

“If you care about the world you live in, you might want to fight for it, because it might not be there next year.” A conversation with hip-hop artist Sole

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30 January 2026

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke recently with independent rap artist Sole after the latter published a video on his social media page denouncing the Trump administration’s deployment of ICE in America’s cities and the brazen murder of Minneapolis resident Renée Nicole Good.

Sole (born Timothy Holland, September 25, 1977 in Portland, Maine) is a pioneering figure of the American underground hip-hop scene, whose work, over more than two decades, has fused experimental musical form with a critique of elements of capitalist society and imperialist war. Emerging at the end of the 1990s as a founding member of the California-based Anticon collective, he helped carve out a new tendency in independent rap that was hostile to commercial formulas, intensely literary and consciously opposed to the degradation of culture experienced in capitalism.

Albums such as *Bottle of Humans* and *Selling Live Water* (2000 and 2002 releases on Anticon Records) are widely regarded in serious music circles as landmark statements of this oppositional current. In the years since, Sole has combined a prolific musical output with an explicit engagement with generally left-wing views. Our differences with some of those views emerge in the discussion.

In his response to the ICE murder of protesters in Minneapolis, Sole-Holland speaks bluntly, stating that the US government is seeking to build a dictatorship and likening the population to “frogs slowly cooking in an authoritarian soup.” He notes that “people are getting killed, cities are under military occupation ... you’re not going to be able to just keep your head down and hope everything goes back to normal. There is no ‘normal.’”

The WSWs reached out to Sole asking him to speak more about the situation. He agreed, despite recovering from a recent illness. The following is the result of that conversation, edited for length and clarity.

Nick Barrickman: Let’s speak a little bit about your background.

Tim Holland: My dad was a heroin addict; he was an abusive person. Both of my parents owned their own businesses. So there’s something about that trauma, but also having parents who were hustlers, working class people, going from having a lot to being on food stamps. You gotta get kicked to make great art.

Around age 11, I just started writing rhymes. I heard a Fat Boys song on a video and just something about it sounded smart. I started writing raps. I’d loop beats on a tape dub by rewinding, pausing. Then I would write rhymes.

I got online in 1996, before the internet was a big thing, and just started trading tapes with people from all over the country and started building up a network with those people. Later, some of them led me to the people who I founded Anticon Records with.

When I was coming up in hip-hop, it was just before the “bling” era. It’s when rap went from Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions and the politically conscious stuff to the gangster stuff. NWA, who were very politically sharp, actually. But then it just went from there, Puff Daddy-hip-hop became s—, in my opinion, around that time.

That’s when Anticon started popping. We were drawing inspiration from indie rock and electronic music and beat poetry and Dadaism, and underground West Coast hip-hop and underground East Coast beatmaking. Just a bunch of weirdo outsiders—mostly white boys—found each other.

We put together the first collectively run hip-hop label in North America. It was collectively owned and operated.

After 9/11, I was in New York on the way to pick someone up at the airport and saw the smoke. The night before, I had this weirdly prophetic dream. So when I saw the smoke, I just had this instinct that now I had to educate myself on history, politics and philosophy. I may have been turned off by where political hip-hop went in the early 2000s, but I needed to educate myself. I didn’t see any reason to just sing about my feelings or to sing about the music industry.

I sought to educate myself. So you want a revolution? What does a revolution look like? I really have put myself through an educational course and put myself and my music in the interest of revolution, of forwarding revolutionary theory and politics. I like art too, I just can’t babble and I can’t make love songs.

NB: What were some of the issues behind the response in rap music to these events you’re describing, 9/11, the Iraq War? These were major turning points in society that impacted culture and yet aside from a few artists, yourself included, music didn’t really become politicized.

TH: I just don’t understand that, personally. You’re a musician. You have all the time in the world to educate yourself. Some of these rappers just sit around playing video games. So that’s why we started a record label. Are you asking me about Anticon or hip-hop?

NB: Hip-hop in general.

TH: Rappers ain’t about s—, straight up. Ninety-nine percent of them. I wouldn’t want to put myself in the mind of someone who doesn’t care enough to speak on these things.

I understand you don’t want to listen to a book report. You don’t want to listen to someone reading a Karl Marx book to you on record. You don’t want someone telling you what you already know. You don’t want to hear a college 101. I understand why a lot of artists don’t put their views out there. Once you put your views out there, you have to be able to defend them. So you have to really educate yourself on these subjects. So there’s that and there’s also, frankly, people being scared. No one said s—

about Palestine either.

NB: Regarding that, there was the Kendrick Lamar-Drake feud, while the genocide was going on, which was so damning about what passes for “consciousness” in rap.

TH: I have to mute out 95 percent of what is said in the hip-hop I listen to. I can’t listen to Billy Woods all day and he is one of the sharpest voices in hip-hop. I love the way he navigates personal issues with the bigger worldly issues. He does it in an interesting way that doesn’t sound like a book report.

NB: Obviously, art has a unique job to do. It can’t replace politics. There are things that art can reveal that nothing else can.

TH: Sometimes I find myself listening to Santigold. She’s like M.I.A. in some ways. The music has a ska-ish reggae kind of vibe in it with electronic beats and it keeps me moving. I always listen to the lyrics and I’m thinking, well, maybe I’m just imagining that these are revolutionary lyrics, you know? It’s vague enough to be empowering and revolutionary, but catchy enough to be a pop song. That’s the power of music, it can put wind under your sails and tell you you’re not crazy. There’s something really important about that, especially right now.

NB: Speaking of that: the first three weeks or so of the New Year has been a whirlwind. There’s been the invasion of Venezuela. There were the protests in Iran, which the Trump administration has cynically latched onto in order to push for regime change and threaten to more bombing. There are the Trump administration’s threats to annex Greenland, which will potentially bring the US into direct military conflict with another member of NATO. The events in Minneapolis obviously form a part of this.

Could I ask you to speak about these events and why you made the video?

TH: First and foremost, if you’ve been following my music, I’ve made it a point to use my platform and whatever art I’m making in furtherance of revolutionary politics, specifically anarchists or anti-authoritarian communism.

Art in itself is actually really important. When I’m in my kitchen, I’m listening to music. That’s the only thing keeping me going right now; music. But over the last seven years, I moved back to Maine. I got a homestead. I’m not super steeped in activism anymore. I run a vegan food company. I’m still making music, but I’m kind of on the periphery of the empire. Now I’m a dad, you know, my life is more domestic.

For me, that’s a really important perspective, because when you’re a revolutionary without kids, your conception of the world is entirely different than someone who has kids. So I feel like, as a parent, part of my terrain of struggle now is like coexisting in a world where there’s like cops and FBI agents and like radicals and parents and different kinds of people.

The conversations I have on a daily basis aren’t with people who want to overthrow the government and want free communism. Most people just don’t want fascism and we’re fine. They were fine with the way things were, and that’s part of the problem.

As someone who has been organizing, I just feel like our actions are never enough to meet the moment. The issues that are on our plate such as global warming, AI and the massive disruption it will cause to our world. Obviously, police killings and all this other stuff, but these are the things that we should be addressing [as a society]. We shouldn’t be rounding up people living here or have our government attack the cities of every single politician who stands in its way. Now they’re [ICE and other agencies] flooding Maine. People are freaking out. The violence is coming home.

Trump is just unleashing so much chaos. He is continuously sticking his finger in beehives. It’s like shock doctrine on steroids. If you care about the world you live in, you might want to fight for it, because it might not be there next year, or it might not be there for your kids.

NB: That’s a strong statement, and it rings true. Trump is the face of the

crisis, but obviously the crisis is much bigger than just him. You wouldn’t have had these types of conversations we’re having decades ago.

The situation has been building up. Trump’s administration is probably the wealthiest administration in world history. Obviously, the government was always controlled in one way or another by the extremely rich. But this marks a whole new level.

I do want to get a little back into this question, though, about your video. You had mentioned that your children had actually raised this issue with you?

TH: Well, my wife doesn’t necessarily agree with how I talk to my kids about politics. I don’t hide things from them. Maine is interesting because it was like the whitest state in the country when I was growing up. But part of why I wanted to move back here was when I would go to downtown Portland, I would now see more hijabs, African markets, Arab markets.

Maine also has a large Somali and African population. So ICE is currently here to deal with [them] and the cruelty is the point, right? But not all my children’s friends are white. They have friends who are from Africa. They have friends who are Mexican. They themselves are mixed. Their grandfather is from Iraq.

So they were asking me about how these things work and what was going on with ICE. They were saying ICE has been around and they’re having conversations at school. ICE is just breaking the laws, they’re profiling.

People I found out who voted for Trump the second time, we’re not friends anymore. You’re an idiot if you voted for him a second time and now we’re all paying for that ignorance. The Democrats suck. Kamala was terrible. Biden, you know what I mean? Like, yeah, yeah, yeah. But that still would have been way better than living under military occupation and the shredding of the Constitution.

NB: I would say America didn’t necessarily know what it was getting. I don’t think most people voted for any of this. And, in fact, it shows in the polls. Even Trump’s immigration policy, which he ran on. Obviously, there remains a political disconnect in this country between the depth of the crisis and the revolutionary methods required to resolve it.

The Democratic Party isn’t a lesser evil, it’s another capitalist party. They work together in tandem with the Republicans. No doubt, what Trump does and what the Republicans do is more openly rapacious. The Democrats’ job, however, is the other side of this, to suppress the population, to misdirect and disorient it, to demobilize it. And, at the same time, to normalize the things which the Republicans then lay hold of and take to the next level.

The suppression of anti-genocide protest started with the Biden administration. The attacks on students for supposedly being “antisemitic” started with Biden. The genocide of the Palestinian people started under Biden. The weapons that Israel used on the children were sold to them by Biden’s administration. Trump, of course, took that and took it further. They work in tandem.

That even showed in the actual behavior of the Democratic Party during the election, where they were warning about Trump one second and then after Trump won, they wished him well. What about what they were warning about? His being a dictator “on day one” and so on?

The biggest thing the Democrats are concerned about, in addition to foreign policy issues, is that the working population may start to assert itself directly in opposing Trump in ways that threaten the oligarchy, which I think is becoming more and more the case. Nothing frightens the Democrats more than a movement from below.

The call for a general strike in Minneapolis on January 23 is significant. It has to be the starting point for a much wider movement. There is a widespread recognition that the normal means and the normal channels for confronting Trump are no longer sufficient. It must be developed by the working population and it must develop independently of the Democratic

Party and all the Democratic Party's arms that it uses to try and box in the population. I'm talking about the AFL-CIO, for example, which has not even endorsed the January 23 event. If they do endorse it, it's to make it as passive as possible, treat it like it's a consumer boycott rather than a work stoppage. Historically, the biggest hurdle of the American working class has been the Democratic Party.

TH: It's so hard, man, battling liberalism. Nobody wants to acknowledge that we're really in this situation where we need to make a new world, you know?

NB: The population doesn't come to revolutionary ideas through idealistic or moral searching. They do so based on necessity. I think we're reaching a point like that now.

Could you let us know if you've got any music coming out in the near future?

TH: I've got a new album coming out, with my man Televangel actually, we will have vinyl in a month.



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