



## Debate

# Reflections of an Anti-Imperialist after Ten Years of Debate

3 June 2021, by **Gilbert Achcar**

**New Politics:** Gilbert, you've recently published a much-discussed article in *The Nation* on anti-imperialism. [1] I wonder if we could begin with you telling us why you wrote the article and briefly summarizing your argument.

Gilbert Achcar: Thank you, Steve. I wrote this article because of the big confusion that exists nowadays on the left on the meaning of "anti-imperialism." I believe that this confusion is primarily a result of the sea change in the global situation that followed the collapse of the USSR. There has also been a change in the type of wars waged in the global South. Imperialist wars against national liberation movements or regimes are no longer the predominant type, as in the first decades after the Second World War. Since the 1990s we have seen imperialist wars against oppressive regimes such as in Iraq, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. The situation got yet more complicated with what has been called the Arab Spring in 2011. Western imperialist powers — Barack Obama's United States in the first place — appeared as if supportive of the popular uprisings against dictatorial regimes.

So, what does it mean to be an anti-

imperialist in this new international environment? That's the issue I tackle in the article, as a result of my long personal involvement in such debates, starting most crucially from 2011 on the issue of Libya, and then later on Syria. My original title was "Their anti-imperialism and ours." [2] I formulated three basic principles of what constitutes truly progressive anti-imperialism in my view, principles that ought to be rather elementary for anyone on the left, whatever their ideological orientation, Marxist, anarchist, or whatever, provided they adhere to the most elementary principle of a true left, which is democracy. People who agree on these principles can discuss anti-imperialist tactics. Some, however, discard them. I call these people "neo-campists" because they are no longer systematically aligned behind a single specific state or "socialist camp" as were the campists of the time of the USSR, but determine their positions negatively, through kneejerk opposition to anything the US or UK governments do and sympathy for whoever the two governments oppose, including despotic regimes and Russia's rival imperialism. The neo-campists are most often incapable of engaging in discussion without resorting to invective and calumny. I concluded my article with this observation, and indeed, no sooner

was it out than various neo-campists rushed to confirm it.

Now, what are the three principles? The first relates to that most elementary democratic principle that I already mentioned. When it comes to international politics, to be on the left means, first of all, to support the peoples' right to self-determination. That should be the starting point in defining a truly progressive anti-imperialism. Crucially, this starting point is not opposition per se to this or that imperialist state. It is rather the defense of the people's right to self-determination: it is because imperialist states, by definition, trample upon this right that they must be countered.

The second principle is that anti-imperialism requires opposition to all imperialist states, not standing with one against the others, or ignoring one and its victims and only focusing on the other, whichever it is. On the left in Western countries, there are neo-campists who only focus on U.S. and British imperialism, or Western imperialism in general, and ignore, at best, or even support, other imperialist states, such as Russia. You may find the reverse in Russia: progressives who are very hostile to what their government does abroad and remain silent on, if not supportive of, what Western governments do.

Once one rises above the Western-centrism of much of the Western left, one understands that a truly internationalist anti-imperialist perspective is one that opposes imperialism whatever its nationality or its geographical location, West or East.

The third principle addresses exceptional cases. There might be exceptional circumstances where intervention by an imperialist power is crucial in preventing a massacre or genocide, or in preventing a popular democratic uprising from being bloodily suppressed by a dictatorship. We have seen such cases in recent years. But even then, anti-imperialists should dispel any illusions, and advocate zero trust, in the imperialist country. And they should demand that its intervention remain limited to forms, and bound by legal constraints when they exist, that do not enable the imperialist power to impose its will or determine the course of action.

This third principle explains why, in the cases of Libya and Syria, even though Western governments pretended to be on the side of democratic change against the dictatorial reactionary regime, I have been opposed to direct intervention. The only exception was at the very beginning of the UN-authorized No-Fly Zone over Libya, when I explained that, for the sake of preventing a foretold massacre, I could not oppose the intervention in its initial phase. I explained a thousand times that I never said that I supported the intervention—but, as we know, there are none so deaf as those who will not hear. All I said is that I couldn't oppose it, which is not the same as saying I favored it, except to those who don't know the difference between abstaining and supporting, or who prefer to deliberately ignore it because their only way of arguing is by distorting the views of those they disagree with.

The population of the second city in Libya, Benghazi—legitimately fearing for their lives, with the Libyan regime moving its far superior forces toward the city, and the dictator, Gaddafi, vowing to crush them—implored the UN for protection. Even Moscow and Beijing could not oppose this: they

both abstained at the UN Security Council. But once the immediate danger was over, I stood against the continuation of NATO bombing, which went far beyond the UN mandate. My attitude became the same as the one I have held on Syria from the very start, which is to support the delivery of defensive weapons to the insurgents in order to protect the population. I would not support the delivery of weapons to an organization such as ISIS, of course, since it is as oppressive as the regime, if not more so, but I certainly support the delivery of weapons to the Kurdish forces in Syria or what used to be the Free Syrian Army before it fell under full Turkish control starting from 2016.

I am opposed to the presence of U.S. troops on the ground, even in Kurdish-dominated northeast Syria, which is where they are stationed at present. I am actually opposed to all five occupations in Syria—in chronological order: Israel, Iran and its proxies, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. Five states have troops on Syrian soil. I oppose all these occupations and support the right of the Syrian people to democratic self-determination, not the right of the murderous regime to bring in accomplices to help it massacre its own people, which is what some neo-campists support.

**NP: Let me explore the three principles a little more. Critics may say something like: But what about regime change? Doesn't the United States have a program of regime change around the world—in Ukraine, in the Balkans, in the South China Sea, and Xinjiang province? Shouldn't we be opposed to that regime change program?**

GA: "Regime change" is a phrase that was used by the Bush administration. As far as I know, it hasn't been used since then. The phrase used by the Obama administration in the face of the Arab Spring was "orderly transition." And that's very different from "regime change" à la Bush. The latter means occupation of a country in order to change its type of government, usually under the pretext of bringing democracy. This is typical colonial-like domination that must be resolutely opposed—even if it were

about North Korea, an appallingly totalitarian state. But "regime change" wasn't the Obama administration's line. Some on the left lag behind reality, always fighting the last war. U.S. imperialism's methods and doctrine did change in the light of the Iraqi debacle, as they had previously changed after Vietnam.

"Orderly transition" might be regarded as the true Obama doctrine: it meant that no existing state should be dismantled. The state apparatus should be kept intact, instead of allowing the kind of dismantlement that the U.S. occupation implemented in Iraq, which has come to be regarded in Washington as the main reason for the subsequent debacle of the U.S. occupation. What Obama favored everywhere in the Middle East and North Africa was a compromise between the old regime and the opposition, opening the way for a transition that preserved the state's continuity. He put pressure on Egypt's military in 2011 for this kind of transition. He tried to steer Libyan events in that direction, but failed completely, as the state there got completely dismantled. He sponsored the Gulf monarchies' mediation to obtain that outcome in Yemen. And that's what he advocated for Syria, openly stating in 2012 that he supported "the Yemen solution" for that country. What was this "Yemen solution"? It was a compromise between the head of the regime and the opposition, mediated by the Gulf monarchies: The Yemeni President stepped down, handed the presidency to the Vice President, but remained in control of major levers of power in the country. That's the "solution" that Obama favored in Syria.

Now, what has been the most important intervention of the Obama administration in Syria? To answer this question, let us compare its attitude toward the Syrian opposition to the way the United States dealt with the mujahideen who fought the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. Washington supported the Afghan mujahideen, along with the Saudi kingdom and the Pakistani military. It is well known that it armed them with anti-aircraft missiles, Stinger missiles. Compare that to Syria. Not only did the United States not deliver any such

weapons to the Syrian uprising—even in 2012, when it was still dominated by what could be described as a democratic opposition. But it even forbade all its regional allies from delivering such weapons to the Syrian insurgents. Turkey produces Stinger missiles under U.S. license, but it wasn't allowed to deliver a single one of them to the Syrian opposition—nor were the Gulf monarchies. That was the crucial intervention of the United States in the Syrian conflict. And that is what allowed Bashar al-Assad's regime to remain in place. It allowed him to maintain a monopoly of air power, which enabled his regime to even drop barrel-bombs from helicopters—a most indiscriminate and devastating type of bombing. Helicopters are an easy target for anti-aircraft weapons, and yet, how many helicopters have you seen shot down by the opposition in Syria? Hardly any. The reason for this U.S. intervention was, first, Israel's opposition to the delivery of anti-aircraft missiles to the Syrian opposition, and second, Obama's fear of creating the conditions for a rout of the Syrian regime's forces that would have led to state collapse in the manner of what happened in Libya.

Thus, the Obama administration in fact helped Bashar al-Assad much more than it did the Syrian opposition. Iran understood this and upgraded its intervention in Syria through its proxies starting from 2013, confident that Obama wouldn't do anything serious to prevent it or to step up qualitatively his support to the opposition. Obama confirmed this in 2013 in the way he backtracked on the famous chemical weapon “red line.” Then in 2015, Russia intervened massively in its turn. So, you have two reactionary states, Iran and Russia, intervening in the Syrian conflict on a much more massive scale than any Western power. There is no way anyone could claim the contrary, lest they completely distort the facts. Add to this that the main armed U.S. intervention in Syria, including deployment of troops on the ground, was actually on the side of the only leftwing force engaged in the Syrian conflict, which is the Kurdish movement. That's something that neo-campism cannot fathom.

NP: Russia is a lesser imperialist power. But somebody might tell you: If there is a lesser imperialist power and a greater one, doesn't it make sense to focus our attention on stopping the greater imperialist power?

GA: Well, that's the logic of the lesser evil, the object of a long history of debates. However, let us consider what one means when speaking of a lesser evil. Not that it is lesser in size, but that it's less dangerous, less vicious, less “evil” than the other. Thus, a dominant liberal capitalist force could be construed as a lesser evil than a weaker fascist one. In that light, I really don't think that Russia is in any way a “lesser evil” than the United States. Russia crushed the Chechen people within its own territory between 1994 and 2009 in ways that are certainly no less brutal, if not more brutal, than what the United States did to Iraq during that same period. Both were huge crimes. Moreover, the Russian government is far more authoritarian and undemocratic than the U.S. government. U.S. imperialism can be stopped by mass action. Russian imperialism doesn't allow any mass opposition to build up. So, there are several issues that make the characterization of Russia as the “lesser evil” void of meaning. And even though the Russian economy is dwarfed by those of the United States, and China for that matter, the Russian military is a much bigger part of the global military balance than the Russian economy is of the global economy, and it is increasingly aggressive in projecting its power abroad.

Look at what Russia is doing today in my part of the world—excuse me again for turning it to my part of the world and not looking at everything from the perspective of New York or London. What is Russia doing today in the Middle East and North Africa? It has played and is still playing a key role in shoring up the Syrian regime, one of the most murderous dictatorships in the region, and it is itself responsible for a good deal of the destruction and killings and carnage that have occurred in that poor country. The Russian intervention consisted mainly in aerial and missile bombing and when you

know what such bombing can do—in the name of fighting ISIS, U.S. bombing in limited parts of Syria led to terrible devastation, especially in the city of Raqqa—you can imagine what was done by Russian bombing on a much larger scale, over all the territories that were under opposition control when Russia began its direct intervention in 2015, up to the present.

Since then, Russia has also been intervening in Libya, along with the Egyptian regime of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and the United Arab Emirates, the region's most reactionary states with the Saudi kingdom. Russian Wagner troops—which are even less “private” than their U.S. equivalent, the former Blackwater—have been intervening in Libya to support former CIA asset Khalifa Haftar, who has grouped around him forces ranging from remnants of the old regime to Salafists to combat the reconciliation government backed by the United Nations. Vladimir Putin has also been fully supportive of Egypt's Marshal Sisi, from the very moment that he organized his coup, long before Trump named him his “favorite dictator.”

So, if we look at the role of Russia in my part of the world, it is certainly no better than that of the United States. In Syria, it's definitely much worse: there, the main actions of the United States by order of importance have been fighting ISIS, supporting the Kurdish movement for that purpose, and supporting sections of the Syrian opposition, whereas the main action of Russia has been fighting the Syrian opposition to shore up the Assad regime.

NP: Let's go back to the Libyan case. How would you describe the opposition to Gaddafi at the beginning of the uprising? Was it a jihadist opposition?

GA: Definitely not. It was a motley group of people with a wide range of ideological orientations. Keep in mind that Gaddafi seized power in 1969 and that the uprising against his rule occurred in 2011. That makes more than 40 years in power! The government in Libya was brutally repressive, no opposition whatsoever was tolerated. In 2003, it shifted

abruptly into collaboration with Washington and its “war on terror.” In that context, it engaged in “extraordinary rendition” arrangements with Western governments, under which they would hand over to the Libyan government jihadi oppositionists that they held. Among those was one of the figures that would emerge later on in the uprising, a man who sued the British government for having rendered him to the Libyan government. [3] So, there were indeed some jihadists, who had been fighting the government and were regarded by Washington and its allies as terrorists. But they were only one component of a vast conglomerate of oppositionists that included different kinds of people: democrats, liberals, Muslim Brothers, and even a few leftists – the same mix that occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo, but with less dominance of Islamic forces than in Egypt.

The first election that took place after the fall of Gaddafi in 2012 was characterized by a high participation rate, a true one since people weren’t compelled to vote as in the sham elections of the past. And the big surprise was that Islamic forces received only a minority of the votes. The majority was dominated by liberals. This proves that the 2011 uprising was not dominated by jihadists. In fact, one of the key early figures of the uprising was Abdel Fattah Younes, who had been one of Gaddafi’s close companions since 1969 and was regarded as Libya’s number two. He sided with the uprising when the fighting started and got assassinated a few weeks later. The other prominent figure, a man who emerged as the chairperson of the Transitional National Council, was the minister of Justice, judge Mustafa Abdul Jalil, a man who may be described as liberal Muslim. But the opposition was very heterogeneous, of course. In an uprising against a long-standing dictatorship, it is only normal to see the full spectrum of opposition currents uniting against the regime. This is what happened in Libya, as elsewhere.

**NP: Some people say that Libya was better off under Gaddafi. How do you respond to that?**

GA: If things had been so good under Gaddafi, there wouldn’t have been a popular uprising. The claim that Libya was better off under Gaddafi ignores the fact that it is a country with limited population and a high oil and gas income, with a GDP per capita of 12,000 USD in 2010, with oil and gas representing two thirds of the economy and almost the totality of exports—the clearest indication of the regime’s massive failure to develop the country. The Libyan population should have been far better off than it was in 2011 when the uprising exploded. Libya is a country where you had huge regional disparities. The regime was privileging some parts of the country, those to which its own loyal constituencies belonged, and neglecting others. It squandered a lot of the country’s income in crazy weapons purchases (mainly from Western countries from 2004 on) and military adventures.

Now there are indeed some people who bring up figures such as per capita GDP, literacy rates, life expectancy and Human Development Index, to tell you that Libya was better than other African countries. But this is a very specious comparison. Why not compare Libya to the Gulf monarchies, which have similarly small populations and huge oil and gas income? Some of them achieved better figures than Libya. Let me read to you from this 2011 report by the International Crisis Group entitled “Making Sense of Libya”:

Given a population of a mere six million, many Libyans believe their country ought to resemble Dubai. Yet, years of poor planning, insufficient and piecemeal development and pervasive corruption (coming atop the crippling effects of prolonged international sanctions), have left parts of the country in a state of considerable neglect. Resentment at this is particularly strong among easterners, who rightly or wrongly believe the government has favoured other parts of the country and deliberately disadvantaged their region. Despite the country’s economic wealth, many Libyans work at least two jobs in order to survive (of which one typically is in the state sector, where wages for the most part remain pitiful). Housing shortages are

acute, with an estimated 540,000 additional units needed. As public opinion generally has seen it, most of the economic opportunities that have opened up since 2003 ... have remained in the hands of a narrow elite. In particular, they have been seized by Gaddafi’s own children and extended family, all of whom have accrued large fortunes across a range of businesses from the health, construction, hotel and energy sectors. These popular perceptions were recently reinforced by the disclosure of Western diplomatic assessments. According to U.S. diplomatic cables as released by WikiLeaks, Gaddafi’s children routinely benefited from the country’s wealth; one noted that it had “become common practice” for government funds to be used to promote companies controlled by his children and indicated that their companies had benefited from “considerable government financing and political backing”. In this sense, Libya has been akin to a large pressure cooker waiting to explode. [4]

Another argument that I often hear is that had NATO intervened in Syria, the country would have been like Libya today. Well, I can tell you this: There is not a single Syrian who would not wish and pray night and day for his country to be like Libya today. I mean, Libya’s situation is nothing compared to what happened in Syria: the scale of the massacres, the devastation, the displacement, etc., are incomparably more horrendous in Syria. After two years of newly acquired political freedom, Libya fell into a new civil war starting in 2014, fueled by rival foreign interventions, but it remained a low-intensity war compared to those of Syria and Yemen.

**NP: Let me go back to one of your initial principles, the one about the exceptional case when massacre is impending. Is this an argument for humanitarian intervention?**

GA: The concept of “humanitarian intervention” is flawed. Nobody would oppose a truly “humanitarian” intervention, such as sending troops to help after a massive earthquake. No anti-imperialist could oppose such an



intervention because that would be completely absurd. I never used the phrase “humanitarian intervention” except to criticize it as a hypocritical pretext for imperialist interventions. When imperialism intervenes in a conflict, it’s never for humanitarian reasons and I’ve never ever subscribed to any illusion about that, but have consistently denounced what Noam Chomsky has called the “new military humanism.” [5]

The exceptional cases I’m talking about are when, for reasons of their own, imperialist powers sides with a popular uprising against a despotic regime, the latest such instance being the uprising against the military takeover in Myanmar. In such cases, if the popular movement decides to bear arms to defend itself from an ongoing slaughter, I support their right to get defensive weapons from wherever they can get them, even if only from imperialist powers. I even support demanding that Western governments provide such weapons. But I do not support direct intervention, be it by bombing or by dispatching troops to be deployed on the ground, all the less when this is done in violation of international law. However, if there is no other alternative to prevent an imminent large-scale massacre, I must abstain until the threat is eliminated. Abstaining means that I wouldn’t demonstrate against the intervention, as a few people did on March 19, 2011 in New York and Washington while the population in Benghazi was joyfully applauding what they perceived as their rescue. But nor would I demonstrate in support of the intervention: I would rather warn those who are rescued against having any illusions about the real intentions and designs of their momentary rescuers. That is what I did in 2011 when the intervention started in Libya. The city of Benghazi was threatened by the regime, the population of Benghazi implored the United Nations for intervention, the Security Council voted on a resolution authorizing this intervention, and Moscow and Beijing consented, albeit by abstaining rather than voting yes. That is what I explained in the March 19 interview [6] that you did with me, and nothing else. And yet, all hell broke loose in some circles of the anti-imperialist left in the U.S. and the UK,

from the usual neo-campists to even some radicals who were yet to “learn to think.” [7]

For me, the original side to this debate was that it revealed the Western ethnocentrism of most of my detractors. They simply could not put themselves in the shoes of the people of Benghazi or of any part of the Arab region shaken by the 2011 revolutionary shockwave. They saw everything from the vantage point of the U.S. or its British poodle and were only interested in countering whatever their government did regardless of what was happening on the receiving end. They attacked me because they couldn’t fathom that I react politically more in unison with the Arab part of the world to which I belong (when it is directly concerned, that is) than with Britain where I happen to reside and work—my work being focused on the Middle East and North Africa. To give you but one example, on March 19, 2011, the very same day that we held our interview, the Lebanese Hezbollah—which is not exactly known to be a great friend of the United States—was holding a mass meeting in Beirut’s southern suburb, in solidarity with the Arab peoples. That was before the Syrian uprising shifted Hezbollah’s position. Here is what the party’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said about Libya in his long speech:

In Libya, people rose up as they did in Tunisia and Egypt. A group of young people started in Benghazi and were met with bullets and killing. People came to their support and the revolution spread from city to city, with demonstrations and civil disobedience. They were countered with bullets, planes, and tanks. War was imposed on the peaceful and civilian popular revolution. ... Like you all, we saw on television planes, and tanks, and canons, and Katyusha multiple rocket launchers, aligned in a way that reminds us in Lebanon of the 1982 invasion and all Israeli wars. This war that is launched today by the Gaddafi regime on the Libyan people is the same type of war as those launched by Israel on Lebanon and Gaza. ... Whoever can provide help of whatever sort to this insurgent people must provide help so that they stand up and resist in the face of destruction

and massacres.

Our revolutionary brothers in Libya and our Arab peoples must know that America and the West have given the Libyan regime enough time to crush the revolution, a lot of time spent in talks and meetings. But the Libyans were steadfast, they resisted and fought, and embarrassed the world by their steadfastness and resilience. ... To be sure, the situation in Libya has become very complicated with the start of the international intervention that might involve Libya in the game of nations, and this requires from the revolutionaries that they deploy their vigilance and patriotism in which we have high confidence. [8]

Note that Nasrallah actually blamed “America and the West” not for intervening, but for having been late in intervening! He was much less critical than I had been on the same day when you interviewed me. Shortly after, once the threat was over, which was achieved after a few days of intervention destroying much of Gaddafi’s planes and tanks, I clearly stated that I was against the continuation of bombing because it was obviously no longer needed to rescue any population, but had become merely an attempt by NATO to interfere in the Libyan situation and take control of it. Here is what I explained on March 31:

Opposing the no-fly zone while offering non-plausible alternatives, as many groups of the sane and true left did with the best of intentions, was unconvincing. It put the left in a weak position in the eyes of public opinion. Opposing the no-fly zone while showing no concern about the civilians, as some fringe groups did, was immoral — not to mention the attitude of those reconstructed or unreconstructed Stalinists who are upholding Gaddafi as a progressive anti-imperialist and dismissing the uprising as a US-led or al-Qaeda-led conspiracy (while resorting to Stalinist-style slanders in discussing the position of those on the left who sympathized with the Libyan uprising’s request for protection).

The no-fly zone request by the uprising should not have been opposed. Instead, we should have

expressed our strong reservations on UNSC resolution 1973, and warned of any attempt to seize it as a pretext in order to further imperialist agendas. As I said the day after resolution 1973 was adopted, “without coming out against the no-fly zone, we must express defiance and advocate full vigilance in monitoring the actions of those states carrying it out, to make sure that they don’t go beyond protecting civilians as mandated by the UNSC resolution.” Our usual presumption against military interventions of imperialist states was overruled in the emergency circumstances of massacre impending, but these emergency circumstances are no longer there at present, and protecting the uprising can now be achieved in a much better way by supplying it with weapons. [9]

The other case similar to that of Libya in 2011 is when you had the surge of ISIS in 2014, crossing the border into Iraq and spreading over a huge territory on which they carried out horrible crimes, including the genocide of Yazidis in Iraq and an attempt to do the same to Kurds in both Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish-controlled city of Kobani in northeast Syria got threatened by ISIS.

Washington intervened and started bombing the self-proclaimed “Islamic State.” Should anti-imperialists have been marching in Washington and London chanting “Stop U.S. intervention in Syria”? The United States was airdropping weapons to the Kurdish forces. Should anti-imperialists have opposed this? I don’t believe so. At the time of most urgent necessity to prevent a Kurdish defeat that would have opened the way for ISIS to invade Kurdish-controlled territories in Syria, one couldn’t oppose the bombing. Once the immediate danger was over, the continuation of the bombing should have been opposed, combined with the demand to provide the needed weapons to those who were fighting ISIS, especially the Kurdish and allied forces in both Syria and Iraq.

To sum up, under exceptional circumstances when there is no available alternative to prevent a large-scale massacre, intervention by imperialist powers may be a “lesser evil” as long and as far as needed to eliminate the threat. Arming a democratic uprising against a much better-equipped despotic enemy is a necessity from a truly leftist internationalist perspective. Internationalists should demand that

their governments, even imperialist governments, deliver defensive weapons to the progressive side in a civil war (remember the Spanish civil war! [10]). At the same time, we should advocate to those who require such aid complete mistrust in the United States and any imperialist government whatsoever. And we should oppose any form of intervention that would tie their hands and subordinate them to Washington, Moscow, or anyone else.

**NP: But if I were part of a group that was facing massacre and I were offered aid and the aid came with strings, I might say these strings are rotten, but I’d rather succumb to these rotten demands and impositions than get massacred.**

GA: And I would completely understand that. But my role from the outside would be to tell you: I understand your position, I understand that you are left with no choice, but I warn you of the real aims and goals of those who are providing you with what you badly need, and I urge you to do your utmost in order to maintain and preserve your full autonomy.

# Desperado in the White House: Coup Fails, Trump Faces Impeachment

13 January 2021, by **Dan La Botz**

The violence was no surprise. For four years Trump built a massive following of white nationalists. For weeks before white nationalists and fascists had been using social media to organize their forces to go to Washington and to bring firearms. They brought not only guns but also Molotov cocktails and explosive devices, communication systems and maps of the capitol offices. Some capitol police cooperated with the insurrectionists, opening barriers and directing them to congressional offices. For obscure

reasons, the National Guard was slow to respond and the Guard was ordered to act only within narrow limits.

As a coup, the event was an utter failure, most importantly because of the lack of support from the military, the key to most coups. Yet it was a coup attempt, however pathetic, since, as the rioters said, they had come to overturn the election, to put Trump in power, and as some said carry out “a revolution.” While there have been hundreds of protests in Washington by

all sorts of groups, and many rightwing riots over the years against workers, Blacks, Latinos, and leftists, there has never been an insurrection such as this, nor any attempt to overthrow the U.S. government since the Civil War of 1861-65 when the slave states rose in rebellion.

For several hours Trump said not a word about the insurrection taking place, but finally under pressure from his closest aids, he told his followers, “I know you’re hurting. We’ve had an

election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it." But, he said, "You have to go home now." Speaking directly to the rioters he said, "We love you. You are very special."

After the invaders had been driven out of the capitol, Congress reconvened with Vice-President Pence presiding, and confirmed the election of Biden as president. Yet even then, some 147 Representatives and eight Senators, Trump loyalists, voted against confirming the Electoral College vote.

Trump's "incitement to insurrection" has led the Democrats with the support of some Republicans to call for his immediate removal from office either by the Constitution's Article 25 or by impeachment. Article 25 allows the vice-president and half the cabinet to remove a president if the president is "unable to discharge the powers and duties" of their office. But Pence

has so far not taken action and the cabinet is unlikely to support such a move. At the same time, the House, controlled by the Democrats, has now written an impeachment resolution indicting Trump for inciting insurrection. Though the Republican Senate is unlikely meet again while Trump is in office and probably would not to have the two-thirds votes needed to convict, impeachment may be taken up after Trump leaves office.

Some fear that Trump might in the meantime, take the country to war or launch nuclear weapons. There is also a fear that he will use his presidential powers to pardon his associates, perhaps to pardon the insurrectionists, to pardon his family and more of his friends, and maybe even to pardon himself. So, it seems that until January 20, we will have to live in fear of the desperado in the White House.

Twitter, after four years of Trump

spreading lies, has finally permanently closed his account, which is followed by tens of millions. Facebook and Instagram have also shut him down. Still Trump remains an enormous danger. Some 147 Representatives and eight Senators opposed Biden's confirmation. The Republican National Committee met during the insurrection and remains 100% pro-Trump. There are 74 million people who voted for Trump and most of those still support him. According to polls between 20 and 40 percent of all Republicans support the insurrection. Among Trump's yahoos, the fascists are organizing. The Trump forces are planning on returning to Washington for the inauguration. There will be no coup attempt this time, but expect violence. Our next problem will be Biden and the Democrats' neoliberalism, but Trump is still the issue for the moment.

Source [New Politics](#).

# Seven Theses on the Post-Trump Right and DSA's Role in the Fight Ahead

12 January 2021, by **DSA Santa Cruz**

While condemnation is widespread, we feel it is also necessary to intervene in some of ways this event is already being framed and narrated, both in popular media and by many on the U.S. Left, including our own organization. Below are seven theses put forward for discussion by the Executive Committee of the Democratic Socialists of America, Santa Cruz Chapter.

## Theses:

**1. This is not a Coup.** It is important to be precise with our categories and to recognize the very real dangers presented by the take-over of the Capitol for what they actually are, rather than through analogy or Hollywood-inspired morbid fantasy. A coup—the undemocratic seizure of

power, usually by elements or factions within the state— doesn't describe Wednesday's events particularly well. **What happened this week was not an attempt to seize and operate the machinery of the state; it was a haphazard, deadly, media spectacle.**

Realistically, the danger is not that the occupation of the Capitol will keep Trump in office or prevent the inauguration. Instead the very real danger represented by Wednesday's action is that it will embolden and inspire individuals and groups on the far right to launch further acts of violence—acts of violence against the left, against people of color, against workers, against immigrants, against Antifa and BLM, against all of us. **Wednesday didn't necessarily help**

**the Republican Party or the Trump administration hold on to power in the short term, but it will propel recruits into groups like the Proud Boys. This is what we must organize against.**

**2. As socialists, we are opposed to everything that happened in Washington Wednesday because it was an attempt by racist, right wing extremists to grow their movement, not because we are, in principle, opposed to occupying Congress.** Any criticism of Wednesday's action must be centered on the politics of the actors involved, more than on the disrespect of "hallowed American institutions" as many CNN commentators have lamented. As socialists, we are committed to defending the limited



forms of democracy that exist in this country, however hollow and compromised they may be. **But we do not fetishize these institutions.** The politics of building more robust, genuine forms of democracy will require transforming, and in some cases, abolishing entirely, these very institutions. This project is not aided when we focus on the tactics, rather than the politics of Wednesday's actions.

**3. The impulse to condemn Wednesday's events on the basis of their violation of "Law and Order"—a phrase invoked by both Trump and Biden— must be resisted.** As socialists, we are committed to defending democracy, but we recognize "Law and Order" as a phrase that, sooner or later, will be used against us. So too should we oppose the language of "treason" "sedition" and "patriotism" in discussions of this event.

4. Similarly, much liberal hand-wringing has been over the fact that some media outlets were slow to describe this as an act of "terrorism". This objection comes from the correct recognition that when acts of violence are committed by people of color, above all by Muslims, the media is quick to describe those acts as terrorism, while similar actions by white Americans rarely earn the moniker. While this observation points to a deeply racist fact about the U.S. media that should rightly be condemned, **the invocation and the extension of the term "terrorism" will ultimately do more harm to the left than good.** Its use, to describe violence by the right or the left, will ultimately serve to justify an expansion of the repressive powers of the state. We can recall, for example, how anti-terrorism measures enacted after 9/11 were used by the state to surveil and repress anti-war organizers. [11]

5. One common response has been to point out that if this same action had been taken by people of color, or by BLM, or by those on the left more generally, it would have been met with overwhelming force and crushed. This is obviously true. **But we have to be careful about how we use this claim. When this framing is used**

**to condemn the laxity of the state's response to Wednesday's actions, the result is to normalize the state repression we have come to expect against our own movements.** When we compare the light treatment of Wednesday's protest to what would surely happen to BLM protesters, the intention is obviously to point to the injustice of the repression of BLM. But the very act of making the comparison between a movement opposed to the everyday reality of police terror and a movement that is fundamentally in harmony with it, leads us to either imagine that the state should treat white supremacists the same as it treats BLM protesters, or else we are led to imagine that the state could treat BLM protesters as leniently as Wednesday's protest.

The problem is that both of these positions treat the police as an institution standing above politics, as a neutral instrument that can be used for good or for bad. **But we know that, at the end of the day, the police and the rioters who stormed the Capitol are two components of the same political project of white supremacy; they may occasionally come into conflict, even violent conflict, but there is no inherent antagonism between the Police and the far right in the way that there is between cops and our movements.**

Merely pointing out that these movements are treated differently from one another turns a structural fact about the state and its relation to white supremacy into a seemingly arbitrary and accidental matter of the state "just not being fair" to those who want to dismantle white supremacy. This line of argument is well intentioned but ultimately mystifies more than it illuminates.

6. One very clear lesson that every leftist should take from witnessing Wednesday's events is that a smooth continuum runs from the police officer to the MAGA chud clad in American flags and viking horns. **However, as socialists we must develop a more strategic understanding of the relation between the state and the far right than merely asserting an equivalence.** Yes, individual cops took selfies with confederate flag

waving protesters in the Capitol and one video showed police officers abandoning their posts, appearing to give rioters open access to the building. Next time you are squaring off against a line of police militantly blocking a BLM march down a public street, recall these images to mind.

But, we also need to recognize that the state has a more complicated relation to these demonstrations. The fact that demonstrators made it into the Capitol was the result of a complex set of political choices. Our thinking about this needs to have room for this complexity, without reducing it to simple statements about how "the police supported the protest." It is undeniably true that individual cops, including some in command, supported the protest. It is true that cops overwhelmingly backed Trump's reelection. It is also true that the storming of the Capitol was not simply a result of the police letting it happen. Instead, it was the result of the police being overwhelmed by a crowd (losing a violent, pitched fight in the process) and making the calculation that employing more force would have escalated the conflict.

Factoring into this strategic situation were choices about police deployments, the relative low level of actual risk to the status quo posed by this demonstration, the relative marginality of the protesters themselves, and of course, the feelings of individual cops (which always impacts the intensity with which they do their jobs). We don't deny that, ultimately, the police are an instrument of white supremacy but we recognize that, as an institution, they are relatively autonomous from the extra-state elements of the white supremacist project. As such, they always have one eye on maintaining their own legitimacy. Understanding these distinctions and divisions is crucial if we are going to have a strategic relation to states, and a correct understanding of the far right.

**7. Wednesday's actions need to be seen as an important moment in the broader political realignment of this country as we move into the post-Trump era.** The split on the Right that may result from this, however, is not likely to be one that



generally orients national politics leftward. After Wednesday, we can imagine an emboldened, anti-institutional far right divided from their previous allies in the mainstream of the Republican Party, but as Mike Davis points out, this break-up may actually just serve to provide cover for the continued rightward movement of the Republicans, who will be able to keep the policies of the Trump administration while more easily distancing themselves from the more riotous elements connected to Trump himself. [12]

Meanwhile, the Democrats will be eager to reach across the aisle to form a coalition with any Republican whose politics don't quite rise to the level of armed skirmishes in the rotunda. The result of this, then, could very easily be the rightward movement of both parties, as well as the massive growth of the extra-parliamentary far right, possibly still loyal to Trump (though Trump himself may or may not be central to this project). In this shifting political landscape, calls for symbolic acts of condemnation, whether from AOC or Mitch McConnell, ring hollow, and the legislative path forward for progressive policy is decidedly

narrowed. What socialists need to do is clear:

- Organize our workplaces, buildings, and blocks to keep our neighbors and coworkers safe, to keep both white supremacists and cops OUT, and to confront them when necessary. After the events of Wednesday, the flight attendants union began organizing to bar passengers who participated in Wednesday's events from return-flights out of DC. [13] **This type of worker-organizing against white supremacists needs to be distinguished from more general calls for increased state repression and tightening of civil liberties.**

- As the largest and most organized force on the U.S. left, the DSA has a particular role to play. We call on every chapter of the DSA to develop plans to monitor and confront far right organizing in their regions. This shouldn't be done haphazardly, but should include developing deeper ties to organized labor, tenants unions, and other community organizations rooted in the multi-racial working class.

- As we move into this new phase in U.S. politics signalled by Wednesday's

events, it is time for the DSA to re-evaluate its relation to the Democratic party and the institutions it controls. Instead of drawing the organizing energies of our members into campaigns to call congress members, we need to turn our face more directly to the working class. Is filing articles of impeachment "the most appropriate response" to the events of Wednesday? From Russiagate to the first Trump impeachment, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer's primary strategy for dealing with Trump has consistently revolved around this kind of spectacle, as though the forces that brought Trump into power can be outmaneuvered by clever congressional politicking. Time and again this has failed. Our response must be different. It must emerge from our understanding of how this racist, anti-worker, anti-poor capitalist death machine can actually be overcome. That will require organizing, not lobbying.

*Solidarity Forever,*

The Executive Committee of DSA-Santa Cruz.

Source [Santa Cruz Left](#).

# The Invasion of Capitol Hill

## 11 January 2021, by Cihan Tuğal

Much of mainstream analysis of the insurrection itself is misleading. The mainstream focuses on the "fact" that the insurrection has failed to prevent the "peaceful transfer of power." Democracy, we are then asked to believe, is still in good health. This "failure," however, is almost inconsequential, since it is dubious that the organizers really believed they could prevent Biden from becoming the next president. This was rather a show of force. And even more important than that, the radical right demonstrated it can go as far as occupying the Congress with little ideological unity and organizational coherence.

What allowed the radical right to walk into even the House Chamber was not its own power, but the cooperation of the police forces. It is very possible that the collaboration goes much deeper, as it is hard to imagine that intelligence services were not informed of this occupation plan and of the willingness of the police to cooperate. Actors within the Republican Party, as well as some of the more "respectable" right-wing civic organizations, must have also been aware. As important is the weakness of non-right-wing mainstream institutions. Liberal media keeps on saying they knew this was going to happen. How do they explain,

if such is the case, the inaction of authorities sympathetic to them? Were parts of the civil and military bureaucracy involved in this knowing inaction?

What is lacking in the widely shared insistence that the insurrectionists should be brought to justice is attention to the authorities who knowingly allowed the insurrection, as well as the rebels' funders. Isn't it significant that many of the rebels arrested at Capitol Hill participated in the Charlottesville clashes? The people who really need to be brought to justice are not only these murderers, but those who let them

walk away from Charlottesville, get more organized in the subsequent years, and come back for more violent action.

The most significant aspect of January 6, then, is not that the radical right stormed the Congress. It is rather that the authorities allowed them to do so. Both the militants and the authorities must have been aware that this action was destined to be short. It was not meant to have a transformational effect. Its result is symbolic and strategic. It shows that liberal institutions cannot protect themselves, or rather, would not have been able to survive if the radical right had a national, effective, ideologically sturdy organization. Given [the dispersed and individualistic legacies of the radical right](#), it would not naturally evolve in an effective and ideologically vibrant direction, under normal circumstances. But January 6 will give it the spirit and inspiration to at least strive for that: the allegedly “failed” invasion shows what a putsch can achieve if prepared and led smartly.

Such a putsch cannot happen next month or next year. The radical right needs years to catch up with the decades it has squandered. Still, the US is likely to experience several financial, climate, and other disasters over the coming years, as well as left-wing mass responses to these. Each of the system crises and popular responses will be further fuel for the radical right. Its real source of strength, though, will not be these crises and responses themselves, but the growing feebleness and disorientation (and occasionally, collaboration) of mainstream institutions.

In the coming years, how the FBI, and state and city-level police forces, react will be very important. Following Trump’s first election, the FBI disbanded many Nazi bands. During BLM protests, they didn’t touch them much. The same is true for the police forces of even the most liberal cities: they cracked on BLM and/or Antifa protestors, but were hands off when it came to racists. [14] The liberal state could just recoil if the Left gets too strong, as we have seen in 2020. This is a worrisome indication that more and more mainstream institutions will

be tolerant of right-wing violence as they feel a left-wing threat.

Nevertheless, the dark scenario sketched above has a big assumption: that the Left remains disorganized. As I have argued before, the rise of the radical right is based on interrelated but distinct dynamics: market capitalism’s destructiveness; the Left’s failure to respond to market capitalism; and the Right’s ability to sustain the belief that the Left is still a threat (despite the latter’s obvious shortcomings). [15] There is good reason to believe that an unshackled Biden presidency would usher in more market-capitalist destruction, and that the Right would cunningly exploit this. Luckily, we do not have to stick to the assumption that the Left will remain disorganized as all of this happens. It can influence the Biden administration and render it less market-capitalist. It can also organize the masses, not with the sole purpose of fighting the coming, more serious cases of rightwing insurgency, but definitely with an eye on that.

The result of the Georgia runoff elections is thus as significant as the fascistic storming of the Congress. The centrist Democrats have lost their major excuse for blocking progressive legislation: they have control of the Senate, the House, and the presidency. They will, however, still strive to base their strategy on “reaching across the aisle” to make peace with people who are not interested in peace. It is clear that for the left, the next two to four years present an historical opportunity. Yet, it cannot count on Democrats to do much, if the latter are not pushed in a certain direction.

What can push them in a desirable direction? Strikes, boycotts, petitions, and other actions are needed to secure jobs, climate legislation, penal and police reform, and the beginnings of a new economy. Serious advance on at least some of these fronts could lead to growing mass organization on the Left – masses who would have clear stakes in preventing coups, instead of standing by as they did in much of interwar Europe, where most promises of the immediate post-WWI years ultimately fizzled away.

The broader task of mass organization, it should be granted, says nothing on what exact action the left needs to take when the radical right attacks minorities or institutions. The past years have witnessed a growing Antifa movement, composed of some anarchist and Marxist tendencies. The movement has certainly prevented rightwing militants from terrorizing certain towns, while it has proven insufficient in others. Incidentally, Antifa and other leftists did the best thing by avoiding the circus on January 6. If they had been there in large numbers, they would get a good chunk of the blame. Echoing Trump’s Charlottesville line (“there are good people on both sides”), much of the mainstream would say, “There are violent people on both sides.” The siege of the Capitol constitutes perfect proof that the right doesn’t need anti-fascists to get violent, even if it is true that socialism and anti-fascism are great excuses for extremists to spread their hatred.

Is broadening and deepening the Antifa movement the way forward, then? That partially depends on how we define the movement. Black bloc-type tactics have their places in the struggle against right-wing extremism. Yet, relying heavily on such tactics by small bands of highly dedicated people would be suicidal in the face of a mass-organized fascist movement. It might be occasionally fine for masked leftists militants to stop extremist advances in certain localities and events. These types of encounters become unavoidable especially in instances where police forces, intelligence services, and courts refuse to act.

However, most of the Antifa’s tactics do not seek mass consent. Small bands are good enough only when they confront small bands. What if the radical right goes beyond its current state of dispersion to become a coordinated mass movement? Only militant masses can stop a mass-based extremist movement. Neither America’s decaying mainstream institutions, nor organized but moderate masses would be sufficient to block a truly fascist tide.

In sum, the left is encumbered with a

very difficult task, with many layers. Building a mass organization requires frequent moderation and pragmatism, yet an exclusively moderate and pragmatic mass organization would be silent in a truly fascistic context, as social democrats (and most of the time, official Communists) were in interwar Europe. The forces to the left of official Communism were not sufficiently pragmatic, and did not have the opportunity, time, and desire to build mass organization. They were

therefore as ineffective as social democrats and official Communists. Learning from the mistakes of both ends of the spectrum, the left needs to infuse the pragmatically built mass movement with militancy and autonomy as it is being built. Anti-fascism cannot be a beginning point for sustainable mass organization, but the mass organization of the future must be militantly anti-fascist. Although the previous two sentences sound self-contradictory, people who

do not want to see further right-wing success in this country indeed need to deploy militancy, mass consent, moderation, and pragmatism in appropriate doses depending on the locality, the event, and the specific issues at hand. We need to build the broadest mass organization possible, while keeping it autonomous from the crumbling system.

11 January 2021

Source [\*New Politics\*](#).

# Trump fanatics invade Capitol as his presidency disintegrates

11 January 2021, by **Jeff Mackler**

The several hundred rightwing racist rioters – a small portion of the several thousands that Trump mobilized for a rally earlier in the day – carrying Trump and Confederate flags, an array of weapons paraphernalia, military gear and noxious gas explosives, easily breached the Capitol Police's unusually thin line of security. The raging Trumpists, virtually unhindered for two-plus hours, smashed Capitol building windows with iron bars, entered the Capitol Dome and took possession of the Senate chambers. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office, among several others, was occupied and vandalized. The handful of overwhelmed security guards inside proved helpless to intervene; some literally took selfies and high fived the rioters, according to a report by Amy Goodman's Democracy Now! Senate security officials organized the hurried evacuation of the assembled members of the House and Senate while others barricaded the doors to the House in an armed standoff against the marauding intruders.

This high drama violent spectacle was captured live and broadcast around the world including videos of frightened elected officials seeking refuge under desks or laying on the ground as the chamber was inundated

with tear gas.

## Trump's mass rally

At least 25,000, perhaps 50,000 Trump supporters had rallied earlier in the day at the Ellipse near the White House for a long planned Trump-initiated "Stop the Steal" mobilization to challenge the joint session's expected Biden certification. Said Trump in tweets to build the rally. "Big protest in DC on January 6th. Be there! Will be wild!"

Trump addressed the rally for an hour proclaiming, "You'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong. We have come to demand that Congress do the right thing and only count the electors who have been lawfully slated." Declaring that he would "never concede," and claiming that he won the election, Trump's presidency was nevertheless disintegrating. The joint session reconvened early the next morning to certify Biden's victory, with 139 House members and 10 Senators dissenting. Hours later, a deflated Trump, with his staff and cabinet members resigning in droves, tweeted that he would assist in the transition to the

new president but that would not attend Biden's Jan. 20 inaugural.

Earlier in the day Trump promised to join the planned "Stop the Steal" march down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol, but instead immediately headed to the White House, where he later frantically phoned hoped for loyal Republicans, who had been evacuated from the Capitol and sequestered to safe and unidentified locations, to press them to reject Biden's certification when the session resumed. Trump's son and featured rally speaker Donald Trump Jr., denounced VP Mike Pence and other Republicans for refusing in advance to use the joint session to reject Biden's certification. The marching crowd chanted, "Hang Mike Pence! Hang Mike Pence!" A Reuters photographer, Jim Bourg, stated that he heard Capitol Hill rioters declaring "they hoped to find Vice President Mike Pence and execute him by hanging him from a Capitol Hill tree as a traitor." Pence was present when the rioters later entered the chambers, mocked, but unharmed.

Said Trump Jr. at the rally, "We're coming for you and we're going to have a good time doing it." Trump's personal attorney, Rudolf Giuliani,

who previously played a key role in filing some 60 failed lawsuits challenging the election results, egged on the crowd of rightwingers, "Let's have trial by combat... Stand up and fight!"

## Minimal security forces present at Capitol

With regard to calling on security forces to defend the beleaguered and occupied Capitol, not to mention to rescue the sequestered congresspersons and senators, the increasingly disoriented Trump, viewing the moment as his last hope to retain his presidency, played no role. In his absence, VP Pence took charge of calling in various police agencies to protect House and Senate members. In a matter of hours, not minutes, a virtual army of National Guard troops, Capitol Police, FBI and other armed forces appeared and slowly, gently to be sure, cleared the area following the DC Mayor Muriel Bowser" declaration of a 6:00 pm curfew. Most of the occupying racist bigots were initially allowed to freely leave the premises. The great portion of the original marchers that headed toward the Capitol, wanting no part of a confrontation with security officials, gradually dispersed and disappeared. But thousands remained.

Capitol Police shot and killed one of the intruders, 35-year-old Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt of San Diego, later described by officials as a strong QAnon conspiracy theory believer. Four other Trump supporters outside the Capitol were later reported to have died due to unspecified "medical emergencies." Some 14 rioters were initially arrested; 83 more were subsequently taken into police custody as of Jan. 9. One member of the Capitol Police died, reportedly from injuries inflicted from a fire extinguisher.

DC Mayor Bowser, in anticipation of planned acts of violence from organized rightwing groups, including the neo-fascist Proud Boys, had earlier in the week requested the Pentagon to deploy the National Guard. Weeks

before the event thousands of Facebook and Twitter communications revealed violent far right intentions. Her request was denied according to some reports, on Trump's orders.

The stunning absence of Capitol security, especially when some 535 members of the House and Senate were present - the formal elected national leadership of the U.S. - appeared to be no accident. A day after the security fiasco, with lawmakers demanding accountability from responsible officials and an investigation demanded Republican leader Mitch McConnell, among others, Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund submitted his resignation. By the end of Thursday, the top security officials in the Capitol also resigned including Senate Sergeant at Arms Michael Stenger and his House equivalent.

## Ongoing resignations from Trump's team

VP Pence's recent break with Trump in refusing to use the proceedings to challenge the election results put him among a rapidly growing group of top Republican officials who have deserted Trump's two-month campaign to retain the presidency. Resigning Trump cabinet members immediately following the Jan. 6 Capitol takeover included Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. Said DeVos in her resignation letter to Trump, "There is no mistaking the impact your rhetoric had on the situation." No doubt, DeVos, Trump's reactionary champion of the privatization of public education and the sister of Trump pal Erik Prince, founder of the private mercenary army corporation, Blackwater USA, (now called Academi) considered resigning rather than take the political risk of voting against Trump's removal should Pence invoke procedures to do so under the 25th amendment to the Constitution.

Mick Mulvaney, a former White House chief of staff now U.S. special envoy for Northern Ireland, also quit

Trump's administration as did a number of White House officials, including deputy national security adviser, Matthew Pottinger and Stephanie Grisham, chief of staff and press secretary to first lady Melania Trump.

Trump fired a State Department official, Gabriel Noronha, who wrote that the president was "entirely unfit to remain in office." Noronha tweeted, "President Trump fomented an insurrectionist mob that attacked the Capitol today. He continues to take every opportunity to obstruct the peaceful transfer of power. These actions threaten our democracy and our Republic. Trump is entirely unfit to remain in office, and needs to go." Noronha added, "All government officials swear to uphold and defend the Constitution. That is where our loyalties must lie, not to any man or political party."

After Chad Wolf, acting Department of Homeland Security secretary, urged Trump to "strongly condemn the violence" at the U.S. Capitol. Trump removed him as the president's nominee to head the agency.

Former Attorney General William Barr, who resigned just before Christmas, said that Mr. Trump's conduct on Jan. 6 was a "betrayal of his office and supporters."

The kid glove treatment of the racist Trump mob that aimed at physically preventing the certification of Biden's presidency stood in marked contrast to last summer's brutal clubbing, gassing and blinding rubber bullet firing violence and mass arrests unleashed against the peaceful DC mass mobilizations to protest the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd. Trump took the lead in orchestrating that horror, pretending to invoke the authority of the 1807 Insurrection Act. Whether or not the relative absence of security forces on Jan. 6 will be attributed to Trump himself or to complicit racist security forces remains to be determined.

Biden, himself, with a decades long record of complicity with, if not facilitation of southern racist segregation norms, not to mention his more recent role crafting racist mass



incarceration oriented legislation, felt to the need to comment on the near absence of security forces. Said Biden, "No one can tell me that if it had been a group of Black Lives Matter protesting yesterday, they wouldn't have been treated very, very differently from the mob of thugs that stormed the Capitol. We all know that's true. And it's unacceptable. Totally unacceptable."

## **Debate over Trump impeachment vs, invoking 25th amendment to remove Trump**

Whether to impeach Trump with a second House resolution or to press his now estranged VP Pence to invoke the 25th amendment to immediately remove Trump from office are among the issues now under discussion at a time when Trump's very stability, if not sanity, is being questioned as never before. House Speaker Pelosi was reported to have called General Mark Milley, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to discuss barring Trump from access to the secret doomsday security codes required to launch nuclear war!

The 25th amendment allows Vice President Pence and a majority of Trump's sitting cabinet to affirm that the president is unable to fulfill the duties of his office. If they should so affirm, Pence, who to date has declined invoke the 25th amendment, would immediately become the acting president and then president, following a required two-thirds vote of the House and Senate. In the waning days of Trump's presidency neither of the above scenarios is likely. Should one or another come to pass nothing of great import for the American people will result, other than the further humiliation and possible prosecution of an already ruling class-discredited Trump and a legal ban on his running for president in 2024.

On the real issues of the day - the great issues of our times - an unprecedented economic crisis where

the real rates of unemployment and underemployment have approached 40 percent, where millions face immediate eviction or foreclosures, where daily COVID-19 deaths have reached 4,000, where a raging climate crisis threatens cataclysmic disaster and the U.S. imperial war machine inflicts daily horrors on poor and oppressed people around the world - neither party of the ruling rich has any solutions.

## **Historical truths revealed**

The unfolding events surrounding the storming of the Capitol inadvertently revealed some historical truths long hidden from public scrutiny. Illinois Democratic Senator Dick Durbin, for example, in countering Ted Cruz's joint session move to establish a commission to review the elections results rather than certify them as the law requires, invoked the memory of an 1877 Electoral College commission whose "compromise" effectively changed the outcome of the 1876 election.

Referring to this "devastating Compromise of 1877" Durbin stated, "The senator from Texas [Ted Cruz] says we just want to create a little commission. Ten days, we're going to audit all the states...and find out what actually occurred. It's parallel to 1876, Hayes and Tilden. Don't forget what that commission achieved: It was a commission that killed Reconstruction, that established Jim Crow, that even after a Civil War which tore this nation apart, it re-enslaved African Americans, and it invited the voter suppression we are still fighting today."

Perhaps well intentioned, Durbin, a Democrat, got some of his facts wrong. The 1876 election between Republican Rutherford Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden saw Tilden win the popular vote. But Republican Hayes negotiated an Electoral College win based on his agreement to withdraw the occupying Northern federal troops from the Southern States. The North's troops were permanently stationed there at the end of the Civil War to prevent the

defeated slavocracy plantation owners, founders of the Democratic Party, White Citizens Councils and the Ku Klux Klan, from regaining power and effectively nullifying the newly-enacted constitutional amendments that guaranteed equal rights to former slaves. In short, in return for the presidency the Republicans placed the former slavocracy Democrats back in power, where their heirs, including those who joined the Republicans in the Nixon era, remain today. In any case, today's Republicans had no such booty to offer or inclination to entice Democrats to part with Biden. Indeed, the ruling class as a whole understands quite well that a Biden presidency, minus Trump's moronic bluster, will not differ in its fundamentals from the decisive bipartisan policies adopted over the past four years.

## **Jan. 6 was no insurrection or coup attempt**

"What happened at the U.S. Capitol yesterday was an insurrection against the United States, incited by the president," said Democratic Party's now Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer of New York. Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell from Kentucky called the attack a "failed insurrection." [Editor's note: With the recent election of Georgia Senators Jon Ossoff and Reverend Raphael Warnock the Democrats captured the Senate majority.] Contrary to the multiple assertions of insurrection or an attempted coup, what took place on Jan. 6 was the product of the delusions of an egomaniac narcissist accidental president, Donald Trump, who believed that he could game the capitalist system and bypass its fundamental ruling class power brokers, not to mention its beholden national security state apparatus and military establishment. All of the above largely deserted Trump either during the pre-election period or immediately after.

## Today's class polarization

The Jan. 6 DC Trump mobilization was matched by much smaller mobilizations in other cities, including in Los Angeles, where a Black woman observing the event was brutally attacked. The fact that some 74 million voted for Trump in 2020 informs us that in increasingly desperate times, wherein millions of workers and small business owners have seen their lives fundamentally undermined by massive plant closures, pension and health care losses and a generalized bipartisan attack on their standard of living and quality of life, significant numbers have turned to reactionary "anti-establishment" demagogues like Trump. We have seen similar phenomenon around the world from, England to Eastern Europe to Brazil in Latin America. In the U.S. many supporters of these reactionary currents, but far from all, have been imbued with virulent scapegoating racist and anti-immigrant prejudice. In these increasingly difficult times they are susceptible to Trump's hatemongering and even more so to high-powered tirades against the corporate "Washington, D.C. swamp dwellers."

But these currents have far from coalesced into fascist-type formations that in times of great stress and when powerful working class mobilizations threaten capitalist prerogatives are called on to use force and violence to defend capitalist rule. No such fascist force exists today. Indeed, of the tens of thousands of Trumpists in Washington on Jan. 6 only a relative handful of posturing bigots and individuals associated with Proud Boy neo-Nazis stormed the Capitol, believing with zero foundation that they could alter the Nov. 3 election result, not to mention the nature of "democratic" capitalist rule.

## Humanity's future

In glaring contrast, an estimated 20 million youth and working people in 2,000 U.S. cities joined the summer Black Lives Matter mobilizations that exceeded in sheer numbers any other working class mobilizations in U.S. history. Today, neither the reactionary Trumpists or the fighters for Black freedom, liberation and social equality have established definitive forms of organization, the former tied to an increasingly discredited ranting demagogue incapable of dealing with an out-of-control deadly pandemic and a debilitating economic crisis and the

latter momentarily detoured into the graveyard of social movements, the Democratic Party.

Today, humanity's future rests more than ever in the capacity of working people to build new and independent fighting formations to defend their interests and meet the challenge posed by capitalist barbarism. This will in time focus on the building of a qualitatively expanded, militant and democratically organized trade union movement in alliance with all the oppressed and exploited. Such a movement will champion workers' interests in communities across the country, at the point of production and in the political arena via the formation of a mass fighting labor party.

Humanity's future also rests on the emergence and consolidation of a new and independent Black, Latinx and Native American leadership to champion the struggles of the most oppressed and exploited and establish democratic control of their communities while opening the way to the formation of independent Black and Brown parties in the political arena.

To help organize and unify the diverse social struggles ahead requires the construction of a deeply rooted mass revolutionary socialist party.

## Capitol (United States): Attempted insurrection fails

10 January 2021, by **Barry Sheppard, Malik Miah**

Before the November 3 election, Trump repeatedly whipped up his tens of millions of followers with the assertion that the only way he wouldn't be re-elected was because of massive electoral fraud.

When he lost the election, he immediately refused to acknowledge his defeat, claiming that, indeed, such electoral fraud had occurred and he was in fact re-elected.

His tens of millions of followers believed him. Polls showed 70 percent of Republican voters believed him.

By so doing he was threatening to use his mass backing to stage a coup to stay in power. He launched some 60 lawsuits, backed by the Republican Party leadership, to get the courts to throw out the votes in key states, which would have made him the winner.

The Republicans lost every such lawsuit, because they were backed only by vague assertions without any facts.

Then the Electoral College met on December 14, and ratified that Trump had lost by 306 to 232 votes.

In preparation for the December 14 meeting, Trump urged his white nationalist armed supporters, the

fascist Proud Boys among them, to come the Washington.

Thousands rallied on the National Mall demanding the reversal of Biden's victory. There was a counter protest which police attacked with pepper spray and clubs, and arrested 33. The white nationalists also managed to stab four.

The stabbing occurred just after members of the Proud Boys tore a "Black Lives Matter" banner from one of the oldest Black churches in Washington, and burned it in the street.

Trump singled out the Proud Boys by name and told them to "stand down" for the present but "stand ready" for further action.

It was only after the December 14 vote that some Republican leaders acknowledged that Biden, not Trump, has been elected. Trump immediately denounced them, including Senate Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, formerly one of his staunchest puppets, and called on his supporters to come to Washington on January 6 to stop the Congressional vote.

"Big protest in DC on January 6. Be there! Be wild!" Trump shouted.

The proposed mass mobilization was backed by a two-thirds majority of Republicans in the House and some in the Senate, who said they would vote on January 6 to overturn the election, an attempted legal coup.

Tens of thousands of white nationalist supporters mobilized that morning near the White House. Trump addressed them. Part of what he said was:

"All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by a bold and radical left Democrats which is what they are doing and stolen by the fake news media. That is what they have done and what they are doing.

"We will never give up. We will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved. Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore, and that is what

this is all about.

"And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will stop the steal!"

After a long harangue attacking "fake news", Republicans who gave up on his coup attempt, etc. etc. he gave the order to his followers to march on the Capitol building and "be strong" because that was the only way "to take our country back."

Earlier, his disgraced personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, told the crowd, "Let's have a trial by combat!" at the Capitol, and Trump praised him.

"Stand up and fight!" Trump's son Don Jr. shouted as he threatened Republicans meeting in the Congress unwilling to overturn the election: "We're coming for you and we're going to have a good time doing it!"

The crowd marched off to the Capitol Building. With the backing of the tens of thousands of supporters in front of the building, some hundreds, perhaps about 1,000, of thugs pushed on barricades of the Capitol police until the police let them invade the Capitol steps and some scaled up to where they could invade the Congressional rooms and offices.

The world saw on TV as many Congress people had to be evacuated to safety while others remained barricaded in their offices. Offices were ransacked, files stolen, furniture smashed. Trump flags were everywhere. One large Confederate flag was seen. A shirt read "Camp Auschwitz."

One video showed the insurrectionists shouting at a cop to tell Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi that they were coming to get her. Others were seen as threatening Vice President Mike Pence for not using his position of chair at the Congressional count of the vote, shouting "we want Pence!"

Some cops were seen high-fiving protestors, taking selfies with them, and pointing out where certain offices of congress people were.

But there were attacks on other police, and an armed standoff at the door of the House. One policeman was

killed by a member of the mob., and a policewoman shouting for help was almost crushed in a deliberate attack.

One Trump supporter was shot and killed by police as she attacked them.

But nothing was done for hours to remove the insurrectionists. The DC mayor tried to get the army to release the National Guard troops who were on standby but was refused, on orders from Trump according to some reports.

The world stood in amazement as the center of U.S. democracy, however decrepted it is, was occupied with nothing being done to stop them, for hours.

When troops were finally brought in, they rounded up those inside, and politely escorted them out, releasing them without a single arrest.

As insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol, hundreds of fervent Trump supporters gathered for local rallies around the country. In Los Angeles a Trump mob attacked a Black woman near City Hall.

The young woman, Berlinda Nibo, was walking home when she came upon the rally and started documenting it on her phone. "Dozens quickly surrounded her, demanding to know who she voted for and to take off her face mask.

"She was then brutally attacked by the group of white supremacists, who shoved her, pulled out her hair extensions and pepper-sprayed her in the eyes. The bearded man pictured holding her from behind [documented on her phone] was one of several witnesses who intervened to help Nibo escape the out-of-control mob," according to Democracy Now.

After the insurrectionists were removed from the Capitol, the Congress convened again. Even in the wake of the insurrection they helped foment with Trump, 139 Republican members of the House and ten in the Senate voted to overturn the election - voted for a coup, even if only symbolically as by then as they were outvoted.

The contrast between how this

attempted coup was treated by the cops, the Army and the National Guard and what we saw in all the many attacks on the Black Lives Matter protests was noted by many commentators, and certainly was not lost on African Americans.

One of these was interviewed on Democracy Now the next day, Bree Newsom, an artist and antiracist activist. Following the 2015 massacre of eight African American members of a Black church by a white nationalist in Charleston, South Carolina, Bree scaled the 30-foot flagpole at the state Capitol and tore down the Confederate flag, seen on national TV.

She said, "One of the things we saw throughout the day yesterday [on social media] were people like myself, who have been present for various protests, mostly people of color, Black people, noting the obvious difference in terms of how police have a coordinated, overly militarized response to any kind of protest challenging racism in policing or racism in the government versus what we saw yesterday.

"And I think that is just another of these flashpoint moments in history that represents a culmination of everything that came before it, and it really shines a spotlight on everything that is fundamentally wrong. And one of those things is clearly policing."

One could only imagine how if Black Lives Matter protesters stormed the Capital after over a month saying they would they would have been treated. They would have been met with thousands of troops, tanks, machine guns.

Concerning the congresspersons who continued to vote for the coup, Bree Newsom said, "One of the things that was most striking to me yesterday - I was among the people who stayed into the wee hours of the morning watching how things played out at the Capital - was, you know, you would see congressperson after congressperson condemning the insurrectionist mob ...

"But there was still very little acknowledgement of the fact that the people who led the insurrection, the

people who have incited these people to mob the Capitol, were sitting in the chamber, were still voicing their objection to the election.

"So, you know, this idea that we are somehow just going to reach across the aisle and shake hands and carry on as though we did not witness things play out as they did, as though the primary inciter of violence yesterday was not the president of the United States is just completely unrealistic. There's no way that can happen."

Ms. Newsom also made the key point: "The central issue here is white supremacy. And white supremacy was foundational to the establishment of this nation. The main thing I continue to say as an activist, this is the central conflict.

"It is baked into our institutions. It was baked into our Constitution at the founding. And that continues to be the case. It is the defining internal conflict of the nation. People in the military. In the police. In the government. It was elected officials who initiated the events that led to this riot."

To those so-called Marxists who never absorbed what Marx and Engels wrote about the English oppression of Ireland and of Irish workers, or what Lenin, Trotsky and the first Leninist years of the Communist International wrote and said about national oppression, and who claim that the only central contradiction in American capitalism is that that between the working class and the capitalists, we say Bree Newsom grasps reality better than you do, especially in this burning moment.

First Black slavery, and then the national oppression of Blacks beginning with the counter-revolution to the Civil War and Reconstruction soon after up to the present, has been central to how the U.S. capitalist class rules over the working class, by dividing white workers and Black workers (and other non-white workers as a consequence), preventing working class unity without which there can be no working class challenge to capitalist rule.

It was Lenin who first saw that Blacks

are an oppressed nationality in the U.S. This became the position of the first years of the CI. It was Trotsky who brought this to the attention of the early Socialist Workers Party, together with C.L.R. James, which set it apart from the other socialists.

As W.E.B. Dubois wrote about Reconstruction and its overthrow, it is the "color line" that keeps the working class divided. He wrote that in 1934, when it was still true and remains true.

## Whither Trump?

This sheds light on what's in store for Trump and Trumpism. Trump was able to tap into white fear and hatred of African Americans, Latinos, Muslims and more, and to present himself as their strongman savior. "Make America Great Again" always meant "Make America White Again."

White fear and hatred of Blacks reached boiling point this year as the major wave of Black Lives Matter mobilizations against police murders of Blacks and systematic, institutionalized racism, exploded.

White racists could not stand to see thousands of Black people, joined by young whites, taking control of the streets, mobilizing against white racism. they strongly supported Trump's leadership of the violent attacks on BLM by troops and police throughout the country.

Seventy-five million Americans voted for Trump, over 45 percent of those who voted. How many sympathize with Trump's white supremacy? Sixty million? "Only" fifty million?

Trump succeeded in energizing these tens of millions and giving them legitimacy. He also mobilized them behind his stand that what is needed is a strong authoritarian state defending their perceived interests. While he didn't succeed in imposing a coup to establish such a regime this time, the threat remains.

These tens of millions are not going away. That are not demoralized at all. They still remain the voting base of the Republican Party. The Republicans



may split, either by Trump driving his enemies out, or vice versa. In either case, Trump remains the cult leader of this base, at least for the next period.

These tens of millions will continue to fight and will remain a factor in U.S. politics. The openly fascists like the Proud Boys, Boogaloo, and other such groups will grow. The broader

movement around Trump will move further to the right, and quite possibly will become an incipient fascist group spearheading the ruling class intention of at least dispersing the Black upsurge.

The Democrats seek to accomplish this through cooption, using demagogic promises and pro-Black

rhetoric devoid of little action, under the cover of needing to make compromises with Republicans to “get things done.”

There will be no turning back to the pre-Trump situation. For the next period Trumpism is here to stay, even if it is a minority movement of “only” tens of millions.

## The Washington Riot Was a Defeat for the Far Right, Not a Triumph

9 January 2021, by **Rafael Khachaturian , Stephen Maher**

But alarming as the scenes in Washington were, these events in fact represented a significant defeat for the far right. The riot and its quick repudiation by the political and economic elite made plain that there is currently little base in the state or among big capital for a Trumpist coup, despite the apparent — and unnerving — participation of police and security forces.

Wednesday’s violence was certainly disturbing. But with so much focus on the potential rise of fascism, we risk losing sight of the more immediate threat posed by a new president, backed by all the forces of the state and capital, strengthened by the riot, and determined to restore the neoliberal status quo ante.

### Elite Backlash

Over the past four years, extreme-right groups like the Proud Boys became core constituents of the “mainstream” Republican Party base. The political and rhetorical style of Trumpism, the political conflicts it created, carved out space for these groups to mobilize and organize. Throughout his presidency, Trump chose to consolidate this hard-right base rather than fashion a wider centrist coalition. This allowed these groups to build, and increasingly enter the political mainstream.

Trump was the first president in modern history elected with very little backing from big capital. The chaotic, personalistic, and kleptocratic nature of his administration meant that he remained a problematic representative of the general interests of the capitalist class. Nevertheless, prior to the pandemic, tax breaks, deregulation, economic growth, and a booming stock market allowed him to enjoy quiet support among Wall Street and big business — and to build a sufficient popular constituency.

Yet in the course of his refusal to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election, these bases of support shrank to the most militant core. In the wake of the siege on the Capitol, whatever inroads these hard-right forces made into mainstream politics appear to have collapsed, at least for now. This will only serve to deepen the crisis of the Republican Party, members of which either endorsed or at least accepted Trumpism, with various degrees of enthusiasm, over the past four years.

The takeover of the Capitol has laid bare the lack of backing, both among corporate elites and within state institutions, for far-right authoritarianism. Capital, it seems, is still committed to liberal democracy, which has served to safeguard its

interests throughout American history. Trump was unable to build a base of power within the state sufficient to usurp its normal constitutional and juridical processes — as shown in his ongoing battle with the “deep state,” and the alienation of the military and national security apparatuses.

On Sunday, none other than Dick Cheney organized every living secretary of defense to sign a statement, published in the Washington Post, repudiating Trump and insisting the armed forces would not participate in efforts to overturn the election. Now, major business organizations have issued some of the harshest statements in their histories rebuking Trump and calling for an end to the chaos of his presidency.

The National Association of Manufacturers — which generally leans Republican and has been the strongest source of business support for Trump — called for Trump to be removed from office. Similarly, the larger and more powerful Business Roundtable also issued a strong condemnation and demanded Wednesday evening that Congress move ahead that night in declaring Biden the president-elect. BlackRock CEO Larry Fink and JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon each issued their own condemnations, along with many

others from a cross-section of American businesses.

Even before Wednesday's events, the capitalist class had soured on Trump. In the days after the election, leading CEOs met to coordinate a business response to Trump's anticipated contestation of the election results. If this gathering of a literal committee for the management of the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie indicated anything, it was that they saw securing political stability, and ensuring the integrity of liberal democratic institutions, as squarely in their interest.

## **Blackshirts, Brownshirts, and MAGA Chuds**

The rise of German and Italian fascism in the twentieth century took place in the context of severe splits within the ruling classes of these societies. Dynamic new capitalist sectors, especially advanced manufacturing, could not find space within existing state institutions for the expression of their political power. In response, they came to cultivate and support radical forces — fascist parties — which would restructure the state to accommodate their emerging supremacy within their national economies.

The riots in Washington have not emerged from such a division within the ruling elite and have left the American capitalist class more unified than ever. They have not only extended their support to liberal democratic state processes in general, but also to the Democratic Party and Joe Biden in particular.

To be sure, the Trumpian right will hardly vanish from the political stage when the transfer of power does occur. Nor will GOP primaries stop serving as engines of far-right radicalization once Trump leaves office. Indeed, Trump himself is an outcome of this very dynamic.

For these reasons, we should remain vigilant about the shape and direction that the far right takes after Trump. In

particular, we should watch for footholds they might establish among the police and border control, as well as at the electoral level. This will be especially important going forward, as they may feel emboldened by the experience of storming the Capitol.

As establishment Republicans seek to distance themselves from Trump, they will have to navigate the contradictions between an angry and mobilized far-right base, on the one hand, and building a broader electoral coalition, on the other. As the congressional votes to certify the electoral college result showed, a significant number of House and Senate Republicans were willing to question the legitimacy of the election — sitting in the very chambers that had been stormed by the angry right-wing mob just hours before.

In addition, the GOP remains entrenched in state legislatures, which only became more significant in the wake of the recent election. This being a census year, this power within state governments will be crucial in allowing the Republicans to gerrymander districts, helping them maintain electoral power for the next decade. So too are they firmly ensconced within the courts — thanks, in part, to Trump.

This is particularly concerning in light of a recent poll showing that 45 percent of Republican voters approved of the storming of the capital. Yet this is a far cry from the 87 percent of Republicans who approve of Trump — suggesting that even many Republicans who support Trump were turned off by the attack. It is also far too low a number to win a national election, especially in light of how this figure contrasts with attitudes toward the attack among Democrats (96 percent oppose) and independents (two thirds oppose). It will be difficult for the GOP to maintain its radical base while also winning nationwide office.

Still, unless GOP voters are polarized against the extreme right, and turnout for Republican primary contests increases dramatically, the party could continue to be a vehicle for building this hard-right base at the state level and in congressional races. The poll

numbers certainly suggest that these forces have plenty of room to organize and recruit.

Their ability to do so will hinge on the extent to which the motley far-right coalition can be held together without completely relying on the institutions of the national Republican Party. And, of course, the ability for these forces to pose a real threat to liberal democracy will ultimately depend on attracting support from big capital — a possibility that, for now, seems remote.

## **The Riot as a Teachable Moment**

It is up to the Left to expose the linkages between the Republican Party and the far-right groups it has systematically mobilized and encouraged — and which will no doubt come under closer state scrutiny as Biden takes office. Highlighting these ties could create further divisions within the Republican Party, with the goal of fracturing and dismantling it as a political force.

However, focusing exclusively on the specter of a fascist threat will only serve to enable a restoration of bipartisan neoliberal stability under Biden — exactly what created the conditions for the extreme right's growth in the first place. Democratic control of the Senate certainly improves the Left's chances to advance a progressive agenda. But it does not, on its own, save us from a return to austerity over the longer term, or bring an end to ecological and social devastation.

Only by organizing and fighting, both on the terrain of the state and in the streets, can the Left hope to make any real progress toward addressing the climate emergency, mitigating the social crisis wrought by decades of neoliberalism, and expanding vital programs for social provision, such as Medicare for All. And this will mean not just defeating the Right, but also taking on Biden and the Democratic establishment, now poised to serve as the crucial vehicle for renewing the neoliberal consensus.

# We Cannot Let Yesterday's Farce Become Tomorrow's Tragedy

9 January 2021, by **Spectre Journal**

## I.

This was a “coup” as social media spectacle. In their pseudo-Viking gear and Confederate patches, the far-right rebels were a distinctly unappealing lot. And their rebellion utterly lacked a coherent plan beyond smashed windows and selfies. It could not think beyond its loyalty to the liar in chief. Yet, for all that, it was a sharp warning to the left and all progressive forces. If we do not rise to the occasion and stop the growth of this movement, next time (or the one after that) could be dangerously serious.

## II.

The stunt had been orchestrated for weeks. And on the day itself, Trump incited a mob led by far right goons to sack the capitol building in DC. The numbers were far from overwhelming—perhaps 15,000 in the nation’s capital—alongside hundreds in coordinated actions in several state capitals. But for all that, it signals a new stage in the emergence of a fascist right in the country.

## III.

Rather than a coup, it was a pathetic right-wing putsch attempt and was put down remarkably swiftly. It was given the green-light by Trump and his inner circle. But it was overwhelmingly condemned by the spokespeople of the capitalist class: the National Association of Manufacturers, the Chamber of Commerce, the CEOs of most major corporations, as well as Twitter and Facebook, which shut down Trump’s accounts. Both bourgeois political parties, the leadership of the military and police, and the bulk of the establishment

media denounced it. Soon thereafter Congress reconvened to confirm Biden. Unsurprisingly, stock markets throughout the world rallied in hopes that a new administration will restore business as usual.

## IV.

For all that, there can be no doubt that the sacking of the Capitol happened with the collusion of the administration and police. Compare the police’s muted response to the violence of the far right with their paramilitary response to BLM protests across the country. We all know the horrifying police violence that would have been unleashed had BLM supporters marched on the Capitol building. While the extent of coordinated police collusion remains unclear, there is no surprise that the police used kid gloves with the fascists. Pro-Trump sentiment is highly concentrated among the police and ICE. When confronted by the right in DC, the cops took selfies and shook hands with the fascists—just as they did with Kyle Rittenhouse in Kenosha last summer before he murdered two anti-racists.

## V.

The state only mobilized some of its forces to quell the protests once it became clear that they posed a threat to the political establishment. Leaders of both parties, the DC Mayor, and the business establishment made sure of that. In particular, the National Guard was called out from Maryland and Virginia. Alongside the DC police, they carried out “low value” arrests of dozens, usually for curfew violations. Order was restored, and Biden’s election was confirmed as Trumpites

like Lindsey Graham (South Carolina) and Kelly Loeffler (Georgia) rallied to confirm the election results.

## VI.

The immediate fallout will be contradictory, simultaneously damaging Trump and boosting the movement around him. He will suffer widespread repudiation by big business, the political establishment, and the security/military/police apparatus. All of the above will back Biden’s moves to restore business as usual at home and imperial credibility abroad. There will be talk of invoking the 25th amendment, and legal prosecution before he leaves the White House—and threats of further action after he leaves office. All of this will be meant to affirm the bourgeois integrity of the city on the hill.

## VII.

The ruling class and its political representatives will call for increased powers for its military and police to surveil, arrest, and detain “extremists.” They will do so nominally to contain and prosecute the fascists. But the left ought to refuse any support for the law and order campaign. We seek to weaken powers of state repression. And we know that in a racist, capitalist society the main targets will be Black people, immigrants, Muslims, leftists, and union members.

## VIII.

None of these actions will stop Trumpism and its fascist current from growing. They emerged from Wednesday’s actions emboldened. Not only do they believe they are protecting their rights against an

illegitimate government, but they have laid foundations for even greater growth. The right has a media infrastructure, organizations like the Proud Boys, and networks throughout the country capable of coordinating actions. That said, they are still small and vastly outnumbered by our side when it is mobilized. Remember, 26 million people marched this summer in BLM protests. Only some 15,000 marched across the country yesterday. But left unopposed, their ranks will swell. The conditions that generated their rise—a crisis in the lives of the petty bourgeoisie caused by the failures of neoliberalism, pandemic shutdowns of small businesses, and those businesses' failures amidst the recession—will only grow more acute in the coming months and years. The right will comprise a clear, present, and dangerous threat to workers and all oppressed people.

#### IX.

Trump's inner circle and his GOP minions cast their lot with the far right and fascists yesterday. When it came to the choice between capitalizing on his presidency to make money or positioning himself as the aspiring Führer of a new fascist movement, Trump chose the latter. Some in the GOP will follow him, most will not. But Trump retains support of about 40 percent of the electorate and has the basis to remain a huge force within the GOP, or to build an alternative if the leaders of the latter disown him. A split in the GOP is distinctly possible, and with it the formation of a new far right party. Ironically, Trump could be

the unintentional vehicle for a very dirty break from the Republican Party.

#### X.

Meanwhile, Biden will move rightward to embrace the GOP leaders who rallied to his confirmation—all in the name of “uniting the country and restoring order.” He will seek to overcome the pandemic, restore capitalist functioning, and rehabilitate US imperialism to better compete with China. But he will face unrelenting opposition from Trump and the far right, which will regard his government as illegitimate. The claim for illegitimacy looms as the foundational myth of a neo-fascist movement.

#### XI.

Liberals will outdo themselves in a rush to rally behind bipartisan capitalist unity and state repression to deal with the fascist threat. They will lend credibility to the law and order consensus articulated by both parties on Wednesday by police authorities and the media, particularly CNN, which rooted for police suppression of the right. Liberal forces are magnetically attracted to the law and order regime because they see the state, not mass anti-fascist action, as the key to dealing with the right.

#### XII.

The socialist left requires a radically different course. We can give no support to the bourgeois establishment, the new Biden administration, or their state

repression at home and imperial reassertion abroad. Instead, we must rally our forces to build anti-fascist united fronts everywhere to confront the right in large numbers and drive them off the streets, out of workplaces and social organizations. And crucially, we must redouble our efforts to build an activist socialist alternative that fights independently of the Democrats for demands that will address the multiple crises of the capitalist system: real pandemic relief; a Green New Deal; rent relief and a moratorium on evictions; Medicare for All; the \$15 minimum wage and union rights; defunding of the police; abolition of ICE; and massive cuts to the war budget.

#### XIII.

All of this requires aggressively working to reorient the socialist left, especially the Democratic Socialists of America, from its overwhelmingly electoral focus toward organizing struggle from below, especially anti-racist and workplace struggles. We are in the midst of the deepest crises (yes, plural) of the capitalist system since the 1930s. These will continue to stoke profound polarization within countries, waves of class and social mobilization, and greater conflict between capitalist states. Out of this a new socialist left can grow and take organizational form. We must do everything in our power to arm it with revolutionary socialist ideas, strategies, and tactics. We must be prepared for the next time.

Source *Spectre Journal*.

## Mob takeover of Capitol highlights instability of U.S. political system

8 January 2021, by **Socialist Resurgence**

“The world is watching!” President-elect Biden warned. And indeed it was. Venezuela's government expressed its opinion quite graphically by pointing out that the U.S. “is

suffering what it has generated in other countries with its politics of aggression.” The action also brings to mind the statement by Malcolm X in regard to the assassination of

President Kennedy in 1963: “The chickens have come home to roost.”

The mob action revealed clearly to the world the instability of this country's



political system. U.S. capitalist politicians are facing interlocking social crises that they are unwilling and unequipped to solve. As a consequence, they must confront the growing distrust of their policies by their constituents, and even a profound demoralization among some sectors. This in turn has provided an opening not only for Trump-style right-wing populists but for overtly fascist groups to gain a hearing.

The mob action on Jan. 6 showed that an angry grouping, hoodwinked by Trump's ravings that they were cheated in the elections and energized by outlandish conspiracy theories, were willing to pursue the discredited politicians even into the so-called "Citadel of Liberty," under the leadership of far-right elements. As some of the rioters explained to reporters, "We're taking the Capitol back!" More specifically, they hoped to stop the balloting that would affirm the Electoral College vote for Biden.

*7 January 2021*

The deep hole in which U.S. politicians find themselves is symbolized in the first place by the deranged "Commander in Chief," who has been too fixated on his narcissistic fantasies to respond in any meaningful way to the country's suffering in the pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis. But although Trump directly incited the rioters, just as culpable in the situation are the over 100 members of Congress who sought to trample on democratic voting rights, or what exists of them, in order to inflate their standing with the MAGA crowd and thus hopefully build their careers.

And right behind them in culpability are other politicians, equally reactionary but more sensitive to the calls by corporate capitalism for stability. They include outgoing Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, who waited two months after the election to finally declare, "The Electoral College has spoken."

The way out of the morass for savvy ruling-class politicians of both major parties, at least temporarily, was blazed by the National Association of Manufacturers, whose CEO affirmed

that Trump had "incited violence in an attempt to retain power," and urged Vice President Mike Pence to "seriously consider working with the Cabinet to invoke the 25th Amendment" in order to oust Trump from the White House. Throughout the evening of Jan. 6, a line of both Democrats and Republicans went before the media to firmly take their distance from Trump.

The Democrats are trying to eke out partisan advantages from the mob takeover of the Capitol by piously invoking the sanctity of the U.S. Constitution while denouncing the action as a "coup attempt" and "sedition," and piling heaps of contempt upon Trump and his dwindling group of supporters. But they too cannot escape the political crisis of the U.S. ruling class. The Democrats may gain popularity in the short term, but after a short honeymoon, it will become clearer to many that they have no real answers to the fundamental problems of the country and the world.

For example, the most pressing issue in the future is that of climate change—whose effects will no doubt be felt this year with another round of fires, hurricanes, torrential rains, and other catastrophes. Yet the plans of the Biden administration to combat climate change fall far short of what is needed. Moreover, the establishments are both the Democratic and the Republican parties are filled with people with deep ties to the fossil-fuel industry—who will be working to hold back any measures to curtail production of greenhouse gases.

## **Trump ignites the far right**

It is difficult to judge at this point whether Trump and his cohorts were fully aware that their exhortations to "Stop the Steal" (a slogan supposedly coined by Roger Stone for the 2016 election) would lead the mob to try to occupy the U.S. Capitol. It is certain, however, that Trump should have anticipated that his audience, which included violent fascist and white supremacist groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers—who had

advertised their attendance for weeks—would not be satisfied with a peaceful protest. Members of the crowd were carrying ladders, ropes, pipe bombs, chemical spray agents, guns, and other paraphernalia that should have made their objectives obvious.

It is impossible to believe that the White House had no advance warning of the violent tendencies of the far-right forces that were planning to go to Washington. A former intelligence official told reporters from Reuters that there were 1480 posts from accounts related to the QAnon conspiracy movement that spoke about Trump's rally on Jan. 6 and contained references to violence. One TikTok post stated that bringing guns to Washington is the "entire reason we're going."

Trump and his advisors should have been aware that his words, "We're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue ... and we're going to try to give them [Republican lawmakers] the pride and boldness to take back our country," would be taken by his far-right supporters as encouragement to do what they do best—create mayhem.

This was already demonstrated after the Charlottesville Unite the Right event in 2017, when Trump complimented members of the fascist torch procession as being "good people," and when he told the Proud Boys last year to "Stand back, and stand by." When Trump finally broke his silence after the mob action on Wednesday, he echoed these earlier sentiments, saying that the rioters were "very special" to him, and telling them sympathetically, "I know your pain, I know your hurt." Trump's still loyal toadie, Rudolph Giuliani, parroted his boss in assuring the rioters, "You are on the right side of the law and history."

Some of the rioters entered the Capitol in costume; the man known to many as the "QAnon Shaman" wore a fur hood with horns, while others were dressed in military fatigues and other get-ups. For them, the break-in was spectacular theater. But for the more organized fascist groups, the theater had a more serious purpose. It served as a kind of rehearsal for more deadly

action at such time when the ruling class might call on the fascists to enact a real coup. In that way (though certainly not in others), the Jan. 6 action is reminiscent of Hitler's 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. Hitler was arrested and imprisoned, but the action served as a great propaganda victory for his fledgling Nazi movement. For now, the fascists will no doubt declare their seizure of the U.S. Capitol to be a victory, and use it as a recruiting tool for their reactionary movement.

Cops handle the rioters with kid gloves

Many commentators have observed the laxity with which security forces treated the mob. Photographs show security personnel creating space for the crowd to climb the stairs to enter the building; at one point, a Capitol guard is seen posing for a selfie with one of the rioters. Although several hundred vandals piled into the Capitol, breaking windows, destroying and looting artwork, rifling through office desk files, and sending Congress members scurrying for their lives into protected shelters, it appears that only about 15 occupiers were arrested immediately, with another 55 people rounded up later, at the last count. Most of the rioters were allowed to exit the building unmolested and at their own pace. It took about three and half hours for sufficient police back-up to arrive at the Capitol to begin to clear the area of rioters.

Many have also commented on the difference between the laid-back manner with which the authorities treated these right-wing rioters—who were practically all white—and the brutality with which cops dealt with Black Lives Matter protesters during the summer. During BLM demonstrations in Washington, the Capitol steps were lined with droves of federal police carrying rifles, whereas on Jan. 6 merely a handful of cops were present. Doc Rivers, the coach of the Philadelphia 76ers NBA team, pointed this out to the media: "I'm going to say what many are thinking about: Could you imagine if those were all Black people storming the Capitol, and what would have happened?"

How should we respond?

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka issued a statement while the rioters were still in the Capitol grounds condemning Trump and Republican lawmakers for enabling what he termed "an attempted coup." Trumka said that given the fact that "the constitutional rights of every law-abiding American" had been violated, "the labor movement will not stand for it." United Auto Workers President Rory Gamble stated in another message, "We are the United States and unite we must. I urge us all to work together to move forward and heal our nation."

There is nothing wrong with urging "all to work together." But missing in these statements is a concrete call to action for the ranks of labor. These top union leaders overlook the emergency need for working people to make their voices heard concerning the threats to democracy in this country. They ignore the opportunity for working people to demonstrate that they have the power to make tremendous changes in the way this country operates.

Rather than resting on their heels, the AFL-CIO and other unions could take the responsibility to call for and to coordinate a vast united front of labor organizations, and groups supporting civil liberties, Black rights, women's rights, and other crucial social issues to demand that the democratic process be safeguarded and expanded in this country. This new labor-organized civil rights coalition could embrace the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement and mobilize to protect women's health and abortion rights from governmental attempts to curtail them.

And at the same time, the unions should mobilize their members to protest the government's inaction in providing serious relief measures for the economic crisis, enforcing strict health measures in the workplaces, and cutting the lag time in getting COVID vaccines to the population.

Gamble decries the "despicable attempt by extremists to disrupt our great republic"—and certainly, the actions by the far-right rioters were

despicable. But what about the politicians who sit in the halls of Congress every day? Is it not a despicable crime when Congress readily acts to override Trump's veto in order to authorize spending billions of dollars in military appropriations—used to overthrow governments and terrorize working people in the semi-colonial world—but refuses to provide a sufficient livelihood to U.S. working people in this time of severe crisis?

Such a labor-led coalition does not have to storm and occupy the U.S. Capitol (although that step might come as a matter of course at a later time!). At the beginning, it could call marches of millions of people—in every town and city and right down Pennsylvania Avenue—to press home its demands.

As a further step, the coalition could call a representative and democratic Congress of Labor to determine what issues need to be tackled and what means are required to achieve them. It could set up committees in every workplace and every neighborhood to enlist working people to fight for what they require. And it could organize union members to participate in political strikes to provide muscle for their demands.

At this point, however, the AFL-CIO leadership shows no signs that they are willing to take action along the lines of what we have suggested above. What should working people do in the meantime? We certainly cannot put our trust in Democratic Party politicians to protect our interests. Instead, we must continue our independent protests and our organizing—and not let up one iota. After the surge of COVID-19 cases dissipates and vaccinations become widespread, we must return to the streets like never before!

The Democrats are never going to mount an effective defense against growing right-wing movements. And their inaction on stemming the multiple crises that working people must confront will only strengthen the fascist right. This underscores once again why independent working-class action is so important.

Building a powerful, self-motivated movement of working people and their allies is the best weapon against the fascists—who prey on people who are politically demoralized and lack a

clear direction. We need to build committees of defense guards to protect our protests and strikes against the fascist goons, who will now be emboldened. And when the fascists and white supremacists come

to town for their rallies and torchlight parades, we need to out-mobilize them with thousands of defenders of civil liberties marching with determination in the streets.

# Reactionary uprising against the Parliament

8 January 2021, by **Kay Mann**

Deputies and senators were quickly evacuated. A curfew was announced for the evening. The governors of the neighboring states of Maryland and Virginia sent out their National Guards. Rioters were expelled before counter-demonstrations could be organized. While many of them were members of right-wing extremist groups such as the Proud Boys, no one group seemed to be leading the affair. The media labeled them as "insurrectionists".

## Violent theater coup

The incidents followed a demonstration in Washington D.C. where Trump spoke out to attack his own vice president and elected officials of his own party for failing to take action (the means for which do not exist) to prevent the confirmation of the results of the November 3 elections.

The invasion of parliament took place as parliament met after the year-end vacations to confirm the Electoral College results on the November 3 elections that were won by the centrist Democrat former Senator and Obama vice president Joe Biden. At the same time, the victory of the two Democrats in special elections in the state of Georgia on January 5 gave the Democrats a slim majority in the Senate (the Democrats also have a majority in the House of Representatives). Biden outdistanced Trump by seven million votes and 306 electoral votes to 232 in the Electoral College. Normally, the confirmation of

the results by both houses - the final step in the presidential political chessboard - takes place without incident or drama. But for weeks Trump, who does not accept his defeat and repeats endlessly in his Twitter statements -without any expectation- that the Democrats stole the elections with massive fraud and that he, Trump, had won by huge margins, has questioned the legitimacy of the elections in the eyes of the hard core of supporters and according to the polls a good part of the Republican electorate.

Lawyers have conducted some sixty lawsuits demanding that the ballots of certain key states be invalidated and that Trump be proclaimed President! Each of these lawsuits, none of which were based on an inch of evidence, failed. Among the judges who rejected Trump's lawsuits were many appointed by Trump himself.

On the other hand, many of Trump's parliamentary acolytes participated in his campaign of disinformation based on misinformation in the style of the Caucasian vision outlined by George Orwell in his 1984 novel and perfected by Hitler and Goebbels, either out of conviction or out of fear of being targeted by Trump. One hundred and forty deputies and a few senators signaled their intention to vote against Biden's confirmation-not enough to prevent confirmation, but extraordinary nonetheless.) But after the riot in parliament, a good party among them, including Kelly Loeffler, Georgia's ultra-conservative senator who had lost her seat to the Democrats a day before, abandoned

their intentions to vote against the confirmation. Indeed, no Republican elected official supported Trump's actions and his rioters, and many called on Trump to issue a statement condemning the riot. Trump finally declared that he would pass the baton to Biden without accepting that he had lost the election. The next day, January 7, saw votes from both parties condemning the riots, the resignation of members including his transport minister. Elected officials, including Republican senators called for Trump to be stripped of his powers for his role in the affair.

The extreme right was always marginal in the United States. There are no comparisons with the experience of fascist and fascist small groups in Europe in the 1930s and they remain marginal today. But the ability of a few hundred of the protesters to easily enter the corridors of opposing power by the meagre police force, which made relatively few arrests (about 50), raises questions. Why were there so few police guarding the area? It must have been hard to imagine such gentle treatment of left-wing or colored demonstrators.

Among the lessons of January 6th: there is an extreme right encouraged by Trump which is small but audacious and ready to resort to violence. Trump's weeks of disinformation, repeated by many of the elected Republicans, would damage the legitimacy of the system in the eyes of a large part of the electorate. But at the same time, the blue-cap Republican system, the white

cap system that served the ruling class so well, remains in place even under heavy pressure. No sector of capital or state apparatus supported Trump in these attempts to build up

the electoral and legal system. More than a hundred of the CEOs signed a document against challenging the November 3 results, and the military firmly rejected the possibility of

coming. Trump found that government control does not give absolute control over the levers of the state.

7 January 2021

## Was it a coup?

### 8 January 2021, by **Todd Chretien**

The mob broke into the Capitol, assaulted police, smashed windows, set off smoke cannisters, and took selfies of themselves sitting in Nancy Pelosi's office (the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representative) and in the Senate chambers. Senators and Representatives donned gas masks and escaped through security tunnels, stopping the process of confirming Biden's electoral votes. All of this was broadcast live on television across the country. Millions feared a coup attempt was underway. And they were right to worry. Capitol police felt sufficiently threatened to shot and kill one protester, who will undoubtedly become a far-right martyr.

What was the mob's purpose? Their goal was to "stop the steal," that is, to prevent the House and Senate from confirming the results (a constitutionally legal requirement) of the November 3 election, which Joe Biden won with 81 million votes to Trump's 74 million (and by 306 to 232 in the antiquated electoral college, state-by-state voting system). Prior to the riot, at least 13 Republican Senators (out of a total 53) and more than 100 Representatives (more than half of the total 197) planned to object to election results from several states. By way of comparison, in 2000, when Bush lost the popular vote to Al Gore, but won a narrow electoral college victory (decided by the Supreme Court), not a single Democratic Senator protested the results. Thus, the number of Republicans trying to overturn the election is a sign of just how radical the Republican party has become.

But was it a coup? Here is my view.

Trump knew the election would be close (closer than most analysts expected) because of the electoral college. When the votes were counted, out of a total of 151 million votes, Trump lost in the four states that decided the electoral college by a total of less than 200,000 votes (Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada, Arizona). In the run up to the election, Trump did his best to suppress the vote by threatening lawsuits and calling on supporters to "monitor" voting locations. He even called on supporters to vote twice!

I expected the Trump mob that we saw storm the capital today would have tried to close down polling locations in Black neighborhoods and create enough chaos on election day so Trump's lawyers could (as Bush's lawyers did in 2000) "stop the count." This would have been a kind of "electoral coup." However, because each state has its own voting system, the pandemic made it very difficult for Trump to target the right places to suppress. And, on election night, he was ahead in some states and behind in others states, so his "stop the vote" strategy collapsed.

And although Trump continued to demand that Republican governors overturn the results, enough of the Republican establishment calculated that there was no way to win (even the Supreme Court threw out Trump's bogus law suits). Thus, Republican governors have not supported Trump's increasingly desperate efforts, including the leaked phone call with the Republican governor of Georgia in which he demanded the governor

commit a felony by "finding" votes.

Trump's mob missed the moment when they could have done maximum damage. There was never any question of a Chilean-type coup. The Pentagon was not interested. And Trump's far-right supporters were never well-enough organized to provoke a military split in the state (or fight effectively under their own flag). Instead, the danger was that Trump could use his mob to create chaos and doubt so that a few well-picked judges could pass law suits up the chain of command to the U.S. Supreme Court where Trump's newly-christened 6-3 majority could find a legal rationale (as they had done in 2000) for handing power back to Trump (despite losing the popular election by 7 million votes). There were never going to be "tanks in the streets" but that doesn't mean that Trump's willingness to subvert U.S. democracy (as exclusionary as it is) is without consequences.

To paraphrase one critic of fascism, economic crisis, imperial decline, and America's racist history has raised a new far right to their feet and Trump has given them a banner. However, if today was a bungled dress rehearsal, or perhaps just a casting call, the danger will clearly grow in the coming years. Mussolini marched on Rome with 30,000 armed fascists in disciplined ranks. Pinochet mobilized the reactionary clergy, the sons of the rich, and the entire military to take power. And in his early days, Hitler led 600 stormtroopers in Munich in his failed Beer Hall Putsch. By comparison, Trump's minions remain weak (some more than others).



However, the specific danger that Trump (or his successor) presents will not look like Germany or Italy or Chile.

The American ruling class has millions of police and security forces at its disposal. It is possible to imagine a scenario in which these forces will move in a Golden Dawn direction (but even in Greece we see the challenges open fascist para-military forces face). Far more likely is an ugly mix of reactionary legal decisions by the Republican-dominated courts that restrict people's right to vote "from above" - the Democratic victories in Georgia's U.S. Senate races today will drive the Republicans to new heights of voter suppression and gerrymandering - combined with local militias, far-right and racist bands, and police intimidation "from below." It may continue to "look" like what has passed for bourgeois democracy, but there will be a pressure from the right to drag the U.S. backwards. Mass

incarceration and immigrant bashing has already created a New Jim Crow, as Michelle Alexander has so aptly labelled it, but it can get a lot worse.

The immediate impact of today will be a period of revulsion from Trump. Even his loyal pet vice president Mike Pence split with him over attempting to "stop the steal" in the Senate and many leading Republicans are today condemning him for his embrace of the rioters. Republican Senate strongman Mitch McConnell attacked Trump today, claiming his methods "would damage our republic forever." Of course, there is a large dose of "rats jumping from a sinking ship" to this along with other displays of Republican flag waving. But they are being careful not to jump too far from the ship because Trump is more popular with their supporters than they are. Many of them want him to disappear, but if he comes back, they want to be on his good side. But most of all they want to hang on to power

and the best way to do that is to block any meaningful legislation from the incoming Biden administration so they can campaign against a "do-nothing" president. It's the same recipe that elected Trump and gave birth to Trumpism.

If he lives long enough, Trump may make another bid for power in 2024. His message today to the mob certainly positioned him for a return, "We love you, you're very special. We've seen what happens, you see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know you how feel. But go home, and go home in peace."

But defeating Trump at the polls, and today's fiasco, has given us some breathing space. We must use it well. The results today in Georgia, Black Lives Matter, teachers and nurses' strikes, MeToo, and the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America all indicate the direction we must take.

Source [No Borders News](#).

## Riot on the Hill

8 January 2021, by **Mike Davis**

But something unexpectedly profound happened: a *deus ex machina* that lifted the curse of Trump from the careers of conservative war hawks and right-wing young lions, whose ambitions until yesterday had been fettered by the presidential cult. Today was the signal for a long-awaited prison break. The word 'surreal' has been thrown around a lot, but it accurately characterizes last night's bipartisan orgy, with half of the Senate election-denialists channeling Biden's call for a 'return to decency' and vomiting up vast amounts of noxious piety.

Let me be clear: the Republican Party has just undergone an irreparable split. By the White House's *Führerprinzip* standards, Pence, Tom Cotton, Chuck Grassley, Mike Lee, Ben Sasse, Jim Lankford even Kelly Loeffler are now traitors beyond the

pale. This ironically enables them to become viable presidential contenders in a still far-right but post-Trump party. Since the election and behind the scenes, big business and many mega-Republican donors have been burning their bridges to the White House, most sensationally in the case of that uber-Republican institution, the National Association of Manufacturers, which yesterday called for Pence to use the 25th Amendment to depose Trump. Of course, they were happy enough in the first three years of the regime with the colossal tax cuts, comprehensive rollbacks of environmental and labor regulation, and a meth-fed stock-market. But the last year has brought the unavoidable recognition that the White House was incapable of managing major national crises or ensuring basic economic and political stability.

The goal is a realignment of power within the Party with more traditional capitalist interest groups like NAM and the Business Roundtable as well as with the Koch family, long uncomfortable with Trump. There should be no illusion that 'moderate Republicans' have suddenly been raised from the grave; the emerging project will preserve the core alliance between Christian evangelicals and economic conservatives and presumably defend most of the Trump-era legislation. Institutionally, Senate Republicans, with a strong roster of young talents, will rule the post-Trump camp and, via vicious darwinian competition - above all, the battle to replace McConnell - bring about a generational succession, probably before the Democrats' octogenarian oligarchy has left the scene. (The major internal battle on the post-Trump side in the next few years will

probably center on foreign policy and the new cold war with China.)

That's one side of the split. The other is more dramatic: the True Trumpists have become a de facto third party, bunkered down heavily in the House of Representatives. As Trump embalms himself in bitter revenge fantasies, reconciliation between the two camps will probably become impossible, although individual defections may occur. Mar-a-Lago will become base camp for the Trump death cult which will continue to mobilize his hardcore followers to terrorize Republican primaries and ensure the preservation of a large die-hard contingent in the House as well

as in red-state legislatures. (Republicans in the Senate, accessing huge corporation donations, are far less vulnerable to such challenges.)

Tomorrow liberal pundits may reassure us that the Republicans have committed suicide, that the age of Trump is over, and that Democrats are on the verge of reclaiming hegemony. Similar declarations, of course, were made during vicious Republican primaries in 2015. They seemed very convincing at the time. But an open civil war amongst Republicans may only provide short-term advantages to Democrats, whose own divisions have been rubbed raw by Biden's refusal to share power with progressives. Freed

from Trump's electronic fatwas, moreover, some of the younger Republican senators may prove to be much more formidable competitors for the white college-educated suburban vote than centrist Democrats realize. In any event, the only future that we can reliably foresee – a continuation of extreme socio-economic turbulence – renders political crystal balls useless.

7 January 2021

Source *New Left Review* [Sidecar](#).

Expanded and updated version **The Guardian**, 8 January 2021 ["With the Capitol riot the Trumpists have become a de facto third party"](#).

## Quick notes on Trump's putsch

8 January 2021, by **Ashley Smith**

2. This is not a coup, but a pathetic, failed putsch organized by the far right that was put down relatively quickly. It was greenlit by Trump and his inner circle. But it was uniformly condemned by capitalist class (NAM, Chamber of Commerce, CEOs of every major corporation, as well as Twitter and Facebook, which shut down Trump's accounts), both political parties, the leadership of the military and police, and by the bourgeois media. The capitalist class, its various representatives, and repressive apparatuses united against it, and shut it down. Soon thereafter Congress reconvened to confirm Biden. Unsurprisingly, the stock markets throughout the world rallied with relief that a new administration will restore business as usual (at least they hope).

3. The sacking of the capitol could only happen with the collusion of the administration and police. Compare the police response to the far right's open threat of violence to their response to BLM protests across the country. When confronted by the right, the cops took selfies and shook hands with the fascists. When BLM

marched in DC and elsewhere it was met with police state repression. Imagine if BLM had marched on the capitol building. People would have been gunned down in mass numbers. The extent of the collusion remains unclear. Clearly the administration leadership did not lift a hand to mobilize security for the capitol building and Trump encouraged the assault. Regardless of whether there was coordination it should come as no surprise that the police used kid gloves with the fascists. The highest concentration of pro-Trump sentiment is among the police and ICE and they are therefore predisposed to glad hand the Nazis.

4. The state mobilized its forces to quell the protests once it became clear that it was a threat to the political establishment. Both political parties, the DC Mayor, and the business establishment made sure of that. The National Guard was mobilized from Maryland and Virginia and the police from DC. They carried out arrests of dozens and the dispersal of the protests. Order was restored and Biden's election was confirmed with even arch Trumpite Lindsay Graham

rallying to support the validation of the results.

5. These events will have the following political results. It will backfire for Trump in the immediate aftermath. The capitalist class, political establishment, and security/military/police apparatus will back the confirmation of Biden to restore business as usual at home and

imperial credibility abroad (this was an enormous blow to US soft power). They will consider invocation of the 25th amendment, impeachment, and legal prosecution before he leaves office and further action after he leaves office. They must underscore that the state remains invincible.

6. The bourgeoisie and its political representatives will call for increased powers for its military and police to surveil, arrest and detain "extremists." They will do so nominally to arrest and prosecute the fascists. But the main target of the repression will be Black people, immigrants, Muslims, the left, and unions.

7. None of these actions will stop Trumpism and its fascist current from

growing. They emerged from yesterday's actions, despite the fact that some will be arrested, prosecuted and jailed, emboldened and confident. They believe that they are protecting their rights against a government under Biden that is illegitimate. They have the foundations for even greater growth. The right has a media infrastructure (QAnon etc), organizations like the Proud Boys, and networks throughout the country capable of calling coordinated actions. That said, they are still small and vastly outnumbered by our side if it was mobilized. Remember, 26 million people marched this summer in BLM protests. Only some 15,000 marched across the country yesterday. But, if unopposed, their ranks will swell. The conditions that generated their rise—a crisis in the lives of the petty bourgeoisie caused by the failures of neoliberalism, pandemic shutdowns of their small businesses, and those businesses' failure amidst the recession—will only grow more acute in the coming months and years. The right will therefore become a clear, present, and dangerous threat to workers and the oppressed.

8. Trump along with his inner circle and GOP minions cast their lot with the far right and fascists yesterday. Trump had had a choice to opt for capitalizing on his presidency to make money or become the Fuhrer of a new fascist movement. Now, utterly isolated in the ruling class and political establishment, he has no choice but to choose the latter. Some in the GOP will follow him, most will not. But Trump remains popular with

about 40 percent of the population—regardless of what happened yesterday—and has the basis to build an alternative to the GOP, which is disowning him now. Will the GOP split? Will a new far right party around Trump form? Both of these are now possibilities, despite being unthinkable before. Trump ironically could be the unintentional vehicle for a very dirty break from the Republican Party.

9. Biden will move to the right to embrace the GOP that rallied to his confirmation and carry out bipartisan rule to “unite the country and restore order.” That was always his plan and he will do so even more now. He will try to overcome the pandemic, try and restore capitalist functioning, and rehabilitate US imperialism to compete with China. He will be hard pressed to succeed on that front and will be militantly opposed by Trump and the far right, which will regard his government as illegitimate.

10. Liberals will rally behind bipartisan capitalist unity and state repression to deal with the

fascist threat. Yesterday there was an utter law and order consensus articulated by both parties, police authorities (especially DC's former Black Chief of Police Ramsey), and the media especially CNN which was rooting for police deployment to suppress the right. The liberal forces will not resist this turn to law and order because they see the state, not mass anti-fascist action, as the key to dealing with the right. They will therefore be even less critical of Biden

than before.

11. Socialists must chart a different course. We must not support the bourgeois establishment, the new Biden administration, and their state repression at home and imperial reassertion abroad. Instead, we must rally our forces to build anti-fascist united fronts everywhere to confront the right in large numbers and drive them off the streets. And, just as importantly, we must redouble our efforts to build an activist socialist alternative that fights independently of the Democrats for demands that will address the multiple crises of the capitalist system: a Green New Deal; Medicare for All; \$15 and Union; Defund the Police; Abolish ICE; and Massive Cuts to the War Budget.

12. We must aggressively argue for the reorientation of the socialist left especially DSA from its overwhelmingly electoral focus toward organizing struggle from below, especially BLM and workplace struggles. We are in the midst of the deepest crises (yes plural) of the capitalist system since the 1930s. These will continue to stoke profound polarization within countries, waves of class and social struggles, and greater conflict between capitalist states in the hierarchy of global imperialism. Out of this a new socialist left will be born and take organizational form. We must do everything in our power to arm it with revolutionary socialist ideas, strategies and tactics.

7 January 2021

Source [LIS-ISL](#).

## After the fascist coup in the United States No time to lose - counter-offensive now!

8 January 2021, by **Socialistisk Politik**

For this cadre of the fascist type, January 6 may be seen as a rehearsal. It also took place in large parts of the United States, where state

parliaments and other public buildings were threatened by armed Trump supporters. In Arizona's capital Phoenix, a guillotine was placed in

front of the State House. In Atlanta, Georgia's secretary of state and staff must be evacuated as hundreds of gunmen gather. In Ohio and

California, Black Lives Matter supporters and others were attacked. Similar reports come from New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Of course, Trump's promise never to give up but to build his movement for future battles is similar to the pure wishful thinking of the defeated. But here are those who take the words bloody seriously and systematically work to make them a reality.

The Republican establishment may now be torn to pieces and most of its representatives in the Senate approved the election, several have openly distanced themselves from Trump. But there are also right-wing radicalized parts that form the bridge between the street's fascist militias and stormtroopers and institutional power at various levels.

At the time of writing, it is not clear why the Washington Congress building with its 2,000 regular police and security devices was so unprotected or why the National Guard was not called in despite the openly declared threats of mass

protests to disrupt the electoral roll. But it is hardly a far-fetched guess that the police and military United States have many allies of Trump.

It is precisely in historical moments that these developments can be reversed. The Democratic Party is a wing of the country's bourgeoisie and it has not lifted Biden to the presidency to pursue a policy in the interests of the majority. He represents large companies and the financial sector and is in the process of filling his future government with representatives from there. But with the far right temporarily sprained after the storm in Washington and with the presidential power and Congress in their hands, Biden has no excuses for continued right-wing politics if he is put under pressure from below.

And there is no time to lose here.

American society must be urgently put on its feet by both the millions of people who hope for a brightening after the Trump years and the broad working class people who have been misled by the right-wing agitation.

Continued disintegration of neoliberalism, mass poverty and social impoverishment along with indecision towards Trumpism and its allies will give the stormtroopers we saw in action on January 6 just the time they need to transform the rehearsal into the real show. That fight will also be waged against Biden and the leadership of the Democratic Party, the last thing they want is popular movements with self-confidence that demand equality, justice and welfare. Our hope is for the forces that in recent years have shown that the United States is so much more than the banner of big business and imperialism, from politicians of Bernie Sanders' cut to activists in Black Lives Matter, it abounds in campaigns for health care reforms and other social reforms to the socialist currents that have smelled morning air in the tracks of these movements.

7 January 2021

*Translated from Socialistisk Politik  
"Efter fascistkuppen i USA  
Ingen tid att förlora - motoffensiv  
nu!"*

## Why the Democrats have won one battle against Trump but can't win the war

19 November 2020, by **Susan Pashkoff**

Having argued that defeating Trump was a primary objective and hence voting Biden/Harris to defeat Trump had to be done (while calling for uniting the movements ready to move against Biden), the closeness of the Presidential race demonstrates that this position was warranted. In order to understand the US and its electorate, it is essential to understand the importance of anti-Black racism in the US. [16] Understanding this election and what has happened means that we need to understand the nature of the Democratic Party strategy, the memes chosen by Trump which actually stuck,

and the nature of voters in the US.

### Understanding what is happening in the US election

Contrary to the expectations of the Democratic Party, there has been no "blue wave" to win the Senate and smash Trumpism. So while Trump has been beaten and the Democrats look like they have won the Presidency, it is clear that the US remains very politically divided and the far right has been normalised along with racism,

misogyny, homophobia and transphobia.

At the moment, the Democrats have not captured the Senate; at the moment, the Dems have 46 seats and two independents caucusing with them (Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Angus King of Maine). For the Republicans, they are currently at 48 seats with the Republicans certain to win Alaska. The three remaining seats that need to be called are the one in North Carolina which looks like a loss for the Dems and the two senate races in Georgia. In Georgia, state election law requires that the victor must win



50% of the vote: there is no question that the Senate Special Election seat will require a run-off and it now looks as though the second open Senate seat between Purdue (Rep) and Ossoff (D) will be a run-off as well. So at this time, it looks as though the Senate remains in Republican hands. Essentially, the balance of the Senate depends on Georgia. Given the close nature of the vote in Georgia, this provides a ray of hope that the Senate could be taken by the Dems – this is needed because Biden’s “New Deal” and his environmental policies and his reform of the ACA require Senate backing.

Understanding the electorate of Georgia is important. There has been a tremendous campaign led by Stacey Abrams to work get Black Americans to vote – especially in the city of Atlanta and its suburbs– following a grotesque level of voter suppression and irregularities in the [2018 Gubernatorial Election](#). However, outside of cities, the strength of the far right especially white supremacists and Neo-Confederates is very strong; Marjorie Taylor Greene a follower of right-wing conspiracy group QAnon has won a seat in the US House of Representatives from Georgia’s 14th Congressional District. [\[17\]](#)

In terms of the Presidency itself, Biden’s win in Wisconsin and Michigan were necessary to defeat Trump, but insufficient to win him the Presidency. If Biden holds in Nevada and the Dems pick up Arizona, that will give him 270 electoral votes and he doesn’t need Pennsylvania to win. If he doesn’t hold in those states (and continued vote counting is narrowing his victory in Arizona), everything will depend on Pennsylvania where Biden now has the lead as mail-in ballots are counted (and this is expected to continue given that Dems used mail-in ballots in far greater proportions there). Trump has filed a lawsuit to stop the counting of votes on the basis of “voting irregularities” and has tried to get the vote counting in Philadelphia to be stopped. The close vote in Georgia is important and depends in large instance on voters in Atlanta and its suburbs; this is a serious positive even if Biden loses the vote in Georgia this time, it represents a major positive shift in this election

as does the vote in Arizona (due in large part to demographic changes and the large Latinx and Native American vote in the state). However, it is possible that Arizona may be a one-off victory due to Trump’s vicious comments about their former Senator, John McCain.

There is, of course, the impact of the pandemic and the lockdowns in the US; the use of mail-in ballots has certainly allowed for a large voter turnout and it seems as though mail-in ballots favoured Biden while votes on the day favoured Trump. The lockdowns impacted voting, especially in states where there is a large tourism industry like Nevada where Biden is holding onto a razor thin lead – Clark County (Las Vegas and its environs) is still being counted and traditionally they are strongly Democratic Party voters, this may cut into Biden votes. [\[18\]](#)

Even if Trump loses, this is not the end of the far right in the US. The current divisions in the country remain intact as does the power of the far right. This was why Biden had to win the popular vote and the electoral vote significantly in order to make the claim that America had rejected Trumpism, the far right, and the politics of division. Dick Gregory on CNN interestingly claimed that so many voted in the elections due to fear of both the far right and the far left.

## Narrow win

There are essentially three things that have led to this result of a narrow win for the Democratic Party rather than a grand blue wave. The Democrats seem to have gotten part of the “blue wall” back, winning Wisconsin and Michigan, but failed to win Ohio (a state with large amounts of voter suppression and under control of right-wing Republicans). The fantasies of winning Texas and Georgia receded in the face of reality; the only traditional Republican state that they have flipped may be Arizona.

We need to understand the level of voter suppression which has played an historical role preventing Black Americans from voting through “Jim

Crow Laws”, but also the role of gerrymandering of boundaries (most important for House of Representative delegations and state assemblies). Then there are laws preventing felons and the incarcerated from voting, and a whole host of other laws put in place by Republicans that disadvantage people of colour and the poor (e.g., ID requirements).

The second problem in the US is racism; the centrepiece of a divide and rule strategy by the ruling class and American politicians historically. Trump built on this racism and utilised its images, particularly those of the Confederacy to mobilise his base. His reaction to the rebirth of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other murdered Black Americans was to attempt to stir up a white backlash against Blacks and other people of colour, using rhetoric against so-called ‘identity politics. He continuously used the line that BLM is being used by Anarchist, Marxists and antifa together with more general red baiting: “they” are “indoctrinating your children” and “coming to a suburb near you”. This is not only racism on his part removing Black control over what is clearly an autonomous Black movement – it is also an attempt to use red-scare politics and link the anti-racism struggles with the hard left.

While Trump comparing himself to Lincoln is more than absurd, he has been using the 1994 Crime Bill (aka the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act](#)) which has led to criminalisation of poverty and the mass incarceration of black men. Biden drafted the Bill for the Senate and while he has recently apologised for the bill and promised reform many Black correctly are suspicious of him. So while Trump concurrently criticises Biden for this bill, he keeps up the racist themes that have been at the centre of his divide and rule strategy. This has had an impact on the vote. While black women came out strongly for Biden (Black women are the backbone of the Democratic Party), there are reports that some black men shifted towards Trump — it doesn’t have to be many in such a close election.



Trump's use of red-baiting ("Biden is a socialist or under control of socialists") cost Biden in Miami Dade county in Florida (due to large numbers of Cuban and Venezuelan expats in the state) — it may have worked elsewhere (and that wouldn't surprise me) but that is clear in Florida—so that is the direct impact of red-baiting. Part of red-baiting in the US is linked to anti-Black racism itself; note that Trump constantly describes the BLM movement as "under the control of Marxists, Anarchists and Antifa." This is not only racism on his part removing Black control over what is clearly an autonomous Black movement — it is also an attempt to use red-scare politics and link the anti-racism struggles with the hard left.

## Democratic Party Strategy

The Democrat strategy for this election was apparent at the Democratic Party convention and hinged upon the creation of an alliance between centre-right Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans on the right. Watching Republican after Republican speaking at the Democratic convention one wondered if you were watching the Democratic Party convention at all. The Democratic Party left was represented only by one speech by Bernie Sanders and a 30 second introduction by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Instead of all wings being represented, the left within the Party was marginalised, along with more progressive Latinx political leaders like Julián Castro.

Biden's strategy relied on the notions of unity and empathy when the country is sharply politically divided. The core of Trump's base is not wealthy Republicans but rather the white working class, especially men, who don't give a damn what wealthy Republicans supporting Biden think. What Biden needed was to shift this; rebuild Democratic support in the rust belt. In this he was only partially successful, the Democrats won back Michigan and Wisconsin, but failed in Ohio. While Biden won in Michigan and Wisconsin, the victories were very narrow. To argue that you have

defeated Trumpism and united the country from the dangers of the far right, he needed to win and win big.

Meanwhile, Biden marginalised the left of the party, American progressives and young people — the same error that the Democrats keep making. The Democrats think that the left and progressives will vote for them as they have no one else to vote for; but they may not vote for them and they may stay home. The Biden and Democrats political line does not bring young people into the process and that means they are neglecting the future of their party. Younger people in the US tend to be more progressive and left; what are they being offered and why should they join the Democratic party? Deliberately marginalising the left from Biden's so-called grand coalition is a mistake by the Democrats and for their aim of getting people inside the mainstream electoral and political process; in a period when the left is stronger they give no encouragement for young people to view the electoral process as a way of changing things.

All the Democrats offered in response to Black Lives Matter movement were reforms that should have happened decades ago. Biden apologising for supporting the 1994 Crime Bill just doesn't do it. In terms of the environmental catastrophe, Biden really does not want to alienate the fossil fuel industry too much. He calls for net carbon zero by 2050 and for a gradual shift to sustainable energy production and away from fossil fuels. But, he also states that he will not eliminate fracking for political reasons, due to the "right" of individuals to allow fracking on their land and generate income for a cash-strapped working class. The importance of the fossil fuel industry in many states and for jobs means that he has to stress the gradual turnover; many workers clearly do not believe that a just transition will happen under Biden. Adapting to the individualism of the American population means that they are severely constrained in addressing the climate crisis. There is also a geo-political dimension here that US strength economically and internationally depends on fossil fuels and fracking. Add to this, the bizarre

belief held by many Americans who think that Trump is better on economic policy than Biden.

Biden's health care policy is also not sufficient. Rather than call for single payer, he wants to amend the Affordable Care Act (ACA — "Obamacare") by adding a "public" option. Irrespective of the fact that many Americans remain uninsured, he refuses to go with single payer despite its popularity. Meanwhile the Republicans have been trying to eliminate the ACA using the courts and accuse Biden of supporting socialised health care — which they claim is a gateway towards socialism. Biden's actual timidity does nothing to mobilise progressives and even worse, some trade unions members believe that if either single payer (or even a public option) becomes the law (or available) they will lose their excellent health care coverage. Many of the Republican criticisms of both the ACA and Biden's healthcare policy are a more indirect use of red-baiting by Trump and the Republicans.

## Real danger

But the real danger in the US comes from the normalisation of the far right, racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia which is clearly evident in the US electorate. There has always been a component of these beliefs in the American electorate; the real extreme versions of these beliefs have often been kept to the margins (except of course women's reproductive rights) ... now these extreme versions of this hate have been normalised. Trump's supporters (especially the far right) will probably come out in force to support his claims that the vote was stolen from him (he has prepared the way for months); there are protests in the US led by both sides and there already have been arrests and accusations of police violence. [19] In Oregon, the National Guard has been activated to deal with protests. National demonstrations to demand that the votes are counted are scheduled for Saturday. The militarisation of the police force and Federal forces of ICE, Border Control and other Federal agencies and their use against American citizens is extremely dangerous. Buildings have

been boarded up in anticipation of problems in many major cities and Trump's fanning the flames alleging that the election has been stolen due to voter fraud will make an already ugly situation dangerous.

The win by Biden is a partial victory but it is insufficient; Trump and Trumpism needed to be crushed and the normalisation of the far right,

racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia prevented. Biden needed to demonstrate that Americans can unite across class, ethnicities and religious beliefs behind his project, that the US is a country of kind, empathetic and open-minded people. Biden needed the appearance of unity, if not the reality. Biden will win the Presidency, but the division and hate

remain ... it is a serious mess! And that is a significant understatement. Trumpism is not an aberration, it is part of the politics of the US and it will remain so until we defeat it. The Democrats strategy completely failed to do this and Trumpism must be crushed or the whole world remains in deep shite.

6 November 2020

## Self-Extinction of Neoliberalism? Don't Bet on It.

4 May 2020, by **Gilbert Achcar**

They also clash with fiscal austerity, but the latter precept is not common to all neoliberal governments. It is a sacrosanct principle in Europe, where British neoclassical neoliberalism blended with German *ordo-liberalism*. But it is not part of a neoliberal consensus in the United States, where paradoxically the Democrats who used to be accused of Keynesian "tax and spend" by the Republicans have become the champions of fiscal discipline in the neoliberal age, while the latter have developed since Ronald Reagan an original policy of "cut taxes (for the rich) and increase (military) spending" that has resulted in huge federal deficits.

The fact remains though that Western neoliberal governments violated their own doctrines twice—the second time on a much-expanded scale—on the occasion of two successive crises of a magnitude warranting the label affixed to each of them, in turn, of being "the worst since the Great Depression" that began in the United States in 1929. The ongoing Great Lockdown, the nickname that the IMF adopted to designate the huge economic crisis resulting from the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, has already sunk to far lower depths than the Great Recession, the name that the IMF started using in 2009 for the previous crisis. [20] The crucial question is

now: when will the current crisis reach its bottom and how long after that will it take the world to recover from it? [21]

The magnitude of the ongoing economic disaster is such that it has revived and boosted the hope that it will lead to a major global shift in economic policies and priorities. In this connection, Naomi Klein quotes from one of the main enemies of Keynesianism and key contributors to the neoliberal shift: Milton Friedman. At the beginning and end of a video that she recently produced on "[Coronavirus Capitalism—and How to Beat It](#)," she uses the same quote from Friedman's 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom* that she already used twice in her book *The Shock Doctrine* (pp. 6, 140): "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around."

Whereas Klein had used that quote in the book as a clue to what she called the "shock doctrine," she quotes it approvingly in the video, commenting that "Friedman, one of history's most extreme free market economists, was wrong about a whole lot, but he was right about that. In times of crisis, seemingly impossible ideas suddenly become possible." The notion that progressive views such as those

advocated by Klein and Bernie Sanders have been vindicated by the crisis has become widespread indeed— even in the *Financial Times* where associate editor Janan Ganesh wrote a 18 March piece entitled "[The Sanders worldview wins even as Bernie loses](#)" A day before, the British pro-Conservative magazine *The Spectator* was inviting Boris Johnson to "borrow from Corbyn's playbook." [22]

For anyone who remembers the previous economic crisis, this must trigger a sense of *déjà vu*. The expectation then was quite stronger actually although the present crisis is much bigger, for the Great Recession was the first major global shock of the neoliberal age and the occasion for the first resort by neoliberal governments to massive state intervention in reining back the crisis. *Newsweek* came out in February 2009 with a cover proclaiming "We are all socialists now." [23] Rereading it today is quite amusing: it starts by quoting "Indiana Congressman Mike Pence, the chair of the House Republican Conference and a vociferous foe of President Obama's nearly \$1 trillion stimulus bill" and his host on Fox News, the epitome of truly fake news, who described the bill as "socialist."

The *Newsweek* article commented

that this accusation “seems strangely beside the point. The US government has already—under a conservative Republican administration—effectively nationalized the banking and mortgage industries.” It went on cultivating the paradox: “History has a sense of humor, for the man who laid the foundations for the world Obama now rules is George W. Bush, who moved to bail out the financial sector last autumn with \$700 billion. Bush brought the Age of Reagan to a close; now Obama has gone further, reversing Bill Clinton’s end of big government.”

That illusion was based on a confusion between a pragmatic and temporary borrowing from the Keynesian playbook, to paraphrase *The Spectator*, and a radical change in long-term economic and social policies. It didn’t last long at the time, as the FT’s Ganesh could not fail to note:

*We are in the early stages of one of history’s periodic discontinuities in economic thought. The sharpest, perhaps, since the OPEC oil crises that elevated the free-marketeers in the 1970s. Readers will suggest the crash in 2008, after which a biography of John Maynard Keynes announced the “return of the master”. Well, it was fleeting. Before long, there were fiscal retrenchments around the western world. In the US, there was the Tea Party movement, the neutering of President Barack Obama by a Republican Congress, and his successor’s raid on the administrative state.*

“This time feels different,” added Ganesh. But that itself is a recurrent feeling. The most recent instance occurred shortly before the outburst of the pandemic, when Joseph Stiglitz, the well-known former Chief Economist of the World Bank, heralded (after countless others) the “end of neoliberalism”. [24] This time feels different, Stiglitz too could have written as he asserted that “if the 2008 financial crisis failed to make us realize that unfettered markets don’t work, the climate crisis certainly should: neoliberalism will literally bring an end to our civilization.”

Understandably, the higher acuteness

of the ongoing Covid-19 economic crisis, although it is of much lesser historic significance than the climate crisis, has led to a lot of new obituaries of neoliberalism—all of them, alas, quite premature. A zealous neoliberal contributor to *Forbes* business magazine confused them with obituaries of capitalism in lamenting that “left-wing intellectuals are thrilled,” thus blaming them for what he believed to be Schadenfreude. [25] He acknowledged nonetheless that the left critique of neoliberalism (capitalism tout court in his understanding) has gained ground over the years, calling fellow neoliberals to be “extra vigilant”:

*Twelve years ago, anti-capitalists succeeded in reframing the financial crisis—wrongly—as a crisis of capitalism. The false narrative that the financial crisis is a result of market failure and deregulation has since become firmly established in the minds of the population at large. And now left-wing intellectuals are again doing their utmost to reframe the corona crisis to justify their calls for the all-powerful state. Unfortunately, the chances that they could succeed are very high indeed.*

Was this fervent neoliberal over-pessimistic about the advent of the “all-powerful state”? Not quite in the view of David Harvey who concluded his long piece posted on *Jacobin* on 20 March with a rather surprising dystopian prospect—not the prospect of a socialist welfare state, but that of a Trumpian Behemoth:

*the burden of exiting from the current economic crisis now shifts to the United States and here is the ultimate irony: the only policies that will work, both economically and politically, are far more socialistic than anything that Bernie Sanders might propose and these rescue programs will have to be initiated under the aegis of Donald Trump, presumably under the mask of Making America Great Again. All those Republicans who so viscerally opposed the 2008 bailout will have to eat crow or defy Donald Trump. The latter, if he is wise, will cancel the elections on an emergency basis and declare the origin of an imperial presidency to save capital and the world from “riot and revolution.” [26]*

A week later, Costas Lapavistas followed in Harvey’s footsteps in contradicting unwarranted left-wing optimism, albeit with a less apocalyptic scenario and no illusions about the end of neoliberalism being in sight:

*The shibboleths of the neoliberal ideology of the last four decades were rapidly swept aside, and the state emerged as the regulator of the economy commanding enormous power. It was not difficult for many on the Left to welcome such state action, thinking that it indicated the “return of Keynesianism” and the death knell of neoliberalism. But it would be rash to come to such conclusions.*

For one thing, the nation-state has always been at the heart of neoliberal capitalism, guaranteeing the class rule of the dominant corporate and financial bloc through selective interventions at critical moments. Moreover, these interventions were accompanied by strongly authoritarian measures, shutting people inside their homes en masse and locking down enormous metropolises. ... The colossal power of the state and its ability to intervene in both economy and society could result, for instance, in a more authoritarian form of controlled capitalism in which the interests of the corporate and financial elite would be paramount. [27]

We stand again facing the two polar opposites of optimism and pessimism, utopia and dystopia, between which the radical left has traditionally swung. The truth is that these are primarily projections onto the future of individual and/or collective dispositions that themselves swing according to shifting political experiences. Thus, the mood among the US left certainly shifted considerably from the eve of Super Tuesday on 3 March to the following day, in the aftermath of Biden’s securement of victory in the Democratic primary—as did the mood among the British left between the eve of 12 December 2019 and the following day, in the aftermath of Boris Johnson’s electoral triumph.

Both utopia and dystopia are useful components of the left’s worldview, nonetheless, in that they sustain the



magnetic poles of pessimism and optimism, caution and voluntarism, the anxiety of a resumption of the fascistic past and the hope of a truly democratic socialistic future, which motivate those who strive to change the world into a better and fairer place. The point at which the cursor eventually stands in the real world on the long range that separates utopia from dystopia is not determined by objective conditions though. These constitute only the parameters within which class and intersectional struggles must proceed. Major shifts in the realm of governmental politics are determined above all by social struggle in the context of the existing circumstances.

Here is indeed where Milton Friedman got it wrong. When crisis occurs, the actions that are taken do not “depend on the ideas that are lying around”. To be sure, the fight around ideas translated into concrete policy proposals is important. And the political-economic measures that end up being implemented are certainly related to the ideas that prevail—not in society at large, however, but among the social group that steers the helm of government. The analogy between the shift away from the postwar Keynesian consensus into neoliberalism and what Thomas Kuhn called a “[paradigm shift](#)” terminates at this point. For, unlike scientific revolutions which are the result of advances in knowledge, paradigm shifts in the economy are not the product of some collective—theoretical or even merely pragmatic—intellectual decision.

As Ernest Mandel put it in 1980 (1st edition; pp. 77-8 of 2nd edition) at the onset of the neoliberal age, in his [Long Waves of Capitalist Development](#):

*The turnabout of academic economics toward the anti-Keynesian counterrevolution was not so much a belated recognition of the long-term threats of permanent inflation. These threats had been well known long before Keynesianism lost its hegemony among economic advisors of bourgeois and reformist governments. It wasn't even essentially a product of the unavoidable acceleration of inflation... It was essentially a product of a basic switch in class struggle priorities of*

*the capitalist class.*

The monetarists’ “anti-Keynesian counterrevolution” in the realm of academic economics is nothing but the ideological expression of this changed priority. Without the long-term restoration of chronic structural unemployment, without the restoration of the “sense of individual responsibility” (i.e., without severe cutbacks in social security and social services), without generalized austerity policies (i.e., stagnation or decline in real wages), there can be no sharp rapid restoration of the rate of profit: That is the new economic wisdom. There is nothing very “scientific” about it, but there is a lot that corresponds to the immediate and long-term needs of the capitalist class, all references to objective science notwithstanding.

The neoliberal paradigm shift was enabled by a steady deterioration in the balance of class forces in Western countries in the course of the 1970s, with unemployment on the rise since the 1973-75 recession and the victorious onslaughts on the labor movement led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. The degree to which the “anti-Keynesian counterrevolution” has been implemented since then in different countries depends not on intellectual differences, but on the balance of social forces in each country. For a timely illustration with regard to public health, it is sufficient to compare Britain and France, two countries with roughly equal populations and GDPs.

The range of health costs is similar in both countries, far from the extravagant costs that inflate US health expenditure. If we take average annual physician compensation as an indicator, it is currently in US dollars, 108,000 in France and 138,000 in the UK (compared to 313,000 in the US). Registered nurses in France and the UK get roughly equal annual salaries on average. [28] Successive neoliberal governments in France have been criticized for trying to shift part of health expenditure onto the patients, and yet France remains in a much better position than the UK with regard to public health.

According to [OECD data](#), health expenditure by government and compulsory schemes has fluctuated, during the past decade, between 8.5 and 9.5% of GDP in France compared to between 6.9 and 7.8% in Britain. From 2010 to 2017, France has dedicated 0.6 to 0.7% of its GDP to investment (gross capital formation) in its healthcare system every year as against 0.3 to 0.4% for the UK. [29] It is thus not surprising that the number of hospitals in 2017 was over 3000 in France as against less than 2000 in the UK, with a total number of hospital beds nearing 400,000 in France compared to close to 168,000 in the UK. This number kept going down in the UK over the last decade under Tory-led governments. [30] As for the number of physicians, it was more than 211,000 in France in 2017 as against 185,700 in the UK. There were 10.8 practising nurses per one thousand inhabitants across the Channel compared with 7.8 in Britain. [31]

These figures show how much it was hypocritical and deceitful for Boris Johnson’s Brexit campaign to use the NHS as its central argument and thus lay the blame for the poor state of the British health system at the EU’s door. Yet, the difference in the state of public health between France and the UK is not due to ideological differences between rulers on either side of the Channel. It is the much greater social resistance in France, and nothing else, that has prevented the country’s successive governments from going further down the neoliberal road.

In the UK, where wholesale privatization of public utilities—such as what the Conservatives managed to do in the sectors of energy and transport—was not possible for electoral or economic reasons, different tactics were used that were met with too little resistance. In public health, it was a reduction of public spending coupled with inducement of the richest layers of the population out of the public service into private health schemes, in order to put progressively in place a two-tier health system, like in the USA. In higher education, this resulted in managerial privatization (corporatization) by way of replacing

public funding with a massive increase in tuition fees, thus creating down the road a generation that is entering professional life burdened by significant debt, again like in the USA. [32]

The outcome of the present pandemic-related economic crisis will likewise be determined in every country by the balance of local social forces in the context of the global balance. The most likely immediate outcome will not be one of the two opposite alternatives of a spontaneous post-Keynesian abandonment of neoliberalism or a Trumpian Behemoth. It will rather be the attempt by neoliberal governments to shift the burden of the huge debt currently incurred onto the workers, as they did in the wake of the Great Recession, depressing the people's purchasing power and propensity to spend, thus leading the world into a major aggravation of the current secular stagnation, as Adam Tooze warned. [33]

The historian rightly concluded: "It makes sense to call instead for a more

active, more visionary government to lead the way out of the crisis. But the question, of course, is what form that will take and which political forces will control it." That is the question, indeed. With our lives shattered by the ongoing dual crisis and with the economic crisis likely to long outlast the pandemic, what is most immediately at stake is to determine who is going to pay for the huge human and economic cost of the crisis: those who are responsible in the first place for the amplitude of that cost, through decades of neoliberal dismantlement of public health and the welfare state and prioritization of financial profits, or the rest of us, i.e. the vast majority of the people?

We can safely predict that neoliberals will be unanimous in increasing public health expenditure, not without making sure to benefit their health-manufacturer friends. They will do so, not because of a sudden conversion to the virtues of the welfare state or because they care for the public, but because they dread the economic consequences of a new pandemic or a second round of the current one. The

point is that they will be naturally inclined to do so at the expense of other aspects of the public interest, such as education, pensions, or unemployment benefits, while making the wage-earners pay—by measures such as a pay freeze or even pay cuts—the cost of getting the economies back to business as usual.

The most urgent struggle is therefore to prevent them from doing so in the way French workers stood against their neoliberal governments' onslaught on their incomes and pension schemes in 1995 and 2019, i.e. by resorting to the general strike or the threat thereof. This fight will be crucial in preparing the ground for a defeat of the neoliberals at the hands of social and political forces such as those that have been standing behind the trade-union movement in France, the Labour Party in the UK, and the Sanders campaign in the US. It is only then that an enduring termination of neoliberalism will occur.

24 April 2020

Source [New Politics](#).

# The role of planning in the ecosocialist transition - a contribution to the debate

25 April 2020, by **Michael Löwy**

## Ecological and social planning and transition

The need for economic planning in any serious and radical process of socio-ecological transition is winning greater acceptance, in contrast to the traditional positions of the Green parties, favorable to an ecological variant of "market economy," that is, "green capitalism."

In her latest book, Naomi Klein observes that any serious reaction to

the climate threat "involves recovering an art that has been relentlessly vilified during these decades of market fundamentalism: planning." This includes, in her view, industrial planning, land use planning, agricultural planning, employment planning for workers whose occupations are made obsolescent by the transition, etc. "This means bringing back the idea of planning our economies based on collective priorities rather than profitability...." [34]

## Democratic planning

The socio-ecological transition — towards an ecosocialist alternative — implies public control of the principal means of production and democratic planning. Decisions concerning investment and technological change must be taken away from the banks and capitalist businesses, if we want them to serve the common good of society and respect for the environment.

Who should make these decisions?



Socialists often responded: “the workers.” In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx defines socialism as a society of “the associated producers rationally regulating their interchange (Stoffwechsel) with Nature.” However, in Volume I of *Capital*, we find a broader approach: socialism is conceived as “an association of free men, working with the means of production (gemeinschaftlichen) held in common.” This is a much more appropriate concept: production and consumption must be organized rationally not only by the “producers” but also by consumers and, in fact, the whole of society, the productive or “unproductive” population: students, youth, women (and men) homemakers, retired persons, etc.

In this sense, society as a whole will be free to democratically choose the productive lines to be promoted and the level of resources that should be invested in education, health or culture. The prices of goods themselves would no longer respond to the law of supply and demand, but would be determined as much as possible according to social, political and ecological criteria.

Far from being “despotic” in itself, democratic planning is the exercise of the free decision-making of the whole of society — a necessary exercise to free ourselves from the alienating and reified “economic laws” and “iron cages” within capitalist and bureaucratic structures. Democratic planning associated with a reduction of working time would be a considerable step forward by humanity towards what Marx called “the realm of freedom”: the increase in free time is in fact a condition for the participation of workers in democratic discussion and management of the economy and society.

Advocates of the free market tirelessly use the failure of Soviet planning to justify their categorical opposition to any form of organized economy. We know, without getting into a discussion on the successes and failures of the Soviet experience, that it was obviously a form of “dictatorship over needs,” to quote the expression used by György Markus and his colleagues from the Budapest

School: an undemocratic and authoritarian system which gave a monopoly over decisions to a small oligarchy of techno-bureaucrats. It was not planning that led to the dictatorship. It was the growing limitation of democracy within the Soviet state and the establishment of totalitarian bureaucratic power after Lenin’s death that gave rise to an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic planning system. If socialism is to be defined as control of production processes by workers and the general population, the Soviet Union under Stalin and his successors fell far short of this definition.

The failure of the USSR illustrates the limits and contradictions of bureaucratic planning with its flagrant ineffectiveness and arbitrariness: it cannot serve as an argument against the application of genuinely democratic planning. The socialist conception of planning is nothing other than the radical democratization of the economy: if political decisions should not be made by a small elite of leaders, why not apply the same principle to economic decisions? The question of the balance between market and planning mechanisms is undoubtedly a complex issue: during the first phases of the new society, markets will certainly still occupy a significant place, but as the transition to socialism progresses, planning will become increasingly important.

In the capitalist system use value is only a means — and often a device — subordinated to exchange value and profitability (this in fact explains why there are so many products in our society without any utility). In a planned socialist economy, the production of goods and services responds only to the criterion of use value, which entails spectacular economic, social and ecological consequences.

Of course, democratic planning concerns the major economic choices and not the administration of local restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, small shops, craft businesses or services. Likewise, it is important to emphasize that planning does not contradict the self-management of workers in their production units. Whereas the decision to convert, for

example, an automobile factory to bus or rail vehicle production would be up to society as a whole; the internal organization and operation of the factory would be managed democratically by the workers themselves. There has been much debate over the “centralized” or “decentralized” nature of planning, but the important thing remains democratic control of the plan at all levels — local, regional, national, continental and, hopefully, global — since ecological issues such as climate warming are global and can only be addressed at that level. This proposal could be called “comprehensive democratic planning.” Even at this level, it is planning which contrasts with what is often described as “central planning” because economic and social decisions are not taken by any “center” but democratically determined by the populations concerned.

There would, of course, be tensions and contradictions between self-governing institutions and local democratic administrations and other larger social groups. Negotiating mechanisms can help resolve many such conflicts, but in the final analysis, it will be up to the larger groups involved, and only if they are in the majority, to exercise their right to impose their opinions. To give an example: a self-managed factory decides to dump its toxic waste in a river. The population of an entire region is threatened by this pollution. It may then, following a democratic debate, decide that the production of this unit must be stopped until a satisfactory solution to control its waste is found. Ideally, in an ecosocialist society, the factory workers themselves will have sufficient ecological awareness to avoid making decisions that are dangerous for the environment and the health of the local population. However, the fact of introducing methods to guarantee the decision-making power of the population to defend the most general interests, as in the previous example, does not mean that questions concerning internal management should not be submitted to the citizens at the level of the factory, school, neighborhood, hospital or village.

Ecosocialist planning must be based on a democratic and pluralist debate, at each level of decision. Organized in the form of parties, platforms or any other political movement, the delegates of the planning bodies are elected and the various proposals are presented to everyone they concern. In other words, representative democracy must be enriched — and improved — by direct democracy which allows people to choose directly — locally, nationally and, ultimately, internationally — between different proposals. The whole population would then make decisions on free public transit, on a special tax paid by car owners to subsidize public transport, on the subsidization of solar energy to make it competitive with fossil energy, on the reduction of the hours of work to 30, 25 hours a week or less, even if this entails a reduction in production.

The democratic nature of planning does not make it incompatible with the participation of experts whose role is not to decide, but to present their arguments — often different, even opposed — during the democratic decision-making process. As Ernest Mandel said:

“Governments, parties, planning boards, scientists, technocrats or whoever can make suggestions, put forward proposals, try to influence people. To prevent them from doing so would be to restrict political freedom. But under a multi-party system, such proposals will never be unanimous: people will have the choice between coherent alternatives. And the right and power to decide should be in the hands of the majority of producers / consumers / citizens, not of anybody else. What is paternalist or despotic about that?” [35]

A question arises: what guarantee do we have that people will make the right choices, those that protect the environment, even if the price to pay is to change part of their consumption habits? There is no such “guarantee,” only the reasonable prospect that the rationality of democratic decisions will triumph once the fetishism of consumer goods has been abolished. People will of course make mistakes by making bad choices, but don’t the experts make mistakes themselves? It

is impossible to imagine the construction of a new society without the majority of the people having reached a great socialist and ecological awareness thanks to their struggles, their self-education and their social experience. So, it is reasonable to believe that serious errors — including decisions inconsistent with environmental needs — will be corrected. In any case, one wonders if the alternatives — the ruthless market, an ecological dictatorship of “experts” — are not much more dangerous than the democratic process, with all its limits.

Admittedly, for planning to work, there must be executive and technical bodies capable of implementing decisions, but their authority would be limited by the permanent and democratic control exercised by the lower levels, where workers’ self-management takes place in the process of democratic administration. It cannot be expected, of course, that the majority of the population will spend all of their free time in self-management or participatory meetings. As Ernest Mandel remarked: “Self-administration does not entail the disappearance of delegation. It combines decision-making by the citizens with stricter control of delegates by their respective electorate.” [36]

## **A long process not free from contradictions**

The transition from the “destructive progress” of the capitalist system to ecosocialism is a historic process, a revolutionary and constant transformation of society, culture and mentalities — and politics in the broad sense, as defined above, is undeniably at the heart of this process. It is important to specify that such an evolution cannot be initiated without a revolutionary change in the social and political structures and without the active support to the ecosocialist program by a large majority of the population. Socialist and ecological awareness is a process whose decisive factors are the collective experience and struggles of the population,

which, starting from partial confrontations at the local level, progress towards the prospect of a radical change in society. This transition would lead not only to a new mode of production and a democratic and egalitarian society but also to an alternative way of life, a truly ecosocialist civilization beyond the imperium of money with its consumption patterns artificially induced by advertising and its limitless production of useless and/or environmentally harmful goods.

Some environmentalists believe that the only alternative to productivism is to stop growth as a whole, or to replace it with negative growth — called in France “degrowth.” To do this, it is necessary to drastically reduce the excessive level of consumption of the population and to give up individual houses, central heating and washing machines, among other things, in order to reduce energy consumption by half. As these and other similarly draconian austerity measures may be very unpopular, some advocates of degrowth play with the idea of a kind of “ecological dictatorship.” [37] Against such pessimistic points of view, some socialists display an optimism which leads them to think that technical progress and the use of renewable energy sources will allow unlimited growth and prosperity so that everyone receives “according to their needs.”

It seems to me that these two schools share a purely quantitative conception of “growth” — positive or negative — and of the development of the productive forces. I think there is a third posture that seems more appropriate to me: a real qualitative transformation of development. This implies putting an end to the monstrous waste of resources caused by capitalism, which is based on the large-scale production of useless and/or harmful products. The arms industry is a good example, as are all these “products” manufactured in the capitalist system — with their planned obsolescence — which have no other purpose than to create profits for big companies.

The question is not “excessive consumption” in the abstract, but

rather the dominant type of consumption whose main characteristics are: ostensible property, massive waste, obsessive accumulation of goods and the compulsive acquisition of pseudo-novelties imposed by "fashion." A new society would orient production towards meeting authentic needs, starting with what could be described as "biblical" — water, food, clothing and housing — but including essential services: health, education, culture and transportation.

It is obvious that the countries where these needs are far from being met, that is to say the countries of the southern hemisphere, will have to "develop" much more — build railways, hospitals, sewers and other infrastructures — than industrialized countries, but this should be compatible with a production system based on renewable energy and therefore not harmful to the environment. These countries will need to produce large quantities of food for their populations already hit by famine, but — as the farmers' movements organized at an international level by the Via Campesina network have argued for years — this is an objective much easier to reach through organic peasant farming organized by family units, cooperatives or collective farms, than by the destructive and antisocial methods of industrial agrobusiness with its intensive use of pesticides, chemical substances and GMOs.

The present system of odious debt and imperialist exploitation of the resources of the South by the capitalist and industrialized countries would give way to a surge of technical and economic support from the North to the South. There would be no need — as some Puritan and ascetic ecologists seem to believe — to reduce, in absolute terms, the standard of living of the European or North American populations. These populations should simply get rid of useless products, those which do not meet any real need and whose obsessive consumption is upheld by the capitalist system. While reducing their consumption, they would redefine the concept of standard of living to make way for a lifestyle that is actually richer.

How to distinguish authentic needs from artificial, false or simulated needs? The advertising industry — which exerts its influence on needs through mental manipulation — has penetrated into all spheres of human life in modern capitalist societies. Everything is shaped according to its rules, not only food and clothing, but also areas as diverse as sport, culture, religion and politics. Advertising has invaded our streets, our mailboxes, our television screens, our newspapers and our landscapes in an insidious, permanent and aggressive manner. This sector contributes directly to conspicuous and compulsive consumption habits. In addition, it leads to a phenomenal waste of oil, electricity, labour time, paper and chemical substances, among other raw materials — all paid for by consumers. It is a branch of "production" which is not only useless from the human point of view, but which is also at odds with real social needs. While advertising is an indispensable dimension in a capitalist market economy, it would have no place in a society in transition to socialism. It would be replaced by information on the products and services provided by consumer associations. The criterion for distinguishing an authentic need from an artificial need would be its permanence after the removal of advertising. It is clear that for some time the past habits of consumption will persist because no one has the right to tell people what they need. The change in consumption models is an historical process and an educational challenge.

Certain products, such as the private car, raise more complex problems. Passenger cars are a public nuisance. Globally, they kill or maim hundreds of thousands of people each year. They pollute the air in big cities — with harmful consequences for the health of children and the elderly — and they contribute considerably to climate change. However, the car satisfies real needs under the current conditions of capitalism. In European cities where the authorities are concerned about the environment, some local experiments — approved by the majority of the population — show that it is possible to gradually limit the place of the private car in

favour of buses and trams. In a process of transition to ecosocialism, public transit would be widespread and free — on land as well as underground — while paths would be protected for pedestrians and cyclists. Consequently, the private car would play a much less important role than in bourgeois society where the car has become a fetish product promoted by insistent and aggressive advertising. The car is a symbol of prestige, a sign of identity (in the United States, the driver's license is the recognized identity card). It is at the heart of personal, social and erotic life. In this transition to a new society, it will be much easier to drastically reduce over-the-road transportation of commodities — a source of tragic accidents and excessive pollution — and to replace it with rail or container transport. Only the absurd logic of capitalist "competitiveness" explains the present development of truck transportation.

To these proposals, the pessimists will answer: yes, but individuals are motivated by infinite aspirations and desires which must be controlled, analyzed, suppressed and even repressed if necessary. Democracy could then be subject to certain restrictions. Yet ecosocialism is based on a reasonable assumption, previously advanced by Marx: the predominance of "being" over "having" in a non-capitalist society, that is to say the primacy of free time over the desire to own countless objects: personal achievement through real activities, cultural, sports, recreational, scientific, erotic, artistic and political.

The fetishism of the commodity encourages compulsive buying through the ideology and advertising specific to the capitalist system. There is no evidence that this is part of "eternal human nature." Ernest Mandel pointed out:

"The continual accumulation of more and more goods (with declining 'marginal utility') is by no means a universal or even predominant feature of human behaviour. The development of talents and inclinations for their own sake; the protection of health and life; care for children; the development of rich social relations as

a prerequisite of mental stability and happiness — all these become major motivations once basic material needs have been satisfied.” [38]

As we mentioned above, this does not mean, especially during the transition period, that conflicts will be non-existent: between environmental protection needs and social needs, between ecological obligations and the need to develop basic infrastructures, especially in poor countries, between popular consumption habits and lack of resources. A society without social classes is not a society without contradictions or conflicts. These are inevitable: it will be the role of democratic planning, from an ecosocialist perspective freed from the constraints of capital and profit, to resolve them through open and pluralistic discussions leading society itself to take decisions. Such a democracy, common and participative, is the only way, not to avoid making errors, but to correct them through the social collectivity itself.

To dream of a green socialism or even, in the words of some, of a solar communism, and to fight for this dream, does not mean that we are not

trying to implement concrete and urgent reforms. While we should not have illusions about “clean capitalism,” we must nevertheless try to gain time and impose on the public authorities some elementary changes: a general moratorium on genetically modified organisms, a drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, strict regulation of industrial fishing and the use of pesticides as chemical substances in agro-industrial production, a much greater development of public transit, the gradual replacement of trucks by trains.

These urgent eco-social demands can lead to a process of radicalization, provided that they are not adapted to the requirements of “competitiveness.” According to the logic of what Marxists call a “transitional program,” each small victory, each partial advance immediately leads to a greater demand, to a more radical objective. These struggles around concrete questions are important, not only because partial victories are useful in themselves, but also because they contribute to ecological and socialist awareness. Moreover, these victories promote activity and self-organization

from below: these are two necessary and decisive pre-conditions for achieving a radical, that is to say revolutionary, transformation of the world.

There will be no radical transformation as long as the forces engaged in a radical, socialist and ecological program are not hegemonic, in the sense understood by Antonio Gramsci. In a sense, time is our ally, because we are working for the only change capable of solving environmental problems, which are only getting worse with threats — such as climate change — which are more and more close. On the other hand, time is running out, and in a few years — no one can say how much — the damage could be irreversible. There is no reason for optimism: the power of the current elites at the head of the system is immense, and the forces of radical opposition are still modest. However, they are the only hope we have to put a brake on the “destructive progress” of capitalism.

3 April 2020

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## A Left Case for Hong Kong Self-Determination

22 April 2020, by **Promise Li**

For ten months and going, Hong Kong has seen its largest social movement yet with mobilizations against an extradition bill that threatens to subject dissident Hongkongers to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s jurisdictional system. Previously under British rule since 1842, the city was allowed to maintain its own governmental system after the Handover in 1997, albeit under Chinese sovereignty in accordance with the “One Country, Two Systems” framework. But civil liberties continue to be threatened and class disparity

deepens. With a fifth of the population below the poverty line in the world’s most expensive housing market, young people are increasingly stripped of job security and social benefits. Citizens only contribute a partial voice to the elections of the city’s highest decision-making body, the Legislative Council (LegCo), and highest elected official, the Chief Executive, which are largely determined by corporate elites and pro-Beijing figures. [39]

The recent introduction of the extradition bill was a breaking point.

It ignited a whole new generation of protestors, many of whom were born with little to no memory of colonial rule. They have seen their own and their elders’ economic and political rights eviscerated under an increasingly authoritarian neoliberal regime. Though the bill was subsequently retracted, the protestors’ other demands – including universal suffrage, release of their arrested comrades, and establishment of an independent commission to investigate police brutality – have not been met.

Despite these conditions, the left has struggled to maintain power or relevance within the mass movement. Left and labor movements have been traditionally weak in Hong Kong, and the establishment's association with "communism" and "the left" has made it nearly impossible to organize an anti-capitalist, worker-centered opposition under any left or socialist banner. In fact, Hongkongers seldom refer to (let alone understand!) the left-right political spectrum, and the city's core political marker is one's allegiance or opposition to the Beijing-controlled Hong Kong government.[*New Politics* 29 June 2019 "Localism's Contradictions in Hong Kong".] Leftist collectives do exist in the movement, like the anarchist *Autonomous 8A*, the workers' mutual aid group *Workers Committee* (???), *Student Labour Action Coalition* (????), and grassroots tenant organizing collective *Old District Autonomy Advancement Group* (ODAAG) (????????). Local publications and media outlets like *Borderless Movement* (????), *Grass Media Action*(??.??.?), *v-artist* (???), *The Owl* (??), and *Reignite Press* (??) continue to promote important left-leaning perspectives. Many of them, especially the minority of leftists in the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), have been struggling to make interventions within the highly heterogeneous opposition camp.

The opposition (also known as the "pro-democracy" or "pan-democratic" camp) has traditionally been led by liberal democrats, many of whom had helped negotiate the Sino-British settlement leading up to the Handover and had emphasized support for mainland dissidents. But their ideological hegemony, marked by political compromises with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has been upended in the wake of the 2014 Umbrella Movement - the last large-scale set of protests after the PRC's National Committee introduced a motion to explicitly pre-screen candidates for Hong Kong's Chief Executive election. Localism, an often-confused mix of political tendencies centering around the interests of local Hongkongers and their political self-determination, was the Umbrella Movement's reaction to the

entrenched political orientation of the pan-democratic camp: a liberal-democratic focus on universal, democratic values for both mainland Chinese and Hongkongers. Some localist supporters even argue for the prioritization of local Hongkongers' interests over those of mainland immigrants, who are seen as threats to local resources and Hongkongers' distinct cultural identity. These sentiments can turn into reactionary and xenophobic demands, treating mainlanders as the key problem for local Hongkongers by filling up the city's already-thinning pool of jobs and other social resources. These positions occasionally put some of the more radical localists at odds with the pan-democrats' conservative, electorally-minded political tactics, though for the most part, both continue to be close allies in the opposition.

Localist sentiments have continued to gain traction since then and have become the dominant political ideology of protestors today, with self-determination remaining a key demand for the movement. But what self-determination means for localists is still highly unstable. It does not necessarily mean national independence. Polls show that support for Hongkongers' national independence remains low - only one out of every six people. [40] In other words, this protest movement is only beginning to define Hong Kong's movement for self-determination, constantly improvising its limits. In the face of this formlessness, a common response across the political spectrum has been to prescribe its limits, in effect putting brakes on the radical and transformative nature of the demand for self-determination. Though the left has been sidelined in these protests, our role should neither be simply tailing these demands nor opposing them. We must understand self-determination's complex history and roots in the city, and amplify its democratic power in its current manifestation in today's movement.

## Localism Beyond Lenin

Many progressives and leftists have developed reductive understandings of

this struggle. *Socialist Review's* Lawrence Wong, for example, has characterized Hong Kong self-determination as a "reactionary demand ... a cover for independence." [41] Indeed, Hong Kong's entangled history vis-à-vis China makes it inaccurate to simply treat it like any other self-determination struggle, as if it were comparable to Rojava. By the same token, writing off self-determination as purely reactionary goes too far and ignores the nuances of Hong Kong society and cultural identity. The subtext for Wong's position is, of course, Lenin's theory of self-determination, succinctly summarized by Paul Le Blanc:

[F]irst, that only the freedom to secede makes possible free and voluntary union, association, cooperation and, in the long term, fusion between nations; second, that only the recognition by the workers' movement in the oppressor nation of the right of the oppressed nation to self-determination can help to eliminate the hostility and suspicion of the oppressed and unite the proletariat of both nations in the international struggle against the bourgeoisie. [42]

However, the case of Hong Kong is an exception that does not neatly fit within this description. Lenin's analysis does not account for cases in which a territory is detached by imperialism and subsequently returned after a century or more of immense cultural and economic development. The city's complicated sense of removal and identification with China makes it such that the most transformative kind of political consciousness in Hong Kong grows from an affiliation with the local, rather than ethnic or national identity.

Existing in the gaps of ready-made theoretical paradigms, Hong Kong's framework of self-determination appears slippery to both its participants and its onlookers. Indeed, localism at times bleeds into more rigid demands, like the minority position of Hong Kong separatist independence, dominated by the more visibly right-wing and pro-Western parties that sprang from Umbrella. But Hong Kong's postcolonial



condition always threatens the limits of ethnonationalism, and the boundaries of “Hong Kong identity” remain highly protean. Cross-racial solidarity exists in instances like the demonstrations of support for the movement in Chungking Mansion in October of last year, involving a hodgepodge of ethnic minorities from Indian migrants to African traders. [43] Many Mainlanders are ostracized in this movement, while many other mainland Chinese have expressed solidarity with the movement both in China and abroad. [44]

## The Leftist Past of Hong Kong’s Self-Determination Struggle

In the face of these complexities, the left has long been seen in Hong Kong as either synonymous with the CCP establishment or simply too dogmatic to have any relevance for Hongkongers’ aspirations. But in fact, some of the first to think through the framework of self-determination actually came from the radical left – a history fully disconnected from today’s movement.

Some of the earliest instances of demands for self-determination emerged from worker-student organizing debates in the anti-imperialist and social movement upsurge of the early 1970s. [45] In those discussions, the pro-CCP Maoists, in an unsteady alliance with other left-leaning groups against the colonial government at the time, reportedly accused other activists of promoting “Hong Kong independence” at one point. [46] In the 1980s, around the time when the British and Chinese state elites met behind closed doors to negotiate the future of Hong Kong, small, radical left formations like October Review (???), Revolutionary Marxist League (???), and Sun Miu Group (???) argued for the right of ordinary masses of Hongkongers to democratically decide their own future. [47] In a joint statement by October Review and Revolutionary Marxist League in 1984, the writers

demanded that, upon the Handover, the Chinese government should allow for “a generally elected, full-powered General Assembly” wherein “the Hong Kong people should grasp the opportunity to mobilize and strive for democratic self-rule.” While the authors affirm Chinese sovereignty over the city, they emphasize that Hongkongers’ have the “full right to decide on how to recover sovereignty” and “decide Hong Kong’s future social system and policies” in a way that builds the socialist struggle along with working-class counterparts in Mainland China. [48] In other words, they stop short of defining what Chinese sovereignty should actually look like for Hongkongers, while still working within that framework: the point is that only Hongkongers themselves, through democratic process, can give form and content to the material reality of Chinese sovereignty in the city.

Similarly, Sun Miu’s statement in 1983 emphasizes Hongkongers’ right to self-determination (???) as a way to reject bourgeois separatism and empower the voices of all Hongkongers, not just political elites, to determine their own political future in the eve of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. For Sun Miu, self-determination does not have to be a bourgeois demand and can serve as the basis for class struggle. Central to this analysis is Lenin’s idea that even though “full political democracy” cannot be entirely achievable under capitalism and imperialism, revolutionary leftists should not:

*reject the immediate and the most determined struggle for all these demands – such a rejection would only play into the hands of the bourgeoisie and reaction, but on the contrary, it follows that these demands must be formulated and put through in a revolutionary and not a reformist manner, going beyond the bounds of bourgeois legality, breaking them down, going beyond speeches in parliaments and verbal protests, and drawing the masses into decisive action, extending and intensifying the struggle for every fundamental democratic demand up to a direct proletarian onslaught on the bourgeoisie.* [49]

The most immediate demand for Hong Kong, as a city in transition caught between two administrations, was to have a seat in the table in this process – to have its own recognized voice, regardless of national or ethnic determinations. Following Lenin, Sun Miu members did not separate themselves from this demand, but intensified it according to left, internationalist principles. Self-determination that links up to other self-determination struggles in both the Chinese and Taiwanese working-classes should be a practical necessity, since “there is no hope of victory if we just use the power of five million Hong Kongers against the CCP, which leads over ten billion.” “If Hongkongers ... publically aim to return power to all people, that would empower the people of China and Taiwan to struggle in solidarity,” the authors write. “Then, the ten billion Chinese would not be swayed by the CCP bureaucracy to oppress Hongkongers’ strength, but would be our greatest ally, and fight with us to take back their sovereignty from the state.” However optimistic and impossible, this demand indeed aims to reform and intensify the struggle, articulating a vision of autonomy that looks outward to internationalist unity.

## “Hong Kong Nationalism”

Thirty years later, the discourse of self-determination has re-emerged in new terms. The influential February 2014 issue of Hong Kong University Student Union’s journal *Undergrad* published a series of essays on the topic of “the Hong Kong people/nation (???)”. Published just half a year before the Umbrella Movement, the issue was edited by Brian Leung Kai-ping, who would later emerge as a key figure in last year’s protests after revealing his identity during a speech he gave at the valiant occupation of LegCo on July 1. [50] Leung’s contribution borrows French philosopher Ernest Renan’s theory of “civic nationalism” to articulate a Hong Kong nationalism that transcends ethnic boundaries. Leung’s nationalism doubles down on a liberal democratic notion of citizenship that only includes those who “put Hong

Kong interests first” and “defend local culture and people’s interests.” Leung’s imperviousness to Hong Kong’s class dynamics and overdetermined place in global capital in fact upholds local autonomy at the expense of social and economic reality. Indeed, he is right that the ideology that “we are all Chinese” has “lost its purchase” in the city. But ultimately, his insistence on establishing exclusionary criteria for Hong Kong citizenship sacrifices the radicality of self-determination in order to pessimistically play by the rules of the faulty, existing economic status quo. Instead of fundamentally restructuring how social resources can be more equitably distributed for all Hongkongers, Leung’s “civic nationalism” in fact limits Hongkongers’ material interests by pitting people against one another, instead of uniting their power and interests to oppose the CCP, not to mention the Hong Kong and Chinese capitalist elites that the party promotes when it sees fit.

In the same issue, we find Joseph Lian Yi-zheng taking an unexpected detour to Stalin’s theory of nationalism in which he makes a similarly nativist determination to define the formal contours of the Hong Kong identity. Stalin prescribes highly specific requirements – “common language, territory, economic life and ‘psychic formation’” – for what constitutes as a nation, and ethnic communities that fail to qualify are considered “national minorities.” This theory of nationalism, in other words, assigns self-determination to specific ethnic movements with a set of preset criteria, in contrast to Lenin’s, for whom the conditions for self-determination dynamically mediate between the shifting forms of autonomous mass movements and democratic internationalism. Indeed, it is also unsurprising that the most dogmatic and anti-Marxist thinker of nationalism on the left would prove useful for Lian’s reactionary nationalism, which applies Stalin’s four-fold criteria to Hong Kong in an earlier essay of his own. That is, despite the kinds of exceptions (e.g. Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers, who Lien parenthetically notes are “too few to discuss”), and historical amnesia of the tight

exchange between Hong Kong and China, needed to make his case. Lian makes no attempt to clarify Stalin’s infamously vague criterion of “psychic formation,” nor explain what that means for Hong Kong beyond anti-Mainland sentiment as Hongkongers’ defensive, culturally unique stance toward years of “Chinese” violation of political and cultural autonomy.

Despite *Undergrad*’s resolve to bring “Hong Kong nationalism” into mainstream political discourse, what self-determination means seems more abstract than ever, let alone its connection to nationalism, by last year. Yet, the young protestors have made the vision of democratic self-rule and self-determination more tangible than any of their forebears have as they physically held on, if only for a brief hour, the city’s center of power on July 1. Leung, now a graduate student at the University of Washington, returned that summer to participate in the struggle. He famously tore off his mask that night in the LegCo room in front of the world through the journalists’ cameras, in a desperate attempt to give a narrative and legitimacy to the protestors’ occupation: now that we are holding LegCo, what future does Hong Kong’s self-determined generation want?

The total spontaneity of the LegCo struggle and its lack of answers do not necessarily imply a regress in the praxis of self-determination, though the movement has its limitations indeed. Rampant xenophobic attitudes toward mainland Chinese continue to plague the movement’s ranks, and the city’s class disparity and the excesses of neoliberal policies remain little-discussed in the mainstream political discourse. Despite this, the freedom and self-activity of mass action, driven by the determination to take ownership of one’s political conditions, have also opened up new practices of radical mutual aid and solidarity. In other words, though the established left has long lost control over the discourse of self-determination in Hong Kong, and today barely exists as a coherent political force, the framework of self-determination continues to be remade and improvised by new activists. This may even remake the terms on which

the radical left can be sustained, holding open new avenues of building a democratic future.

## Left-wing Alternatives Today

It is in this context that [Lausan](#) (??) Collective, an explicitly left-wing collective of Hong Kong and Chinese activists on the ground and in the diaspora formed in the late summer of last year, abstained from prescribing a single, cohesive horizon of self-determination from the left. Whatever vision of self-determination can only articulate a formal set of principles of which the actual content remains to be enacted and practiced. And in this movement, the struggles borne from this in-between city have emerged in myriad forms that have threatened again and again its ingrained neoliberal ethos. Newly-elected left-leaning district councilor Chu Kong-wai notes how this movement has challenged Hong Kongers to think in terms of radical solidarity with others in need, rather than personal gain, though “these anti-capitalist moments are in competition with the more reactionary elements, and we have yet to see which pole will become more dominant.” [51] Indeed, the left must enter into this paradoxical space that is Hong Kong’s movement for self-determination, to struggle with the progressive and reactionary elements with the masses of protestors, to show that building links between movements is no idealism, but a rational extension of the movement’s material constitution.

Internationalist unity between the working-classes and the marginalized, of course, should be a central vision for all leftists. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the lens of self-determination as a crutch for Hong Kong to connect to other mass struggles. Lausan’s Listen Chen provides a powerful critique of how the movement’s uncritical dedication to self-determination precludes meaningful solidarity with the Mainland working class and flirts with Western imperialist elements. [52] While these critiques are entirely correct, Chen limits “national belonging” and “independence” as the

only available pathways for self-determination. In doing so, they rightly critique the reactionary, “cultural-national” forms of self-determination as Lenin describes – only to prematurely limit the different avenues from this demand and preclude the radical capacities for self-determination inherent in the mass movement that underscores democratic political practice.

It should never be the strategy of the local and international left to embolden the nativist and nationalist sentiments in the movement. But we must also never forget about the powerful democratic impulse that characterizes a people’s right to self-determination – a radicalism that may exceed the lure of ethnonationalism and separatism. Black feminist writer Barbara Smith, writing of Black lesbian women’s self-organizing in the U.S., notes the difference between “autonomy” and “separatism,” identifying the former with the capacity to deal with “a multiplicity of issues ... a solid base of strength with those with whom we share identity and/or political commitment.” [53] While the experience of Black lesbian women, of course, cannot be entirely correlated with those of Hongkongers, Smith’s insight about political autonomy points to a key vision of concrete socialist practice: lived autonomous decision-making by communities can be done in coalition and solidarity with others’ struggles. Patricia Hill Collins’ gloss on Smith’s passage years later in *Black Feminist Thought* underscores this sense that “group autonomy fosters effective coalition with other groups ... although Black feminist thought originates within Black women’s communities, it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups.” [54] Given Hong Kong’s position at the nexus of multiple cultural and political influences, Smith and Hill Collins may offer a flexible and effective model for a powerful politics of self-

determination. Practicing autonomous politics does not need to be linked to national boundaries, and it must be consistently improvising, drawing from the power of different identities, especially those in the margins, to increase the overall power of the mass movement.

Any class-based solidarity must take into account a people’s messy and non-prescribed road to self-determination, beyond the boundaries of nationalism. Hong Kong still suffers from structural oppression of its minorities, like the hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers whose basic rights are continually exploited by both Hong Kong and their home governments, or the Mainland migrants who fill swaths of low-income jobs while facing discrimination. But this movement shows that self-determination – this unstable improvisation of “Hong Kong identity” – may offer a framework of liberation even for people in the margins, many of whom don the same black masks and feel connected to the larger struggle. [55] The unlikely actors have been improvising and reshaping the form of Hong Kong self-determination, at times, into something radical and levelling.

## Self-Determination, Not Dogma

James Leong and Lynn Lee’s 2020 documentary *If We Burn* gives a raw, unfiltered glimpse of the tumultuous decision-making process of the protestors as they were charging into the LegCo building on July 1: pro-democracy lawmakers attempting to physically block the more radical protestors from breaking in at one point; the protestors spending half an hour wandering around the building figuring out what symbolic statement to make; the disconnection between those outside the building and those inside about whether to occupy and

lock themselves in or not. It looks like mob rule par excellence, but the glimpses of radical democracy are undeniable. No bureaucrats or police were in sight, as anonymous protestors argued tactics through sweat and tears as they deface the building’s stately facade of anti-democratic rule. This is Hong Kong self-determination at work, and for a moment, anyone could speak.

The radical left, indeed, should develop its own programs and principles for liberation, not be allured by every twist and turn of mass movements. But mass liberation also has no room for dogma and entails critically engaging with and struggling alongside the mass movement to increase its power of activity in its current conjuncture. Our principles of left internationalism and anti-discrimination aim toward the ever-increasing capacity of ordinary people to collectively think for themselves and democratically determine their own lives with others – a radically flexible and form-less political practice that has informed Lenin’s revolutionary internationalism and Smith and Hill Collins’ theory of autonomy.

Leong and Lee’s film records a young protestor’s speech at a rally after the LegCo siege, as he tearfully proclaims, “No matter where the movement ends up, at least we are alive to bear witness to these decaying times.” In a similar vein, I recall James Baldwin’s call for us, as artists, thinkers, and activists, to “bear witness to the truth.” The left must struggle alongside the masses in the collective struggle for self-determination, not to reify national borders or set up layers of exclusion, but to witness a basic reality of democratic thinking that would stimulate and guide our internationalist commitments for a more equitable society for all.

3 April 2020

Source : [Spectre](#)



# Problems with an Electoral Road to Socialism in the United States

23 January 2020, by **Kit Wainer, Mel Bienenfeld**

Unfortunately, neither Chibber nor Blanc base their arguments for a road to socialism“a road based on a combination of electoral victories and mass action“on an assessment of the specifics of the capitalist state in the United States.

Indeed, the “popular legitimacy” of the U.S. state is grounded in a constitutional order that seems to allow for democratic transitions, protects civil rights and liberties, and purports to stand above class interests. The constitutional framework appears to many to provide a mechanism to speak out, win office, and effect change. The suggestion that such an order should be overthrown in what Chibber terms a “rupture” seems undemocratic and even irrational to most workers today.

However, the same constitutional system that gives the state legitimacy also contains the seeds of capitalist resistance to socialist transformation or even far-reaching reforms. It creates numerous fallback positions from which capital can continue to exercise authority and constitutionally wield instruments of repression against working-class movements, even if it has lost control of the highest elected offices.

## What Do We Mean by a “Workers’ Government”? The Problem of the Separation of Powers

Although the constitutional system of “checks and balances” may appear to many on the left as fraudulent and as

a method of mystifying class rule, it actually serves an important role in the implementation of capitalist state policies and preserving capitalist rule. Originally a product of the constitutional settlement of 1787, the separation of powers facilitated the balancing of the two main ruling classes: northern merchants and southern slave owners. The creation of the Senate provided southern planters with veto power over federal policies, and the disempowerment of local government disorganized the lower classes of small farmers and laborers. By the twentieth century the division of the state into three branches had begun to allow modern capitalists to use the state to mediate conflicts among themselves and to ensure their power when it is threatened. A government committed to an increasingly socialist program will inevitably need to confront these constitutional institutions.

It is true that if socialists or a workers party were to win majorities in both the House and Senate and the presidency at the same time they would be able to pass bills. But single-party control of both the legislative and executive branches arises only after wave election years and is generally short-lived. Typically, the party in power fails to deliver meaningful change to day-to-day living conditions and the voters who put it there grow demoralized and are less likely to show up for the next election. Yet the creation of a workers’ government would require not just a single victory in federal elections but a series of consecutive victories in both branches.

Complicating any socialist transition, however, would be the judicial branch. Under the Constitution, federal judges serve for life. This means that a left government would be met by a federal

judiciary appointed entirely by the old regime. This would render much potential socialist legislation difficult to implement. Laws that violate the rights of private property, for example, would fly in the face of the Fifth Amendment and would be struck down. A more activist court might strike down government efforts to create publicly owned banks or industries as violating the essence of the Fifth Amendment by crowding out private investors. We don’t need to stretch our imagination too far to envision this scenario; the U.S. Supreme Court interfered with the New Deal, and even the Affordable Care Act was saved by only one vote on the Supreme Court. Of course, a socialist president could simply refuse to abide by court rulings, but that would challenge the legitimacy through which the “democratic road” runs. And although the Constitution only specifies the creation of the Supreme Court, leaving the creation (and presumably dissolution) of other federal courts to Congress’ discretion, a move to abolish a recalcitrant judiciary would be widely perceived within the federal bureaucracy and much of public opinion as a violation of centuries of constitutional practice and precedent. Practically speaking, it could lead to civil war as substantial sectors of the state would rally against such a federal government.

The uneven development of political consciousness would further complicate any socialist victory. Along with a powerful socialist party, there would continue to exist parties hostile to socialism. The workers party will therefore have to contend with an ongoing opposition at all levels of government. Capitalists, facing the existential threat posed by the socialists’ program, will wage a powerful struggle on the electoral front. They will still control the news

media and the means of communication and will use all those means to attack and demean the socialist program, sow confusion, and promote alternate parties ranging from the liberal to the fascist right. And those with money are in a better position to engage in electoral fraud.

When radical socialists win office within the existing state, they will always be subject to an opposition with plenty of power to block or reverse socialist measures. Pro-capitalist politicians will continue to control some parts of the federal government, which they can use to obstruct. A workers' government that insists on operating within the U.S. constitutional framework will never be able to transcend this impasse. It will soon face the cruel choice of yielding to the limits the Constitution imposes or taking revolutionary measures by acting unconstitutionally.

## **What Do We Mean by a "Workers' Government"? The Problem of Federalism**

The Tenth Amendment of the Constitution reserves important powers for the states. These include control over most of the criminal justice system, trade and economic regulation within state boundaries, and most infrastructure and education policies within state boundaries. The Supreme Court has already limited the power of federal authorities to prosecute criminal cases reserved to state authorities (for instance, *Bond v. United States*, 2011).

It seems highly unlikely that even in a wave election, a workers party could triumph in all fifty states, or even in a substantial majority of them, because all states also are governed by a separation of powers doctrine, which means that such a party would have to win control of both the executive and legislative branches simultaneously. Furthermore, many states do not elect all their officials in presidential election years. New Jersey and

Virginia, for example, elect their governors and legislature one year after the federal elections. New York and Wisconsin are among several states that elect their governors in the same year as federal midterm elections, not presidential elections. This guarantees a degree of institutional conservatism and continuity of the old order that would require several consecutive wave elections to overcome. And until workers parties win office at multiple levels, it is difficult to see how they could institute meaningful social reform. Yet, given the constitutional and bureaucratic difficulties of implementing socialist legislation in a short period of time, it seems difficult to imagine that socialists—or even a radical, reformist workers party—could continue to triumph at the ballot box.

Governors control the National Guard and state police. Local governments control local police forces, although the Constitution allows states full discretion to limit the autonomy of localities. While the president may federalize the guard for a period of time, it is easy to imagine guard generals refusing to obey presidential authority when asked to enforce decisions the courts have ruled unconstitutional. Of course a president can send the army into states, thus violating the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, but it is similarly easy to envision generals refusing to execute orders on solid constitutional grounds, or the officer corps dividing amongst itself, in that scenario. In short there would be no way of overcoming state recalcitrance to implement socialist legislation without destroying the legitimacy of the constitutional order.

In fact, not only can state authorities resist, they can also repress. Partial socialist victories in the electoral arena would inevitably yield a fractured state, with critical parts still in the hands of pro-capitalist officials. The latter would be constitutionally authorized to arrest and terrorize mass movement activists who threaten their rule. They have, after all, done so numerous times in U.S. history. Even today, federal and state authorities are far more likely to arrest someone for the crime of being an immigrant or

person of color than for marching with an armed fascist gang threatening the annihilation of the Jews. Mass movements that are not prepared to physically confront and defeat armed authorities would stand little chance.

## **Bureaucracy, the Regulatory Process, and Unelected Authority**

While the legislative and executive branches make law and the judicial branch reviews laws, unelected regulatory bodies determine how they are actually interpreted and implemented. Currently, these bodies are staffed by skilled bureaucrats through a combination of patronage, political favoritism, and civil service promotion. Regulatory agencies are typically staffed by and managed by the industries they are designed to regulate. Even lower-level bureaucratic posts often enable employees to audition for far more lucrative private-sector employment. This creates enormous incentives to defer to corporate prerogative, even if the elected authorities have a different agenda. And these regulatory agencies decide what the law means in day-to-day situations that lawmakers can never predict when writing bills.

Bureaucratic and regulatory agencies govern at the local, state, and federal levels. They set zoning policies that largely determine whether housing is affordable and safe for working-class habitation. Their rules indirectly affect how much of their lives working people spend commuting to and from work because where tall buildings are built often determines which neighborhoods are clogged with traffic. As with regulatory agencies, building departments are typically instruments of real estate developers, even if they do protect occupants' safety to some extent. Unelected bodies, such as public authorities in New York and New Jersey, typically control public transportation and critical infrastructure, and an army of bureaucrats runs the education



systems all over the United States. All of these bureaucratic agencies are susceptible to intense pressure from highly paid lobbyists. Conditions of housing, transportation, public health, and education are some of the most powerful forces shaping workers' daily lives, and it is difficult to imagine how working people would maintain confidence in and enthusiasm for a workers' government that could not demonstrably improve those aspects of their lives. It is also difficult to see how a government could make significant headway in those areas without breaking apart the relevant bureaucracies and busting up the private-sector lobbying firms that influence them. In short, the very precondition for sustained radical electoral success would require the demolition of most regulatory organizations and their replacement with democratic and accountable bodies.

Unelected bureaucracy also reigns in the area of foreign policy. While major decisions such as going to or avoiding war, or negotiating trade agreements, are in the hands of elected officials, many of the day-to-day details of foreign relations are decided and implemented by career officials who are similarly subjected to substantial corporate lobbying and use foreign service careers as springboards into highly paid private-sector employment. The State Department routinely approves international trade licenses, contacts foreign bureaucrats on behalf of U.S. firms, and utilizes personal relationships with international counterparts to smooth those processes. In a world in which several major capitalist states still rule and the U.S. state is fractured, these bureaucrats could become key links between global and domestic counter-revolution.

While bureaucracy takes different forms in different countries, career civil servants staff the state apparatus in most capitalist states today. They tend to be ideologically committed to the survival of the state. Their career ambitions also depend on the patronage of higher ups in each department and alliances with private capitalists who hold the key to their promotion both inside and outside the public sector.

Can bureaucracy be subordinated to a workers' government? Yes. In fact the soviet state had no choice but to rely on sectors of the tsarist bureaucracy both to win the civil war and for government administration in the 1920s. In a scenario in which the capitalist class has been fully defeated, disempowered bureaucrats might well decide, one by one, that cooperation with the new workers' regime represents the only hope for maintaining their careers. However, the "democratic," or, more accurately, the electoral, road to socialism leads inevitably along a different path. It does not deliver a sudden, decisive defeat to the state or to the ruling class. Quite the contrary, it leads to what might be termed "dual power," in which socialists rule over substantial sectors of the government but capitalist politicians dominate others and much of the capitalist state bureaucracy remains intact. The police, fearing that their careers are in jeopardy, would likely continue to repress mass movements and fight at all costs to preserve their positions. These institutions of the capitalist state would also have powerful allies in the judiciary, not to mention support from capitalists around the world. Under that scenario it is highly unlikely that the administrative bureaucracies would place themselves at the service of workers' regimes who have far less to offer them and from whom they have far less to fear.

## Repression

Throughout U.S. history the labor movement and other radical reform movements have had to contend with ferocious and violent counterattacks. After World War I, socialists, anarchists, and labor activists of various stripes faced intense state repression. The survival of U.S. capitalism was not in question at this time. Yet, the federal government responded with mass arrests, deportations, frame-ups, and violence. After World War II, federal and state governments effectively repressed the radical wings of the labor movement with witch hunts and blacklists, while tolerating rampant racist violence. It is important to note that the Communist Party not only, at this

point, could not have threatened revolution, its orientation was heavily electoral. But the mere prospect of a more militant labor movement and a radical electoral alternative was something both Democrats and Republicans were determined to repress. In the 1960s the FBI's Cointelpro program targeted movement activists and even murdered Black Panther leader Fred Hampton.

A workers movement in the United States must prepare for severe state repression or it will succumb to it. At times this may involve operating clandestinely. It may also require active self-defense against legal authorities or fascist paramilitaries. Most importantly, preparation means educating a generation of socialist and labor activists about how and why the state protects capitalist profitability both through its own constitutional mechanisms and often with repressive measures that violate its own legality.

## Could an Electoral Transition Succeed?

Hypothetically, yes. But to imagine a successful socialist transition that does not entail a decisive defeat of the capitalist state and repression of capitalist political institutions assumes implausible preconditions. First, because it is impossible to win all levers of governmental power in one election, we would have to imagine several wave elections over a multiyear period. Second, this would require mass working-class mobilizations involving large demonstrations and strikes that don't ebb over multiple years. These would be necessary to maintain intense pressure on nonsocialist politicians and career bureaucrats and sustain electoral armies to reelect socialist (or at least working-class) majorities at the federal and state levels. Activists in these movements would have to be willing to continue to mobilize, despite the enormous sacrifices of time, energy, and attention to their personal lives, for a socialist cause that would yield few tangible benefits for the first several years.

The problem with these suppositions is that historically, working-class struggle is episodic but capitalist reaction is continuous. Ultimately, the electoral road—“even one that combines electoral victories with mass strikes and protests”—depends on a type of working-class mobilization that is wildly out of sync with the actual patterns of workers movements since the nineteenth century. Workers have been able to organize to win substantial gains from employers and the state in most of the world at one point or another. However, these struggles have always been episodic. They sometimes win tangible victories at the high point of mass struggle or in the aftermath. They often change cultural values as well. But then they inevitably recede. There are good reasons for this. First, under capitalism workers do not own the means of production. Rather they depend upon their ability to work for employers in order to pay their bills. Consequently, they cannot strike continuously. Second, although for socialists mass movements are exciting, for most participants that excitement is combined with enormous sacrifice. Workers who organize surrender precious hours after stressful work days. They have to forgo time with their children and often need to choose between attending meetings or rallies and working the second jobs they need to pay for their housing, health care, or children’s education. Understandably, when meaningful victory appears remote it is difficult to get people to become activists even at a minimal level. When a movement grows, the passion and possibility of success attract larger numbers. But eventually, commitment levels are difficult to maintain and the lure of normal lives chips away at the movement’s base.

Capitalist counter-reaction, by contrast, is persistent. Even if ruling classes suffer partial defeats and have to make temporary concessions, their struggle to maintain their dominance and expand their advantages proceeds. U.S. workers, for example, mobilized in multiple waves between the Civil War and the late twentieth century. Strikes and militant organizing crested in the late nineteenth century, again after World

War I, again in the mid-1930s, and again after World War II. These waves yielded partial victories: legalization of unions, limits on the work day, and workplace safety legislation, to name a few. Yet employers’ counterattacks, particularly since the 1970s, have been persistent, frequently violent, and have whittled away most of those gains. The vast majority of workers today are not unionized. Consequently, they enjoy no real workplace protections. Bureaucratic regulatory agencies rarely protect workers, even if the laws say they should. And most workers need to work more than forty hours just to survive. Employers’ struggles are not episodic for very practical reasons. While workers’ struggle requires independent organization, demands personal sacrifice, and often runs counter to dominant ideological and cultural assumptions, capitalist and bureaucratic counter-reaction is relatively cost-free. Capitalists do not need to surrender family time in order to squeeze employees. They do it at work when they shape the pace of production and negotiate contracts. Government bureaucrats similarly give up no free time to assist employers. They are on the clock when they interpret and enforce regulatory regimes in line with a pro-business agenda. For business owners and state officials, anti-worker reaction is their day job. And they can keep doing it, day after day, year after year, regardless of their levels of enthusiasm.

Anti-racist and feminist movements have experienced similar ebbs and flows for similar reasons, and the reactions against them have been similarly consistent. The movements have won equal-rights legislation, outlawing formerly legal regimes of discrimination in education, housing, and employment. In part, mass civil rights and women’s movements have succeeded by fracturing governmental authority through pressure from below. In some cases, such as the 1965 Civil Rights Act, they pressed the federal government to impose restrictions within the various states, often against the resistance of state authorities. In others, they created an atmosphere that pushed the judicial branch to reinterpret the Constitution to outlaw educational discrimination

by race or to declare that a woman’s right to choose was a protected “privacy right.” Here too, however, the racist and anti-feminist countermeasures have been incessant and have benefited from the systems of separation of powers and federalism. Local and state authorities have fought both racial and gender equality for decades. They have limited the right to vote, expanded school segregation since 1954, and virtually eliminated the right to abortion in much of the United States. The Supreme Court has ruled voter suppression and partisan gerrymandering—even with clear racial overtones—constitutional. And the court now appears poised to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Examples from other countries pose the questions of revolution and counter-revolution more starkly. They illustrate the global and historic nature of the conflict between episodic mobilizations from below encountering persistent reaction from above.

In 1936 the French Popular Front of Communists, Socialists, and republicans was swept to power following massive strikes. Workers won meaningful reforms that limited their work day and guaranteed vacation time. While the French ruling class was temporarily on its heels, it quickly recovered and began to roll back workers’ gains after 1938. After 1940 the Vichy regime seized the opportunity the German invasion offered and wiped out workers’ rights even more substantially.

In Chile from 1970 to 1973 and in Poland from 1980 to 1981 workers mobilized en masse. They formed new organizations such as popular-power councils in Chile and Solidarity, a mass national union, in Poland. Whether either had the capacity to break apart the existing state and replace it with a government based on workers councils is impossible to determine in retrospect. But in both cases the old regimes depended on their control over the officer corps to declare martial law and destroy working-class organizations. In both cases the rulers were persistent: They relied on important sections of the state and waited for the critical

moment to strike.

Any theory of socialist transition requires coming to terms with the practicalities of the U.S. capitalist state. It must be able to anticipate both governmental and bureaucratic resistance and state repression. Finally, it must address itself to the difficulties of maintaining militant working-class mobilization over long periods of time.

Both Chibber and Blanc raise valid cautions about what Blanc terms the “Leninist” model. The problem with their arguments, however, is that they vastly underestimate the complexities of the capitalist state in this country, the power of the constitutional order to preserve capitalist property relations, and the numerous modalities of class rule and repression. By not offering a realistic strategy for destroying that order or those modalities, they have created a vision of socialist transition that is somewhat ethereal and not at all practical.

## Historical Context for a Socialist Victory and Its Strategic Implications

Eric Blanc characterizes the perspective he disputes as the “insurrectionary approach”: “According to this conception, there will at some point be a deep crisis and the emergence of institutions of dual power (like workers councils). For the revolution to succeed, these dual power institutions will have to, through an insurrection, overthrow the entire existing state and place all power into the hands of workers councils or some equivalent form of organization.”

He goes on to argue that “unlike democratic socialism, the insurrectionary approach has never even come close to being taken up by a majority of workers under a parliamentary regime.” We can agree that organs of dual power have not seriously threatened “objectively or

subjectively” any established, stable capitalist democracy. Blanc continues that we should not “hinge our strategy ... on such an unlikely possibility.”

But a “democratic socialist” movement for such a revolutionary change “and Blanc agrees that we are talking about change on the order of a social revolution” is just as historically unprecedented. Further, no effort to create a workers’ government through parliamentary means has ever led to a successful socialist transition. In fact all such efforts have failed to overcome capitalist resistance and been turned back.

Before uniting behind an anti-capitalist program, the working class is likely to have gone through a period of deepening class struggle. Before becoming subjectively revolutionary, workers would have to have arrived at the conclusion that the satisfaction of their most basic needs is no longer possible under capitalism. This would be most likely during a period of profound political and economic crisis.

Moments of the potential collapse of a large social system are very rare, and the ultimate collapse itself can only happen once. (In this sense, a movement of workers councils aiming to take state power is of course an “unlikely possibility.”) Such crises undermine the legitimacy of the system and make revolutionary alternatives seem more attractive. It is in this context that we have to contemplate the behavior of the state apparatus and the legitimacy of the existing state institutions in the eyes of the working class.

## Capitalist Democracy in the Face of Class Struggle

One does not need to look very deeply into United States history to observe how willing are ruling elites to resort to severe limitations on democracy to maintain their dominance. Even such a moderate change as the 2018 election of a Democratic, more labor-friendly, governor in Wisconsin led the

Republican legislature to pass a measure during Governor Scott Walker’s lame-duck session limiting the powers of the incoming governor in order to safeguard Walker’s “right-to-work” legislation. The North Carolina legislature’s September 11, 2019, “stealth override” of a Democratic governor’s budget veto provides another illustration of the limitations on electoral democracy. Political movements for reforms much more threatening than those involved in these two states are likely to be met with even more blatant anti-democratic measures.

In times of crisis the repressive functions of the state apparatus come to the fore. These can be supplemented by the “soft” power of the FBI, National Security Agency, Department of Homeland Security, and (internationally) the CIA. In a period when the rule of the dominant class is explicitly threatened, all of these will be used against the movements advocating socialism, not excluding their electoral arms.

Any program of democratizing the existing state would of necessity involve purging its bureaucracies. Such a move would not be perceived as “and in actuality would not be” a mere replacement of one group of officials by another. It would entail a fierce battle on all fronts “in the courts and in the streets. Its success would not be achievable via the actions of the workers’ legislature or executive alone.

Further, the historical conditions we are discussing will involve the need for immediate solutions to critical problems. Workers will expect their government to encroach widely on capitalist property rights in order to produce meaningful reforms. They will need to check the power of the repressive apparatus mobilized against them and begin taking the measures necessary to pull society out of the depths of its crisis. Then they will have to impose their own repressive force against the capitalists and other counter-revolutionaries fighting to prevent the success of the revolution and overturn its gains.

It is likely that institutions like workers councils will arise in a period

of intense struggle. Among the roles they will play will be to defend workers' social movements against the force of the state and to defend democratic rights. Blanc suggests, reasonably, that workers may need to defend an elected government against a coup. Yet, this alone would be a revolutionary step and likely provoke violent reaction. A parliamentary regime presiding over the current constitutional order would not be in a position to continue the revolution. For better or worse, only if and when workers councils are able to cohere a force with both the physical power and firm intent to break through legal and constitutional limits in order to complete the revolution can the transition to socialism be carried out.

## Legitimacy, Elections, Insurrection, and Workers' Power

Although the U.S. government enjoys a substantially higher level of legitimacy than did the collapsing Romanov, Hohenzollern, and Hapsburg monarchies, we should not overstate that legitimacy. Both major political parties and the U.S. Congress consistently earn higher disapproval than approval numbers in polls, and voter turnout in all U.S. elections is notoriously low, illustrating that people generally have low expectations for the institutions of the state to improve their lives.

However, the positive aspect of viewing the state as legitimate means that when people do demand reforms they will look to elect leaders likely to carry out those reforms. Not only do we agree with Eric Blanc that "working people will try to use the existing institutions of political democracy under capitalism to further their interests and to transform society," we also believe that any electoral success of an independent workers party would represent a positive step toward an eventual socialist revolution. Some reforms will

be achievable by this means, others not. It will be the full experience of an increasingly widespread, conscious social movement, inside the electoral arena and out, that enables working people to learn the specific limits of the existing system, including its state.

Because we believe that these limits will ultimately prove that the U.S. state cannot be used to implement a socialist transition, we believe the state must be transcended and replaced by workers organizations dedicated to carrying out the tasks of a social transformation. It is impossible to predict the form that the deployment of the revolution's force will need to take. But what distinguishes our position from Blanc's is not that we call for an insurrection and he does not. Rather we argue that revolutionary workers' institutions will be able to lead a socialist transition, while the attempts of left parties to win control of the current branches of the U.S. government will not.

Source: [New Politics](#)}

# Identity Politics Can Only Get Us So Far

3 November 2017, by **Roger Lancaster**

I first encountered the assertion that "all politics is identity politics" some time in the 1990s. The claim seemed tailor-made for that decade, when Judith Butler was portraying all identity as performance and politics as a slow, staid, and distinctly non-revolutionary adjustment of social norms.

This idea has persisted, no doubt because the wider political conjuncture that shaped it still remains in force. It reverberates in current debates about the 2016 election and in discussions about the relationship between post-1960s social movements and a renewed socialist left.

At first glance, the idea looks like a useful shorthand for how politics

really works. For instance, in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson showed how a certain kind of identity shaped the modern world. After Gutenberg, books, newspapers, schools, and other emergent institutions undermined ancient axioms, coaxed people to join different communities, and thus prepared the ground for the spread of nationalism and the rise of nation states.

Likewise, we might read Karl Marx as an identity-politics theorist. When his followers define class consciousness as the development of a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself, they effectively describe a process whereby members of a class become aware of themselves as a class and forge a collective identity.

However, categorizing Anderson and Marx as identity thinkers misrepresents their work. Anderson does not base his analysis on general assertions about the timeless mechanisms of identity formation. Rather, he takes converging political-economic factors — especially the rise of what he calls print capitalism — into meticulous account.

And, as [E. P. Thompson suggested](#), aligning class consciousness with identity abstracts class from the historical conditions and struggles of its production.

*Once this [approach] is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which "it" [the working class] ought to have (but seldom does have) if "it" was properly aware of its*



*own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural “lags” and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be.*

In fact, the claim that all politics is about identity is so general that observers can use it to give a flyover view of almost any political phenomenon. After all, every movement positions an “us” against a “them” and builds support by enlisting people to join a group and to *identify* with a cause.

That this assertion can apply to so many cases is not a strength. The paradigm rejects an analysis of the particular in order to feign expertise in the general, erases the historical specificities of given struggles and movements, and paints everything with the same brush.

## Weaponized Identities

A scrupulous review of what socialist and working-class movements have usually demanded “universal health care, free education, public housing, democratic control of the means of production” doesn’t easily square with how identity politics are typically understood. In its strictest sense, identity politics describes how marginalized people embrace previously stigmatized identities, create communities on the basis of shared attributes and interests (which are typically held to be essential and unchanging), and rally either for autonomy or for rights and recognitions. I would take this argument a step further and say that even the new left social movements that gave birth to the term identity politics have not always fit this mold.

Consider the gay movement. In its late-1960s upsurge, gay politics had less to do with the pageantry of identity than with urgent demands to end violence and oppression. Activists first called for the cops to get out of

our bars, the institutions to get off our backs, and the shrinks to get out of our lives.

Identity comes up early, of course, usually in discussions of coming out. In this context, however, activists gave no hint of seeking what Nancy Fraser calls “recognition,” nor did they reify homosexuality as a person’s unchanging essence.

Surveying his research on the early history of gay liberation, [Henry Abelow](#) argues that today, blinkered by post-Stonewall preconceptions, we fundamentally misunderstand the relationship early gay activists had to identity. “I find little to suggest,” he writes, “that [the early liberationists] saw coming out as the result of a truth-seeking journey deep into a supposed interior self. They thought of it rather as a release from a quite deliberately assumed reticence.” That is, they considered publicly identifying as gay as an “indispensible means” for building a political movement, a gentle and persistent weaponization of the individual in homosexuals’ collective struggles.

Among other things, this means that the liberationists generally took a dialectical approach to sexual categories. From the start, they maintained that labels like heterosexual and homosexual would be cast aside after liberation.

Carl Wittman’s influential broadside, “[A Gay Manifesto](#),” published in 1970 by the Red Butterfly brigade of the Gay Liberation Front, gives us useful insight into the early militants’ thinking. Far from celebrating the gay ghetto, Wittman treats San Francisco as a “refugee camp.” Rejecting gay marriage as a political goal, he calls instead for alternatives to matrimony. And while stressing the political necessity of coming out, Wittman underscores the tentativeness of identity with glances at a liberated, bisexual future: “We’ll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it’s an issue.” Likewise, Dennis Altman’s 1971 polemic, [Homosexual Oppression and Liberation](#), concludes with a chapter titled “The End of the Homosexual.”

Under the rubric of *liberation*,

activists embraced identity in order to abolish it. Marxist ideas about class struggle “which similarly culminate with the abolition of social classes” influenced their ideas. They rallied around demands for adequate income, housing, medical care, ecological well-being, and meaningful employment. Their liberation struggle was ultimately a revolutionary call to action with a universalist view of freedom.

The turn to identity as the key political trope, as well as the whittling-back of demands to fit this narrower concept, came in the wake of the original political upsurge, as urban gay communities were growing, as gay was emerging as a niche market, and when the political discourse shifted from social to personal liberation. In this context, increasingly reified identities would step out of closets to claim their rights, each vying for recognition under increasingly elaborate acronyms. A complex history of separatisms, nationalisms, and intersectionalities follows.

## Universal Liberation

All of the new left social movements trace similar trajectories. Over the course of the 1970s, the women’s movement, the black movement, and the gay movement all retreated from their original, radical outlooks to take on essentially liberal worldviews. As political imaginaries contracted, each began to dwell more comfortably in the house of identity. This process dovetailed with post-Fordism’s and neoliberalism’s new forms of lifestyle consumerism. Periodic upsurges in radicalism occasionally interrupted this trend, but these outbreaks were quieted, domesticated, and reabsorbed back into the main movement.

Identity politics, from this perspective, is neither coterminous with politics nor the form invariably taken by new left social movements; rather, it describes the form that these movements took under changing circumstances.

This evolution has had important

results. We owe the fact that the United States has become more tolerant and inclusive to identity politics' successes and to the liberal reforms they have won.

But this kind of political engagement has failed to address the types of social inequalities around which earlier liberationists centered their activism. And now, as class inequalities have dilated,

establishment politicians ally with identity groups to shore up neoliberalism against any resistance to it.

Let's give identity politics its due but let's also be clear about its limitations. We can learn from the past, but not from potted histories that make terms like identity into abstractions. And we deceive ourselves if we think the path forward will involve the accumulation

of minorities into a majority, the mere amalgamation of pre-constructed identities into a socialist movement.

The Left must now discover how to win over the publics currently being represented by identity brokers with an inclusive and universalist socialist program.

08 March 2017

Source *Jacobin*.

## Anatomy of a Collapse

14 August 2015, by **Kevin Lin**

The sheer enormity of the destruction was staggering. In less than a month, from mid-June to early July, the Shanghai Composite Index plunged by 30%, wiping out more than \$3 trillion in share value from its June 12 peak. The wealth liquidated in the crash was equivalent to approximately 30% of China's GDP (\$10 trillion in 2014), 20% of the United States's GDP (\$17 trillion), and about ten times the size of Greece's current total debt (\$350 billion).

The collapse sent shockwaves around the world, not surprising given that China accounts for more than [one-third of global growth](#). China's spectacular stock market crash is a testimony to the increasing volatility and the underlying contradictions of the Chinese economy. More importantly, rather than simply being a financial crash, it is also immensely political.

No one can claim they didn't see it coming – the only uncertainty was the exact timing of the crash. Since last year, there's been a 150% rally fueled by [margin trading](#). (the practice of using borrowed money to buy stocks). The overvaluation of shares was widely recognized, with some analysts [estimating by more than 20 percent](#). The mainstream financial press had been describing it as a bubble for months. Even the Chinese government, which had encouraged

people to invest, [issued warnings](#) back in April, and tried to tighten trading rules to dampen the exuberance.

The crash finally came this month, producing widespread panic and pushing the Chinese government to implement a range of stopgaps.

It halted all new stock listings, restricted short-selling (the practice of betting against price falls), and ordered some of the largest state-owned enterprises – [not to sell shares](#). Instead, the Chinese state quickly made plans to buy more shares, while the country's top twenty-one securities brokerages [collectively pledged](#) to purchase shares worth at least \$19 billion. The Chinese government [also directed](#) the central bank to lend money to brokerages and investors to buy shares totaling \$365 billion.

It was this highly political intervention into the stock market – popularly dubbed *jiushi*, or “rescuing the market” – that came as a surprise to many, both within China and abroad. And what made it even more political was the thought of what the spectacle of tens of millions of individual investors – ordinary people investing their incomes, loans, and savings – suddenly losing their money might do to the legitimacy of the Communist Party.

## The Chinese Economy and Its Discontents

Stock market crashes are a relatively new phenomena in China – during Mao's reign (1949–1976), stock exchanges were regarded as a capitalist institution and thus abolished. They weren't reintroduced until 1991, well into the post-Mao reform period.

In these early years, however, buying shares was considered too risky; instead, investors and ordinary people preferred to purchase government-issued bonds or put their money in state-owned banks for safe returns. Incomes for the majority of the population were also quite low, so few people could afford to invest in the stock market. While volatility and risk certainly existed, stock market crashes were not a part of the economy.

This started to change in the 2000s as China's economic growth, facilitated by financial liberalization and the commercialization of the banking system, channeled money into the stock market and fueled a huge bubble. Between October 2005 and October 2007, [the Shanghai Composite Index](#) grew from a little

over 1,000 points to almost 6,000 points – only to plummet to less than 2,000 points with the onset of the global economic recession.

The effects on Chinese industry were even worse. In the first six months of 2008, with the export sector shrinking due to declining demand in the North American and European markets, 67,000 factories closed across China. In the final quarter of 2008, an additional 50,000 factories were shut down. An estimated 20-30 million rural migrant workers temporarily lost their jobs in the process, and labor protests spiked. Many returned to their rural hometowns.

Intent on instantly propping up the country's falling growth rate, the Chinese government rolled out a \$586 billion stimulus package that focused on infrastructure instead of social services and welfare. It largely worked. The stimulus, and government intervention more broadly, was credited with successfully staving off a deeper recession. With mass unemployment and social unrest still a threat, it has committed to keeping its foot on the pedal and boosting the annual rate of economic growth above 8%.

Despite the government's concerted intervention, China's GDP growth rate has continued to decline: a mind-boggling 14% in 2007, it dipped to less than 10% for a few years, and then dropped to 7.4% last year – quite good by international standards, but low for China. This year, GDP growth is likely to be 7% or less, causing concerns about a further slide.

The government has made a virtue out of the slowdown, describing the Chinese economy as entering a period of "New Normal" in which growth is purportedly more balanced and sustainable. But there are lingering economic contradictions that are related to the recent stock market crash.

The housing market, built on the back of rapid urbanization, invited speculation that inflated housing prices. The rapid uptick prompted the government to depress housing prices in an attempt to prevent the bubble

from bursting and triggering a wider crisis. This deflationary tactic rendered investment in housing and manufacturing industries less profitable, sending investors looking for high returns (often on borrowed money) to the stock market.

At the same time, the post-crisis stimulus package was being financed mainly through bank lending rather than direct state grants, and was made possible by loose monetary policy. The stimulus ended up exacerbating the existing local government debt problem, which the Chinese government was still working to address via a debt-for-bond swap program shortly before the stock market crash.

Finally, while fixed investment has contributed significantly to China's growth, consumption levels remain low as a percentage of GDP. A sharper increase in domestic spending is necessary for the transition from an investment and export-led economy to a consumption-driven one, but this is a political issue more than an economic one. Low levels of consumption reflect the increasing share of incomes going to capital instead of labor in the post-Mao era, where workers have lost employment security and labor rights, and face enormous difficulty organizing independently and engaging in collective bargaining.

The expansionary monetary and fiscal policies the government has implemented since the financial crisis have largely failed to resolve these problems, and the recent crash has only made the situation worse.

## The Shape of the Stock Market

Financial liberalization and government encouragement have made it extremely easy and appealing for individuals to trade in the stock market. Since mid-2014, more than 40 million new accounts have been set up, and a significant majority are individual investors.

Share trading, unsurprisingly, is concentrated in China's major cities and the wealthy east coast. But many

also trade in second- and third-tier cities and towns, and the spectrum of who trades has broadened considerably.

One group that has entered the market in large numbers over the past year is younger people, primarily those in their twenties and thirties. These are mostly professionals, workers making middle-level incomes, and migrant workers making lower- to middle-level incomes. This demographic's slow wage growth has encouraged it to put money in the stock market in the face of China's high urban living costs, exacerbated by the recent housing bubble.

Then there are slightly older people, the mom-and-pop investors in their fifties and sixties who have invested part of their retirement savings in the hopes of then contributing to their children's housing down payment.

Faced with low interest rates that dissuade them from putting their money in the banks, increasing social inequality, and few other ways to earn higher incomes, more and more people are willing to gamble their savings on the stock market, believing the government will not let the market crash. So while much of the Chinese media has focused on the fact that a plurality of the individual investors has only a high-school diploma – cynically implying that investors' lack of education caused the bubble – it's China's new middle class that is heavily involved in the stock market, acting rationally in an irrational system.

On its own, the stock market crash doesn't pose a real threat to the survival of the Chinese Communist Party, but popular discontent is growing, with large protests that include an increasingly assertive working class.

Politically, many people in China hold contradictory opinions about the role of the government. They believe, for instance, that the state meddles in and manipulates the stock market to the detriment of the investors. But when the stock market collapses, they hope the government comes to the rescue. Thus, both the failure of the state to control the stock market and what

some deem excessive intervention damage its credibility and undermine its legitimacy.

This is a politically sensitive period in China; since its accession in 2013, the new leadership has sought to consolidate its power and regain legitimacy. It has launched an expansive [anti-corruption campaign](#), disciplining more than 100,000 cadres across bureaucracies and levels of government, and simultaneously tightened censorship and cracked down on civil society activism. During the stock market crash, the authorities [detained and questioned](#) more than 100 lawyers and NGO workers.

Since the 1990s, China's middle class has reluctantly offered support to the regime in exchange for a rising standard of living at the expense of liberty and democracy. How the government responds to the crash in the coming months may test this loyalty.

While the threat to the Chinese economy is real, there is a risk of overstating the impact of the crash. Even at its lowest point the shares level in the Shanghai Composite Index merely returned to that of March, still 80% higher than a year ago.

Moreover, the stock market plays a fairly minor role in the Chinese economy relative to other developed economies. The amount available for trading is only about [a third of Chinese GDP](#) compared to more than 100% for developed economies.

The number of participants is also comparatively low. The recent [China Household Finance Survey](#) found that only 9% of households actively traded shares and another 4% of households

owned mutual funds. And less than 15% of household financial assets are invested in the stock market. This is still a large number given the size of the Chinese population, but it remains a small percentage for now.

In response to [government intervention](#) to restore confidence, two days after the market hit a low of 3,500 points, the Shanghai Composite Index [surged by 10.6%](#), the biggest two-day gain since 2008. Fears were eased as the Shanghai Composite Index returned to 4,000 points.

However, despite the rebound, the ability of the state to continually inject money and confidence into the stock market is uncertain, and its decision to reflate the economic bubble may very well increase the size of the problem.

On Monday, the Shanghai Composite Index suffered an 8% plunge, raising fears of a repeat of the downward spiral of early this month. And if another, bigger crash occurs, it may have a significantly greater ripple effect on China's real economy.

## A Left Response

The crash rekindled the age-old debate about the role of the state in markets, and the government response is being seen as a setback for free-market advocates both inside and outside of China. We will likely hear strong calls for greater financial liberalization and a larger role for the market in the Chinese economy. Indeed, there are already criticisms of [government intervention](#) and reports of global capital's displeasure.

The Communist Party is not opposed to more marketization. It has made

clear its receptivity to more [market-oriented reforms](#), including financial liberalization, and its willingness to encourage more market competition, private businesses, and individual consumption. However, it has not been able to implement significant reforms due to opposition within the government and state-owned industry. The current anti-corruption campaign is seen as clearing the way for the reforms.

The Left has to resist such deepening marketization, which will only lead to more economic instability and widening inequality. However, our knee-jerk response should also not be to defend Chinese state intervention in the economy as such. The Chinese government is responsible for creating a financial environment where individual investors are lured into gambling their incomes and savings, and its recent actions will likely inflate the bubble further.

Instead, we need to demand more regulation of the financial sector, as well as more equitable distribution of incomes so people won't depend on risky investment strategies to compensate for low wages and high living costs.

Because of the highly restricted political space in which they operate, China's social movements "including the restive [labor movement](#), the environmental movement, and the feminist and anti-discrimination movements" often fly under the radar. But they remain China's only hope for a more socially just and environmentally sustainable society. When the next crash comes, the ability to chart alternative responses rests on their organizational capacity.

[Jacobin](#)

# A Crash With Chinese Characteristics

14 August 2015, by [Sean Starrs](#)

The Shanghai and tech-heavy Shenzhen stock markets crashed 32

percent and 40 percent, respectively, from peak (June 12) to trough (July 8),

wiping out over \$3.2 trillion in value "equivalent to the market



capitalizations of France and Spain combined. The Chinese state responded with a series of extraordinary and unprecedented measures, essentially rendering it illegal for share prices to go anywhere but up. Chinese stocks obliged, and while there is still volatility, just a few weeks later the markets have recovered roughly 15 percent.

What just happened?

Perhaps we can call it a “stock market crash with Chinese characteristics,” to echo Deng Xiaoping’s phrase coined to describe the introduction of capitalism in China from 1978: “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

The destruction in financial value is massive, but it will not lead to the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) — let alone China itself. Some Western observers never seem to lose confidence in prophesying “The Coming Collapse of China” with the CCP’s every hiccup and misstep, but it is important to resist this tendency just as we must stop seeing every congressional gridlock or diplomatic embarrassment as a harbinger of the decline of the United States.

In the case of China’s recent crash, there is also a sense of *schadenfreude* among some Western observers. This is because Chinese elites are now facing their own crisis seven years after the global financial crisis, when Chinese observers chastised Western (particularly American) elites for their highly volatile and destructive “free-market” system — as opposed to China’s supposedly more stable state-controlled financial system.

Whether we like it or not, capitalism is the most durable, flexible, and dynamic socioeconomic system of power that has ever existed, and in this regard, so far the Chinese version is no different.

The massive \$3.2 trillion destruction in financial value hasn’t sparked a broader financial crisis in China — an illustration of how China’s financial system is different from other major powers. While the People’s Bank of China has sufficient firepower to reverse a crash of several trillion dollars (far more than most other

countries), China’s financial system is also comparatively isolated relative to both global finance and China’s own domestic population. Only 6 percent of Chinese households own any stock whatsoever, compared to 55 percent in the United States.

This insulation partly explains why the Chinese stock market was less impacted, relative to neighboring countries, by both the 1997–98 East Asian financial crisis and the 2008–9 global financial crisis, and is largely the result of state policy.

The global investor class cannot buy and sell freely in the Chinese stock market, and in early July, in order to stop the free-fall, the Chinese state implemented several measures including banning corporate executives, board members, and any investor owning 5 percent or more from selling company shares over the next six months, to forcing “listed companies to report positive news to bolster stock prices.” One of China’s largest institutional investors, the National Social Security Fund, was ordered not to sell any shares at all, and from July 8 to July 10, trading in half of China’s listed companies was suspended.

China’s developmental model, therefore, prioritizes the political stability of the CCP, or what the state calls “social stability,” over the interests of investors and shareholder value. This is one reason why use of the label “neoliberal” in reference to China tends to confuse more than clarify, since there is no liberal separation between public and private in China.

Indeed, in a similar vein to the Japanese and South Korean developmental states historically suppressing the interests of savers (i.e. the general population) to benefit capital, a primary function of the Chinese stock market is to transfer savings from the newly arrived middle classes to the state-owned enterprise sector — a crucial mechanism of CCP power.

State control over the stock market will not prevent financial crises in the future, and does not mean that the Chinese state easily controls the

financial sector. In fact, the immediate spark of the recent crash occurred when, on June 13, Chinese regulators announced a crackdown on margin lending (the practice of borrowing money to invest in shares), which they believed was getting out of control. China’s 140 percent stock market boom from November 2014 to June 12 was dependent on margin lending.

Three weeks later, the government-induced recovery massively intensified margin lending. The People’s Bank of China and all the main SOE banks have pumped hundreds of billions of dollars into the China Securities Fund Corporation, which was founded in 2011 and is the main state-owned vehicle that lends to brokerages engaged in margin lending.

Officially sanctioned margin lending is two to one, but in the gray market it reputedly reaches five to one or more with unknown risks to the financial system. As a result, systemic risk due to margin lending is now even more dangerous than it was on June 12, and nobody knows what will happen once the state relaxes its emergency measures that are currently propping up its stock market.

The recent crash and the state’s bold interventions contribute to a broader sense of uncertainty over China’s economic trajectory. The state management of the crash suggests that China’s RMB is far from challenging the US dollar as a global reserve currency, which at minimum would require an open capital account. And recent events increase uncertainty for China’s myriad infrastructure development institutions and initiatives — ranging from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to the Silk Road Fund — all of which partially depend on financing from a healthy and open domestic stock market.

At the same time, economists say the Chinese economy has substantial overcapacity in certain sectors of production and real estate, and, according to government research, roughly half of Chinese state investment between 2009 and 2013, about \$6.8 trillion, was spent on “ineffective” projects. Chinese corporate debt has exploded to 160

percent of GDP (American corporate debt is second largest in the world at 68 percent), and total debt from all sources in China has rocketed from 148 percent of GDP in 2008 to 261 percent in June 2014.

But these potential tinderboxes do not necessarily spell doom for the CCP, or for China's version of capitalism. For comparison, the Japanese stock market was the best performing in the late 1980s and became the world's largest at the beginning of 1990, surpassing even the United States. The boom then turned to bust, falling 39 percent by the end of 1991. This led to two decades of deflation and stagnation, from which Japan has yet to fully recover.

However, while Japan is unlikely to regain its 1980s growth rates in the foreseeable future, it has not collapsed. It remains the second richest (in terms of household net worth) and second most technologically advanced country in the world. What changed from the 1980s are forecasters' prognostications of Japan surpassing the United States to become the next economic superpower.

With the growth slowdown of China amid heightened domestic problems — including increasing debt, financial volatility, overcapacity, and even the possibility of a full-blown financial crisis sometime in the near future — observers will similarly have to adjust their expectations of continued explosive Chinese growth. This revision has implications that extend beyond China to the numerous countries that depend on exporting to China — especially Third World commodity exporters, but also Australia and, to a lesser extent, Canada.

But again, slowdown and the inability to decouple from, let alone surpass, the United States certainly does not equal collapse. And Japan's experience also tells us that even a Mt. Fuji of debt is not necessarily unsustainable if the financial system is relatively insular.

Japan has been able to sustain total

debt near or above 200 percent of GDP for over a decade because the majority of participants in the Japanese financial system are Japanese. The same point is even truer in the case of China, since the Chinese financial system is owned and operated by the CCP — and not private Chinese, let alone foreign, investors.

Yet how Chinese domestic contradictions of overcapacity and over-investment will play out is anyone's guess — mine is that the CCP will likely muddle through — at the continued expense of Chinese workers, keeping a lid on their rising living standards. Indeed, the history of the United States is useful for understanding this durability-despite-exploitation.

While the 1930s labor movement was characterized by increasing unionism, mass strikes, and socialist party politics, in the decades following World War II the US working class — especially white males — was progressively atomized and co-opted.

Through the New Deal and later the 1944 GI Bill, the working class was given a sizable stake in the American pie through social spending, pensions, mortgage financing, and other forms of financing — from auto to credit cards to student loans. This was coupled with a culture of mass consumption and a successful campaign of smashing the unions. For many it became more beneficial to strive to join rather than rock the boat.

What American elites achieved in half a century or so China is trying to accomplish in less than two decades. Since 2012, President Xi Jinping has even introduced the concept of the "Chinese Dream," equating rising living standards with home ownership and mass consumption.

But unlike the American version emphasizing rugged individualism, the Chinese Dream also encompasses a discourse of nationalism that revolves around returning China to its great power status as the "Middle Kingdom" — never again allowing the so-called

"Century of Humiliation" (1839-1949) in which China suffered from Western and Japanese imperialism — all centered on the guidance and management of the single-party state.

So while there is rightfully much excitement about increasing labor activism in China today, most campaigns and actions are, understandably, concerned with bettering workers' position within the exploitative structure of the Chinese Dream and CCP power, rather than building a movement to challenge authoritarian state capitalism itself.

This of course could change, so it's important for the Left in the United States to learn about the ongoing (and ever-changing) Chinese version of state capitalism. For example, during the global financial crisis, there were calls on the US left to nationalize the banking system in the West, with an emphasis on the relationship, and in some left circles, equivalence between nationalization and state control.

As the recent stock market crash shows so clearly, the Chinese banking system is entirely nationalized and under state control. But the Chinese financial system is not designed for the benefit of the working class, nor can China's state-directed financial system overcome high volatility or prevent market crashes.

Thus, while nationalization of the financial sector is necessary, democratization is the crucial factor to ensure the interests of working people. These interests will not be prioritized as long as the financial system is controlled by a single authoritarian party — as in China — or by private capitalist interests, as in the United States. The financial system, especially decision-making over where to direct credit, must be democratized.

In the meantime, unfortunately, given the current structure of global, and in the case of China, national financial markets, we should expect more, and probably even greater, financial crises to come.

Jacobin

# We're All Precarious Now

22 June 2015, by **Charlie Post**

What some have started to call “the precariat” is a concept that bundles together these feelings and theories, and is a term that has gained currency with many on the Left.

Charlie Post, author of the book *American Road to Capitalism*, argues that “the precariat” is a misleading category for understanding the changes working people face today. This interview, conducted by Tessa Echeverria and Andrew Sernatinger for *Black Sheep Radio*, discusses how radicals should relate to the existing labor movement and how our tactics should change in response to new economic conditions.

**Let's start with some background. Can you tell us why socialists, communists, anarchists, and other radicals have traditionally been interested in organized labor?**

I want to break that down into a couple of pieces. Historically, the socialist/communist left has been interested in the workplace and in the *industrial* working class: workers in manufacturing, transport, etc. That flows from an analysis that these workers have social power. Their work and the withholding of their labor is socially more disruptive to the operation of capitalist society than workers who work in stores, smaller workplaces, and the like.

Industrial workers also, because of their position in production, can develop a collective interest in a democratic collectivist socialist society. That's the foundational reason that Marxian socialists of various stripes, anarcho-syndicalists, and others have been focused on the workplace. Thus, the issue becomes the importance of organization at the workplace.

**So are you distinguishing here between the “proletariat” and the working class in general?**

Hal Draper [56] used that distinction. I generally want to talk about the distinction between industrial workers, those in manufacturing, transport, construction, telecommunication and the like, and workers in other areas of social life. Historically, the Marxian and anarcho-syndicalist left have always had a *strategic* focus among workers in industry, even though they've also been involved with teachers, hospital workers, and others.

There's also the understanding that without organization, even workers in large workplaces who have potential social power are not going to act in a class manner or become class conscious. Workers under capitalism have a dual existence: both as collective producers struggling against capital for control of the workplace, for hours and wages, but also workers compete with each other as sellers of labor power. [57]

This gives rise to what the early twentieth century Marxists used to call “sectional interests”: divisions along the lines of race, citizenship, nationality, gender, sexuality, etc. So the question of the organization of the workplace first and foremost through the formation of militant, democratic unions has also been a historic focus.

Then there's the third element that really comes into debate in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for radicals and revolutionaries who are interested in organizing at the workplace and building consciousness: “How do we relate to the existing unions?” Because since the early twentieth century, the labor movement has been really dominated by top-down-run bureaucracies that are more interested in cutting deals with the bosses, often at the expense of their own members, than with actually struggling against the boss.

Before the First World War, the revolutionary left was all over the place. Some people said what we need to do is build revolutionary red unions; that was the response of anarcho-syndicalists with the *IWW* in the US. Other people said you have to work within the existing unions and build opposition to the bureaucratic leaderships. Still others said that you could somehow convince bureaucrats, trade union officials, to be more progressive.

Since probably the 1920s, the revolutionary left has mostly been aligned with that second position (opposition within existing unions). The reality is that workers in unorganized workplaces, when they begin to organize themselves and struggle against the bosses, they're going to first look to the existing unions to organize them and carry on the struggle. Thus revolutionaries and radicals need to relate to those existing unions, otherwise when workers start to move they'll be isolated from the activity.

**Continuing with that we wanted to get into, how have radicals used tactics in organized labor to radicalize the workforce or to bring their socialism into the organizing? How do you see that changing as the structures of labor have been changing in the last few years? There's a different relationship to work and a different character of the workforce since the 1920s . . .**

Right. The 1920s bear some superficial resemblance to today as only a small portion [58] of the workforce, mostly skilled, was unionized but in sharp decline, and the bureaucracies were cutting deals left and right.

By the 1930s revolutionaries had shifted towards the internal opposition strategy mostly, arguing that where

these unions existed they had to relate to them, be members of them, argue for industrial unionism, etc. For workplaces that aren't organized, they should try to create non-majority unions — groups of workers who organize workplace actions over immediate grievances, recognizing the activists and organizers of these unions would for the most part be the radicals in that workplace.

In the late 1930s and early '40s, the Communist Party started to argue that as bankrupt and bureaucratic as the unions are, they needed to not only relate to the existing unions, but to find leaders who are progressives and support them. This would frame the position of most of the socialist left in the US toward the labor movement ever since.

So you get socialists who were incredibly enthusiastic about the election of John Sweeney [to be president of the AFL-CIO] in the early 1990s, believing that his rhetoric about organizing new groups of workers and immigrants was going to lead to the revitalization of the labor movement. [59] Later, a lot of radicals were interested in the model put forward by the Service Employees International Union under Andy Stern, because they were talking about organizing new groups of workers. Today we see the same thing with people trying to relate to local, progressive union officials through citywide central labor councils.

Unfortunately, many of these people who they want to relate to, while they're good on the war in Iraq or may say good things about health care, in the workplace these people carry out the same kind of policies of cooperating with the employers that the more conservative unions do.

Only a [relatively small current](#) on the US left in the last thirty or forty years has been committed to rebuilding militancy from below. What that looks like is building reform caucuses, the most successful being [Teamsters for a Democratic Union](#). Or in non-unionized workplaces, which are the vast majority of workplaces in the US, building non-majority unions — small groups acting like a union but without going through the National Labor

Relations Board election process.

**At this point, the percentage of the organized workforce is actually lower than it was before the right to bargain was won through the National Labor Relations Act. I think there's a lot of young people who see labor as important to the socialist project or at least to building a fighting element in the United States, but their argument is that there have been some substantial changes to the economy, and the concentrated industrial strategy doesn't apply anymore. They reference this thing called "the precariat," and I was wondering if you could introduce the concept and explain why it's something people find attractive.**

The notion that there's the emergence of a new social class or a new layer in the working class is something that goes back to the beginning of the neoliberal offensive in the late 1970s or early '80s. The idea is that there's a category of people whose conditions of life are marked by short-term, temporary, part-time work, at lower-wages without social protections or benefits.

By the late 1980s, there were a number of French sociologists who were talking about "precarious" work. In the English-speaking world, the book that's attempted to make this argument most systematically is [The Precariat](#), by Guy Standing. What he's arguing is that the precariat is a distinct social class, separate from the working class. He defines the working class as the 1950s and '60s unionized working class in the industrialized world: people who had full-time employment, job security, who stayed with their employer for twenty or thirty years, who could not be hired or fired at will and the like. [60]

The precariat, according to him, is the growing number of people, particularly among youth and people of color, who are increasingly employed in non-union workplaces, and are part-time and most importantly to him precarious, short-term; people are constantly turning over jobs, moving from one job to another. Standing's argument, then, is that it is this layer, the precariat, who

have a more radical potential.

The problem I have with this is that I'm not sure empirically the description of the precariat as a distinct, precariously employed sector of the working class, or even distinct class, is in fact accurate. There's a very good book by Kevin Doogan called [New Capitalism?](#) For the most part, it focuses on this issue of precarity.

On the one hand, there's been a clear growth in part-time work: in health care, retail and big box-type stores. But what he points out is that while all of these employers are using more part-time work so that they don't pay medical benefits or pensions, the work is very steady. People aren't working for only a few months, but rather are working sometimes ten or fifteen years for the same employer, and they just can't get full-time.

Doogan argues that the reason that the notion of the precariat has gained so much resonance is not because there's this growing number of people whose attachment to employment has become more precarious, or that there's a distinct group with distinct interests, but instead the defeats of the last thirty years, the rise of neoliberalism and the dismantling of the welfare state, have made the consequences of unemployment much more severe for workers today than they were in the postwar period.

When I was much younger, in my late teens and twenties, I was first radicalizing in the 1970s, and I had a lot of friends who'd get jobs at the post office or the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They knew that if they got laid off or fired for political activity, they could collect unemployment, get food stamps, probably get on Medicaid, or they could pick up another job quickly. Since the successful neoliberal offensive, we have seen that it is much harder to get full-time employment that have social benefits, and in general the welfare benefits have degraded or disappeared.

The consequences [61] of getting laid off or fired today are much more severe today than they were just a few decades ago. This is what contributes to a growing sense of precariousness



among all workers. That starts with workers who are so-called “privileged” with full-time jobs, down to those who are working part-time for Walmart with no prospect of a full-time job.

This has contributed, along with the series of defeats and declining organization of the workplace, to a growing sense that the objective social power that workers once had in this society has dissipated. This goes along with a tendency that many on the Left have had to believe that the relative decline in the percentage of the industrial working class is something new. They argue that there’s a historic change in the history of capitalism.

The reality is that the percentage of workers employed industrially has been shrinking since the 1880s and 1890s! This is a result not of geographic mobility of capital leaving the core, but the result of mechanization.

We have seen a very sharp increase in mechanization and in speed-up, or “lean production” [62] — a hyper-scientific management where you break up jobs into very simple and repetitive operations, you eliminate or combine jobs, get people working even harder and faster. You get a situation where today more cars are produced in the United States than in any time over the last one hundred years, but with many fewer workers, and the percentage of those workers organized in unions is very small because of the employers’ offensive.

So this notion of precarity goes along with the notion of deindustrialization. Unfortunately, it’s also the argument of the trade union officials! What they say is that the reason the trade union movement is in such bad shape is that employers have broken the post-World War II social contract: they’re no longer hiring us full-time, they’re no longer giving us benefits, and they’re moving to China. They say that instead of confronting the dead end of bureaucratic business unionism — reliance on the NLRB to maintain union density.

**Do you have any thoughts on how people could use this common sense to guide them in action?**

### **How to organize some of these part-time or service jobs that lend themselves to the idea of the precariat?**

The most useful way to use this concept is to do what [Richard Seymour](#), who runs the blog *Lenin’s Tomb*, has done and say, “We’re all precarious now.” Deunionization, the neoliberal offensive means that all working people face precarious conditions of one sort or another. It’s only through organization that we can begin to overcome this, with the recognition that a lot of the struggles of precarious workers are to become regularized and get full-time hours, job security, and benefits.

This means that those of us who are radicals need to bring in a strategic vision. There’s been lots of discussion of how do you organize Walmart, which is the biggest retailer in the United States. Many of the unions who have been trying to do it have been going store by store. To be honest, my sense is while it’s important and should not be given up, this will not be strategically central because no group of workers in these stores, even those employed regularly, has the social power to disrupt their operations and force Walmart to give in to something.

What’s been interesting to me is that the United Electrical Workers, which has been one of the unions who have most done non-majority organizing, in their organizing they have focused on not the stores but the distribution centers: the places where all the crap comes in and goes out to maintain the just-in-time inventory systems. [63]

Those who are trying to figure out how to organize retail, industries where most people are today working, and we also want to reorganize the traditional industries: auto, rubber, transport, and the like. In order to do this, we need to do this strategically, and if young radicals are thinking about how to organize Walmart, you need to think is the key getting a job at a store or a distribution center? At the latter, a small, concerted group of radicals can make an impact to disrupt and bring the company to its knees for a short period of time and exercise more social power.

On the one hand, deskilling, fragmentation, speedup and greater precariousness for all workers has weakened workers. But other aspects, particularly in lean production [64] and just-in-time inventories, have given more power [65] to strategically placed groups of workers.

If people are serious about organizing Walmart, they should follow the UE’s example of focusing on these distribution points, because if you can shut those down you shut down dozens of stores, not just a single one. For auto, think about key suppliers of certain parts. In transport, look at the elements of the transport network.

**So what you’re saying is that the natural resting place in capitalism for its workforce is a state of semi-precarity? Precariousness is not a distinct category or phase, and it’s the conscious organizing of ordinary working people that combats precarity and puts stability in people’s lives.**

Exactly. If you look at the condition of workers before the First World War, say in the 1890s, the vast majority of working people lived an incredibly precarious existence. I was doing some research on skilled workers in Victorian England, the so-called labor aristocracy. Most of these people were working half the year, subject to long bouts of unemployment, and if they were out of work they could lose housing. You had some minor sections of the working class with what we think of as regular full-time work, but not many.

The sense of what most people alive today thought was “the norm,” was actually the historical exception. The 1940s through the early 1970s was an exceptional period for working-class people in the industrialized countries. In the 1930s and 1940s, workers had posed a major political threat and forced capital to concede major reforms. Once the pressure of competition and profitability forces pushed capital in a different direction and they’re not meeting resistance, then we go back to where we were in the 1880s and 1890s.

**Could you talk about the approach**

**that unions have been taking of putting pressure on city governments or state agencies in order to win labor reforms? The idea is that the workplace is too small or they don't have enough power, so they'll do it through the government. I wonder if you could get into this distinction of pressuring capital versus state agencies?**

I should preface by saying I think that putting pressure on local governments for better labor standards is part of a repertoire of tools for organizing. It is a way for workers who are organizing to reach other to others in their communities.

However, the problem is that the American union officials, particularly United Food and Commercial Workers and the Service Employees International Union have been using this as a substitute for organizing at the workplace. It goes along with this idea that we're too weak at the workplace, so we're going to get the government to step in and regulate. This is part and parcel of the worldview of the trade union officials. They say, "We don't have to sit down, or occupy factories. We can rely on the labor board."

The reality is that unless workers are exercising some real social power there's no reason government officials should buck the people who finance their campaigns or "provide jobs in the community." Unless workers have this workplace social power, their ability to win these local campaigns for government regulation is very limited.

If you look at many of the living-wage campaigns, where they have not been accompanied by concerted workplace action they've either been unsuccessful or the laws have been highly restricted or just unenforced.

**There's a critique farther on the Left that the problem is the reliance on cooperation with the state. They identify Taft-Hartley and the NLRB as never making it possible to succeed in any real way. Their model tends to focus on the IWW and concerted illegality.**

**Your position has tended to be somewhere in between there, and I was wondering if you could draw that all out? It's very understandable for people to say, "Look at how this has been stacked against us, so fuck the whole thing."**

For the most part, that's a healthy reaction. But it's not a substitute for a real strategy. The problem is that it harkens back to the idea that in each isolated workplace, we have enough power to take on capital. It leaves open, how do you coordinate actions between workplaces?

Some of the Wobblies back in the 1980s were pointing to some Spanish dockworkers that had very strong organization, but because of their syndicalist influences didn't engage in nationwide bargaining. The problem was, as the employers became more aggressive, they pitted one group of militant dockworkers against another "threatening to move one port to another" and got them to agree to lower wages and gutted work rules.

The question is, how do you negotiate the interface between strong workplace organization and coordination in a democratic, bottom-up way? How do you use whatever rights workers have won historically, in terms of legality, to advance that?

There's a really good book that everyone interested in a better labor movement should be reading called *Reviving the Strike*, by Joe Burns. He's written a very good and balanced framework for the National Relations framework and how it appeared to work in the boom years of the 1950s and 60s. But since that boom ended, employers have become more aggressive, and it has become more of a restriction to workers in unions to fight back.

He does not say that you should now ignore the NLRB, but he argues that unions have to be ready to break the law in a more systematic way: extend strikes, spread strikes, take illegal actions, go beyond jurisdictional boundaries, etc.

He talks there about people who have done non-majority actions: we build

groups that act as though they're a union, organize around grievances, link up with other groups of workers in similar industries. But how to press for employer recognition? There the question becomes balancing maintaining real power and pressure from below, and then participating in NLRB elections. That's something the labor left needs to go back to, because the labor left has been polarized between those who say, "We'll just figure out a strategy to win NLRB elections" and those who say, "Fuck all this. We'll just organize individually."

**How do you respond to people who find the notion of the precariat still very attractive? You've presented some very compelling arguments for why as a category the precariat maybe conceals more than it reveals, and the working class as a whole is experiencing more insecurity that leads to a general feeling of unease and precarity. But for those who aren't interested or able to leave behind a service or retail position, how would you think they should proceed?**

On a broad level, I think it comes back to the argument that we're all precarious now. But I think you should go through the experience of organizing where you are. No one should be saying, "I told you so" about limitations, but rather you should go through and consider, "What power do we have in the workplace where we are? Can we leverage that through our potentials and limits?"

It's part of an ongoing discussion of how to organize Walmart, or the big-box stores, home health care aids, nonunion hospitals and the like. Go through the experience and carry on the conversation about what it will take and what we can do in our organizing attempts.

If there's any group of people thinking about organizing their workplace, I'm the last person to say it's a waste of time. That's the kind of conservatism that's gotten the far left a bad name, and deservedly.

*From Jacobin.*

# The probable working class

3 February 2015, by **Lidia Cirillo**

## Marx and the active dimension of class

The discussion on class is one of the three big topics that Communia has to tackle. The others are the state and the forms of organisation through which the proletariat has been constructed and those through which it could constitute itself again as a class. This seminar has been conceived as a follow up to the contributions on the website and as an exchange of individual reflections which have not yet been brought into the debate. A single meeting will not be sufficient, but it will already be a step forward if we succeed in setting up future sessions on the theme and clarify what the political implications are of resolving the theoretical difficulties.

We should necessarily begin with some thoughts on the contributions made on the website. A certain number allude to an absence: the lost class, the class that isn't, a class whose traces we have to search for... Since I cannot be the interpreter of other people's ideas and I am not even certain we are talking about the same thing, I will try and say what I think about this idea of an absence.

## What does it mean to say that there is a dramatic absence of a class?

It means to go back to a red thread within Marx's thinking that is very evident in both his work as an intellectual and as an activist. Many times he said that a class is a class when it is capable of thinking and

acting as one. In the *German Ideology* he stated that numerous individuals become a class when they carry forward a common battle against another class. In a letter to Kugelmann he said he saw his programme as a means to bring about the transformation of workers into a class. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, he referred to the small property-owning French peasantry as both a class and not a class at the same time. They formed a class because they lived in economic conditions that differentiated their way of living, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and they confronted the latter in a hostile way. However they did not form a class because they did not constitute a community and were not able to express a political union or organisation.

Certainly Marx also said other things - he distinguished between a "class in itself" and a "class for itself". But at a certain point he abandoned these concepts. He used the term class when he spoke of the worker as a "beast of burden" or a "brutalised soul" prior to "subversive practices" that could redeem him/her.

This rather catch-all use of a concept does not cancel out numerous statements by Marx where he sees class as something alive and active, in tune with his political practice. Indeed he identified the industrial working class as the protagonist in the conflict against the division of society into classes because when he decided to join its ranks workers had already been involved in very hard struggles for decades. Only later did he start to research for the criteria and logic underlying these definitions. This research was left unfinished since his death prevented him completing projected work on a theory of classes.

The difficulty of grasping and defining class when a class does not perceive itself as a class, is also shown in

Marx's uncertainty in applying the term class to various social groups. Bertell Ollman documents this in an article. Is class struggle possible without classes, without a class capable of constructing a community, a political union and organisation, in other words without the formation of a real class? Clearly for Marx it is possible, given that he considered class struggle to a constant feature of human history, indeed its dynamic force. At the same time he thought industrial workers would be the first subaltern class in human history capable of acting as a class and therefore becoming the quintessential class.

If we are going to refer to class in terms of an absence then at least in discussions like this one, and to reach a clearer understanding, we need to make certain distinctions. For example between proletariat and class or between working class and workers movement. This is useful due to the confusion that using the same name for different things engenders. For example when people respond to us that the working class and its struggles still exist, that de-industrialisation is a simplistic interpretation of reality and that service sector staff are often workers either in house or outsourced. As if we did not know that or as if we have been afflicted with some sort of collective amnesia.

The problem is quite different. The thing is, if we just look at the twentieth century experience, the "class in itself" very rarely existed as a "class for itself" if you really want to continue to use formula that Marx himself abandoned at a certain point and that Bensaïd considered to be an idealistic illusion. In other words the topographical model of a proletariat in itself would only show the existence of a vast territory but not where or how the class would express itself as a class, nor what its

identity would be. No structural definition of the class can resolve the problem of its formation. There are multiple ways in which the subordinate classes in contemporary society have participated in social conflicts. The forms of participation have been very diverse and heavily conditioned by the historical contexts. The two scenarios that have traditionally inspired the radical left have been shown to be reducible to a paradigm of unrepeatable historical events or a model which has not been replicated. I am referring to the self-emancipation of a class according to Marx and the experience of the First International. Or the model of a class capable of developing strong forms of self-organisation guiding the party and letting itself be guided by the party in the virtuous circle of 1917. These events have been obviously fundamental because they created the conditions for events that followed, but the ways in which the labouring masses became a class always varied.

That same factory proletariat - similar in terms of the productive process, the organisation of the work process and the degree of numerical concentration - was to have radically different trajectories in the various historical contexts. In 1917 Marx's prophecy seems to come true, but in the exceptional context of a strong proletariat and a weak bourgeoisie, which had not yet established the conditions for its own rule. In the United States, where a racist hierarchy of waged labour exists, you can get at one and the same time extraordinary trade union struggles while the same workers voted for the racist right-wing of the Republican party. In Italy at the end of the 60s we saw a reformist period which took place under the vigilant and worried eyes of the trade union apparatuses and the PCI (Italian Communist Party).

Not only can the same class have different trajectories but the same class can be substantially different. Marx knew not just one but two - a working class with an artisan background which was only formally subordinated to capital in France and maintained a greater capacity for self-organisation and a working class which was much more subordinated/integrated to the

demands of capital and which had already begun to produce a solid trade union bureaucracy. Furthermore the proletariat did not only exist where there was industrial production. Among the events that formed the workers movement **in the 20th century were also the Chinese and Cuban revolutions where the protagonist classes were hardly similar to those that had built the Paris Commune or took the Winter Palace.**

The extent to which this paradigm of events falsifies reality can only be really grasped if you take account of the fact that already in the twentieth century the formation and actions of the working class were diverse and changeable and that this is even more the case if you look at the changes in the last decades. Among these changes we have the dissolution of what we have called the 'workers movement'. I want to return to this argument because I have realised that younger comrades often use the formulation in the same way as others of the same type. The 'student movement' means a movement of students and 'women's movement' means what it says, a movement of human beings of the female sex. With the formulation 'workers movement' the second term has ended up indicating a genesis, emphasising only one of the components of a more complex construction. The term here is not used in a post-modern sense but indicates a series of material forces and interests. If 'workers movement' is defined as the synergic totality that in Europe and the world has constrained capitalism to change in order not to die then this totality is only partially something to do with being a class. Certainly the working class, especially in the big industrial centres, was the nucleus around which the rest of the class aggregated. But the final product was an historical, social-political and cultural construction with uncertain limits, extremely differentiated and internally conflictual but synergetic. This workers' movement was made up of:

- a working class with a significant structural force that was able to make itself the centre of social conflicts;
- bureaucratic and nepotistic

structures which gave positions and power to the most dynamic and ambitious sectors of the petty bourgeoisie;

- state entities with their economic and military power;
- liberation movements in the colonised countries, who found an interest in putting themselves under the protective wing of the Soviet Union and sometimes ventured into the creation of more or less credible 'socialist' states on a national scale;
- social democracies which kept open spaces in which revolutionaries could continue to intervene;
- revolutionaries who punched away at the side of the social democrats and the trade union apparatuses, occasionally forcing them to rekindle their relationship with their own social base;
- creative intellectuals attracted by the progressive myths built up through the revolutionary events of the century;
- occasional mobilisations;
- organisational implantations;
- faithful electorates;
- fellow-travellers and allies...

Now many of the components of this totality no longer exist or have been maintained in name only without any corresponding reality or have undergone a dynamic of disaggregation, which has left each element isolated from each other. You have to give up any sort of materialist judgement to believe the enormous destruction of the material forces produced by the disaggregation of the twentieth century workers movement has left intact those old paradigms, imaginative narratives, language, symbols and expectations.

## The immense territory of the



## 21st century working class

If we limit ourselves to coming to terms with history and only take into consideration the diversity of ways in which the proletariat has acted and expressed itself then today we are in a living in a night where all the cats are black. In other words we have no image of the identity of the 'probable class' as Bourdieu calls it. Nothing remains but the totally empirical practice of being where we are and where there is some movement already happening. That is what we are really doing but only within the limit of our forces. Empirical practice must be accompanied by the understanding that present struggles and their logic can end up petering out without much consequence and that other social groups, other subjective dynamics can develop without any relationship with the present struggles that can come into play and have a greater impact. So it is worth name checking *Where are our people?* in the Clash City Workers book. But who is a proletarian today and what is the proletariat? Defining them is not an exact science and it is insufficient to carefully read documentation from ISTAT (Italian state statistics agency) and other institutions. In fact it is not a neutral operation because the choice of criteria is necessarily partial. Is there a criterion for conceptualising class when there is no class which thinks and acts like a class? Not because you can imagine a 'class in itself' as an inert body but because the processes of formation of a class will highlight objective determinations.

If we look back at Marx again we can note that when he is referring to concrete historical events the proletariat for him means the factory workers. However when he developed concepts that functioned as criteria then the category was extended to the point that it helps us understand the breadth of the present process of proletarianisation. The proletarian is in fact a free worker who is forced to survive by putting him or herself on the market like any other commodity to sell their own labour power - in other words the totality of their

physical and intellectual attributes. Already in Marx's time the definition did not only include the industrial working class but other social groups like the office workers who often found it hard to make ends meet. This confirms the political sense of the concept of class in Marx who is interested in the most dynamic and active working class sectors who least identified with bourgeois values. During the 20th century there has been a growth in the number of office workers in insurance, the banks and those companies directly producing wealth. Labour productivity is not the criteria we should use for working out 'where our people are' but it is not completely irrelevant in the process of the making of the working class which is achieved above all through conflict. Workers in these sectors directly producing surplus value were able to use the weapon of stopping that flow and at certain times this was something that terrified the capitalists. De-industrialisation, outsourcing, the repression of trade union rights, organised scabbing under the aegis of institutional racism and precarious work also has meant the weapon has been disarmed.

Marx also said something else in one of those reflections about the future that appear quite prophetic, but which shows his capacity to identify the very logic of the capitalist mode of production. He said that the profitability and effective employment of capital is not achieved only with immediate labour but with the totality of social activity. To understand the present phenomenon of proletarianisation you can also use the concept of subsumption that Marx also provides us with. Real, substantial or effective (whichever formula is used) subsumption is the process through which capital not only exploits labour through the appropriation of surplus value but also organises, divides it up, makes it an appendage of the machine or imposes forms of cooperation which it controls and that are often not part of workers' direct experience. Always penetrating into new areas capital has produced a global proletarianisation of vast proportions with its own logic and in diverse forms.

A strong working class has developed in Asia and Latin America whose force

has been shown in southern China, the so-called workshop of the world, where there have been numerous struggles that have been ignored in a conspiracy of silence. We see quite different features in the late capitalist countries where a great number of industrial workers remain and often engage in struggle.

In this part of the world proletarianisation was achieved with the reduction to proletarian conditions of the relative independence in working conditions that were enjoyed in the past and now work has the same characteristics as those already imposed elsewhere - in other words extreme division of tasks, a cooperation at work that is external to the experience of those who are involved, a subordination to machinery and its system. The crisis has also contributed to further proletarianisation, squeezing hard the former middle layers who not only live and work in proletarian conditions but see themselves as working class contrary to the lower middle class identity often adopted in the first half of the last century. So is everyone proletarian today? Not really everybody but certainly a great many if for theoretical reasons we distinguish the concept of proletariat and class.

The problem, if we take up what the comrades from Precarious Connections say, is that we are seeing a paradoxical disconnection between proletariat and class and we are facing a reality which prevents its spatial concentration and identity. The decomposition of the 20th century workers movement, the disappearance of the big working class strongholds, the disarticulation of the productive process, the new class stratification with the multiplication of new productive roles and the increasing precarity of labour, makes the reconstruction of collective identity very difficult.

Precarity at work is the first consequence of this state of affairs, the intended and planned effect of the outcome of the last century's class struggle. Working people have always suffered from a high level of precarity. Proper rights at work and a welfare system of social insurance were only

established after the Second World War, even if some elements of both existed here and there in the previous period.

Stabilisation was not the consequence of struggles against precarious labour although there certainly were some. On their own these struggles would not have obtained much if they had not been backed up by the relationship of forces established in the thirty years following the Second World War. This relationship of forces was not only the product of the structural strength of the industrial workers and the need capital had for labour at this time. What was determinant were the political, cultural and even military factors. We could say – rather glibly but without being too far from the truth – that this stabilisation also had something to do with the national liberation struggles and the revolutions following the war.

Feminisation of the workforce and immigration does not simplify things but makes the connection between working people more complex but it would be really superficial to attribute divisions to workers' racial prejudice. Not because it does not exist but because sexism and racism as a function of a lower cost of labour power have a specific origin. These attitudes are constructed and reproduced not only within the overall institutions of capital itself but also in the adaptation of those organisations that should defend all workers, to the existing reality. Laws that make it impossible for immigrants to defend themselves from exploitation induces the local worker to see the immigrant, who is ready to sell his labour for a lower price, as a scab. If there is no development of a common struggle, the intervention of political parties then transforms this hostile reaction into support for authentically racist and xenophobic policies and actions. The way in which the extreme right wing in France has won over significant sections of the PCF's (French Communist Party) former working class electorate is a very clear lesson to us.

For women entry into the labour market in a precarious and subordinated way draws on a naturalisation of their reproductive

role (which is not only or especially a question of biological reproduction) in a context in which all the material and cultural conditions exist for its socialisation and sharing. **Where the proletariat is made up of so many immigrants and women the cultural and political struggle against sexism and racism is quite simply a class struggle.** Homophobia is less directly tied to the appropriation of surplus value but this does not mean it is extraneous to it. The interest the owners of capital have in maintaining conservative institutions (the family, the Church, the monarchy and so on) allows it to sustain its political control even if their precise significance varies according to a country's history, traditions, religious influence and political/cultural hegemony.

Given this state of affairs it would appear to be really problematic to identify the dynamic capable of transforming this proletariat into a class. Apart from anything else we are not capable yet of understanding what processes in the future will express the centripetal force previously exerted by the trade union and the political organisation of the industrial working class in the twentieth century. I do not agree with the objection that the disarticulation of the labour process renders the search for a centre (a new one or the old one) and a socially more mature protagonist irrelevant or a waste of time. Certainly it is not our job to search out the path of a central nucleus of a probable class and nothing can guarantee that this really exists anyway. Nevertheless there are two good reasons to not exclude such a concern [i.e. seeking a central protagonist role for working class – Tr] from our project. The first is that not all the fall outs from a conflict are equal and have the same potential for mobilisation and resistance. **Concentration in a workplace for example still represents today a non-negligible element of strength** even if we are talking of a strength that to a large extent is only a potential (for reasons we have already discussed). The second reason is that it appears unlikely, in fact I would say anthropologically hardly credible, that a series of fragmented struggles knit

together into a convergent dynamic spontaneously and at the same time. Referring back to the question of political organisation would in this case be wrong since it would skip a stage because a form of organisation with the necessary force to sustain a confrontation with capital and its institutions have as a necessary condition a class capable of forming and recognising itself as a class. Are we once again in a night where all the cats are black? Are we faced with a multitude but with the signs reversed – negative instead of positive. This seminar is really about discussing whether processes and dynamics exist today which go in the direction of class formation.

## The varied and diverse dynamics of becoming a class subject

All those who suffer from capitalist rule have in reality never stopped struggling but that does not mean that today they form a class. The dispersed members of Orpheus continue to sing but their voices do not make a choir. It is not only a question of a lack of connections, which is above all a symptom. When a whole world is crumbling the civilised conquests of that world become forgotten. One of those is precisely the need to connect. Starting from struggles is a more coherent way to continue to roll out the red line of Marx's research with the obvious difficulty that in Italy the people in struggle are often reciprocally invisible. Even the hubs around Communia (see website of same name – Tr) do not really know each other and often speak different languages because in different work sectors the languages and slang of antagonistic cultures have become crystallised. In that culture there is also a more structured militant intervention with a greater capacity to communicate it.

We need to ask the following questions when discussing struggles. Who are the protagonists? What relations do they have with the institutions and the trade union

apparatuses? Are they self-organised and to what extent? What significance can we assign to the self-organisation – is it the only way people can react given the context of overall regression or is it the sign of a class composition more capable of self-organisation than that of the 20th century workers movement? Or is it a varying reflection of both realities at the same time? In the desolate world of the 21st century proletariat are more mature social protagonists emerging which we should search out in a similar way to the workers from the big and medium sized industries at the end of the 1960s? Or can we simply identify the probable class with economic recovery, the development and the connections of waged labour where it is most concentrated? Let us hope that future discussion on these questions can at least respond to some of these, but we can already say something about them now.

From the beginning of the new century the proletariat has defended itself in all or nearly all of its sectors – factory workers, teachers, students, local communities defending the environment, women and the temporary art workers, the health workers and patients, the homeless and precarious, the LGBT community and the urban ghetto residents.. But there is a long way from this to having any consciousness of being part of the same class. For example I was amazed to hear someone when speaking in an interview from the theatre and cultural occupations that the occupiers belong to different social classes. In fact it is already a political step forward if someone at least recognises themselves as proletarian. The identification of a large number of working people with a presumed middle layer is traditionally one of the common features of the bosses' ideology. We have every interest to transform this stereotype into one that is more useful for our side and which is above all closer to the truth. It is not a question of covering up or ignoring internal differentiation – there is a great deal and it is problematic – and one thing you have to accept is that the working class is not homogenous. Above all we have to begin to point out the clear frontier between them and us.

In fact in recent years self-organisation have frequently been the form struggles have taken. There are two reasons for this and it is difficult to say which is the most important. One reason is the ossification of the political and trade union forms of organisation, that had led the struggle in the last century – even if this was done in a limited way and with notable contradictions. The 'do it yourself' approach is often the reaction to a well-founded lack of confidence in those traditional bodies and is a necessary condition for action being taken. But at the same time it produces problems such as isolation and difficulty of connecting. However there is also another reason. This proletariat in all or nearly all its forms has a greater capacity for self-organisation than that which characterised waged labour in the past. While the idea of 'knowledge workers', as pointed out by Formenti, is a 'dangerous utopia' at the same time it is also clearly an acceptance of the overall growth in the ability and expertise of working people. Certainly a great amount of the knowledge necessary today for the accumulation of capital is absorbed by machines of which new and older workers are only appendages condemned to executing tasks requiring no autonomy or creativity. Nevertheless it is also true the relationship with machinery today demands higher cultural levels. In this way we see men and women, with competence and expectations that their work does not fulfil, become assimilated to proletarian conditions. The level of education comes into play here, which while it has declined in Italy in recent years, had risen for many decades before. The multiplicity of information channels – which we must not accept uncritically – certainly has created a more cultured working class. At the same time as people are more imbued by capitalist values and stereotypes this is only maintained until these come into clear conflict with their desperate living conditions. Consequently the same dynamic can be triggered which Marx described as the "brutalised souls" and "beasts of burden" becoming human class subjects. Indeed self-organisation is the expression of a loss, of abandonment but also of the proletariat's historically acquired

potential, included the industrial working class. It is on this potential that we can base our hopes of self-emancipation, which includes political organisation but defined in different terms and processes to the past.

This proletariat is also precarious in those sectors which have permanent contracts because restructuring, outsourcing, the crisis and the indebtedness creates an unstable and threatening situation. This precarity is also internally diversified because, while from the point of view of guarantees and certainty working class employment is being levelled to the bottom, the different contexts means there are still possibilities of resistance. The existence of larger groups of workers in certain workplaces who also have some trade union experience means there will be at least some attempts to struggle for the stabilisation and defence of jobs. However where there are smaller groups the struggle against precarious labour conditions can appear almost impossible but if it does break out it can spark off something more interesting. In other words there are precarious work conditions where the very lack of a concrete possibility of trade union negotiations can push workers to become more political.

The survey of temporary creative arts workers in Italy showed that isolated workers who are often unemployed or who work irregularly can come together, involving thousands of people and develop effective action through a politicised approach. What did they do?

- They used the institutions, the constitution and old laws to demand the right to employment;
- they set up political relationships with more militant trade unions and movements to avoid isolation;
- they worked on forms of communication on a community level to involve people in defence of a "common good";
- they sought to raise revenue and to discuss the contents and commitments of artistic production.

You can object that there remains the

risk of dissipation of those fighting in this way and that this means these forces are marginal in a conflict in which shifts of the masses are what really count. Such shifts, it is argued, are only possible where the very organisation of the work process produces a concentration of working people in particular workplaces or big university centres. While this observation is partly true it omits a vital aspect – the people involved in this particular struggle were mostly

young or youngish and highly educated and had a certain level of consciousness. Therefore they represent a sector of society that is more involved in movements and conflicts and are more able to bring them towards a liberation perspective, preventing them being dragged into scapegoating or against false enemies. In cases like these the struggle of people living in precarious working conditions can also be considered as an expression of the presence of

marginal intellectuals in class conflicts. These people obviously do not resolve the problem of the class because they only represent a fragment of it. They are a vanguard but with a difference significance to the one that was crystallised in the 20th century. But here we are already beginning another discussion on forms of organisation, which we will take up later on.

*July 2014*

## **Nonracialism Through Race (and Class)**

**1 September 2014, by Betsy Esch and David Roediger**

Shortly before the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, amidst wonderfully frantic activity by newly legalized and relaunched organizations of struggle, one of the many keywords being debated was "nonracialism."

Since building a "nonracial" nation was a longstanding African National Congress goal, the word gave shape to discussions about how to address racial inequality amidst other social transformations in a Free South Africa, especially during considerations of affirmative action in the draft constitution.

Both liberals and some Marxists argued against stressing the "racial" in the sophisticated analyses of racial capitalism that held purchase in that time and place. The former could claim that capitalism without apartheid would settle racial inequalities through growth while the latter could emphasize that ending capitalism was the key, and perhaps the prerequisite, to a nonracial future.

In this context, a certain phrasing by militants struck home as particularly brave, precise and worth thinking about as a starting place for any discussion of race and racism: "The way to nonracialism is through race."

As defenders of this approach we wish to challenge readers of New Socialist

to go beyond considerations of race and class which begin from — and therefore can't transcend — an either-or stance. If the 20th century drove home any point to revolutionaries, it is that oppressions are multiple and cannot be explained entirely through class relations.

Even as we criticize some Marxists for economic reductionist analyses of racism, or for failing to see the critical place of anti-racism in building resistance to capitalism, we see ourselves as part of the struggle to define a political economy of racism from within the Marxist tradition.

### **Marxist tools and analysis**

Marxism has produced the best tools for understanding race and racism: the idea race is constructed by society has been best and most articulately explored by Marxists, and the tradition of the critical study of whiteness has been led by materialists as pluralistic in their approaches as James Baldwin, WEB DuBois, Oliver Cox, Karen Brodtkin, Michael Rogin, Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev.

So, too, was the fundamental refusal to accept race as scientifically real and measurable a contribution of Marxism. It is no surprise that the

leading debunkers of racist science, most notably the late Stephen Gould, would be influenced by historical materialism. Among other brilliant contributions, Gould's analysis of how race was assumed as it was measured in order to prove its existence gave us one of the most trenchant historical materialist arguments against racial difference as biologically measurable and thus real, long before the human genome arrived with its "new" evidence.

These tools have never been more needed than they are now. Much of the world continues to throw up clear lessons regarding the continuing significance of race to the structuring of oppression, to the shaping of strategies of rule under capitalism, and to some of the contours of resistance.

In Venezuela, opposition to Hugo Chavez and to his social base includes anti-indigenous and anti-African characterizations so broad and so racist that the veteran leftwing journalist Tariq Ali regards the elite there the world's most self-consciously white reactionary force; in Brazil affirmative action has just begun, while in the US it has grown ever more clear that powerful rightwing forces promote a "colourblind conservatism" that seeks to end not only affirmative action but also the



very gathering of statistical evidence on racial inequality.

In the 2004 presidential election a Bush vote was equally well predicted by making over \$200,000 a year and by being a white male. Recently, a top French politician suffered criticism for his racist attacks on Islamic youth rebelling against police violence in and around Paris. His response was to quickly plan a trip to Martinique designed to emphasize how little colour matters in the French colonial world. He was so thoroughly unwelcomed by Martinique's great poet and theorist of liberation, Aime Cesaire, and others that the publicity stunt had to be cancelled.

## Class without race?

Surprisingly, amidst such realities, we are now witnessing an attempt by sections of the left and of liberalism to distance race from class analysis in a way that leaves no doubt as to the overwhelmingly greater import of the latter and indeed calls into question the very use of race and racism as categories of analysis.

The late activist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his co-thinker Loic Wacquant, for example, have attempted to portray aspects of the analysis of the racial axis of power in the world, and particularly the rise of affirmative action in Brazil, as the terrible result of the heavily funded export of "cunning" and "imperialist" US ideas. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres hold that the "problem of the twenty-first century" is the use of concepts like "race" and "whiteness," echoing US socialist Eugene V Debs's claim that (assumedly white) socialists properly had "nothing special" to offer African Americans except a place in the class struggle.

In this view, concerns about the racialization of power or structural analyses of whiteness, by default or design, provide a "smokescreen" to "successfully obscure and disguise class interests." While Darder and Torres allow that "racism" is still a problem worth addressing, the writings of the radical political

scientist Adolph Reed, Jr., are done even with all that. "Exposing racism," he argues, is for activists "the political equivalent of an appendix: a useless vestige of an earlier evolutionary moment that's usually innocuous but can flare up and become harmful." Echoing Debs, Reed maintains that class is the "real divide."

This kind of one-sided and dismissive approach arises out of a number of things: the fact that class and race are different kinds of categories, the distressing continuing popular associations of race with biology in the face of all decisive scientific evidence to the contrary, the tacit acceptance of ethnic cleansing as a tool of warfare, the decades of defeat for anti-racist movements in some nations, and the difficulties in bringing the worldwide struggles against what participants call "racism" closer together. But this context does not provide an excuse.

In this article we argue that the way to both nonracialism and to anti-capitalism is still through race and class analysis as well as anti-racist action. The editors of *New Socialist* have given us not just the task of explaining our method but of offering some thoughts on the nature of racism today. In doing that we hope to touch on several aspects that we think are particularly vital to an anti-racism that is sophisticated without being jargonistic, and militant while realizing that the slogan "Black and White Unite and Fight" is, as Trinidadian-born revolutionary socialist CLR James once said, "unimpeachable in principle... But... often misleading and sometimes even offensive in the face of the infinitely varied, tumultuous, passionate and often murderous reality of race relations"

There is an overriding Marxian tendency to reduce the cause of racism to competition among workers for jobs. Yet the idea that racism is produced always as a result of labour market competition cruelly disregards the possibility that racist acts are sometimes, or may often be, acts of racial empowerment, rather than of class disempowerment. The existence of all-white schools and neighbourhoods originates now less than ever in patterns of job

discrimination, as workplaces and residences are geographically separated sometimes by great distances. And if we acknowledge that some of the most white places in society are untouched by multi-racial labour market competition then we have to grapple with the idea that race and racism grow and develop beyond the specific relations of production or reproduction.

Drawing inspiration from Lenin's understanding that ideology is real and DuBois' idea that race gives white workers a psychological wage, we understand that race — like gender — organizes relations of power in multiple ways. Understanding racism necessitates a separate and distinct perspective on power relations beyond the terms of class. The history of death row in the United States makes it clear that killing a white person is considered a more harshly punishable crime than killing a Black person, highlighting the need to understand the state's role in not just overseeing, but in creating, social rules based on race.

## Learning from Australia

A brief account of the recent travails of the Left and labour in Australia shows why it is so urgent to raise the call for continued focus on race as well as class relations of power.

In early December of 2005, the rightwing Liberal Party government rammed through, largely without debate, a harrowing series of laws that put that nation in the front ranks of reaction worldwide. John Howard's government passed a draconian new labour code squarely in the tradition of Thatcherism, and an anti-terrorism act that rivals the US Patriot Act.

The centrepiece of the triumph of neoliberalism, and the focus of the most successful left and labour opposition, lies in the dramatic reverses in labour law. The massive and euphemistically named "WorkChoices" bill abolishes unfair termination appeals in all businesses with less than 100 workers and in all of the sure-to-be-many cases where

the employer claims that layoffs reflect "operational requirements." It guts overtime premium pay and enables forced overtime work in a way that will be the envy of Bush administration anti-labour strategists. It severely restricts union access to workplaces while sharply limiting and increasingly criminalizing the right to strike. The bill allows for unilateral termination of expired agreements by management. Minimum wage settlements are put in the hands of a commission mandated to make economic competitiveness - not the living and fair wage ideas so prominent in white Australian industrial history - the benchmark in setting standards. In the run-up to the bill's passage its opponents mobilized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in what were, with the anti-Iraq War protests of 2003, the biggest in the nation's history.

The anti-terrorism bill, passed without similar mass protest after gag orders to curb reporting on its contents, authorizes detentions without evidence of criminal involvement and without disclosure of incarceration. Even the disclosure of facts regarding these irregular seizures and interrogations of persons is itself made a crime both for journalists and others. The bill grants "shoot to kill" immunities in pursuits of possible detainees. It opens the way — in a manner chilling to aboriginal activists who necessarily build their campaigns for land rights and "stolen wages" on searching and vocal criticism of government policy — to prosecutions on charges of "urging disaffection" with the state.

The great South African novelist JM Coetzee, now living in Australia, put the new law's inhumanity squarely in human terms. He offered a scenario in which "someone called a reporter and said 'Tell the world-some men came last night, took my husband, my son, my father away, I don't know who they were, they didn't give names, they had guns.'" And he spelled out the results: "the next thing that would happen would be that you and the reporter in question would be brought into custody for furthering the aims of a terrorist [and] endangering the security of the state." Coetzee continued, "All of this [was done]

during apartheid in South Africa in the name of the fight against terror... I used to think that the people who created [South African] law that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know that they were just pioneers ahead of their times."

While elements of the Labour Party fought relatively hard on the trade union legislation, its historically racialized perspective on labour allowed it to define its class interests separately from what it believed to be its security interest. Thus Labour voted with the Howard government on the anti-terror bill, even as the United Nations warned of the possibility that the legislation would ratify anti-immigrant racist hysteria and victimize asylum-seekers. In an angry post-mortem when the law passed, the Law Council of Australia held, "Unlike the Labour Party, we've put up a good fight."

Within in a week of the legislation's passage, many Australians mobilized in a militant demonstration in the Sydney area, though not of the kind for which we would hope. At the time of these historic legislative defeats for the working class and the Left, what in Australia is called "talkback radio" became saturated with political exchanges and calls to action. The popular populist radio host Alan Jones strongly urged the need for "a rally, a street march, call it what you will. A community show of force." Radical groups joined in building the protest. When thousands gathered at the week's end the policing was so hesitant as to suggest broad sympathy with the demonstrators. Nonetheless the crowd of between five and ten thousand embraced extralegal tactics and violence lasted for many hours. The early December actions absolutely galvanized press attention with giant headlines clearly distilling the crowd's message.

But, as the blaring headlines showed, that message did not include a murmur of protest against the week's legislative barbarisms. Instead it urged "RACE HATE" (Herald Sun) and threatened to begin "RACE WAR" (The Australian). Jones, the talkback radio riot organizer, was a racist populist of the variety so familiar on US airwaves.

The radical groups building the mob were white supremacist ones. The victims of the extremely bloody and well photographed militancy were the few Arab youths on beaches that organizers and the mob had declared off limits. Arab swimmers suffered taunts and attacks as potential bombers, as threats to Australian women, and as puritans opposed to bikinis, nudity and beer on the beaches. On Cronulla Beach, the white crowd could see itself as the beleaguered combative essence of the Australian nation. "And the mob," as one newspaper put it, gesturing towards The Pogues' great anti-war anthem, "sang 'Waltzing Matilda.'"

After parliamentary defeats and the beach riots, many on the Left turned to building resistance in single-issue campaigns that focus on the "real" and "unifying" issues of class and capitalism. This strategy, they believed, would draw energies away from the irrationalities that fueled the Cronulla mob and allow them to identify and champion alternative national traditions and values in Australia that could lead to deep opposition to attacks on both workers and on immigrants. Yet to follow this seemingly non-racialized course is to ignore the very real, and distinct, problem of racism. That the full and excellent website of the main Australian trade union federation did not mention the riots underscores this point.

Such a response continues patterns firmly established in the campaigns against repressive labour legislation. In the former campaign, the labour federation argued for the existing laws because "for more than a hundred years, Australia has had an industrial relations system that has given working people a share of the benefits of economic prosperity when times are good and ensured that there are decent protections... when times get tough." The leftwing journalist John Pilger worries that the new labour code has "put paid to Australia's tenuous self-regard as the 'land of fair go.'" He recites a litany of firsts that gave reason for such a self-image: women's suffrage, the minimum wage, the Labour Party, the eight-hour day, the Australian ballot. "In the 1960s," Pilger concludes, "with the exception

of the Aboriginal people... Australians could boast of the most equitable spread of national income in the world. " Such appeals ignore, or in Pilger's case literally bracket, the decimation of aboriginal people, land seizures, stolen wages, stolen children and exclusion from the very social goods for which the nation is extolled. Similarly disappeared is the unambiguous grounding of Australian social democracy and women's suffrage in white supremacy and Asian and Pacific Islander exclusion.

Rightwing victories are not explicable without understanding the dynamics of white supremacy exposed by the beach riots. While the Howard government does not generally more than flirt with openly vulgar racism — the prime minister's response to the riots was that Australia is a colourblind society — its attacks on indigenous land rights, stalling of the reconciliation process without even of a symbolic apology for settler colonialism, and setting up of offshore compounds in which asylum seekers are indefinitely detained as a precondition of entry speak powerfully. As radio talk shows turned the conversation away from class, labour law and civil liberties to beaches and Arabs, the Howard government announced a study of the alleged pathology and waste of small aboriginal settlements, with a view to the withdrawal of government services and support from them. The Labour Party's feeble colourblind response was to suggest that small white settlements also be investigated.

Such sidestepping cannot work. In Australia, rightwing policies have won votes by uniting nationalism and an individualism leavened by male-bonding around the image of the "battler," the hard-working man struggling indomitably in a hostile and changed world. Made up of elements of frontier mythology, imperial sport and "mateship," the battler is distinctly white. The important indigenous Australian scholar of whiteness Aileen Moreton-Robinson has recently written that "representations of mateship, egalitarianism, individualism and citizenship" are presented as if they have no "connection to whiteness," but in fact at every turn they do connect

with it, and with rightwing political success.

The literal wrapping of those in the beachfront mob in flags and flag headbands, the avowals of defense of Australian womanhood, the claiming of the high-ground of talkback radio commonsense before the show of force all tie Cronulla to everyday politics of race and gender. Editorial cartoons in the wake of the bloodshed were far more acute than written editorials. The best of them, in *The Australian*, showed in extreme close-up a gaggle of flabbily fierce white men, brandishing weapons and sporting t-shirts that read "Muslims Out!!" "Bash Lebs!" and "Kill Wogs!" The caption read "Howard's Battlers."

Potent in its linking of racial violence to the policies of the Howard regime, the cartoon accomplishes what the Left should. With racist demonstrators themselves rationalizing their attacks on immigrants and non-white Australian citizens as a direct response to Howard's legislative victories, leftists need to think about the timing of such events. That the most militant expression of rage to follow the passage of the WorkChoices legislation as well as the anti-terror bill was a demonstration of white power — notably aimed at recruiting working-class youths, but not led by them — should inspire leftists to creative and innovative thinking about the explanatory power of race in people's lives today.

## Three issues for activists

This kind of thinking requires us to accept the complex but plain notion that race has been created historically and changes over time. Of course, this statement is more true at the level of the state than the individual, but we have to acknowledge that race and racism, while structurally organized, are created and reproduced in everyday life. Indeed, this dimension of race, in which it is created while class is "real," is one of the crutches the Left has leaned on in order to think less hard about how to combat racism.

Toward the end of creating both anti-racist theory and practice we wanted to speak to three issues we think activists must confront in the process of multi-racial movement building.

### 1. Rights and Privileges

In a world in which rights are constructed as privileges, it is logical to speak of racism in terms of white skin privilege. But precisely because some of what exist as privileges are in fact rights it is imperative that activists understand the difference between what we are fighting for and what we are fighting against.

As anti-racist activist and scholar George Lipsitz has beautifully articulated, "opposing whiteness is not the same as opposing white people... one way of becoming a [white] insider is by participating in the exclusion of others. White people always have the option of becoming antiracist...we do not choose our color, but we do choose our commitments. Yet we do not make these decisions in a vacuum; they occur within a social structure that gives value to whiteness and offers rewards for racism."

If opposing racism means opposing societal exclusion, expanding opportunity and possibility for those historically and still excluded, it is critical that we attempt to understand the difference between rights and privileges.

What is it that white people must give up? For example, white privilege shields white people from much repressive everyday policing. So, after white supremacist Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, should anti-racists have demanded that white men with short hair be randomly stopped, questioned and detained? Of course not! But today, when people believe anti-terrorism measures are about security — and not at all about race — it's worth pointing out this inconsistency: young white men weren't singled out after McVeigh's bombing in the way that young men of colour have been since Sept. 11, 2001. Should we argue for more policing of white youth because immigrant and Black youth are more harshly policed? No, though we should creatively and

with conviction develop language to talk about how skin privilege does shape life experiences without urging personal guilt as a solution.

Knowing the difference between rights that should be expanded and privileges which should not be taken for granted is essential in building genuine multi-racial organizations and societies.

## 2. Understanding Racism

Theoretically informed writing, even when the language is tough-sledding, can help inform our practice. Thus when Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts* that capital often profits "not through rendering labour 'abstract' but by... creating, preserving, and reproducing the specifically racialized and gendered character of labour power," she speaks to what happened in Australia's labour law and on its beaches. She shows us that race is no "fixed essence" but a convergence of

contradictions. She models how Marxist insights can be both deployed and extended. Developing as it does out of so many different kinds of intersections, so many different kinds of state actions regarding citizenship, and so many different degrees of unfreedom, race must constantly be specifically situated, which means that racism must also be.

One task of activists should be to continue developing new language for understanding the myriad actions and ideas that fall under the heading "racism." As the freedom movement in South Africa gave us the concept of nonracialism, as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements each expanded our understanding of the difference between legal and extra-legal discrimination (along with the importance of understanding and taking on both), and as women of colour feminists challenged and fundamentally transformed national liberation movements with regard to gender roles, so, too, do today's

activists need to understand the systems of oppression we confront and need to shift. If the UN Conference on Racism proved one thing it is that there are multiple racisms, and thus must be multiple strategies for resistance.

## 3. What Should We Do?

We must support every small effort, including especially demands for reparations that potentially educate white people about the ways in which capitalism, settler colonialism, slavery and racism developed together in the past, and about how serious anti-racist actions can benefit all of us today. We must expand participation, resist complacency, and demand reform while opposing top-down reformism. We must insist that quiet desperation is the best we can expect without direct action for transformation.

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[New Socialist](#)

# Has working-class consciousness collapsed?

3 September 2008, by **Phil Hearse**

In many countries efforts have been made to create, or begin to create, broad left parties that can begin to resolve this crisis. However the idea of the 'crisis of the working class subject' takes the analysis one step further, saying in effect that class consciousness has declined to such a degree that the overwhelming majority of working class people have no consciousness of themselves as part of a class that has its own interests other than those of the ruling class; using Lukacs' distinction the working class is a "class in itself" but no longer a "class for itself". If this is correct of course then it has big implications for socialist analysis and strategy.

We argue here that the idea that the working class is no longer a "class for itself" is an exaggeration, but like

most caricatures is based on aspects of reality that socialists have to identify and integrate into their strategy and tactics. Consciousness, especially mass consciousness, is a dynamic factor that is subject to change and sometimes, in periods of crisis, is subject to abrupt shifts. So any attempt to capture and interpret mass working class consciousness is likely to be partial and one-sided. Before we get into the detail of that we have to say something about the changing structure of the working class, in Britain and internationally.

John Major in 1996 argued that "we are all middle class now" - in other words working class living standards have risen to such a degree that the difference with middle class people have become blurred. However Cumbria University academic Phillip

Bond has recently argued the precise opposite - the 'middle classes' are being forced into the working class (1).

He argues, "The middle classes are no longer earning a living wage while a new global super class has over \$11trillion in off shore tax havens...Forty years ago a single skilled manual wage was enough to provide a living for a working-class man, his wife and family. Now even a middle-class couple with both partners working can't bring in enough to make ends meet.

"The golden age for the salaried worker across all the OECD countries was between 1945 and 1973, when ordinary working people gained their highest percentage share of GDP. Since then the real wages of the middle and working class have



stagnated or fallen, while income for the rich has rocketed and that of the super-rich has hit the stratosphere.

"The facts are astounding. Contrary to the delusions of the free-market fundamentalists, the Thatcher/Reagan revolution has come at a great cost to the working and middle classes. In the US, the top one per cent have seen a 78 per cent increase in their share of national income since 1979 with the bottom 80 per cent of the population experiencing a 15 per cent fall.

"Far from being a tide that raises all boats, neo-liberalism has undermined the wealth and security of the majority of the working population. In Britain for example, the liquid wealth of the bottom half of the populace has fallen from 12 per cent in 1976 to just one per cent in 2003, while the top 0.01 per cent in Britain are taking a larger share of national income than at any time in modern history and have seen their incomes rise by more than 500 per cent in under a generation.

"Wage earners have coped with this structural shift by taking on unprecedented levels of debt, working more and asking their partners to join the workforce. Family life has suffered; children see less of their parents than at any time in the last 100 years and since nobody has any time, civic life has virtually vanished.

"But there are signs that the general population across the globe has had enough of this rampant inequity. According to a recent FT/Harris poll, huge worldwide majorities consider income inequality to be too great. The percentages against this global shift to the rich are remarkably consistent: 87 per cent in Germany consider income inequality to be too great, 76 per cent in Spain agree. Even in Britain 74 per cent of people believe the rich should be taxed more and the poor less. What is most striking is that 80 per cent of the Chinese concur."

While outrage at the excesses of the super rich are important and point to the likelihood of future growth in class consciousness, it is not necessarily an indication of a "class for itself" now. Indeed the very economic and social changes that Phillip Bond points to have been responsible for a decline in

class consciousness. In our view the fundamental factors driving this have been:

\* The experience of defeat of working class struggles in the 1980s and 1990s, which has undermined confidence in collective action and solutions, and with it greatly reduced trade union membership. In Britain the key turning point was the defeat of the 1984-5 miners strike and the Wapping strike that followed.

\* As a result of these defeats and as a consequence of the restructuring of the workforce associated with them, a decline in the percentage of the working class involved in manufacturing, and thus a sharp decline in the number of large, factory-based workplaces with a tradition of working class organisation and their replacement with generally smaller service-based work places.

\* In Britain especially, through the semi-destruction of the social housing stock by Margaret Thatcher, forcing people into an immense economic effort to find somewhere to live and forcing people to rely on their own capital, generally in the form of a house, to find resources for their old age.

\* As a consequence of these defeats and declining confidence in collective action a general ideological retreat that finds its expression in the "dumbing down" of popular culture and the absurd cult of celebrity and the dreamworld of fame. This aspect is particularly important among young people who are likely to be apolitical and have no experience of trade unions, although there are important counter-examples, most importantly the involvement of young people in the environmental movement.

## Where has the working class gone ?

The basic answer to this question is: nowhere. The restructuring of production internationally has shifted the focus of manufacturing industry south and east so that China is now

the "workshop of the world" and countries like India and Indonesia are increasingly industrialised. But that doesn't mean that the vast majority of the population in countries like Britain aren't working class. The latest available figures of workers by industry in Britain show this, as can be seen from the following table:

### Occupation Percentage of the work force

Manufacturing	14%
Construction	9%
Public administration, education and health	27%
Agriculture	2%
Banking, finance, insurance etc	15%
Distribution, hotels and restaurants	21%
Energy and water	1.5%
Transport and communication	7%
Other services	7%

*Source: Nasima Begum, Office for National Statistics: Labour Market Trends*

The same study shows that something like 14% of the workforce has some managerial or supervisory role - everything from directors to checkout supervisors.

In each of these categories the overwhelming majority of the workforce are proletarians, ie people whose labour contributes to the production and reproduction of surplus value. But the subjective experience of the working class is now very different to what it was in the 1930s or even the 1960s. The "massification" of the working class has ended, with many people working in smaller work units. In larger workplaces like call centres, the workers are likely to be low paid, highly regimented and un-unionised. Working class organisation depends on struggle and the building up of organisation and consciousness over time. It would be incredible if call centres and the like had emerged fully unionised from the beginning. So the

decline in unionisation is striking: from just over 13 million workers in 1979 to just over 6 million today

But do these people, unionised or not, consider themselves to be working class? According to a survey published by the National Centre for Social Research in January 2007, 57% of people said they considered themselves to be working class, a figure that the Centre itself said was "staggering". In the light of the ideological bombardment through the media telling us we're all middle class, that someone with a mortgage and a car is middle class, 57% is an amazing figure, even if it's down about 10% since the 1960s.

Interestingly the number who consider themselves working class is far in excess of those who work in 'blue collar' manual jobs. According to a BBC report of the survey, "...only 31% of people are actually employed in what are categorised as traditional 'blue collar' occupations, according to the survey. The number who consider themselves working class far outstrips this" (2). In other words, large numbers of those who work in call centres, warehouses, banks and hairdressers still consider themselves to be working class, even if they're not in a union.

So it seems that, in Britain at least, the working class still exists as an objective category and that very large numbers of them consider themselves to be working class. But does this amount to a 'class for itself'. Clearly consciousness of being part of a class is just a spit away from recognising that that class has its own interests but a much bigger step away from finding the means for fighting for those interests.

However two factors need to be taken into account here. First is the economic crisis which is likely to be prolonged. Like all economic crises this is a huge assault on working class living standards and conditions. Probably unemployment will be in the millions within a year or two. Price rises at something over a real figure of 10% for poorer working class families (who spend more of their income on food and energy) are catastrophic for workers whose wage increases have

been held at 2% or thereabouts for several years. While growing unemployment is likely to be a disciplining factor it is highly likely that we shall see in the next period a big increase in strike action, particularly in the public sector. Already we've seen important strikes of local government workers and others this year. The likelihood is that trade unionism will grow in this period and not decline, and struggle naturally leads to an increase in levels of class consciousness not their decline.

The second factor, alluded to in the Phillip Bond report quoted above, is the growing anger many ordinary people at the huge disparity between the super-rich and everyone else. Neoliberalism has meant the ascendancy of finance capital and the swiveling of production to prioritise high profit luxury goods (3). What ordinary people see is that the super rich are rewarded for incompetence and idiocy and working class people are punished for the mistakes of the rich.

The Northern Rock example is very eloquent. Former chief executive Andy Kuipers who pioneered the 'lend money we don't have' business model that led the bank to become bankrupt was given more than £1m in 'compensation' for having to go. Northern Rock meanwhile is making 1,300 workers redundant and leads the market in house repossessions for those who are falling behind with their mortgage.

More generally the massive profits of the energy sectors and supermarkets are obvious to everyone as is the fact that the super rich generally pay little or no tax while enjoying luxury lifestyles. An amusing take on this was the popular response of Italian holidaymakers. According to Alexander Chancellor:

"As other people have to tighten their belts, do without luxuries, and scrimp on their holidays, one wonders for how long they will put up with the arrogant ostentation of the super-rich, and when they will start to insist that they take some of the pain as well. There are signs, indeed, that the worm is already beginning to turn. Fat cats arriving in dinghies last week at

Sardinia's Emerald Coast were pelted with wet sand by resentful holidaymakers trying to stop them disembarking. The flotilla of celebrities from a luxury yacht moored out at sea was led by Flavio Briatore, co-owner of QPR football club and manager of Renault's formula one team.

"Briatore, accompanied by his new showgirl wife, Elisabetta, who now spends a lot of time shopping in London, had come to inaugurate a new beach restaurant that he recently transformed from a popular bar into a heavily protected retreat for luxury yacht owners and their guests, the daytime equivalent of the nearby Billionaire night club that he also owns. Briatore and his VIP guests arrived in three motorised dinghies to a storm of protest by holidaymakers already crowding the Capriccioli beach. They screamed and swore and shouted, 'Louts, go home.' They drenched them with water from their children's buckets. They hurled wet sand at them." (4)

This little incident is indicative. As the crisis deepens impatience with the super rich and celebrity culture will grow enormously reinforcing a developing class consciousness.

### **The real issue: strategy and tactics**

Nonetheless, anger and resentment, and the possibility of future struggles, do not a 'class for itself' make - not necessarily. A huge job has to be done to rebuild working class combativity and organisation, something that will take a whole historical period. What implications does that have for socialists? Tactics are born of overall strategy and since the working class remains the only social force capable of effecting a transition to socialism, its struggles remain at the centre of socialist concerns. However at this time there is a dispersal of fields of struggle, of campaigns and issues that do not necessarily find their focus in the organised working class. But it is not, and cannot be, a question of getting involved in 101 campaigns and 'waiting for the working class' to achieve a higher level of organisation and consciousness at a future time. On the contrary both in terms of issues and fields of struggle a working class

orientation is immediately relevant.

Let's take first of all the issue of community struggles. Many issues of course present themselves first and foremost as a concern of the local community, for example hospital closures or post office closures. Campaigns on these issues are legion. But the leadership of them is contested or potentially so. Tories and even the BNP frequently involve themselves in these fights or give them demagogic support as a way of attacking New Labour. The answer to this is not just active socialist intervention but linking up with the local labour movement in general and in the first place with the trade unions involved - something that happens spontaneously on many occasions. Building alliances including the unions promotes trade unionism in the wider community.

Moreover taking central political campaigns into the labour movement both strengthens those campaigns and helps politicise and radicalise the movement. The environment is an obvious example here. This is a central political issue that needs the kind of social weight behind it that can only be eventually supplied by the organised working class. Here and now activist groups play a vital role and something like the climate change camps couldn't function without them. For socialists it is a question of forging alliances which centrally involve the labour movement.

Revolutionary socialists are not trade union fetishists and understand full well that a 'labour movement orientation' can degenerate into getting labour movement bodies that only activists attend to pass worthy resolutions that have no implications for action. Many campaign activists are sceptical about the labour movement and understandably so. Even so, unions and working class struggle remain central to our long-term strategy and the tactics of alliance building that we pursue today.

## **Dangers of lumpenisation**

Because of the death of social democracy as a force fighting for any kind of reform, sections of the white working class where de-industrialisation has taken place - the so-called 'sink estates' - are prone to lumpenisation and the growth of the BNP. Of course the BNP is building a classic fascist alliance involving sections of the petit bourgeoisie as well as lumpenised workers. But key areas of BNP support include areas like Barking and Dagenham, Stoke-on-Trent and towns in the Manchester conurbation that are precisely areas of extreme deprivation with high unemployment, high levels of crime, drug abuse and general despair. It is becoming increasingly obvious that traditional 'anti-fascist' activities of the ANL type, while remaining important, will never crack this issue in the long term. Only a rise of working class struggle and the building of a mass working class political alternative can challenge the BNP's attempt to monopolise the political vacuum the collapse of social democracy has left in these areas.

Once again however the left cannot adopt a spontaneist, wait and see attitude, hoping for a working class upsurge and the appearance by some magical process of a broad left alternative. Class politics, of the kind provided by Respect, aids the development of class consciousness and trade union struggle.

## **Global working class**

Neoliberal globalisation has created a new, global working class. The decline of the peasantry and the rise of the proletariat globally creates the basis for a new class politics on a truly global scale. As Paul Mason documents in his book *Live Working* or *Die Fighting* (5) the emergence of a new class consciousness will be a long and complicated process. In China

massive struggles happen daily, largely hidden from view, but the development of a working class consciousness and organisation is proceeding slowly. In Vietnam this year dozens of strikes (6) have occurred in factories owned by the transnational corporations and this is indicative of the likely development in many countries.

Class consciousness may have declined in Western countries, but a decline does not denote an absence. To truly become a 'class for itself' the working class, in Britain and elsewhere, has not just to fight for its immediate interests but to fight for an historical alternative. This is a work in process. Socialism is not inevitable but only the working class can develop the consciousness and organisation to bring it about. That certainty remains at the heart of socialist strategy and tactics.

## **Notes**

1. <http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/AboutUs/News/Press%20Releases/2008/June/PR339.aspx>
2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6295743.stm>
3. See M. Chossudovsky, *The Globalisation of Poverty*, <http://globalresearch.ca/globaloutlook/GofP.html>
4. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/15/italy.globaleconomy>
5. See: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Live-Working-Die-Fighting-Global/dp/0436206153>
6. See "Vietnam labour strikes scare foreign companies" <http://asia.news.yahoo.com/060409/afp/060409020352business.html>

*This article will appear in a future issue of Socialist Resistance*

# The Social Question in Europe

28 December 2004, by **Frank Slegers**

In his interesting contribution on the London ESF, Alex Callinicos writes that the war is the dominant issue in world politics. He adds that there is a necessary connection between the Bush war drive and neoliberal globalisation. He further states that it is a disagreement on this analysis that is at the base of the critics who say that the war was too prominent in the London ESF.



**Euromarch - fighting for jobs, against austerity**

Is this so? Is this the fundamental disagreement with those who in the process of building the ESF stress the importance of the social question in Europe (like I do)? And is the question "what is dominant today in world politics" the good question to assess the role in the ESF-process of the social question in Europe?

I do not think so, and I do not recognise myself in this type of debate. If I stress the importance of the social question in Europe, it is not to underplay the importance of the war, but because it is impossible to build a counter-force to neoliberalism in Europe, on the level of the EU, if you do not address the living and working conditions of the mass of the working people in Europe itself.

I want to comment on this, as I think it is an important question now that we are preparing what might turn out to be a big European mass demonstration on the 19th of March in Brussels.

My opinion implies two ideas:

- (1) it is important to build a counter-force able to oppose neoliberalism on the level of the EU;
- (2) to do this, you need to address the living conditions of ordinary people in Europe itself.

On the first question. It is important to build a force able to act on the level of the EU for two reasons: not only because the EU is a political field with more and more impact on national politics, but also because in a globalised world it is less and less credible to build alternatives on the level of a single national state in Europe. You can resist on a national level, and stop some attacks, as the recent mass mobilisations proved in the Netherlands. But it is difficult to imagine global alternative politics, in Europe, being developed today at the level of one single national state.

This is why in the workers movement, and more particularly in the trade unions, many people are convinced that the only chance to save the European social model (social security + public services) against neoliberal globalisation, is on the European level. That is, paradoxically, why they turn to the EU for protection against neoliberal globalisation or, at least, hesitate to wage social or political struggles that could destabilise the EU.

This is a big strategical problem for the left today. If you do not build credible alternatives on the European level, the EU as it is today will fill the gap. So you need to build on the European level, inside the EU, a force able to act as a counter-force against neoliberal EU-policies: inside, not only or merely in a geographical sense, but chiefly in the sense that it addresses the EU-politics. Only if such a force on the European level is massive and legitimate enough, we will be able to escape the actual deadlock that you need a European wide response to neoliberal globalisation, but that there is nothing serious on the European level but the EU.

This, of course, does not mean you have to build a European social movement on top of and separate from social movements in the national states. It is more like learning to act

together on the European level, dealing with the EU, its policies and its institutions. Why stress this European dimension? Because the fact of life today is that there is a succession of mass mobilisations on the national level, with general strikes and huge mass demonstrations in one country after another, but a big delay or gap once it comes to do the same on the European level.

There is a real possibility to overcome this deadlock today, as more in particular inside the trade-unions there is a double tendency:

- (1) more and more trade-unions are convinced of the importance of the European level. The credibility of union politics limited to the national level to face neoliberalism is losing ground;
- (2) in the past such a European orientation implied in general unions subordinating to EU-neoliberalism (the ETUC serving as a mediating force), but today this is less true. The Belgian unions, very "pro-European", for example openly criticised at several occasions positions taken by the ETUC (lastly the positive ETUC-response to the Kok-report).

Inside the unions indeed, the conviction is growing that there is more than one option once you decide to go European. One option is to accept the framework of neoliberal EU-policies, and escort those without questioning their provisos (this is basically what the ETUC is doing, at least since the Delors-presidency of the Commission and the neoliberal turn of EU-policies). But you can also act inside the EU questioning its policies, accepting conflict inside the EU, and mobilise to change the balance of forces to support your own point of view. The way the Belgian unions took the initiative to impulse a European wide opposition to the Bolkestein-directive is emblematic for this second approach. But it is much



more widespread than this. The impressive adherence of trade-unions especially in Europe to the social forum-movement, since the second WSF and the first ESF, is a sign on the wall that the consciousness is growing inside the trade-unions that things are going the wrong course in Europe, and that the trade-unions need allies. This has nothing to do with a smash-the-EU policy. But it are the concrete developments that could open breaches to alternative policies.

On the second question. If you want to build a genuine European mass social movement, this movement has to address the living conditions of working people in Europe. Doing this encounters different obstacles. Important layers of the no global movement, for example in youth but also many ngo's, are mobilised on issues like the north-south divide, global ecological questions, war and oppression, and consider the living conditions of working people in the rich countries as secondary at best, or worse, as expressions of "euro-centrist egoism". The trade-unions at the other side, for who the social question is core business, often come to the no global movement to enlarge their own vision with new horizons, and not to put the social question on the agenda. Now and then they even consider the social question as too important a question to take the risk of loosing control of its gesture.

To make things worse, often the social question as it is understood in the no global movement refers to the most exploited and oppressed, and not to the bulk of working people (the

"middle class"!)). Personally I strongly disagree with those voices, for example some people in the No Vox movement, who advocate a world wide alliance between the most oppressed and exploited, excluding from this alliance the bulk of working people in the rich countries and their "egoistic" trade unions. If we do not overcome these limitations, the no global movement in Europe will remain an ethical movement with a legitimate appeal in public opinion, but unable to change the core relationship of forces with neoliberalism. It will be unable to build a force that actually challenges the EU-policies, and thus failing to do what should be the main contribution of the Europeans to the world movement.

All this is not simple. So we need to debate it. This debate will not really happen if it is a debate between those who "underestimate the war" and those who "underestimate the social question".

I feel some urgency, for several reasons. First, I am impressed by the massive delay we have, faced with the neoliberal forces that are building the EU.

Second, I think the ESF will lose its legitimacy if there is no progress on this question. After all, it is surprising how easily people describe the ESF as a sterile talking shop, when you know how many networks and campaigns are being built up through the ESF. At the heart of this deep rooted defiance is scepticism about our willingness to oppose the overall neoliberal dynamics of EU-policies. This

movement is driven by the understanding that neoliberalism is a global political force, that you need to oppose as such. So single issue campaigns (Bolkestein, Tobin tax, against privatisation,...) do not convince, and rightly so, if they are not linked with a global political battle against EU-neoliberalism.

Thirdly, we decided on the mobilisations on the 19th and the 20th of March, with a European mass demonstration on the 19th of March in Brussels. This demonstration could be a turning point, if we are able to reach out to working people. Those who waged the grandiose battles against the neoliberal reform of the welfare state in the different countries should have the conviction that the demonstration on the 19th of March will bring their struggle on the European level, to continue the fight all together. It will not be so easy to convince people of this, and that the demonstration in Brussels will be more than a one-shot operation, with no continuity afterwards. This is why the demonstration in Brussels only makes sense if this movement firmly decides that the living conditions of ordinary people in Europe are one of its core concerns in the long run.

This not to forget about the war, or to blur the links between austerity policies and the war drive. The Belgian organisations opposing the war already signalled their will to demonstrate that day in Brussels in one form or another.

**Frank Slegers** (Euromarches Belgium, but in my personal capacity)

# Building on the Success of the London ESF

28 December 2004, by **Alex Callinicos**

BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE LONDON ESF

1. The third European Social Forum in London (14-17 October 2004) provided further evidence - if more were needed - of the vitality of the

altermondialiste movement. It also confirmed - after Porto Alegre and Paris, Mumbai and Florence - that the social forum remains an astonishingly dynamic and successful political form. The success of the London ESF can

demonstrated in various dimensions:

â€¢ First of all, the figures: approximately 25,000 took part in 500 plenaries, seminars, workshops, and cultural events, which were addressed by over 2,500 speakers: the figures for

pre-registered delegates show that the participants came from right across the continent and beyond the boundaries of even the expanded European Union:

Belgium 593  
France 1,003  
Germany 834  
Greece 363  
Italy 1,362  
Poland 499  
Russia 190  
Spain 1,271  
Sweden 170

¶ The concentration of the bulk of the ESF at Alexandra Palace captured something of the atmosphere of the Fortezza at Florence, producing an intensification of energies by bringing together a large number of different actors and debates in a confined space for two and a half days; London also displayed the same interplay of mobilization and debate that has been the driving force of all the great social forums: the ESF culminated in a demonstration in central London of around 100,000, before which the Assembly of the Social Movements launched a call for international protests against neo-liberalism and war on the weekend of 19-20 March 2005.

These are all measures common to the London ESF and its predecessors. But in certain respects, the ESF marked a significant step forward.

¶ The mainstream of the trade union movement in Britain was actively involved in both the preparatory process and the Forum itself: feedback from various unions has been overwhelmingly positive, with reports of highly successful seminars involving important networks of activists;

¶ There was also a marked increase in participation by black, Asian, Muslim, and refugee networks: this is an important achievement given the Europe-wide offensive against civil liberties and the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers;

¶ There was a very rich and ambitious cultural programme;

¶ The number of plenaries was sharply reduced, giving more space to self-organized events. Moreover, the efforts to reduce the number of plenary speakers, establish a gender

balance among them, and allow more time for discussion from the floor were quite successful;

¶ My impression - and that of others to whom I have spoken - was of a significant increase in the intellectual quality of the debate: in the seminars that I attended I was very struck by the extent to which both platform speakers and contributors from the floor avoided the ritual denunciations of neo-liberalism and imperialism for serious analysis and discussion.

All these improvements did not occur randomly. They were among the aims of those centrally involved in organizing the ESF. We are therefore entitled to claim a fair measure of success.

The ESF in London was smaller than its predecessors in Florence and Paris, which each attracted around 50,000 people. This is hardly surprising: the altermondialiste movement first began to take shape in Europe with the formation of ATTAC in France in 1998; since Genoa the movement has been strongest in Italy. In Britain there has been a very strong anti-war movement, but only a widespread, but diffuse anti-globalization consciousness.

The London Forum, which involved the plentiful participation of young people and a broad coverage of all the issues of concern to the movement in the plenaries and seminars, should, together with the mobilization for the G8 summit in Gleneagles next July, help to transform this consciousness into much stronger organized networks in Britain. The corporate media in Britain are notoriously reluctant to provide serious coverage of the altermondialiste movement, but the Guardian (18 October 2004) acknowledged the significance of the Forum, warning that mainstream politicians are out of touch with both the spirit, content and the style of the inclusive non-party politics now emerging under the ESF umbrella.

Any professional politician observing the audiences of 1,000 or more people raptly listening to debates on globalisation, the power of corporations, racism, food or the environment would do well to reflect on the narrowness of their own

political agenda and the genuine transnationalism now clearly informing European youth... Out of the connections being made between radically different groups, it is possible to see in years to come the emergence of a genuine new politics of the European left. Of course, there were weaknesses.

No one comes to London for the food, but the food at Alexandra Palace was terrible, and terribly expensive. The experience of the preparatory work on the programme confirms Bernard Cassen's criticism of the first two ESFs that an enormous amount of time and energy is devoted to deciding the subjects of the plenaries and selecting the speakers. It will be interesting to see the experiment at the next World Social Forum at Porto Alegre of dispensing entirely with plenaries and having only self-organized events.

Other problems were more subjective. Some people didn't like the way in which the division of the rooms at Alexandra Palace meant that noise from one seminar or plenary spilled over into others. Personally, I thought the noise was manageable and that it did have the virtue of making audible the diversity of voices that is such a powerful feature of our movement.

2. The London ESF was accompanied by plenty of political noise. To a significant degree this reflected the fact that our very diversity means that there are plenty of political disagreements. For example, many comrades, especially from France, didn't like the fact that the war in Iraq was very prominent in London, as it was in Florence.

In part this disagreement reflects differences in national context. In Britain the war dominates politics and is far and away the biggest mobilizing issue. Without the prominence of the war and the leading involvement in the ESF of the British peace movement, the Forum would have been a far less dynamic affair, and the final demonstration would have been little larger than the participation in the Forum itself. But there is more involved here. The war in Iraq is also the dominant issue in world politics. This is not simply because of the

divisions that it has provoked among the major powers. The Bush administration's unilateral assertion of military power, the brutality of the occupation, its accompaniment by the imposition of the full neo-liberal economic programme on Iraq - all of this for many activists sums up what is wrong with corporate globalization.

Others - and they are particularly influential in France - disagree. They believe there is no necessary connection between the Bush war drive and neo-liberal globalization. I think they are mistaken, and that every day that passes underlines the importance of understanding the links between economic and military power that are at the heart of modern imperialism. This is a substantive political disagreement with which we are going to have to learn to live while working together in the same movement.

Often it is more difficult to acknowledge the significance of these disagreements because they are presented as procedural problems. Thus a number of French networks have complained about the fact that the platform at one seminar were all agreed in defending the right of young Muslim women to wear the hejab, even though this does not seem to have prevented a very vigorous debate taking place from the floor. This seems to me like an evasion of the real issue.

The truth is very many activists in the rest of Europe find the support that much of the French left and union movement gave the law banning the hejab in French state schools quite incomprehensible. ATTAC France's recent assessment of the ESF complains about the role of 'confessional organizations' in London. But a secularism that excludes the most oppressed sections of French society is as communalist as any of the Islamist organizations it denounces.

The issue of the hejab is really a symptom of the real problem, which is how to expand our movement to embrace those at the bottom of European society who suffer both economic exploitation and racial oppression and many of whom, for

that very reason, strongly attach themselves to their Muslim faith. Once again, this isn't a question on which we will reach rapid or easy agreement. But at least we should recognize the importance of the debate, rather than take refuge in arguments about how one seminar was organized.

3. These disagreements spilled over into several attempts at disruption. Overall these incidents had very little impact on the ESF. The vast bulk of events went on completely unaffected by them, and most participants in the Forum and the final demonstration and concert didn't see them. But both because they received some attention in the media and on the net, and because this is the first time that an ESF has been successfully disrupted (an attempt to attack a Socialist Party representative in Paris was foiled by security guards), these attacks are worth discussing.

Their apologists have offered various excuses. One is the alleged lack of democracy in the organizing process in Britain. One difficulty in this process has certainly been that participants have very different conceptions of democracy and often showed little tolerance of definitions different from their own. But the real problem with the British process lay elsewhere.

At different stages this process embraced a very wide range of forces - stretching from the Trade Union Congress and mainstream NGOs to autonomist groups with a history of intermittent violence such as the Wombles. Holding this coalition together would have been difficult in any circumstances. Of course, the Italian and French comrades also have developed very broad coalitions, but it was probably an advantage that these had been constructed well in advance of actually organizing the ESF, so that people had an experience of working together.

In Britain, by contrast, the altermondialiste networks that had participated in the earlier Forums were relatively weak. A coalition had to be created from scratch to organize the London ESF. This involved

bringing together very diverse organizations with no history of working together and huge differences in political culture. Working together would have been hard in any circumstances. Nevertheless, a very heavy responsibility for the difficulties that developed must rest with the autonomist circles. Their attitude towards the ESF varied between outright opposition (theorized by the Wombles in a critique of the Social Forums as inherently reformist) and variable but usually not very constructive participation in the process (often through the agency of various fellow travellers).

Every effort was made to accommodate them: for example, the London ESF provided an Autonomous Space along the lines of those organized in Florence and Paris. As agreed at the European Preparatory Assembly, all meetings of the UK Organizing and Coordinating Committees were open. But many of those associated with the autonomists expressed hostility to the experience of the Social Forums as mass events and therefore to the participation of the unions and the NGOs. To have given way here would have led to an ESF in London dramatically smaller than any of its predecessors and confined to a self-selecting circle of the already converted.

The case of the Iraq plenary illustrates the problem. I think it was a mistake to have invited a representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, which supports the Anglo-American occupation, to have spoken at the ESF. The fact that one did was as a result of very strong support for the IFTU from many British trade unions (the IFTU now has an office in the headquarters of the largest union, UNISON).

The unwelcome presence of the IFTU at the ESF was thus a consequence of building a Forum that reached deep into the mainstream of the labour movement. The foolish decision by a handful of protestors (in this case mainly members of British and Middle Eastern far left sects) to shout down a platform mainly composed of the convenor of the Stop the War Coalition and Iraqis opposed to the

occupation was thus a refusal to engage with this mainstream. It represented exactly the kind of sterile sectarian politics from which the rest of us are trying to escape.

4. The attacks made on the anti-fascist plenary and the stage in Trafalgar Square were the work largely of autonomists many of whom are in principle opposed to the Social Forums. In addition to claims of lack of democracy, two other excuses were given for these actions. First of all, the 'corporate ESF' and the support given by Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, were denounced. It is hard to take this seriously.

Anyone who has attended the WSF in Porto Alegre will remember the corporate adverts welcoming delegates and the VIP suite at the PUC. The importance of support from local government (and indeed from political parties) is indicated by the proposal that was made to move the forthcoming WSF from Porto Alegre after the PT lost control of the city in November. The pattern has been the same with the ESF. Florence received support from the regional government. In addition to help from the municipalities of Paris, St Denis, Bobigny and Ivry, the Paris ESF received a 1 million from the office of the right-wing Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. No one criticized the French comrades for this, presumably because we all understood that a mass Social Forum needs money and money means compromises. In the case of London this money was provided by a mayor who, despite his mistaken decision to rejoin the Labour Party, has consistently supported the anti-war movement. Why are different standards applied to London than to the other Social Forums?

The other excuse given for the disruptions was the role of the police. It has even been claimed that ESF organizers were responsible for the arrests at the demonstration and in Trafalgar Square. These assertions are entirely false and indeed libellous; but they are also ridiculous - how could a veteran revolutionary socialist like me have any influence over the Metropolitan Police? The comrades who have made such claims should withdraw them at once.

It is, moreover, is puzzling that some arrests rather than others have attracted attention. For example, during the registrations at Conway Hall on Thursday 14 October a very aggressive police squad cleared Red Lion Square of the queues and arrested a Socialist Workers Party organizer. Two Globalise Resistance activists were stopped leaving the final demonstration under the Terrorism Act 2000. One of them was arrested and fined £80. An individual who appears to have been part of the group that tried to storm the stage in Trafalgar Square was also arrested and fined the same amount. But only his case attracted sympathy and attention, for example from some leading French activists. Once again, a double standard seems to be at work. But even if the criticisms that have been made of the British organizers were largely correct, this would not justify the introduction of violence inside the Forum. Violence and debate are antitheses: those who believe that diversity and discussion are among the greatest strengths of our movement cannot tolerate attempts to settle arguments by force. Moreover, those who bring violence into the movement bring the state in with them: the attacks in Trafalgar Square gave the police the pretext to intervene and arrest people. Those European comrades who have refused to condemn, or condoned, or even colluded in the disruption of the London ESF should reflect on the very dangerous precedent they are creating for the future.

5. It is, in any case, the future about which we need to be thinking. The next ESF will be in Athens in the spring of 2006. What political lessons does the experience of London offer? The most important is that, as the Italian comrades pointed out after Florence, the great strengths of the movement are radicality and diversity. We have managed the near-miracle of developing a movement that embraces an extraordinarily wide social and political range but that has mounted a challenge to capitalist imperialism as a system. This was very evident in London: as at Florence, many of the largest and most dynamic meetings were dominated by the politics of the radical left.

But London also showed that combining radicality and diversity becomes harder, not easier, over time. Important divergences have crystallized over a variety of issues - the war, the European Constitution, the hejab, the role of the radical left. There are also differences over how to build the movement: some networks are much more ambivalent about involving the trade-union mainstream than others. This last difference cuts across others: for example, I suspect I am closer to some French comrades about bringing in the unions than I am to some Italian comrades with whom, however, I agree much more about the war. This makes holding together and expanding the coalitions we are trying to build much more complicated. We must also confront the fact that the process itself is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. ATTAC France rightly points to the fact that attendance at the European Preparatory Assembly has stagnated since Florence and argues that 'the functioning of the EPA must be improved in a logic of democratization, of representativity and of enlargement'. This is easier said than done, particularly given the stress laid in our procedures on meetings being open to all and deciding by consensus, which can give great power to disruptive but unrepresentative minorities. Hence the strains that became visible in London. We need to understand this when we prepare for Athens. The divisions in the British process tended to polarize between a coalition of significant social movements and a disruptive but socially weak autonomist fringe. But there are some four powerful forces that will need to be brought into the ESF - the Greek Social Forum, the Genoa 2001 Campaign, the Greek Communist Party, and the trade unions, whose leadership tend to be linked to PASOK. Only the first two have been involved in the ESF process, and all four have a history of mutual conflict. Bringing them together will be a big challenge for us all.

So things are unlikely to get any easier for us - and not primarily because of our own petty squabbles. After all, George W. Bush has been re-elected with what he regards as a mandate to carry on waging global war and polluting the planet. This is a



reminder of the distance we have still to travel before we can imagine having achieved any of the concrete goals adopted in all our seminars and

plenaries. But our successes - most recently at the London ESF - leave me confident of our ability to build a

movement that can start to win real victories.

Alex Callinicos 26 November 2004