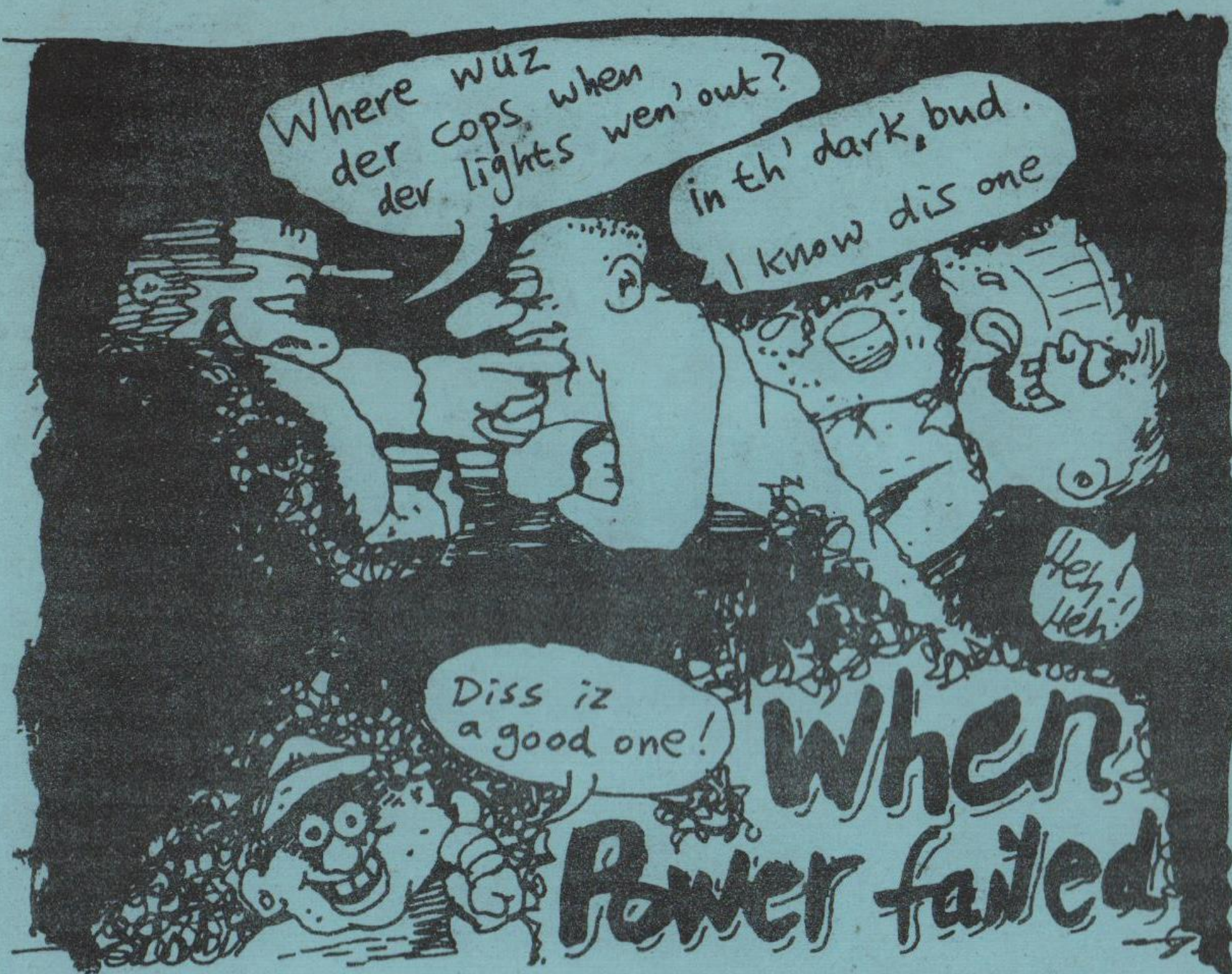
ANGER, VIO-
LENCE, CRIME
IN THE
STREETS.

SEE? THERE'S
YOUR ANSWER
TO CRIME
IN THE
STREETS.

WHAT
IS?

A POLICE
STRIKE.

ONE DAY MORE



ON NOVEMBER 9, 1965, shortly after 5 p.m., at the Sir Adam Beck No. 2 Distribution Plant at Queenston, Ontario, a little four-inch-square electric relay took it upon itself to illuminate a number of anarchist principles. In doing so it selected a method which in and of itself is anarchistic: direct action. Certainly it was far and away the all-time world's champion blown fuse, in that it blacked out 80,000 square miles of the US and Canada, leaving about 30 million people in total darkness. This was an electronic *attentat*—and on a scale one is hard put to overlook. Yet through the darkness, like a beacon, shone such anarchist truisms as decentralism, mutual aid, direct action, and the like.

On the individual level we found people acting so beautifully that even Kropotkin might have been impressed. Naturally there were instances of people acting like capitalists—selling candles at \$1.50 (11/-) each, charging up to \$50 (£18) for a taxicab ride, gouging pounds of flesh for flashlights, etc. However, as *Newsweek* (11.11.65) pointed out, the “real keynote” was struck by a Negro cleaning woman who led a Manhattan career girl up 10 flights of stairs to her apartment, gave her two candles, and then waved away a \$5 tip. “It’s O.K., honey, tonight everyone helps everyone.”

Somehow it seemed as if the whole crazy city had read *Mutal Aid* the night before. Remember, New York is notorious for being this planet’s biggest cut-throat rat-race. Furthermore it was not only the town longest hit by the blackout, it was also by far the most vulnerable area. The blackout struck in the middle of the rush hour, hence there were probably 800,000 people stranded in subways and/or subway trains when the power failed. Another 100,000 were stranded

waiting for commuter trains. Thousands more were trapped on the upper floors of skyscrapers. Undoubtedly the worst off were the hundreds upon hundreds who were trapped in elevators. Yet there was no panic! Everyone was calm and patient. Neither was there any crime wave or looting—of course for this we have to thank the fact that the police were kept too busy with rescue work and other emergency activities. It was estimated that \$100 million (£36 million) was lost in revenue. Certainly one of the hardest hit business interests was the New York Police Force. Therefore I have to give them credit for coming through in the pinch, although several cops of the 24th Precinct failed to appreciate my concern when I walked by in the darkness explaining to my companions in stentorian tones of commiseration that the poor guys were beating their brains out and “all on straight salary for a change”. (The 24th Precinct specializes in shooting 14-year-old Puerto Ricans.) All in all some 5,000 off-duty policemen were called up to join the 7,000 already on duty. The Fire Department brought in their off-duty personnel also.

Yet although these men all performed beautifully at tasks of supererogation, the real stars of the show were the people. Piecing together various contemporary reports (cf. *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, *New York Times*, and *New York Post*) many people actually enjoyed the situation. There was drinking, singing, and necking in the streets. Parties of Frenchmen and US Southerners stuck on the 86th-floor observation roof of the Empire State Building chorused each other alternately with “La Marseillaise” and “Dixie”, though how many hours they kept this up was not reported. A church sexton handed out free votive candles—even God lost money—while a blind woman led passengers out of a subway station. One 19-year-old girl said: “They should do this more often; everyone is much more friendly. It’s a big community again—people have time to stop and talk.”

Volunteers directed traffic with flashlights and handkerchiefs. Home transistor radio listeners pitched in to report on developments and incidents so that helpful information could be shared with everyone else. Drivers shared cars with pedestrians. People quietly queued up at pay telephones, restaurants and saloons. They gathered on street corners to listen together to portable radios. One shoeshine boy completed his task by his customer’s matches.

There was incident upon incident: the whole situation was fantastic. *Time* later mentioned a “crisis-born spirit of camaraderie and exhilaration” and a very prevalent view was that “it brought out the best in people”. Of course the fact is that our authoritarian social system cannot help but bring out the worst in people, hence its removal—and bear in mind that the state had well-nigh disappeared—merely allowed them to act as free human beings. After the blackout various politicians, officials, and kindred parasites delivered encomia

to the splendid behaviour of their "fellow citizens", never realizing how completely superfluous this splendid behaviour proved their own functions to be. Somehow or other the ruling class is incredibly fortunate: people often see through individual leaders, but rarely through leadership *per se*. One woman said that she had received "so many singular courtesies" during the power failure that her "faith in mankind had been restored". Tragically she didn't say she had received so many that her faith in authority based on force had been lost. Yet that power failure was nearly a power vacuum: we were closer to a true anarchy for those few hours than anything most of us will ever be lucky enough to see again. Incidentally, the Statue of Liberty, because it draws its current from New Jersey, remained lighted throughout the blackout. For the first time in her life "that old bitch" as one of her would-be bombers described her, was almost telling the truth.

To some extent there was a Dionysian quality reminding one observer of VE or VJ Day "when everybody loved everybody". Another commented on "the same air of revelry that often accompanies a heavy snowstorm". A lawyer in his 32nd-floor office said, "first we just sat around having drinks. Now we're having a seance to communicate with the spirit that caused this bliss. We could have walked down, but it's about 600 steps, so we're staying, and we're all getting to know each other." Someone else confessed: "It's a big pain and all, but I sort of hate to see it over. Tomorrow will be just another working day." But the following day, and several thereafter, there was a continued *élan* as people exchanged anecdotes of courage, kindness and adventure. There was something to talk about and we were impressed by one another. Cab drivers, waitresses, secretaries, truck drivers, grandmothers, teenagers, lawyers and bell-hops interviewed by the *New York Post* all remarked on the "calm, cheerful, considerate attitude the majority of people maintained". Yet, by way of contrast, there were the inevitable exceptions: an elderly woman paused diffidently trying to cross Fifth Avenue and instantly acquired a four-man escort; meanwhile a panhandler continued to intercept passers-by, concentrating on his own version of mutual aid.

Naturally, the transportation hang-up, vertical as well as horizontal, posed the biggest problem. There were 600 stalled subway trains containing some 800,000 commuters, hundreds of whom were trapped for as long as eight hours, and 60 of whom stayed on for over 14 hours. Furthermore in New York City there were hundreds of elevators stalled between floors in apartment and office buildings, which meant several thousand additional victims requiring rescue.

Nonetheless even in these untoward circumstances the leitmotif was solidarity. As one housewife put it after a six-hour stay in a subway car, "I never thought New Yorkers could be that way. I mean everybody seemed to lose his anger." In one car a passenger

was leading people in Calypso songs and handclapping. Couples were dancing when the conductor arrived to lead them out of an emergency stairwell to the surface. The universal report was that there was no panic. As one woman said, "Our conductor would pop in every once in a while and ask 'How's everybody?', and everybody would say 'Fine'. We really weren't worried at all." Some good samaritans left one train and walked along catwalks to find emergency exits. But then, instead of going safely home, they returned to lead their fellow passengers out. On other trains, talented victims entertained their fellows: in one car there was a tenor; in another, an harmonica player; but the *pièce de résistance* was a bagpiper. Many cars featured communal singing. The most common thing, however, was light conversation interspersed with sardonic humour. Men gave up their seats to ladies who frequently offered them back. In one car a woman fainted but word was transmitted from person to person until someone was located with smelling salts. Thereupon these were passed back up hand to hand.

Those who had long waits on their hands exchanged whatever comestibles they had in pockets or pocket books: peanuts, wild cherry drops, assorted goodies, or even antacid tablets. One group shared a combination of doughnuts and salami which had been sliced with a nail-file. At midnight the Transit Authority sent in food to those who hadn't yet been extricated. The food-bearers were greeted with a tableau of people sleeping with their arms draped about other people who had been complete strangers five hours previously, and nary a cop in sight!!!

Meanwhile those unfortunates trapped in elevators—96 in the Empire State Building alone—were enduring their plight with the same sort of equanimity exhibited in the subways. Here too the people entertained one another with improvised games, such as the unlikely partners for stalled elevators. This was readily won with the combination of Defence Secretary Macnamara and a draft card burner. In an elevator in the RCA Building one gentleman gave a course in Yoga positions. When firemen chopped their way into one immobilised car, they asked: "Are there any pregnant women in here?" They were answered: "We've hardly met!"

Surface transportation reflected the same sort of co-operation and solidarity. Even though the Transit Authority was running 3,500 of its 4,000 buses it could barely make a dent. Therefore countless thousands hiked home across the bridges or up the avenues. Others waited calmly in line at the bus stops, with no pushing or shoving. Nobody seemed to take advantage of the confusion to avoid paying fares, although some passengers couldn't have paid if they'd tried—they were riding on the rear bumpers. Bus drivers themselves were inordinately accommodating, calling out each stop as they approached. In New York this comes under the heading of *mirabile dictu*. At the

same time, dozens of private automobiles were loading up at every intersection with absolute strangers.

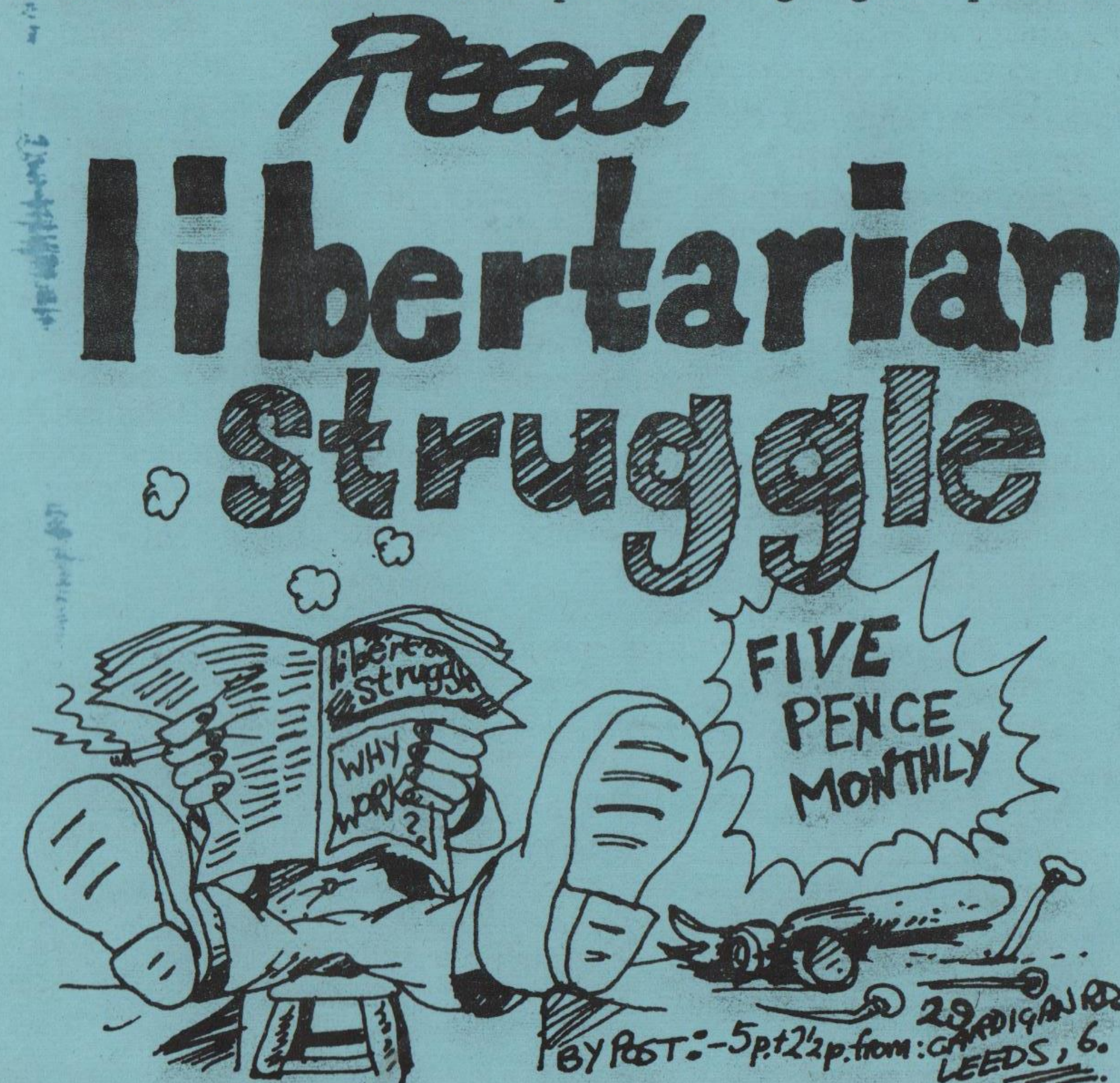
On the other hand all was not sweetness and light during the darkness. Some people capitalized on others' vulnerability. About 100 windows were smashed in, and about 41 looters were arrested (none in blue uniform). All told perhaps a dozen stores were looted, which is absolutely negligible in a city of over eight million. Even Police Commissioner Broderick conceded that both the crime and the casualty rates for the night were far below normal. (So who needs him?) One enterprising gunman held up a rare-coin dealer by the flickering light of the shop's only candle—a touching vignette to be sure. There were a total of 65 persons arrested for burglary, larceny, or felonious assault—as opposed to a typical 380 for a comparable 16-hour stretch. The sum total of arrests for all crimes was only 25 per cent of what it would have been during an ordinary night. There were very few shoplifters reported, which is nothing short of miraculous considering the open-house policy of the department stores (cf. infra). Moreover there were only 33 vehicle accidents involving injuries, and 44 involving property damage—and this in the world's largest city, completely devoid of traffic lights! There was one bus that ploughed into a crowd of people in Queens knocking down 38 persons, some of whom were seriously injured. The driver—evidently in complete consternation—jumped out and fled. Yet his actions must be viewed in context with the fact that his was only one out of 3,500 buses operating under these weird conditions.

Somewhere along the line a subway motorman found himself facing charges of rape for flashing a badge and leading a young lady to the ostensible safety of his room. Yet later in court he contended that on any number of previous occasions he had led the same young lady to a similar lair to similarly lay her, so who knows. . . . Progressing from debatably to unquestionably false alarms, we find that the Fire Department reported a much higher incidence than usual: 227 rather than the typical 50. This is totally irreconcilable with anarchist theory, so I've decided not to mention it at all.

Easily offsetting those relatively few human beings who acted like capitalists were the many capitalists who acted like human beings. For example many department stores flirted with free access for the evening. Macy's played host to an estimated 5,000 customers and employees for the night—inviting one and all to make themselves comfortable, and serving them all coffee, sandwiches, cookies, and candy. Needless to say, the furniture department on the ninth floor was the best spot for comfort. Meanwhile, across the street, Gimbel's was featuring a guitar-playing salesman for the entertainment of its customer/guests. One of the songs they reportedly joined in on was the old wartime favourite, "When the Lights Go on Again All Over the World". Evidently no one was familiar with "We Shall Over-

come". Lord and Taylor's turned over its entire second floor to customers for the duration of the blackout, while B. Altman's turned over its first. Altman's, incidentally, has its own power generator, so there was some light by which to enjoy the caviare and specially blended coffee which were among the imported delicacies provided by the gourmet department and served to shoppers and employees. Five hundred stayed there overnight, evidently being unable to tear themselves away from all that caviare. Bloomingdales turned over its home furnishings department to strandeers—one woman slept on an \$800 (£287) sofa—and then capped it off by having its staff serve breakfast to everyone the next morning. Fina Company had a combination sales meeting and dinner scheduled for that evening, but they catered it to customers instead. Bonwit Teller chartered two buses to get its employees home, and suggested that they hold hands leaving the store so that none would get lost. Indicative of the prevailing mood was the fact that the employees danced out of the store together because "someone thought it would be fun". Meanwhile 40 people were bedded down for the night in the showroom of the Simmons Mattress Co.

The city's hotels came through in grand style. The Commodore set up 150 cots in a banquet room. Both the Roosevelt and the Algonquin switched elderly guests and those with heart conditions to the lower floors. At the Stanhope the manager gave up his own



room, and an assistant manager carried a crippled woman up to the 16th floor. On arrival, she said, "Now I'd like a glass of water," so he procured one. At the Statler Hilton two bellmen carried a crippled guest to the 7th floor, but it was not reported what his needs were on arrival. The Americana passed out blankets and pillows to the 200 occupants of its plush lobby—most of the other hotels merely provided their lobbies as free space. The Sheraton-Atlantic, whose lobby was occupied by some 2,000 people, considered the evening somewhat less than a total loss, because as one manager pointed out, "The bar is doing a land-office business". That hotel's report seemed typical: 99 per cent of the people were "terrific" but a few guests tried to sublet their rooms at double the rate.

Unfortunately, utopian free access was much less prevalent in food than it was in shelter. Nevertheless one meat market in Brooklyn donated a whole pig to a neighbouring convent thereby providing roast pork snacks to everybody for blocks around. Two numerically named restaurants, 21 and Four Seasons, adopted a policy dangerously akin to "from each according to his ability; to each according to his need". The 21 passed out steak sandwiches and free drinks without limit, while Four Seasons ladled out free soup. Fully to appreciate the enormity of this, reflect on the following: in 1960, when prices presumably were lower, an acquaintance of mine told me that two friends of his went to Four Seasons for luncheon. Including drinks and tip it cost them nearly \$60 (over £21) while the band played "Nearer my Veblen to Thee". My wife and I didn't happen to go there that night so we missed out on the free soup, but we did enjoy knishes by candlelight at our own expense in a nearby delicatessen. Many other restaurants, although they didn't give away food, stayed open all night to provide free shelter.

Most downtown offices close at 5 p.m. and were empty when the blackout struck. Those still occupied did whatever they could. Revlon, for example, gave its girls couches in the executive offices and then told them to take the next day off. One of their secretaries, stuck on the 27th floor, ate crabmeat and graham cracker sandwiches, and described her experience with a wistful: "I had a great time." Whether she was alluding to the crabmeat or the couches was not made clear.

All sorts of institutions opened their doors, or in some instances dropped their gangways, as a free public service during the emergency. Final estimates included well over 400 people who had been put up for the night in staterooms of ships in port when the lights went out. Armouries were thrown open to all comers, while railroad stations, airlines terminals, and churches sheltered countless thousands.

The 34th Street Armoury alone accommodated 1,500 refugees, offering wooden chairs and what illumination could be furnished from the headlights of a few jeeps parked in the middle of the drill

floor. For some unexplained reason no cots were available. Naturally Rockefeller had immediately called out the National Guard, which is always a good safe ploy for masking gubernatorial inutility. According to the *New York Post* the Guardsmen were armed with rifles "unloaded but impressive". To complete the farce they wore packs containing ponchos and gas masks, perhaps out of fear that someone would fart. The Guard's major contribution seems to have been scouring the area around 34th Street and Park Avenue until 1.30 a.m.—a full eight hours after the attentat—at which point they finally came up with coffee and French bread for the besieged. Compare this forlorn, dilatory effort on the part of the military to the ingenuity of the prostitutes in their quest for bread. *Life Magazine* pointed out that these ladies "were among the first to procure flashlights", indicating that the yen is still mightier than the sword.

At the Central Commercial High School, a double session school, the second session runs from 12.30 to 5.50 p.m. Thus there were 1,000 students being subjected to obfuscation when the blackout struck. Some 400 of these left during the course of the evening as parents arrived to pick them up, but the school officials kept the other 600 in the classrooms all night. These joked, sang, and later put their heads on their desks and slept—readily taking the crisis in stride. Of course they were nowhere near as comfortable as the lucky ones who spent the night cradled in luxurious barber chairs, but they were infinitely better off than the hundreds who sought sanctuary in St. Patrick's Cathedral. These were huddled in the pews without even a hair shirt for warmth, and worst of all, no bogs. Mgr. McGovern later confessed, "We've been sending people over to the New Western Hotel for 80 years," which tends to confirm something many of us have long suspected: God's up shit creek.

Of far more serious import was the situation in hospitals. Here, too, people improvised brilliantly in the emergency. At Bellevue a delicate cornea transplant was under way when the lights went out, but was successfully completed by battery-operated floodlights. At St. John's, under similar conditions, emergency surgery was performed on two people whose spleen had been ruptured in the previously mentioned bus accident. In another hospital a five-hour craniotomy was performed by makeshift light. Final reports indicated at least five dozen babies delivered by candle or otherwise. One man died tragically in the emergency room at Flushing Hospital. He had been in an automobile accident prior to the blackout and was already under surgery when the lights went out. Only two other deaths in New York City were attributed directly to the blackout: one man suffered a heart attack from climbing ten flights of stairs, and a second fell down a stairway and struck his head. Injuries, of course, were much more common: at the emergency ward of Bellevue alone, 145 patients were treated for blackout injuries—broken arms or legs from falls, car accident victims, and some heart cases. Police, firemen, and volunteers rushed dry ice to the city's hospitals to keep stored blood

from spoiling, whereas a distress call from St. Vincent's brought forth 30 volunteers from a Greenwich Village coffee house to hand-pump iron lungs.

Although New York offered perhaps the most spectacular, and in view of its well-deserved reputation for ruthless competition, the most unexpected examples of mutual aid, the same pattern was repeated everywhere throughout the blacked-out area. It was solidarity, ingenuity, lack of hysteria, consideration, etc., and little or no government. In Toronto, Ontario, businessmen directed traffic, and in the process unsnarled the city's all-time record traffic jam. Among other things all the street-cars and trolley buses had stopped dead. In Albany, New York, teenagers with transistor radios went from house to house advising residents to turn off electric appliances. In Burlington, Vermont, 200 people hurried with flashlights to the local hospital in answer to a radio plea which later turned out to be a prank. In Springfield, Vermont, a barber finished trimming a customer's hair by the headlights a motorist aimed in his front window. All over the stricken territory civilians patrolled areas, directed traffic, and maintained order. Included among all these civilian volunteers would have to be the contingent of Boston gendarmes who rushed out of the Police-men's Ball dressed in tuxedos. Devoid of badge, uniform and gun these were on identical footing with the students from Boston University who also pitched in.

Incident after incident offered irrefutable proof that society can function without the implicit threats of force and violence which constitute the state. There was probably more freedom from law, however temporary, in that blacked-out 80,000-mile area than there has been at any time since it was originally stolen from murdered and/or defrauded Indians. And it yielded compelling evidence of anarchist theories. As Kropotkin once stated: "We are not afraid to say 'Do what you will; act as you will', because we are persuaded that the great majority of mankind, in proportion to their degree of enlightenment, and the completeness with which they free themselves from existing fetters, will behave and act always in a direction useful to society."

Such then might be the blackout's confirmation of Kropotkin. What reinforcement does it offer Bakunin? Actually a good deal, but I'll cite only one case—a frequently distorted quotation which Max Nettlau once described as "a clarion call for revolution in the widest sense". Written in 1842, some 20 years before Bakunin became an anarchist, in fact before he could even be considered a conscious revolutionary, it appeared at the conclusion of an article entitled "Reaction in Germany", under the pseudonym Jules Elysard: "The urge to destroy is a creative urge". Bakunin's detractors, both in and out of the anarchist movement, invariably swoop down like vultures on that line. However Bakuninists might suffer less dismay (and, let's face it, embarrassment) if they viewed it in context with a heart-warming article which appeared in the Financial Section of the *New York Post* the day after the blackout: "Without power, Computers

Died and Wall Street Stopped".

On the other hand, if the blackout provided all sorts of verification for decentralists, anarchists, Kropotniks and Bakuninists, what comfort did it offer to pacifists? The answer is, damn little. As both James Wechsler (*New York Post*) and Brad Lyttle (*Peace News*) pointed out, the same sort of unfathomable but infallible electronic technology which blacked out 30 million of us temporarily is exactly what we're relying on to prevent an accidental World War III blacking out three billion of us permanently! Small solace to me is the fact that the whole god-damned Pentagon will come down as local fall-out: my urge to destroy is not quite that creative. What with the hot line conked out, and the blithe "assurance" from the First Regional Army Air Defence Commander that despite the blackout "all of the Army's missile sites on the Eastern Coast are operative", it was obviously a case of genocide continued as usual. Bring on the Dark Ages!

The final object lesson of the blackout? The predictable, virtually automatic, responses of various members of society when confronted by crisis: soldiers fall back on their weapons; clergymen fall back on their prayers; doctors fall back on their antibiotics; bureaucrats fall back on their desks; and politicians fall back on their asses. But people fall back on one another, and in that fact must remain all the hopes—however minimal—for the survival of the human race.

