



SOCIALIST FACES IN HIGH PLACES

ELECTIONS & THE LEFT



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AN INTRODUCTION

As the 2018 midterms move into our rearview and the 2020 presidential race appears on the political horizon, the permanent election cycle of American politics will soon pull at the US left once again. In the last several years calls for left participation in electoralism have

continued to grow louder as the traditional political center hollows and the popularity of socialism rises.

Our allies on the left often argue it is imperative to engage and take up electoral politics, whether out of a short term strategy of harm reduction or as

part of a long term project of social change through wielding state power. But important questions should be posed around whether left engagement in electoralism constitutes an effective strategy for socialist transformation. Indeed, when we live in a political reality where fundamental disparities in wealth and power are stronger than ever, where white nationalists leave our most vulnerable communities in constant fear and where the ravages of climate change are an existential threat to humanity and the earth itself, we should also be asking whether this is a strategy that speaks to the urgency of our times and more importantly whether it is the right tool to begin with.

When 1960s Civil Rights leader Bayard Rustin called for the movement to turn “from protest to politics” - a phrase often repeated in contemporary times - he likely did not envision the actual outcomes of this shift. As efforts towards electoral power became “one of the principal strategies that emerged from the Black Power era” as Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor notes in her book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, one could draw a line between the development of the strategy and disappointment in the results with MLK advisor Andrew Young being elected as Atlanta’s mayor in 1982 to the 2015 Baltimore uprising around the police murder of Freddie Gray in a major city with overwhelm-

ingly Black leadership. Ultimately these efforts have fundamentally not changed the systemic conditions of white supremacy and police violence experienced by working class Black people.

Despite good intentions, elections siphon energy and resources from social movements while simultaneously limiting their power by shifting the terrain of struggle from our daily lives - where we live, work, study, play and pray - to the marble halls of power. When leftists commit to electoral campaigns in the name of building movements they are in fact, we argue, undermining the very power and strength that many of us work towards.

When we organize populations as voters instead of along the lines of common interests of class and shared experiences of oppression we abandon our autonomy and responsibility to struggle for social change in exchange for the ballot box and the hope that the next supposed movement champion will be our savior. In the event that socialists are elected in a game rigged against them, the nature of self-reproducing state violence, political machinations and threats from international capital limit their ability to implement even basic changes: these forces infamously defeated Syriza and countless socialist parties around the world. Social movements, on the other hand, can effect change in seemingly hopeless conditions, by allowing

communities to fight where they stand: at work, in their communities, and on their land, arenas where popular power holds the possibility of victory.

In fact, popular movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street and the more recent #RedForEd teacher strike wave fundamentally changed both conversations and the political terrain around white supremacy, anti-blackness, state violence, capitalism, unionism and the utility of worker strikes - something even the most radical candidates could not have accomplished in the same amount of time. Candidates like Bernie Sanders, while being important symbols of shifts in consciousness, step into the doors opened by the momentous cultural shifts forced by movements and work to channel their grievances back into the electoral arena.

Another aspect of electoral organizing is that much of the left both deeply overestimates the possibility of change through the state, and equally underestimates the potential of popular power to force changes. The question isn't if it is ethical to vote or abstain, it's what we must do the other 364 days of the year. Now more than ever it is clear that movements must find other vehicles to generate new forms of self-governance and popular power while striving for visions of autonomy and solidarity that won't fit in their ballot boxes.

We selected the enclosed readings to contextualize, analyze, and critique electoralism with the goal of challenging assumptions and contributing to a more robust conversation among socialists. We begin with several articles that present broad critical overviews of left electoralism, ranging from a former campaign consultant to rapper and filmmaker Boots Riley. We then move to specific examples within the US, including the 2016 presidential campaign, local city councils and Jackson, MI. We end with a selection of articles looking at left electoralism globally, from Latin America's pink tide to the UK's Jeremy Corbyn to South Africa.

To all those struggling outside, against, and beyond the state, capital, and social domination!

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THE LURE OF ELECTIONS: FROM POLITICAL POWER TO POPULAR POWER

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In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the gravitational pull of elec-

toral politics has gripped the left with renewed intensity. Fueled by the popularity of Sen. Bernie Sanders, discontent with political elites and the failure

of the Democratic Party to defeat Trump, various segments of the left see an opening for breathing new life into building a “party of the 99 percent,” a “party of a new type” or a “mass socialist party.” Others are content running leftist candidates as Democrats under the guise of radical pragmatism. Given the history and structural limitations of such projects, social movements, activists and organizers should regard these calls with caution. If we want meaningful social change, or even basic progressive reforms, the electoral road leads us into a strategic cul-de-sac. Instead of better politicians, we need popular power — independent, self-managed and combative social movements capable of posing a credible threat to capitalism, the state, white supremacy and patriarchy.

The recent push toward electoral politics stems in large part from Senator Sanders’s insurgent primary campaign. For decades, Sanders occupied a relatively obscure position in the political arena. From his first stint in office as mayor of Burlington in the 1980s, to his recent years in the US Senate, Sanders’s lone voice against corporate power had little impact. Yet by 2016,

the cumulative weight of deteriorating socioeconomic, political and ecological conditions, along with the growth of mass movements, laid the groundwork for the popularity of the Sanders campaign. Indeed, the political terrain had already shifted before Sanders launched his “political revolution.”

An oft-cited 2011 Pew Poll revealed that 49 percent of Americans under 30 had a positive view of socialism, while just 47 percent had a favorable opinion of capitalism. Disillusionment with President Obama, coupled with a steady stream of post-recession movements from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter, had significantly altered public discourse, expanded the field of struggle and pulled the broader political spectrum to the left. In other words, the Sanders campaign slipped through the door kicked open by social movements and brought a broad cross-section of the left into the electoral arena.

Following the Sanders campaign, a growing mix of old and new voices have been clamoring for the left to consider electoral struggles. For example, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Jacobin Magazine and strate-

gists like Max Elbaum at Organizing Upgrade have been some of the most vocal proponents of electoral strategies. They justify their calls in terms of fighting back against Trump and the far right, shifting politics to the left, and winning policy change like universal health care. Coupled with the recognition that we also need to build mass movements outside of the voting booth, these same organizations and individuals are promoting variations of an “inside-outside” strategy.

The “inside-outside” approach, which casts itself as hard-nosed, strategic and realistic, claims to hold out a possible middle path between focusing exclusively on movement-building and leaping headlong into the palace intrigue of beltway politics. Its advocates argue that social movements are of vital importance, but they can’t get it done alone: There needs to be a ballot-box strategy to punish bad incumbents, elect movement champions and enact real change by leveraging state power. In other words, as Marxist political economist Leo Panitch often says, echoing civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, we need to move “from protest to politics.”

Their strategy is characterized by the following three points:

- If we want victories, we need strong, militant social movements in communities and workplaces agitating on the outside, but we also need movement champions in elected office changing the system from the inside. Through election campaigns, social movements can expand their base and have the ear of someone in power who can be held accountable to movement demands.
- Political campaigns are an effective way to bring up vital issues, expose more people to left politics and provide easy on-ramps for the newly politicized to get active. After Election Day, no matter how we do, our politics have reached a wider audience and built movement capacity.
- Currently the Democratic Party is the most viable vehicle for our candidates if we want them to win, but ultimately, we need to develop our capacity for building an independent party of the left. Alternatively, some argue that the Democratic Party is beyond repair and we need to build an independent political party of the left now.



But this is wrong; elections are a trap with more costs than benefits. Political change is a question of political power, and the electoral arena is a field of battle that caters to the already rich and powerful. It hands our power to politicians. As a result, when popular candidates win electoral office without the backing of powerful social movements (even candidates of the left), they are powerless to take meaningful action. Instead, electoral campaigns drain movements of vital resources that could be better spent elsewhere. The electoral road is not a shortcut to power; it is a dead end — structurally, historically and strategically.

Electoral Campaigns Don't Take Us We Want to Go

It's often said that electoral politics is the graveyard of social movements, but that always seemed unfair to graveyards. After all, graveyards merely house the dead: They don't actually do the killing.

Those who enter the front door of elective office are quick to find themselves in the house that capital built. Even those with the best intentions will find themselves boxed in on all sides by business interests and institutional constraints. For local and state officials, they must strain under the weight of a larger political and monetary system over which they have zero control, and which can override their decisions and policies at any time. For national officials, not only are constitutional and procedural restraints ever-present, but looming over every choice is the power of business to influence policy and one's chances of re-election. Ultimately, the ruling class can always use the threat of capital strike and capital flight: A Wall Street crash, a bond rating downgrade, a panic, runaway inflation, currency manipulation and so on. The particular constraints may change

based on what position they're elected to, but the outcome remains the same.

Social movements that dedicate their limited resources to electing politicians end up undermining the very energy and capacity needed to hold those politicians accountable once elected. The resources spent electing someone would be better spent forcing whoever is in office to concede to our demands by developing popular power that cannot be ignored.

History Shows the Failures of the Left in Power

To illustrate that movements — not politicians — make change, it's useful to look at history. In the US, the major periods of political change came when social movements — including labor, Black liberation, feminist and ecological struggles — were at their peak. New Deal reforms of the 1930s came when workers were occupying factories and shutting down cities with general strikes. Civil rights and environmental protection bills came at the end of the 1960s, when social movements were organizing for popular power, and disrupting the ability of business and the government to operate. It is often

quipped that Richard Nixon, a Republican, was the last liberal president because he oversaw the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and other liberal reform measures such as the expansion of affirmative action. He even contemplated a proposal for a universal basic income and mandating employer-provided health insurance. This is not because he was a good-natured liberal at heart, but because social movements had changed the political terrain and forced his hand.

In periods without social movements, politicians fare much worse — even those that authentically believe in creating a better world. In Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1980s, Andy Young, the chief strategist, legal counsel and close friend of Martin Luther King Jr., ran for and won the city's mayoralty, a position he held for close to a decade. By that time, however, the strength of the civil rights movement had ebbed, leaving Young a crusading reformer in office without the power base to make change. According to scholar Clarence Stone, Young faced widespread opposition from the city's corporate business

elite, preventing him from passing any meaningful reforms for the city's Black population. Here, lone progressive candidates can do little without the backing of social movements. The phenomenon is true even for far-left candidates like socialist Seattle city council member Kshama Sawant. Her major reform, "\$15 Now," was watered down and transformed by business and business-union interests who created major exemptions in the law, giving Sawant a "victory" she could run a re-election campaign on, but not bringing meaningful change to working people in Seattle. To this day, many workers do not earn \$15 an hour in Seattle because of employer exemptions.

In short, movements — not politicians — make social change. No movements, no change — no matter how far left the politician. With movements, social progress and shifting the terrain is possible, no matter how far right the politician.

Elections are designed with the needs of the state and capital in mind. Every step of the way — from the first donation to the final TV ad — is crafted to further stack the deck in favor of entrenched elites and draw people into a

system that many have rightfully abandoned. There's no bypassing the white supremacist, patriarchal, anti-Black and settler-colonial pedigree of the state: The true political power of people is always found and built elsewhere. Elections are at best a reflection, not a cause, of social change — using elections to change society is like trying to turn up the temperature with a thermometer.

Electoral Campaign Work: Shallow and Superficial

The kind of outreach and mobilization efforts undertaken by campaigns is little more than a shadow of actual grassroots organizing, focused first and foremost on the singular transaction of the vote. Forget about a serious one-on-one conversation. When a campaign has 20,000 doors to knock on and it's crunch time, there isn't a spare minute to ask about the problems a constituent is having, or what issues they're interested in. You must find out if they're planning to vote, and if so, for whom. Give them some literature and a big smile, and be on your way to the next house. Every pancake breakfast, parade appearance and house-party fundraiser is geared toward building the

candidate, not the movement. The unique activities of a campaign have very little to offer social movements.

Furthermore, if a left candidate wins, it's a signal for their supporters to go home and disengage. Getting the candidate in office is the supreme goal of any campaign: the next steps belong in office chambers and committee rooms. "We get you elected, then you do good things for us," is the rationale of electoral work. Staying active and organizing beyond Election Day goes against the core logic of the campaign itself. We need not look back further than a decade to find concrete examples of this dynamic. After Barack Obama's historic election in 2008, his administration proved unwilling to mobilize millions of campaign volunteers in support of the Affordable Care Act and other political priorities.

Picking the Wrong Target

Organizing 101 instructs us to pick a primary target that can grant us what we want — be it a corporate board, slumlord or politician. The electoral campaign throws this out completely, focusing on a single elected official and the bad things they've done or stand

for, while offering an opposing single elected official and all the good things they'll do and stand for as the alternative. This personalization of politics is harmful to social movement-building because it reinforces the popular notion that our problems are not systemic and structural, but merely a problem of staffing, fixed by swapping in new and improved politicians.

The Media Horserace

Mainstream media coverage is usually trouble for organizers. But elections are a bit easier, and positive media coverage for important issues is one of the main strengths of electoral campaigns of this type. The fundamentals of electoral strategy — people should vote for me and donate, my top issues are x, y and z, and my opponent is bad for these reasons — are familiar to journalists. And they have a set of narratives they choose for their coverage: the outsider, the long-shot, the neck-and-neck race, the third-party spoiler, etc.

But even here there are serious pitfalls. While it can be exciting to have a candidate's core message spread far and wide through the news, the surrounding narrative makes it often not worth

it. Winnability will be the ultimate metric that the media will use to frame a candidate and their agenda. A fringe candidate's issues can be automatically cast as dangerous and unpopular. A candidate running neck-and-neck with their opponent can have their bold ideas portrayed as politically risky, costing them precious votes.

Election Day: A Timeline Not of Our Choosing

For electoral organizers, dates of campaign climax — the primary and general election — are set in stone. It doesn't matter if we'd prefer to move it up a few weeks to capitalize on an opponent's scandal, or delay it until some key community leaders can focus on the campaign. The date is set, and that's it. Workers know to time union elections and contract fights based on a timeline that offers them the most strategic advantage and greatest ability to harm the owners. Tenant organizers plan their campaigns around the cycles of the housing market to find the best moment to withhold rent from a slumlord. Student organizers ensure their protests and strikes coincide with trustee meetings, alumni days and parent weekends — occasions when the stakes

are highest for administrators. With political elections, however, once the votes are cast, you're done; there is little way to escalate, or for broad-based movement-building to develop.



Getting the Goods: Social Movements and Class Power

When political elites agree to adopt progressive reforms, it has never been because of a burst of sympathy for those of us at the bottom. It's been because they saw a systemic, existential threat to their collective power that made concessions unavoidable. We didn't get Social Security, the Wagner Act, or the eight-hour work day because of electing the right individual politicians, winning primary fights or clamoring from the sidelines on behalf of a third party. We won them because we had built massive, militant movements that threatened open revolt against our nation's economic and political rulers.

For those of us who want a world beyond capitalism, we know that we should be spending our limited time, energy and money investing in people-powered movements strong enough to topple our unjust social order. For those who want reform, understand that the only time liberals and progressives in power actually make good on the reforms we want is when we're capable of posing a fundamental threat to the status quo. Following the "Great Recession," President Obama said in 2009 to the nation's bankers that, "I'm the only one standing between you and the pitchforks." We don't need more Obamas, or even Sanderses and Sawants. We need more pitchforks.

Despite hopeful spurts of activity, social movements in the United States remain weak, unable to impose their demands beyond a small scale. While most advocates of electoral politics acknowledge that the balance of power is not in our favor, they argue that running candidates — or better yet, winning elected office — will complement or strengthen social struggles. However, the historical record is clear: Electoral campaigns tend to defang, demobilize and drain social move-

ments of limited resources, not strengthen them.

We should resist the calls to organize as an electorate and pick up once again the task of organizing as a class. Only through popular organizations that are democratic and accountable to their members, can we improve our living and working conditions right now while building the power needed to create a better world. These combative popular organizations should be based on our particular location within the economy and society: labor unions at work, student unions at school, tenant unions at home, popular assemblies in our neighborhoods and communities. They're important not just because they are the sites of struggle most accessible to us as individuals, but because they amplify our power to disrupt and halt the flow of production, distribution and profit. More importantly, they are the necessary basis of a society free from oppression.

This is not a call to disengage from politics, or somehow to operate outside of capitalism and the state. It is exactly the opposite — a call to engage in politics, organizing, and the state in the only meaningful and empowering way

available to us. Because we exist as objects, not subjects, of the economic and political system in which we find ourselves, our true power lies in our ability to collectively disrupt, dismantle and replace that system. The state in general, and electoral outcomes in particular, play a critical role in shaping the political terrain in which we all struggle, but we don't need to "take" the state in order to affect the playing field. You don't need the excuse of canvassing for a politician to knock on your neighbor's door; you don't need to cast a vote to influence an election; and we don't need a campaign rally to advance our vision for a better world.

Dedicating precious resources to electoral work isn't just a mistake, it's malpractice. While many socialists rightfully refuse to try to take back the Democratic Party, the perpetual appeal to independent party politics maintains an instrumentalist approach to the state, fostering the illusion that with the right people in office, along with the right balance of forces, we can wield state power to advance our interests. But even if we want limited social reforms, electoral strategies are dead ends. At the moment, we're all short on

people, resources and — thanks to climate change — we're short on time. Instead of an "inside-outside" approach, it's time to commit ourselves to organize where we live, work, study, play and pray — outside, against and beyond the current system.

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WHY ELECTIONS FAIL TO BRING ABOUT REAL CHANGE

By Andrew Flood

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Why can't the 99% simply vote in a government that acts in their interest and not that of the 1%

At a simple level parliamentary elections sound like the ideal way for the mass of the 'have nots' to use their

numbers to overcome the power and influences of the tiny number of have's. Occupy talked about this division in the language of the 1% and 99%; a crude approximation that does reflect a reality where the number of wealthy decision makers is actually very tiny, indeed less than 1%. So, why can't the 99% simply vote in a government that acts in their interest and not that of the 1%?

Let's start off by acknowledging that this is not through lack of trying. The fight for the full franchise in the 19th century was very much caught up with the idea that once everyone had the vote a government of the working majority could be elected and that would redistribute wealth in the interests of all. It was not just a large section of then left that saw things this way, the wealthy elite also did and they were terrified of the mass franchise for that reason. But they came to see that the sort of educated workforce they increasingly needed in their developing society could not be denied forever and so switched from opposition to the franchise to granting it only after they had worked out how to contain it and use to their advantage. Their abil-

ity to control the vote and electoral system was clearly demonstrated in the 20th Century when again after again left governments were elected but fundamental change was almost always avoided. How was this achieved?



Anarchists are sometimes guilty of over simplifying this process along the lines of the old slogan 'If voting changed anything it would be illegal'. The argument being that if a radical government was elected the capitalist class would overthrow it by using its influence over the military to stage a coup. There are plenty of historical examples of just this happening, Chile in 1973 being one that is often cited. But it's a crude over simplification that would mean in much of the OECD countries we haven't see interference in the 'democratic process' for a long period of time. In fact as we see a coup is just the desperate last measure

if all else fails. The preferred method is to filter out radical change and replace it with harmless window dressing and minor reform.

One way of understanding how this happens is to compare the process to a filtration system. Each filter in the system is designed to catch a particular type of threat. Ideally those being filtered are not only unaware this is happening but actually co-operate in the process. What are these filters?

Why elections fail to bring about real change - 10 filters that make them ineffective for the left

1. Costs

The first filter is relatively obvious and is often acknowledged particularly by those on the left. Running in elections is an expensive business in most countries. In some countries like the US the amount of money candidates spend strongly predicts who the winner will be. Under the US system a lot of information is disclosed about election finances and the Opensecrets website has gathered a lot of this information which we use here as a detailed example. Elsewhere, especially in Ireland, there is a lot of secrecy with

many cash donations being made in brown envelopes and so never recorded. However if the public US results show that elections are overwhelmingly funded by the richest section of the population we can only assume the real figures, if known, would be much worse for Ireland.

From 1968 to 2008 there have been 11 US presidential elections, in 9 of the 11 elections the winning candidate has been the one with the most money. The case is similar in the 2012 elections to Congress, of the 435 seats that candidates filed their expenditure for, 409 of them had spent more money in their races. In only 26 - or 6% of cases - was the candidate with the most money defeated - and some of those cases were where that candidate had been exposed as a complete crook or caught sniffing cocaine at a gangster's birthday party. Remember that in 2014 the top 0.1% of the US population owned as much wealth as everyone in the bottom 90%. If wealth decides election the 0.1% in effect get to outvote the 90%.

So how much money are we talking about and who contributed it?

In the same US electoral cycle in 2012 a total of \$6285 million was spent on the elections with \$2621 million spent on the presidential race. Most of that money came from a tiny number of people, 63% came from just 0.4% of the population. And that in an election where there were far more donors than usual thanks to the Obama effect. The top individual donor gave 93 million, the top business (an American casino and resort operating company) gave \$53 million.

You can understand for yourself what effect such funding has on policy passed but some rather technical research by Princeton University Prof Martin Gilens and Northwestern University Prof Benjamin Iversen has shown that “Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organised groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.” In other words the policies the rich want passed by politicians gets passed, the policies the rest of us want generally don't.

So in what is only our first filter, the money a candidate has to spend on an election turns out to determine the winner in over 90% of cases in the US. Given the enormous amount of wealth that the richest 1% hold this on its own almost allows them to determine that the results of elections will be favourable to them. The handful of exceptions are, if anything essential to maintaining the illusion that the vote of ordinary workers has any value at all. Being able to elect the occasional radical brings workers who may have lost faith in electoral, change back into the process. And not being able to stop the re-election of politicians who are caught accepting bribes would be disastrous as very large numbers of people might start to look at other mechanisms for change.

2. Media

During elections a lot of the money goes towards advertising. In the US this comes in the form of TV and radio ads, in Ireland we're more accustomed to billboards, posters and leaflets. But alongside such advertising is the exposure a candidate is given by the media and as importantly the nature of that exposure. Are they given soft ques-

tions and allowed to waffle in their replies or are the toughest questions fired at them and no deviation allowed? Are their press conferences and stunts even covered at all? Are rumours and speculation about them reported or ignored?

All of these choices have huge impacts on how a candidate is viewed, not to mention the media is not some sort of level playing field. Much of it is owned by the same multi billionaires who donate to the political parties and even when it's not explicitly stated journalists know it can be career destroying to report against the owners' interests.

One clear example from Ireland is when multi millionaire, Tony O'Reilly, controlled the Independent Media Group - in turn it controlled most non-state media outlets. It was only years later as he went bankrupt that one of his journalists revealed in a looking back article that "The one clear, consistent policy was that there was to be no truck with republicanism [i.e. Sinn Fein]"

In the UK the Murdoch (another billionaire) controlled press claimed to

have decided the 1992 and 2015 elections by running blatantly biased front page stories right before the election.

In the 2015 case the Independent reported that "Mr Murdoch personally instructed The Sun to turn the heat up against Mr Miliband, telling editors that the very future of News Corp depended upon the result."

Update: Just after we published this piece a particularly blatant example appeared when one week before the election in Ireland the Independent (owned by billionaire Denis O'Brien) ran three front page stories in sequence aimed at frightening people out of voting for Sinn Fein.

3. Separation of powers

Many so called democracies have limits to what parliament can decide in order to slow down or eliminate certain types of reforms. Often there is some sort of second parliamentary layer that is much less subject to any sort of popular mandate because it's either not elected at all as with the UK House of Lords or its elected only by certain limited and often elite constituencies as with the Irish senate, many of whose other seats are filled by appoint-

ment. The abolition of capitalism under most systems would not be a legal act and the legal system is protected from the parliamentary system in a way that would not allow this to be rapidly changed. In the US for instance the all powerful Supreme Court is composed of judges appointed by the ruling parties who then remain on the court until they die, ensuring that a new government cannot replace them.

Over time these filters combined prevent most electoral parties making significant anti-capitalist changes in parliament in the short term and in the medium term house train such parties so that they no longer even try. But sometimes the pressure for change is such that enough people get elected quickly who share an ideological program that is relatively resistant in the short term to these influences. Such events are rare but they are important because subsequent failure of such parties lead to demoralisation and despair of the radical movements that get behind them, or to straight up coup, counter revolution and massacre of a movement that has not prepared for armed defence.

4. Scare mongering

When there are prolonged crises caused by major crashes in capitalism it can get to the stage where all the establishment parties have been in power and have been rejected by the people. That can lead to the situation where despite a lack of finance and media hostility a window opens where a radical party of the left (or far right) can emerge and gain a lot of votes quickly from an unhappy population.

Or there can be a sudden shift of power within an establishment party bringing someone on the fringes to the centre, as happened in 2015 with the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the UK British Labour Party and may be happening right now with Bernie Saunders in the USA.

This is where the gloves start to come off and an additional filter comes into play, that of outright scare mongering where lies are told and repeated by the establishment about such new parties and leaders. The short term impact of this can be enormous but in the medium to long term it's a risky strategy as it will tarnish the reputations of those that use it. But the process by which the radical left makes an electoral breakthrough is very often short

term, taking advantage of a window of opportunity that briefly opens due to mass struggle, scandal or crisis (or all three together).

These mechanisms normally prevent a small party suddenly making enough gains to win an election. In particular the enormous expense of elections means that a small party without wealthy backers will only be able to focus on a small number of electoral areas and so has no hope of suddenly gaining enough seats to rule. This is widely recognised so the electoral left aims at a process of accumulation over time; winning a few seats in the first election, and then building on that in subsequent elections.

Looking at how such strategies worked out in the past you see that parties who are successful in this strategy end up abandoning their once radical politics by the time they come anywhere close to power. Why does this happen?

5. House training

When a worker gets elected to parliament they are no longer a worker but become part of the set of people who rule us - retaining radical ideas in your head does not influence that new rela-

tionship. Economically parliamentarians are paid many multiples of the minimum wage in most countries, often they are amongst the highest paid salary workers in a country. They often quickly qualify for a large pensions even if they lose their seat. And there are a huge amount of additional financial benefits both legal as in expenses, and dubious as in being given paid positions on company boards and illegal in the form of bribes.

They start to mix with and get flattered by an entirely different class of people than whom they were previously exposed to. Their opinion becomes important, if they co-operate and if they work well with others they can tweak legislation in a way that 'delivers' for those who elected them, boosting their chance of re-election. It would be foolish indeed to insist that every individual elected would be immune to the temptation to shift a little under such pressures. Any look at the history of left groups that get people elected to power demonstrates that most of them shift a lot. In Ireland the Workers Party of the 1980s managed to get seven left TDs elected. Over time 6 of the 7 abandoned any pre-

tence of radical politics, eventually merged with the Labour Party and as the new leadership of that party became the implementators of austerity after the first election during the crisis. Much less was expected of the Green Party but they followed the same path, flipping from opposing the deeply unpopular Shell Corrib gas project in opposition to running the ministry implementing it in power.

Some individuals don't give in. Tomas Mac Giolla stayed with the Workers Party and no one would suggest Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party had his hand in the till. But that's fine, most parliaments do well out of having a court jester whose role is to speak truth to power and be laughed at while doing so. Anyone who watches televised parliamentary proceeding will know that this is literally what happens when such politicians stand up to tell the truth to an almost empty chamber.

6. Expertise

The other pitfall for elected parliamentarians is that they are unlikely to have much expertise when it comes to many of the decisions they are mak-

ing. The British TV comedies *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It* were based around the way top civil servants and party advisors run rings around Ministers who can't really grasp the detail of much of what they are deciding. More seriously the 29 September 2008 Irish Banking Guarantee when the Minister for Finance effectively saddled the population of Ireland with tens of billions of bank losses was in part a product of the minister being bamboozled by banking experts.

Expertise can not only trick (or provide cover for) politicians into making decisions that go against our interests but in the medium and longer term result in politicians increasingly valuing the opinion of experts over those who elected them. Indeed the 2008 Financial crisis produced a rhetoric coming from the establishment of how good politicians listened to such experts and made tough unpopular decisions while bad politicians listened to their electorate. Parliaments are set up so that the electorate cannot mandate politicians on how to vote for exactly that reason, indeed it's often not legally valid to try and create mechanisms to mandate politicians.

7. Taking power

Parties that have limited electoral success can resist these temptations very much easier when they are too small to matter. It becomes very much more difficult when they have enough electoral success to be worth bargaining with. Negotiations only make sense with a party that is big enough for the number of seats they hold to make a difference. In that case the offer is made that some policies they get elected on will be implemented in return for them entering government.

An offer that has proven very hard to resist for both party members and the people who voted for the party on that issue.



In the mid 2000s the Irish Green Party went into coalition with Fianna Fail and did get some policies that promoted cycling and energy efficiency in

return. But they reversed their opposition to the gigantic Corrib project under construction by Shell and instead took up the ministry that was in effect implementing that project. Literally, they arrested those they had once stood alongside in opposing the project. And when the banking crash happened they passed the guarantee that that will mean austerity for years as the 64 billion required is paid back out of a public purse that otherwise could be used for health, education and public transport improvements. Alongside the Corrib project the Green Parties slice of power cost ordinary people in Ireland over 100 billion that could have been used to fund public services.

This is not an uncommon story. It turns out that offers of coalition (for small parties) or constituency perks for individuals are seldom resisted.

Even without the bribe of taking power and the ministerial merces, salaries and pensions that go with that it's unlikely the electorate will understand a refusal to take power, in particular if it leads to another immediate election.

8. Careerism

The people who join marginal far left parties obviously don't do so for career reasons. But for those parties that have electoral success, particularly if its based on running broad front organisations with watered down politics, this will change. In particular outside of core areas that party may offer the best chance for someone whose motivation, at least in part, includes wanting access to the power and earning power or a professional politician. And its not that easy to say no as most electoral systems reward parties who have more members, candidates and elected officials over those with less. The extra person can mean considerably more access to the media, speaking time in the chamber and even the ability to move motions that might actually get debated. They may also mean the difference in being able to hold the balance of power and to carry or pass key votes. This is another mechanism by which a successful radical electoralist party is shifted over the course of a couple of electoral cycles to something a lot more house trained as such careerists are likely to put their own electability above all else.

9. The terror of the market

A party in power that tried to implement any sort of anti-capitalist program would quickly find itself trying to run a society subjected to the terror of the market.

Market terrorism has become a very much more potent force as the economy has increasingly globalised and finance has shifted to electronic systems. Billions of dollars can be quickly sucked out of an economy by such means leaving a country unable to make loan repayments and so unable to buy food and medical imports or pay public sector workers.

When Syriza came to power in Greece in early 2015 we saw market terrorism force them to their knees within a few short months. This despite not only their electoral mandate but the very much stronger mandate they gained from the anti-austerity referendum they staged right before they were forced to capitulate. Any radical left government will be subjected to similar and worse levels of market terrorism. The only defence against it is a revolutionary one where capitalist assets are seized and redeployed and rebellion is encouraged in other countries. But as Syriza demonstrated you

can't get elected on the promise that a compromise can be negotiated and then overnight win the population to revolution instead. They were forced to their knees through the use of economic terror, a terror fully sanctioned by the Troika.

This filter is deployed relatively frequently, particularly outside of Europe and North America. It often takes the form of a currency crisis as vast sums are quickly transferred out of a country. It even happened in France, one of the G7 economies, in the early 1980s when capital flight was used to defeat a radical set of reforms that the newly elected Mitterrand government intended to introduce.

10. Coup

Our last filter is the one that anarchists often first describe, where the military are used to bring down a popular government in a coup. A surprising amount of so called democracies even build this possibility into their constitution. The Spanish constitution for instance refers to the “indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation” which has allowed the Spanish military to threaten a coup if too much autonomy

is given to any of the regions. On January 7 2006 for instance Lieutenant-General Jose Mena Aguado, the commander of Spain's 50,000 ground troops threatened, “The armed forces have a mission to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain.... The constitution establishes a series of impassable limits for any statute of autonomy. But if those limits are crossed, which fortunately seems unthinkable at present, it would be necessary to apply Article 8 of the constitution—the armed forces, including the army, the navy and the air force, have the duty to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain, and to defend its integrity and constitutional order”

When Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the British Labour Party the Sunday Times quoted a senior serving general who had served in Northern Ireland as saying “The Army just wouldn't stand for it. The general staff would not allow a prime minister to jeopardise the security of this country and I think people would use whatever means possible, fair or foul to prevent that. You can't put a maverick in charge of a country's security.”

It's significant that the general was never named in the media although as we were told he had been based in the north in the 1980s so the media must have known his identity. The Ministry of Defence condemned the remarks but no disciplinary action was taken. And Corbyn hardly even represented a serious future never mind present threat to UK capitalism.

The overthrowing of the Allende government of Chile in 1973 is probably the best known of the coups against reformist governments but in the period after WWII there were literally dozens of coups across the world designed to favour multinationals and block radical reforms. The only reason we haven't seen many in western Europe is because the filters already described have been enough to block movements of electoral reform. The abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986 by Thatcher provided a title for Ken Livingston's biography, "If voting change'd anything they'd abolish it." Livingston, the head of the GLC prior to its abolition, would have been well aware he was repurposing an anarchist slogan.

From time to time an establishment government makes such a huge mess of people's lives that the next election becomes a significant moment of mobilisation and expectation. Now everything will change, or so we are told.

But soon the new lot in power very quickly look like the old lot who were thrown out. And all too often once the next election arrives the old lot get back in again and the cycle continues.

Those on the left who are believers in the power of parliamentary elections to bring real change hate these patterns being pointed out. In order to get people to vote for them they need to sell the electoral process to the more impoverished and marginalised groups of society. They need to get them to reengage, often by suggesting that their marginalisation is a result of them not voting previously and so being ignored. This victim blaming is a reverse of the real situation, that people ignore the electoral process because they know from experience it has not delivered meaningful change for them.

Is it worth it?

Those on the radical left who see electoralism as a legitimate tactic would probably accept the existence of most, if not all of the above filters. The more orthodox of them insist that they are only using elections as a dung heap on which to stand so that they can be seen and heard by the masses.

Although rather obviously that's not what they put on their election literature, which repeats the electoral mantra 'Elect us and we can Change things'. If there were no costs this might be a reasonable argument. After all as well as the publicity of the electoral process itself the salaries of elected officials and their expenses including the hire of offices, research assistants and transportation can amount to hundreds of thousands of euro that would be very difficult to raise by other means.

But the cost is also enormous as such participation has not only eroded the radicalism of all parties that have had any real success but done so in a way that very often leaves the movements and individuals that got sucked in disillusioned and burned out. The parties that want to try again present failures as a product of a betrayal by flawed

leaders - and of course promising that they will be different. Such defeats are the points struggle in general recedes and even collapses - too often accompanied by an electoral swing to the right.

The more insidious cost is that in order to get votes the parties and individuals involved have to convince sections of the population that have quite correctly rejected electoralism that they should participate once more.

The medium to long term success of the electoral system in limiting struggle depends on these periodic revitalisations from the left. Indeed if you look back at the period from the early 20th century when the universal franchise started to become common you can observe a cycle of the energy of revolutionary upsurges being channelled into long marches through institutionalised power that go nowhere.

Sometimes they win reforms for a period that are subsequently rolled back, frequently by the same party as it 'matures'.

The task of anarchists is to convince the mass of the population that radical transformations can happen, that there is a point to politics. We have

nothing to gain from cynicism about electoralism in itself But radical change must come about outside and against the electoralist cycle. Rather than a language of revolution amounting to 'defeating the government' at the ballot box we need to ensure revolution is understood as a transformation that sees mass, collective self-organisation in our housing estates, communities and workplaces replacing the rule of governments, landlords and bosses.

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4

“CAMPAIGN IN POETRY, GOVERN IN PROSE”: INTERVIEW WITH A FORMER CAMPAIGN CONSULTANT

A decades-long veteran of the Democratic Party explains why elections fail to bring about meaningful change.

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Introduction

It's often said that it's easy for radicals to criticize from the outside, but what about when the critique resonates for someone who is an insider? As a follow up to the publication of ["The Lure of Elections: From Political Power to Popular Power"](#) by a group of Black Rose/Rosa Negra authors, we present the experience of an individual we will call "Carlos," on the dynamics of electoral campaigns. Carlos first became active in politics in his native Puerto Rico and then as a youth growing up in East Harlem where he first registered to vote during a rally at his high school organized by Jesse Jackson and his Operation PUSH campaign. has over 10 years of experience working in progressive electoral campaigns as a professional campaign consultant. He's worked on national campaigns such as Howard Dean and Obama as

well as with progressive local and state candidates running for office in major urban areas on the east coast.

Carlos now describes himself as a "former" campaign consultant as he threw in the towel well before the 2016 election and pursued a different career path. We invited him to share his experience with us on the internal dynamics of electoral campaigns. Here's what he originally wrote to us:

"Campaigns are designed to strip-mine resources out of communities. Instead of instigating popular movements, they stifle critical examination of power and its inherent abuse within the electoral paradigm. Instead of fomenting social movements, they serve as a cyclical escape valve whose sole purpose is to perpetuate the grip that the status quo has on society"

Note: Out of respect for this interview being conducted anonymously certain details and the names of specific campaigns have been omitted. Additional references have been added for individuals and organizations for those who may not be familiar.

BRRN: Can you give us some examples of how campaigns hurt

the social movements and organizations that already exist in communities? What did you mean when you said that electoral campaigns are akin to “strip-mining resources out of communities”?

Carlos: The most valuable asset any community has is its human capital. A well-designed campaign aims to matriculate supporters into its ranks and lead them along a prescribed engagement continuum. Electoral campaigns identify supporters and entice them to become activists by engaging in financial contributions, contributions of their free labor as volunteers and most importantly by contributing their most limited and irreplaceable asset: their time. Ultimately we aim to get your vote, but along the way we want you to first become an evangelizer of sorts. We want you to become a human amplifier of the campaign’s sphere of influence. We don’t only want your vote, we want your money, your body, and your soul! We want you to proselytize to the masses the good news that ballot-box salvation is (once again) at hand. At this point, you have become a trustee of the institution of electoral campaigns and as such upon you is

conferred the most enviable status of “grassroots community leader”—gatekeeper to the campaign and another handful of votes in the neighborhood.

And if you were with Obama for America (OFA) as a staff member chances are that you participated in training sessions that utilized the Marshall Ganz method for developing a public narrative. OFA organizers would often counsel campaign volunteers to stay away from engaging in discussions about specific issues and instead focus on sharing the “story of self,” the “story of us,” and the “story of now.” This methodology is intended to engage the prospective voter at an affective level much like a 12-step group speaker or a born-again Christian sharing her story of how she found Jesus. And, while I’m not critical of Prof. Ganz for sharing the lessons that he learned under the tutelage of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, I am critical of the manner that OFA used his methodology to short-circuit a perfectly legitimate way of facilitating the raising of critical consciousness (a long-term proposition) for the short-sighted aim of mobilizing the electorate for an election-night win.

That's not a way to build political sustainability but instead strip-mining votes, in a manner of speaking.

We can surmise that the electoral conflicts that are presented to the voting public more often than not limit their participation to a choice between candidate A and candidate B (first dimension of power). In other words, the voting public does not truly participate in setting the agenda (second dimension of power) as to who they really prefer to have as their representative and what the representation should entail in the first instance. Nor do they examine how they truly feel or made to feel (third dimension of power) about the whole question of a sham participatory democracy. Here their will is invalidated via post-election horse-trading in the name of practical compromises that are supposed to advance the public good – although the scorecard seems to demonstrate a clear advantage to those who wield power.

And sure, there is always the next election, but what then? Another reshuffling of deck chairs on the electoral Titanic? As they say in the hood, don't hate the player; hate the game.

BRRN: Given the reality of most low-income, Black & Latinx communities and neighborhoods being excluded from politics and decision making, tell about the narratives for political campaigns in these communities, how do they sell their candidacy? What do candidates do to pull them in one more time?

Carlos: In 2013 I consulted for a candidate for NYC council running for an open seat in the Bronx. One of his opponents was the choice of the county Democratic committee who is, by law, supposed to remain neutral during the primaries. However, their chosen candidate received the full support of essentially every member of the county committee as well as the support of the powerful real estate board (REBNY) who had invented a PAC named "Jobs for NY." Not only did the chosen candidate, with the help of the local political apparatchik, raise the maximum amount of campaign funds pursuant to public campaign finance rules, the independent expenditure group went ahead and spent near \$192,000 in support of her candidacy and an additional approximate

\$11,000 specifically targeted against my client.

In other words, it doesn't matter that you get throngs of local constituents to donate a paltry \$10 each of which are then matched by the NYC Campaign Finance Board. If the opposition is favored by a group like REBNY they're are going to get an additional \$200,000 in spending power. And, that doesn't even include the benefits of the full organizational support (think campaign volunteers, election day workers, staging sites, etc.) that they get by virtue of being the darling of the county committee and the real estate interest, for instance.

According to the NYC Campaign Finance Board, during the 2013 municipal campaign cycle, Jobs for NY spent just shy of \$7 million on behalf of its chosen candidates. How can anyone really believe that the voices of ordinary people have real power when their locally elected representatives are bought and paid for even before they take their oaths of office? If you look at voter turnout in many of those same low-income communities you'll find that voter performance often hovers at less than 10 percent of regis-

tered voters. Not to be confused with the number of eligible voters, only focusing on those who bothered to register and you still sometimes get as low as three percent turnout in a city where elections are determined by who wins in the primaries. The system is not broken, it's working just as it was designed: to suppress popular participation in the body politic.

BRRN: Often there's a perception that while national politics are completely dominated by power plays and political expediency, local politics, especially those at the level of city council, are different and there's greater room for accountability. Having worked on national, state and city level electoral campaigns what does your experience show?

Carlos: In the early 2000s I was just making inroads into Lower Hudson Valley politics. At that time one of the strategic objectives was to wrestle the [NY] State Senate from the hands of Republicans. The 35th district held by Republican, Nick Spano, of Yonkers, was a prime target. I approached the NARAL PAC about getting support for a progressive African American woman who was vying for that seat,

Andrea Stewart-Cousins. After an exhausting back and forth the position of NARAL was that they couldn't support Stewart-Cousins because Nick was pro-choice and they didn't want to alienate him. Never mind that Nick, as a member of the Republican conference leadership, had always cast his vote during the organizational leadership meeting at the launch of each session in support of a majority leader who was a sworn enemy of the pro-choice movement. But such is the political logic of many a liberal group.

That vignette encapsulates the dilemma that progressives face in getting their chosen candidates elected to local office. We can organize around a progressive platform, recruit, develop, and launch progressive candidates, but if as a condition of getting any of the political "lulus" like a chairmanship or a leadership post, additional staff, or something as inane as a plum spot in the parking lot, they first have to sell their souls to the devil by aligning themselves to the organizational leadership already in place. In those places the money behind the power often comes from real estate industry or one of the many powerful business in-

terests whose access and control of the legislative/appropriation process determines profit margins and windfalls.

BRRN: A lot of losing candidates, especially those running as progressive or left third party candidates, conclude by telling their supporters "this election is only the beginning, we're building a movement!" Have you ever seen a promise like that be fulfilled? And when people have built movements and won victories for working class people, where have you seen that come from?

Carlos: I witnessed the transition of Dean for America into Democracy for America (DFA) under Howard's brother, Jim Dean. From the beginning, it hosted something called DFA Night Schools via which it provided lots of useful information to those who were interested in entering politics as progressive candidates even if it meant challenging their local Democratic committee. However, when this was first happening Howard was restructuring the DNC and bringing in The VAN or Voter Activation Network (VoteBuilder) to implement the 50-State Strategy. In the end, that elec-

tronic voter file capability strengthens many local committees and makes it even more difficult for true progressive reformers to beat their local machine politicians.

Take a state like NJ where the state Democratic party decides who will have access to the voter file. Even if you are willing to pay for it, it's up to the party to grant you access. Another reform-intended tactic co-opted by the political bosses. DFA certainly does provide information for the lay political enthusiast to use in her quest for elected office. But again, it doesn't matter how many progressive candidates there are if the rules are rigged in favor of the status quo. From the moment that new progressive is inducted into public office special interest will bring whatever pressure to bear in pursuit of their goals and objectives.

Then there was Obama for America's (OFA) transition into Organizing for America following Obama's win.

Whereas Dean's Democracy for America functioned at arm's length from the DNC, Obama's Organizing for America was a 'wholly-owned and operated' project of the DNC. It was supposed to help organize and mobilize

the electorate to support Obama's legislative agenda, but as we witnessed, it seemed like the Tea Party ate their cookies and stole their milk money. It was a colossal flop. They tried to resuscitate it in 2013 as Organizing for Action (a 501 c4 org), but any serious post-mortem would conclude that the corpse was DOA by time Sanders announced his intention to run—his candidacy sucked the oxygen out of the room and left OFA and the DNC both gasping for air.

Which brings us to Bernie. Here again, I saw a glimmer of hope due mainly to the gracious acceptance of a self-described democratic socialist running as a mainstream candidate by both Democrats and independents. For many people who had all but given up on the superannuated DNC-RNC quadrennial tango, Bernie was a novelty. He made bold proposals that made the DNC establishment cringe at the thought that their Wall St. bosses were about to pull the plug on them and jump ship to the RNC en masse. But alas, Bernie's candidacy was thwarted by the powers [of the party].

BRRN: The Obama campaign was a milestone in being per-

ceived as a progressive candidate that was to the left of Democratic Party establishment. It sought to mobilize a young and progressive bases of voters in novel and non-traditional ways. Tell us about what you saw working within this campaign?

Carlos: Around 2006, I was residing in Philly working on some client campaigns in the region when I began to pay closer attention to Barack Obama. As Sen. Harry Reid put it, he was “clean.” I understood what Reid said through the cold lens of political calculus: Obama was an “acceptable,” Ivy League trained, affable African American with a beautiful young family. If we were to break through the racial barrier he was it.

Like [Howard] Dean before him, Obama captured the attention of young America by his sheer novelty as a charismatic African American candidate but also because he, for the most part, was saying the right things. We would later come to once again be reminded of the observation that “they might campaign in poetry but they govern in prose.” After the presidential campaign, Dean became head of the

hydra known as the DNC and then after that a shill for the HMO cartels. Obama, who promised immigration reform deported more Latinos than his predecessors, and while he campaigned on closing Guantanamo instead dropped more drone-powered bombs on Muslims than the Republican he ran against.

So, what gives? It seems that no matter how much they genuinely yearn for transformative change once they get into the halls of power they are co-opted into the existing, permanent power-structure.

Robert Caro said it best when he surmised, “We’re taught Lord Acton’s axiom: all power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely...” To my mind, there is a power behind the public face of the electoral process and it is suspect. We need to interrogate that power. After a lifetime of helping ordinary men and women gain access into the halls of power, I look around and wonder is there a better way? I hope so because at this rate we’re killing our planet and our chances of survival as a species today stands in peril.

BRRN: Given this picture of electoral politics, where and how can regular people create meaningful change?

Carlos: In the final analysis, true and lasting change can only come from efforts that aim to raise critical consciousness without regard to short-term electoral victory. Take a concept like that of Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School, for instance. They have been facilitating transformative change to people lives in their quest for social and economic justice for decades. It is that sort of model that provides those precious spaces where common people can share with each other their experiences, strengths and hopes so that the great challenges we face today might be conquered.

It is not via the latest slick campaign that we'll find salvation, but in the empirical praxis that a life of struggle brings to the cold reality of living in the most sophisticated system of oppression known to man. [This is] a social-economic system that banks on the expectation that most people will feel so beaten down by life that they conclude that there is no hope; that there is only surrender to the bosses,

the landlord, the state, and hope for a better afterlife. But we know that history has provided instances where ordinary people have challenged that paradigm and discovered in their shared struggle the key to their common salvation. Myles Horton said it best when he said, "Nothing will change until we change—until we throw off our dependence and act for ourselves." No politician, no electoral victory will ever do that for us.

I still believe in those prophetic words spoken long ago by Frederick Douglass, who understood liberation as a lived-experience. In 1857 he said: "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . . . If there is no struggle there is no progress. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." It was true then and it's still true today. That is my gospel.



5

BOOTS RILEY: POWER IS NOT IN ELECTED OFFICE

The following are excerpts from an interview by Patt Morrison (PM) of the LA Times published on July 18, 2018.

PM: There are many people who, like your character Cassius —

Cash — who say, “Look, I agree with you, but I need to pay the bills, and if I have to cross a picket line to do it, so be it. I’ll take whatever they pay me, and I’m happy to get it.” What makes

these people feel they have any power?

I think that people end up realizing, in those situations, that they are just pawns as well, and they're by themselves. You can't get much done by yourself. Speaking as someone who made a movie — and it took hundreds of people to make it happen — I can say that. And any movement that we see, any big change, does take other people.

I actually don't think most people would make those decisions [like Cash]. I think some would relate to what he's saying.

One the one hand, many movements have put being involved in social justice as an extracurricular activity, as something you do when you're off work or on Saturdays or whatever. And people say, I can't be involved in it — I got to pay the bills. And we haven't been organizing in the way that helps people pay the bills.

If there is a different kind of movement, where it is organizing around those things, organizing around putting food on the table, I think we'll have a whole different look at these

movements. People shouldn't have to get involved after work; they should be able to get involved at work.

PM: If we were to update a movement anthem — maybe from “We Shall Overcome” — could you write one? What would it sound like? What would it say?

It would probably be a song from my last album, a song called “The Guillotine.” It's a metaphorical guillotine because [if] you use the guillotine for real, just more of them pop up.

It's talking about the idea that we have the ability to have a society where the people democratically control the wealth that we create with our labor, so we don't have someone ruling us in that way.

PM: Is this a system you'd ever take part in by running for office?

Nope. Here's the thing: I know where the seat of power really is. And it's not in the elected office.

PM: Where is it?

It's in the ruling class, the folks that have the money. For lack of a more understandable thing, the 1%, you know.

Those are the puppeteers. The folks in office are the puppets. If we can make a movement that can get to the puppeteers, then the puppets will do whatever we want.

Think about it like this: Affirmative action came in under [President] Nixon, and it's not because he just had one contradiction where he had some progressive idea and was like, "Hey, let's do this." No, it's because the ruling class was afraid of this movement that was building.

Let's take it back to even the New Deal. It's the biggest liberal reform we've had in the 20th century — that and the civil rights bill. But that didn't come because of a big campaign to get FDR in office. That came because all throughout the South, and places like Alabama, Utah, Colorado, Oklahoma, there were mining strikes, shutting down mines.

In the Midwest at the same time, in the '20s and '30s, there were people occupying factories. On the West Coast, at that time, there were the longshoremen who were shutting down the ports to create there, for the first time, a union.

In that milieu, with revolutions going on all around the world, the ruling class was afraid of an actual movement, perhaps a revolutionary movement happening, and because of that, we've got the New Deal, specifically because that's what the left focused on — movements that were able to withhold labor.

So if we're looking for extreme changes like that, and we want elected officials to make big changes like that, we've got to stop focusing only on elections because then we're going to get caught in this cycle.

Right now, the next time a Democrat gets in office, all they have to do is be two inches to the left of [President] Trump.

The evil genius of Trump is that he's already got the Democratic Party and people who want him out to move to the right in order to get him out. You got people cheering on the CIA and the FBI, this false nationalism where people are cheering, "Let's only use politicians that only take U.S. billionaires' money."

There are people that are doing this that know better. But the opportunism of electoral politics makes people lie to each other.



6

A SOCIALIST ON CITY COUNCIL: A LOOK AT THE CAREER OF KSHAMA SAWANT

By Michael Reagan

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2016*

2016 is shaping up to be a year of social movements: Black Lives Matter, trans-equity, teachers and workers struggles. It is also an election year,

and one candidate, Bernie Sanders, has activists and organizers across the country “feeling the bern.” But is the enthusiasm justified, will electing good politicians lead to substantial change?

“The question is,” according to Kshama Sawant, Seattle’s socialist city council member, “How can we build a public movement that would counter business opposition?” This was Sawant soon after her historic victory where she and her party, Socialist Alternative, defied expectations and won a tight race against an entrenched incumbent Democrat, Richard Colin. Her major legislative agenda, “\$15Now,” a substantial minimum wage hike for workers, faced hostility from business interests. Sawant recognized that they couldn’t do it alone, that it would take a movement of regular people to make change.

But how far did the minimum wage law go given the tremendous support Sawant’s campaign generated, and did her repeated electoral success help build social movements as she often claims? This article wants to go back to Sawant’s central question posed in

2014 – how can we build social movements to counter business power?

While Sawant and Socialist Alternative claim they are building a movement, they are instead building a candidate at the expense of building a movement. When labor groups backed a watered down version of the Seattle minimum wage law, Sawant and her party followed suit because they had no independent power from which to win a stronger bill. The result is that Sawant’s most recent re-election campaign represents the politics of business as usual, with Sawant advocating business friendly reforms like commercial rent control in order to secure political support and win reelection. Sawant’s political career shows that pushing candidates without building social movements will fail to win substantive change. As activists and social justice organizers consider working on electoral campaigns in 2016 we should reflect on the pitfalls of an electoral strategy. Sawant’s political career is illustrative.

Sawant’s career begin in the streets, with Occupy Wall Street where she

was at numerous general assemblies, protests, and demonstrations. Just months after the Seattle encampment was broken up and abandoned, Socialist Alternative ran Sawant for the state legislature. Her campaign slogan, “a voice for the 99%,” attempted to build on the popular momentum coming out of OWS.

After the collapse of Occupy, Sawant’s campaign manager Ramy Khalil explained their strategy: “Socialist Alternative argued that the movement could be rebuilt by running 200 independent Occupy candidates across the country.” Sawant’s personal assistant, Ahn Tran, framed the strategy as a question, “We thought: Why not Occupy the elections?” SA seemed to miss a major point of the anti-electoral OWS movement. Nonetheless, from here they would go to build Sawant’s political career on the victories of movements.

In their first electoral stint, SA lost to the well-connected speaker of the state house, Frank Chopp. On her second run, they targeted an equally well entrenched city council member, but one who was vulnerable in the political climate post-Occupy. Richard Conlin

was a retrograde corporate democrat. The lone “no” vote on a paid sick-leave bill, he supported the disastrous Alaskan Way tunnel project, and attempted to pass legislation to fine homeless panhandlers. Conlin was backed by “coal money, police money, and freeway money” according to the Stranger who called him a “a greenwashing liberal fraud.” What was important for Sawant was that Conlin’s milquetoast liberalism was no longer sufficient post Occupy; Conlin, “the longtime liberal,” in the words of the Seattle PI, “became too conservative for Seattle.”

But the key to Sawant’s campaign victory in 2013, as opposed to the previous year, was support from the labor movement. In her first campaign against Chopp, Sawant and SA raised an impressive \$21,000, mostly from small contributions. When she ran against Conlin in 2013 major labor unions backed her. A look at her contributors shows that, on the second campaign, big unions gave big and gave early; SEIU Local 6, PTE Local 17, SEIU Local 1199NW, Teamsters Local 117 and IBEW Local 77 all maxed out their allowed contributions at \$700.

(All told candidate Sawant raised a whopping \$161,023 for the campaign). Sawant also won significant endorsements from major local unions including AFSME Local 1488, AFT Local 1789, IBEW Local 46, and CWA Local 37083 and the Seattle local of the APWU. Union support like this is more significant than just the dollars collected, union endorsements come with staff, voter drives, phone banking and mailers.

Why did unions turn to support Sawant? Largely for their own reasons. In 2013 they were engaged in a major battle with area businesses in the city of SeaTac, a bedroom community of Seattle and Tacoma and the site of the area's major international airport. The crux of the battle was the fight to increase wages for workers at the airport to \$15 an hour. SIEU 775, the union leading the effort, decided to run a ballot initiative to force employers to grant a wage increase (companies are still fighting the outcome in court). Meanwhile, in Seattle itself, other unions were moving forward with the audacious fast food workers campaign, staging one day strikes and media events to build support for a \$15

an hour wage increase for fast food workers. These were the two major campaigns for the labor movement in Seattle in 2013; Conlin would do them no favors, and Sawant became their candidate. Her major campaign plank became the \$15 minimum wage, rather than a party for the 99%, and it defined her candidacy and reflected the interests of her backers.



Sawant and SA's great success is that they dramatically changed the climate of politics in Seattle. With Sawant, "\$15" became locked in as the legislative agenda for the new city council. She told the UK Guardian, "The public battle on \$15 an hour, that number, has been lost by business," she said. "Now the fault lines have gone to: I support 15 but we have to do it thoughtfully." The question before Se-

attle was what would the final legislation look like? How good would the law be for Seattle's working families?

Sawant and her allies pushed for "\$15 now," an immediate across the board increase with some costs offset for small businesses (but importantly small businesses were included). In this way, Sawant's legislative agenda was akin to the measure just passed in SeaTac, won through a massive organizing campaign. In addition to providing for paid sick leave, measures to promote full time employment and that tips and service fees go to the workers, the SeaTac law mandated immediate \$15 an hour wages for airport workers and yearly cost of living increases. The SeaTac measure was far more direct and effective than what would pass in Seattle.

The Seattle law is a complicated mess of exemptions and extensions. The biggest compromise came when Sawant and SA agreed to define a small business as one employing 250 or fewer employees. That limit was extended to 500 in the final law. Further, a complicated timeline of implementation and exceptions was incorporated. If the employer is a "small business" they have

a lower rate to pay; if they provide health care they have a lower rate; if the worker receives tips, the employer pays a lower rate. As of now, spring of 2016, the minimum wage rate in Seattle is \$13.00 an hour for large employers with no payments toward medical benefits, \$12.50 for those large employers who do. It is \$12.00 an hour for "small-businesses" that don't pay either an equivalent \$1.50 toward medical benefits or in which an employee receives an equivalent \$1.50 an hour in tips. For the small employers that provide either of those services the city minimum wage is \$10.50, just .75 cents higher than the state minimum. Some of the schedule increases don't complete until the year 2024.

In the campaign, Sawant herself spoke out against machinations like this. In the \$15Now campaign launch party in January of 2014, Sawant explained that "when we say minimum wage, we mean all workers. A universal minimum wage is what we are fighting for." She warned that corporations and businesses were already building opposition to the bill, and that they were talking about a phased-in plan over "many, many years," adding that

what owners wanted was to “do it in such a way that it takes 10 years to get to \$15. Then it’s meaningless.” She said that with the decline in value of the minimum wage over decades, that workers have “already been phased into poverty; we don’t need any more phasing in.” Referencing the efforts in SeaTac she argued that there were “many not-so-small businesses, parading as small businesses,” trying to water down the bill, and she noted that some of the same businesses that vigorously opposed the SeaTac measure were placed on the Seattle Mayor’s committee to develop a bill. As was Sawant.

Her critiques were prescient; so why did everything Sawant warned against come to pass? Why was the minimum wage bill so weak, given all the support Sawant’s candidacy generated?

In the wake of Sawant’s election victory, the new mayor, Ed Murray, quickly put together an “Income Inequality Advisory Committee.” The committee included Sawant and major representatives of labor, but also representatives of the city’s major business interests, like the city Chamber of Commerce and the Capitol Hill Chamber,

the downtown Hotel Association, the hospitality industry, senior executives at banks, and other business owners. Importantly, the main union representative was Dave Rolf, a leading reform figure in labor politics, who advocated a style of “entrepreneurial unionism” whereby unions and progressives “should take a cue from business” and run their organizations like Silicon Valley startups. His union, SEIU Local 775NW, backed Sawant’s opponent, Richard Conlin. Rolf was co-chair of the mayor’s committee.

Rolf was a major author and vocal supporter of the final compromise. Rolf told the media, as paraphrased in Al Jazeera, that “he stood by the ‘delicately constructed’ deal.” When even more changes were made, adding a “training wage” and weakening enforcement, Rolf sent an email to Al Jazeera saying he “fully supported” the further compromises.

Sawant, to her credit, came out strongly against it, threatening to take the measure to public referendum that would create “\$15 now” if a stronger bill was not put forward. At a hearing just four days after the compromised bill was announced, she read an email

from a Domino's Pizza driver arguing for an "immediate hike" and that "Most of us are one paycheck away from financial tragedy. Living paycheck to pawn shop is no way to live when you're working full time."

But the referendum never got off the ground; Sawant and SA abandoned the whole effort. Once Rolf and the unions came out in support of the compromise, Sawant and SA were the only organized group in favor of a stronger bill. As a small left party they didn't have the organizational heft to actually take a referendum to the people of Seattle and get it passed. That would take canvassers, phone-bankers, funds, ads, and well, a movement. The major institutional backers of her election campaign, the unions, had pulled back, and she couldn't move forward without them. Sawant's election was made possible by the labor movement, and her legislative victories and defeats are also explained and defined by the role of the movement.

Instead of building an independent base of worker support that could either push for a stronger measure through demonstrations and direct action, or through an organized get out

the vote effort in favor of the referendum (like what happened in SeaTac), Sawant and SA built a political career rather than a movement. And they were stuck. When the city council passed a horribly watered-down measure Sawant sheepishly argued it was the best that was possible. This was the same position her opponent, Richard Conlin, argued six months previous during the campaign.

A similar story can be told with Sawant's recent legislative efforts and her bid for reelection. In 2015 Sawant was the big money candidate. She broke fundraising records for Seattle city council races, and outspent her opponent, Pamela Banks of the Urban League, \$419,000 to \$330,000. At one point during the campaign Sawant had more campaign contributions than any other politician in the city. And once again, money came from unions, this time, from major local unions, their members and leadership.

Sawant's reelection issue was residential rent control, something critically important in Seattle. Unfortunately she was outmaneuvered on the city council by her chief political opponent, Tim Burgess, chair of the coun-

cil. Burgess orchestrated a vote that put the council on record supporting residential rent control. In Washington, any municipality that passes rent control needs to have those laws cleared by the state legislature. The Seattle city council vote meant that Sawant would have to lobby and cajole state legislators in Olympia. While potentially beneficial in a long-term struggle for affordable rent, this would do nothing for the short-term goal of getting re-elected in Seattle. Sawant abandoned the effort.

Here Sawant teamed up with Seattle businessman and “establishment power broker” Dave Meinert to push for commercial rent control. Meinert, who opposed Sawant’s “\$15 Now” effort and was on the committee that created the mayor’s compromise measure, has a lot to gain from commercial rent control. Most of Meinert’s main businesses are in the Capitol Hill neighborhood where rents are skyrocketing. And he is no small fry; he has “his hands in nearly every line of business” including, a record label and artist management company, a number of restaurants and bars including The 5 Point Cafe, Lost Lake Cafe, Big

Mario’s New York Pizza, The Comet Tavern, Grim’s, is the founder and co-owner of the yearly “Capitol Hill Block Party,” and owns an events and promotions company.

Sawant and Meinert announced their proposal together at City Hall. In a press release, Sawant defended the measure saying, “There’s a lot of small business rhetoric from corporate politicians, but little actual policymaking that helps our city’s small businesses. Commercial rent control, for example, is a policy that will directly benefit small businesses.” Here it is hard to distinguish Sawant from the rhetoric of a corporate democrat, in which “small business” means “business” and “jobs” means “profits.”

The reality is that in her bid to win reelection, with no social movement to back her, Sawant turned to established sectors of power to win support. In her first election this included unions, but in 2015 favored business interests like Meinert’s. In this sense Sawant is representing the business interests of boutique business owners, against another segment of local capital, commercial landlords, with nary a worker to be found. This is business as usual poli-

tics, with one segment of business using elected representatives to foist their interests over other segments of business – casting deep shadows on society.

Passing a \$15 minimum wage in Seattle would not have happened without Sawant. The point is not to disparage her; it is likely that Sawant is genuinely interested in furthering the cause of working people in Seattle and believes in the electoral process as a path of effective change. Our question is why wasn't the effort for \$15 now able to achieve more? The answer lies in the campaign's overall strategy of pushing forward a politician, rather than building power of popular forces.

When Sawant says one thing, and does another, when she runs on a particular platform, and then helps to implement policies supported by her opponent, she is reflecting the realities of state power and elected office. Pushing candidates without social movements that can make them do the right thing is a failed strategy. It has failed in Greece with Syriza, in France with Francois Hollande, and in Seattle with Kshama

Sawant. And, although exciting, it will also fail with the Bernie Sanders campaign in the unlikely event he is elected. Putting politicians before movements leaves elected officials, no matter their intentions, alone in a wilderness of business power.

This is why the OWS movement and the BLM movements are anti-electoral. They've learned the lessons of social struggle from history. The legacy of Dr. King is a case in point. King knew the importance of keeping his efforts focused on movements of resistance, rather than running for or holding office. To get the Civil Rights Act he marched on Washington, to get the Voting Rights Act he helped build a movement in Selma.

Our own moment is marked by movements demanding and winning real social change. The BLM movement, immigrants' rights, trans equity, and workers movements are all having dramatic impacts. Chicago teachers are striking for a "millionaire's tax" in their city. Seattle teachers are boycotting onerous and wasteful standardized tests. We should look here for hope. We don't have to look to socialist faces

in high places for our answers. We are generating them anew all the time.

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7

“WILD, UNPRECEDENTED” REFORMISM: THE CASE OF LARRY KRASNER

By Tim Horris

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“Activists do politics better than politicians.”— Lawrence S. “Larry” Krasner, 26th and current District Attorney of Philadelphia (May 2018)

Introduction

In the socialist movement today, the importance of electing progressives to public office is a widely accepted axiom, considered relatively uncontroversial by all but the most hardened anarchists. But only rarely do we seek to justify this belief, despite a less-than-stellar track record of left electoral ventures.

This “electoralist” perspective is widely echoed in the mass media – a set of institutions which plays an important role in policing what is considered politically acceptable at any given time. As the interim between election cycles seemingly shrinks into nonexistence, it becomes more important than ever to take a step back and take stock of the relationship between policy reforms to electoral politics.

Putting aside the numerous instances of supposed progressives and reformers who’ve gone on to betray the movement for criminal justice reform, we must still grapple with the following questions: How important is it to have progressives in elected office?

Is the election of a progressive the key ingredient to achieving reforms?

This essay intends to contribute to the argument that reforms and concessions are not dependent upon the ideological beliefs or partisan identification of elected officeholders. Policy victories are the product of class struggle, when the mobilization of masses of people creates a threat (or the possibility of a threat) to class rule.

To investigate these questions, we will take as an example a situation which has developed locally here in Philadelphia, but with implications nationally: the election of progressive trial lawyer Larry Krasner to the office of District Attorney (DA), a move which has been frequently pointed to as evidence of the efficacy of running on the Democratic ballot line.

Our contention is simple: in most cases, activists can achieve similar policy objectives without working to elect progressive politicians. From a purely tactical perspective, the superiority of electoralism has yet to be demonstrated, and the burden of proof lies squarely on the reformist camp.

By zeroing in on one of the reforms being touted by Krasner’s proponents, the elimination of cash bail, we show that this reform has been accomplished in many other municipalities without the election of a progressive district attorney, which raises the question for those of us interested in making social change: just how important is it to have progressives in elected office, anyway?

What we will find is that, at least around the issue of ending cash bail, not only is the presence of a progressive District Attorney not a key ingredient, but that a number of quite different political strategies — some of which stand in direct opposition to the tactics promoted by electorally-minded socialists — have led to an identical outcome: the phasing out of cash bail.



A Progressive, People’s Prosecutor

Larry Krasner’s candidacy took place in the context of a seriously troubled DA’s office. District Attorney Seth Williams, who’d been elected as a reformer, became mired in a corruption scandal which ultimately culminated in the disgraced DA being sentenced to five years in prison.

Following this upset, Krasner persevered in the Democratic Party’s primary after establishment forces failed to unite around a single candidate, splitting their support between several contenders. His ground game was buoyed up by canvassing muscle provided by a number of unions and liberal activist groups. To seal the deal, his message was further amplified by \$1.7 million in funding from billionaire hedge fund manager George Soros. While progressives tend to downplay the role that investment capital played in the race, it’s hard to imagine that it had little or no impact, given that contributions from Soros “exceeded the \$1,288,287 spent by all candidates in the race over the same period.”

Before and after his election, liberal news outlets have lavished glowing praise on the “people’s prosecutor.” Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Will Bunch claimed Krasner’s election wasn’t simply a primary victory, but rather “a revolution.” Slate claimed Krasner was making, “wild, unprecedented criminal justice reforms.” Meanwhile, commentator Shaun King (who works for a PAC dedicated to electing progressive District Attorneys) wrote a breathless piece for The Intercept calling Krasner’s policies “revolutionary” and “a dream come true.” But it’s not only liberal journalists who’ve been enchanted. Current Affairs referred to Krasner’s election as part of a “wave of victories” for the left. Left-wing tastemakers at Jacobin hailed Krasner’s election as beginning “a new day in Philadelphia,” while New York’s Independent touts Krasner’s campaign as “a grassroots model” which should be replicated across the country.

While Krasner’s candidacy certainly excited Philadelphia’s activist milieu, the wider public wasn’t nearly as taken with it. Voter turnout for the election was a mere 17%, relegating it to the re-

spectable but far-from-spectacular third highest turnout over the past eight DA races. In terms of share of the vote, Krasner received a smaller percentage than his now-disgraced predecessor Seth Williams did in 2009, with Krasner’s share being lower than Williams’ in both the primary and the general election.

To be sure, the District Attorney’s progressive bona fides have never been in doubt. Krasner has gained a deserved reputation among Philadelphia’s activist milieu for defending protesters pro bono. Beyond Krasner the candidate, the role of individuals and organizations who have done years of organizing against mass incarceration in raising these issues in the public consciousness deserves recognition and acknowledgement. Many of these comrades saw the elevation of a friendly face to high office and assurance of a “seat at the table” as the culmination of many years of painstaking labor and sacrifices undertaken in conditions of relative obscurity.

Krasner’s campaign marked a tactical alliance between establishment progressive nonprofits and labor front groups, rich liberal donors, grassroots

prison abolition organizations, Bernie Sanders supporters, and networks of returning citizens and the families of the incarcerated. However, socialist participation in the Krasner campaign was negligible; although Krasner's campaign has been widely associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the Philly chapter didn't endorse his campaign until several months after the critical primary election, at which point Krasner's ascension into office was already a shoo-in.

On the policy end, Krasner has backed an unobjectionable reform agenda, which includes a number of common sense measures such as ending civil asset forfeiture abuse and treating addiction as a medical condition rather than a crime. His principled stance against mass incarceration have gained a grudging respect even from his more conservative detractors.

Krasner has also promised to never pursue the death penalty, although just how much of an impact this pledge will have is debatable, given that "Pennsylvania has not executed an inmate since 1999 and has carried out only three executions since 1976,

making it one of the least-active states with the death penalty" and that the state currently has an active moratorium on the death penalty.

A Case Study in Reform: Ending Cash Bail

One of the flagship reforms Krasner has been credited for has been pushing to end the practice of cash bail.

The cash bail system means that when someone suspected of breaking a law is arrested, they must pay a certain amount of money in order to be released from jail until a trial determines their guilt or innocence. In recent years, a national debate has unfolded in which critics of the system point out the unfair and unequal burden this places on poor and minority suspects.

A number of negative consequences flow from the cash bail system, including the propping up of a parasitic bail bond industry, the imposition of enormous costs onto taxpayers (who foot the bill for interning suspects), the exacerbation of preexisting racial and class inequalities, and the de facto unjust imprisonment of poor suspects regardless of guilt or innocence.

Fortunately, a reform movement has made numerous strides toward decreasing power of the “American gulag,” and cash bail is one flash point in this struggle. Here in Philadelphia, the City Council recently passed a non-binding resolution calling for the District Attorney’s office, the state legislature, and the courts to begin overhauling the cash bail system. This symbolic action reflects a widespread sentiment among lawmakers at the municipal and state level that the cash bail system is irreparably broken.

In locales as diverse as New York, New Orleans, Nashville, Birmingham, and Washington D.C., activists have succeeded in pressing state and municipal governments to lower or eliminate bail bonds. Without question, the tenacity of grassroots activists in these cities and many others have made admirable progress in reversing the decades-long trend of mass incarceration.

In many of these cases, this has been accomplished without a progressive District Attorney initiating the process.

In Maryland, changes in cash bail were made as a result of a decision by the state’s Court of Appeals. Certainly reforms such as these which are handed down by courts from on high are welcome, but what lessons do we draw from them? Rarely if ever do socialists (even of the “democratic” variety) argue for the movement to employ litigation as a strategy for achieving our policy goals, although litigation in defense of social justice has historically been responsible for major breakthroughs and has been a long-standing tactic used by progressive groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Freedom to Marry.

Why don’t socialists generally support strategies utilizing litigation as a centerpiece of a campaign? Perhaps it’s because on some level, even the most right-wing elements of the movement intuit that our job as socialists has something to do with organizing the working class and the oppressed, whereas lawsuits and court cases only create opportunities for organizing by way of byproduct or afterthought, if at

all. Fighting it out in the capitalist courts means entering into a political terrain that privileges the ruling class. From a revolutionary perspective, it also engenders the illusion that our legal system is the fair and unbiased institution that civics textbook propaganda claims it is, disarming us by muddying the clear-eyed realism we need in understanding the courts and prisons as appendages of the enemy.

The case of Atlanta is further instructive. Here, the newly-elected mayor, Keisha Lance Bottoms, made eliminating cash bail her administration's first policy initiative. But far from being the progressive darling, Mayor Bottoms ran against the Bernie Sanders backed candidate. Liberal columnist Shaun King eloquently summed up Mayor Bottoms' political outlook while chastising leftists for not supporting her:

Bottoms was the establishment Democrat in the race from the beginning. She was supported by the Democratic Party. She was endorsed and supported strongly by the current mayor, Kasim Reed. She was supported by much of the black establishment in Atlanta. Bottoms, on policy matters, is not democratic socialist. She's not a

Berniecrat. She's not an activist. To my knowledge, she's never been arrested in a protest. She's not a radical. She's a mainstream Democrat.

Clearly having a progressive in office is not a necessary prerequisite for achieving meaningful reforms.

Finally, while the District Attorney should certainly be credited for doing his part to eliminate cash bail by pledging not to request it, we should remember that "Even if a prosecutor doesn't ask for bail for a particular defendant, magistrate judges could still make the decision to order it." Effectively, the ball remains in the judge's court.

This points to a larger problem in the Krasner "model": while District Attorneys can exercise prosecutorial discretion – which is to say, while they can determine whether or not to press charges, what sort of charges to bring up, recommend sentences and offer plea bargains – they are neither legislators nor judges. They don't write laws, issue rulings, or set legal precedents. So while DAs have significant leeway in setting priorities, any policies they enact are less durable than reforms won through legislation or judicial de-

cisions; it only takes a new person occupying the office of executive to roll back such reforms-by-fiat, as we've seen in the case of the Trump administration reversing many of the Obama administration's executive orders.

All told, the urgency of electing progressives appears to take a backseat to spurring on powerful grassroots social movements and building independent political organizations which can effectively criticize policies, raise demands, and put pressure on every institution and political actor.

Police and Prisons: Reform or Abolition?

In studying the political context, Krasner's policies appear much more as a continuation of long-standing trends rather than a sharp break from past practices.



When touting Krasner's victory in the Democratic Party primary as a

“model” to be employed elsewhere, proponents of the progressive prosecutor have proudly touted the nine percent reduction achieved in the DA's first one hundred days. Unfortunately, this sort of boosterism fails to account for larger long-term trends which have driven these sorts of fluctuations and, therefore, obstruct us from understanding the root causes of the changes, instead ascribing them to the actions of a single politician.

Nationally, incarceration rates have reached a two-decade low. Locally, from 2008 to 2016, the number of inmates in Philadelphia prisons fell by over twenty percent, from 9,300 to 7,452. In 2016, Philadelphia received a \$3.5 million grant from the MacArthur Foundation, the twelfth largest private foundation in the United States. The goal of the grant was to reduce the prison population in Philly jails by more than one third. Today, the number of inmates has fallen an additional “26 percent since the reform initiative was announced.” In fact, the city has made enough progress on these metrics that officials recently announced their plan to shut down the dilapidated, 91-year-old

House of Corrections, which they expect to close by 2020.

In material terms, a grant from a capitalist foundation likely had a significant impact in reducing the prison population. But no serious revolutionary would argue that we need to spend our time writing grants. Given that a decent case could be made that a policy-directing grant from a capitalist foundation has as big an impact as the election of a progressive politician, we're left with no understanding as to why elections are the favored tactic of the reformist when, looking at it purely from the perspective of accomplishing a given reform there are much more efficient routes. Perhaps this is why so many reformists end up capitulating to the political logic of the nonprofit industrial complex, finally ending up snugly in the capitalists' back pocket.

Liberal elements of the ruling class have recognized for some time that current incarceration levels – the highest in the world – are unsustainable. In bourgeois democracies such as the United States, the ruling class doesn't govern by violence alone. Consent of the governed requires keeping up the

appearance that the system works for a large fraction of the population, and at least the acquiescence of the majority. The system is also adept at leveraging reforms and concessions to co-opt potential enemies, undermine more radical demands and placate strategic sections of the working class. For this reason, criminal justice reform has recently become a pet project of more farsighted liberal elites.

While a variety of wealthy liberals have bankrolled criminal justice reform institutions such as the Sentencing Project, Real Justice PAC, the ACLU and others, without a doubt the most visible role has been played by hedge fund manager George Soros, who in addition to pumping the aforementioned million dollars plus into Krasner's campaign, has lavished funding on numerous other District Attorney races as part of a larger nationwide strategy. As of August 2016, "The billionaire financier ... channeled more than \$3 million into seven local district-attorney campaigns in six states." The number of DA races and the amount of money has only increased since that time.

Why has this been happening? Capitalists prize social stability, and over the past few years our society has been rocked by the reemergence of a powerful mass movement against police violence. The Black Lives Matter movement polarized American society – at one point exerting such influence over the narrative (as reflected, for instance, in a precipitous drop in confidence in the police by the general public) – that the legitimacy of the police has been questioned to an extent and with a persistence that is really unprecedented.

Realizing not only are the policies of mass incarceration unsustainable, but that the entire system of policing is threatened by a crisis of legitimacy, liberal capitalists promote the remaking of the police on a new basis (“police reform”). By materially supporting efforts at police and prison reform, it allows the ruling class to preempt and undermine the more radical specter which has been raised by numerous activists within the black liberation and socialist movements: abolition of police and prisons.

The demand to abolish police and prisons is the sort of clarion call which can

dramatically reshape the political playing field. As author and lawyer Derecka Purnell explains, “a call for police transformation after abolition undermines the purposes of abolition. The call tethers accountability to police review boards, task forces, and pleas to value black lives.” It’s precisely these sorts of efforts to bring about “police transformation” which are a prominent feature on the agenda of the nonprofit-industrial complex. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, but a movement for abolition and liberation can never emerge from a set of institutions funded by billionaires.

On Tough Choices, Self-Discipline, and the Need for Strategy

“To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.”

— Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966)

Among socialists today, it’s popular to say that all strategies can be pursued simultaneously, and there is no need

to pursue a single, unified and coherent strategy. The idea is widely promoted that there are no trade-offs between throwing time and effort into phone-banking for a Democrat and protesting in the streets, setting up a mutual aid program or organizing a union in our workplace.

Much like Adam Smith's "invisible hand," our movement seems to believe that by every activist pursuing their own individual interests, this will ultimately, somehow, result in a net positive social change. This idea makes sense to many of us because it syncs up with and reinforces an understanding of the world which has been drilled into us our whole lives: call it the "neoliberal theory of social change."

However, the hard truth is that as individuals we cannot be in multiple places at the same time. Our organizations and movements have only a finite amount of time, resources and energy to expend in pursuit of our objectives. In terms of deploying our relatively few activists and volunteers, we are still operating under conditions of acute scarcity, and we should be therefore laser-focused in how and when we take up a cause.

But there is an alternative to this individualist laissez faire attitude toward movement activity: it's called "strategy."

As important as it is to choose tactics and interventions wisely, most of the time pursuing a strategy means making decisions about what not to do. As individuals, organizations, and movements, increasingly we need to learn how to say "no" to volunteering to take on activist obligations. "No, we won't attend your rally." "No, we won't endorse your candidate." "No, we won't sign onto your campaign."

For every action we take, there exists an opportunity cost for the action we didn't take. Without adhering to a clearly-delineated strategy, we risk losing our ability to identify fault lines in the class struggle and intervene in critical political openings. If, on the contrary, we believe that every political opportunity which comes our way is equally important, we're likely to end up right back in the vicious cycle of activist networking. This inevitably leads to us chasing after the latest political fad until enthusiasm inevitably dies down, until the next big social move-

ment appears, and desperately trying to jump on the bandwagon once again.

Our movement needs to learn how to practice self-discipline: how to investigate social conditions, identify fault-lines, gather and collate information, create a strategy, then do the work and stick with it until our efforts have produced enough evidence to even tell us if our efforts are succeeding or failing. That doesn't mean we shouldn't improvise on the fly.

It does mean that if we pivot from deep organizing into mass mobilizing, our sharp turn needs to fit into a long-term strategic sequence, so that we emerge from the other end of our pivot in a better position than we did going into it.

For the reformist, the purpose of activism is to win reforms. The choice of tactics flow from this analysis – for instance, we support politicians because they will fight on behalf of a particular reform, etc. Revolutionaries, however, especially within the base-building milieu, see our present moment, and its related tasks differently. In the absence of a revolutionary situation, our primary task is to develop revolutionary political organization

which can lead toward the construction of a socialist party. When we decide whether or not to intervene in struggles to win reforms, our first question is therefore not whether the reform is a good in and of itself, but will this specific reform help cohere a social base which can form the nucleus of a party.

In the current period, neither reformists nor the majority of revolutionaries believe that revolution is on the immediate horizon. Recognition of this fact doesn't mean, however, that what's needed to achieve success is to modulate our message or water down our politics. Meeting people where they are at doesn't absolve us from the responsibility to engage them in a process of mutual transformation through organizing, education and collective struggle.

Revolutionary politics are, to be sure, a minority perspective – not only in our society but even within the socialist movement. But it doesn't necessarily follow from this we need to throw out our entire understanding of the world in order to better fit in. If anything, we have an obligation to vigorously advocate for a revolutionary per-

spective. Opinions are not static, and while we can't will into existence a revolutionary situation, we can and should try to change people's minds and win them over to a politics of working class hegemony.

Conclusion

“We do not live in a revolutionary moment, but that is no excuse to abandon revolutionary socialism as a political horizon.”

— R.L. Stephens (July 2017)

The Krasner campaign presents no conundrums whatsoever among liberal progressives. If anything, it functions as the epitome of what a successful electoral campaign should look like, which probably explains the urgency with which the campaign's successes have been bandied about in the left media. This is because the liberal is generally not especially concerned with long-term goals of revolution, the abolition of police and prisons, or establishing a socialist economic system; for the liberal, harm reduction isn't simply one component of a more ambitious political strategy; it's the end goal itself.

But among revolutionaries, the Krasner campaign must necessarily appear more problematic. Given that socialists only participated peripherally in the Krasner campaign, it can't very well be taken as any kind of “model” which the movement should attempt to replicate elsewhere. Neither does it vindicate the notion that progressives winning competitive primaries is any sort of determinate factor in shaping policy. For the revolutionary left, the campaign raises more questions than provides answers, but primarily this: If not this, then what?

The economic crisis of 2008 showed conclusively that contemporary capitalism stands on much shakier ground than is generally acknowledged. As for those in the movement who proclaim that this time the capitalist state really is invincible, and that any rebellion against it is a fool's errand, we can only reply that for all their talk about the impossibility of revolution, they have no more idea of what's to come than we do. While they chide us for faith in the revolutionary potential of the masses, the reformists have their own kind of faith in the stability of the status quo.

The ultimate test of truth for Marxism is determined by the encounter with reality. For the genuine revolutionary, a certain humility about an unknowable future coexists with an optimism as to the long-term structural instability of capitalism. The great revolutionary socialist Amílcar Cabral instructs us to “tell no lies, claim no easy victories.” For those who wish to change the world, fidelity to truth is indispensable; if we misunderstand our reality, if our goals are nothing more than pipe dreams, then any positive outcome to our activity will be at best a happy accident, and more likely a predictable tragedy.

While the election of Larry Krasner to the office of District Attorney in Philadelphia has certainly buoyed up hopes of many, we must be clear-eyed and vigilant; our movement cannot subsist on feel-good victories which don't build up long-term capacity, just as human beings cannot subsist on sugar-coated rocks. Only by facing unpleasant truths and dispensing with comfortable self-deceptions can we fully reckon with the enormity of our tasks – the abolition of police and prisons and the establishment of a revolution-

ary counterpower – which, while daunting, remain an absolutely essential prerequisite to achieving our goal of socialism.



8

POWER TO THE PEOPLE, NOT POLITICIANS! A CRITIQUE OF SOCIALIST ELECTORALISM

By the First of May Anarchist Alliance - Minnesota Collective

Originally published at www.m1aa.org on November 4, 2013

I.

All across the Central, Corcoran, Phillips, and Powderhorn neighborhoods of Minneapolis you can see the red &

white “Ty Moore for City Council” yard signs, symbolic of the impressive effort the campaign is mounting. The Campaign literature emphasizes social justice, in particular the ongoing movement to defend homeowners from foreclosure and eviction. The Green Party (Minneapolis’ 2nd party) and, significantly, the SEIU union leadership have endorsed Ty’s campaign – signaling an apparent challenge to Democratic-Farmer-Labor rule in Minneapolis. What could be wrong with all of this?

Plenty, actually. Electoral campaigns, including this one, have as their aim to get “our guy” into a place of power – the government – and to “educate” the public on issues of importance. But what kind of power is this? And what are people being taught?

II.

The government is not a democratic institution. It is bureaucracy in the shape of a pyramid with more power and fewer people the higher you climb. “The State”, as anarchists call the government – including City Hall – is a system imposed over the people and land in which self-determination is

“taken from the people and confided to certain individuals, and these, whether by usurpation or delegation, are invested with the right to make laws over and for all, and to constrain the public to respect them, making use of the collective force of the community to this end.” (Malatesta, an old-school Italian anarchist)

The State overlaps with and is usually subordinate to the economic hierarchy of the super-rich, their corporations and banks – what the Occupy movement called “the 1%” and what anarchists refer to as “the ruling class”. Together, the ruling class and the State control the system of exploitation, oppression, and alienation – and the resultant wars, low pay, police brutality, sexual harassment, gentrification, environmental destruction, boredom and depression – that dominate our lives.

Prioritizing a campaign for City Council can be seen as akin to saying that workers should focus their energies around getting the right person to be their CEO or on the board of directors.

III.

Historically there have been two ways people have organized to confront this system:

Reform or Revolution.

Reform is the idea that the system can be successfully modified and improved through legal means and especially through participation in its official channels like lobbying and elections. Reformists argue that this is the realistic and peaceful approach to change.

The problem is that the system, while very adept at incorporating and co-opting reform efforts, has been incredibly resistant to any fundamental structural change from within. It is built to administer class division, racism, sexism and homophobia – not to end it. Those that accept the logic of helping run the system are rewarded. Many more reformists have been changed by working within the system than vice versa.

The biggest reforms under capitalism have actually been the product of struggle from outside the system, not from friendly politicians within. From the union sit-down strikes, Black Liberation movement, and anti-war resis-

tance, to ACT-UP, and the May 1st immigrant strikes – militant mass movements of people using direct action outside the system have forced governments of the left and right to concede to popular demands.

Revolutionaries want to help take these independent movements from just defending past gains or making limited demands on to the offensive by challenging all of the authoritarian social relationships and the system that administers and defends them. This will require a social revolution that expropriates the rich, dissolves the State apparatus, overthrows structural and cultural patriarchy (sexism) and white supremacy (racism) and builds decentralized, directly democratic, ecological self-governance from below. Campaigns for City Council are a detour from our tasks.

IV.

But isn't Ty's campaign at least raising issues? Won't his campaign teach people about Socialism?

First, movements across the city were already raising the issues of low-paid service work, the foreclosure crisis, and immigrant rights. We don't need a

politician to legitimate those movements. More troubling is the inference that this campaign is taking these demands to a higher level. It will not be City Council resolutions that prevent foreclosures or raise minimum wages, but a mobilized community willing to physically block sheriff's evictions, and organized workers willing to strike.

Second, Ty Moore's campaign isn't saying much about Socialism (however understood). The campaign does not mention capitalism, socialism, workers control, or revolution. This is an important choice. Ty Moore is campaigning for reforms of capitalism not its abolition.

But campaigns teach by more than what is in their written programs. Even if the campaign was more explicitly radical, functionally it is teaching people that social change comes about through electing better politicians. The campaign has all the features of a mainstream election effort – adoration of a single personality, exaggeration of his “leadership”, meaningless pledges to “get results for you”. This is an elitist approach that reinforces the passivity of people by making someone else the “leader” who gets things

done, instead of arguing for all of us to take control over our own lives. The activists and community members who have dived into the Ty Moore campaign are not prioritizing organizing one-on-ones to plan direct actions at work, at school, or in their neighborhoods, or discussing and debating how to replace the racist police with community militias or how narrow gender-roles stifle our humanity or how to build rank & file power against the union bureaucracy. They are rallying around “our guy” and training people to fundraise and to get out the vote. This is the main lesson that participants in the campaign are gaining: How to participate in this unjust system.

V.

Socialist Alternative has organized an impressive united front around its candidate. The campaign describes it as a breakthrough: “A big-tent coalition is emerging as an alternative anti-corporate base of political power in Minneapolis, uniting union leaders with socialists, Greens with disillusioned Democrats, block club leaders with urban farmers, immigrant rights advocates with LGBTQ organizers,

and Somali business owners with Occupy Homes”.

What we notice is that at the core of this coalition are organizations influenced and funded by SEIU leadership, and sharing their top-down, staff driven, reformism with a militant veneer. It seems that SEIU leadership recognizes in Ty’s campaign a similar approach and made the calculation that a break with the DFL here would help solidify the hegemony of this kind of politics over community, labor and social activists in Minneapolis. It is not just that reformism is inadequate for fighting capitalism and the State, but that in order to maintain its place within the system the reformists have to be able to police the radicals and grassroots. Nationally SEIU has played hardball with its internal dissidents (such as placing militant locals under trusteeship) and Occupy Homes pushed out its solid anarchist activists. A major leader of Socialist Alternative’s sister organization in Britain threatened to “name names” of the hundreds of militants who fought the police during the Poll-Tax riot against Margaret Thatcher’s policies. We should not automatically assume that

a Socialist on the city council would be an ally of radical social movements.

VI.

The Ty Moore campaign has succeeded in making a splash, and whether he wins or loses, by challenging the DFL, the campaign may have opened up some space for alternative politics in Minneapolis. These potential positives are undermined by the nature of the project: a radical reformist campaign to enter the government. All of our experience tells us it will lose its radicalism and will gain no significant reforms.

While we certainly also oppose Ty’s main opponent Alondra Cano (the DFL candidate supported by the City establishment as well as some activists), and are not trying to sabotage Socialist Alternative’s efforts, we cannot support any politician including Ty Moore’s campaign.

We are enthusiastic about the growing possibilities for radical change and the increasingly complex web of organizations and people out there struggling and experimenting with different ap-

proaches – but it is crucial that movements also find ways of reflecting and evaluating our experiences and history. We understand that some friends and allies will look at the situation differently. Discussion and debate is good for the movement. We see this is a contribution toward that ongoing conversation, and look forward to fighting alongside each other wherever possible.

We will continue to put our efforts into building radical autonomous movements of workers, students, prisoners, and the poor. Our goal is revolution not just reforms. Our strength is in the neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools – not the voting booth.

For a socialism without politicians

Power to the People, Not Politicians!



9

“ELECTORAL PURSUITS HAVE VEERED US AWAY”: KALI AKUNO ON MOVEMENT LESSONS FROM JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

*Originally published at
www.blackrosefed.org on April 18,*

2018

Introduction by Adam Weaver

Pledging to make Jackson become “the most radical city on the planet,” the July 2017 election of Chokwe Antar Lumumba as Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi is by many accounts an inspiration as to the ability of the left to critically engage in social change through elected office. By no means an isolated effort, Lumumba’s election is the result of decades of base building and social movement growth, most notably highlighted in their use of community assemblies and the work of Cooperation Jackson, which promotes the creation of worker cooperatives.

The origins of the campaign are rooted in the politics of Black self-determination and is spelled out in the Jackson-Kush Plan (referred to as the J-K Plan) formulated from 2004 through 2010 by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and New Afrikan People’s Organization. The Plan laid out an analysis and a collective model which was based on three pillars: building people’s assemblies for grassroots decision making, building an independent Black political party; and building a solidarity economy. Most important though is that the plan was very explicit that electoral efforts

would be “on a limited scale” and that the focus on popular assemblies, building autonomous and dual power institutions “is primary.”

Trouble in Electoral Waters

But since last year’s election victory not all has gone as planned. Kali Akuno, one of the key figures within the Jackson movement, has been raising critical questions of the role of electoral politics in the movement. Often doing interviews and speaking engagements highlighting organizing efforts in Jackson, Akuno is a key figure of Cooperation Jackson, one of the primary authors of the Jackson-Kush Plan and co-editor of the book *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*.

As Akuno wrote in November 2017 for Black Agenda Report, the electoral focus was intended to be “adjunct component of a broader objective ... to build a transformative, anti-colonial power from the ground up through the People’s Assembly as an autonomous vehicle of self-governance,” but the reality is that “this understanding has been lost or ignored, and even more

disappointing, has not really been pursued by the forces claiming adherence to the J-K Plan.”

He continues his criticism around the narrative that has been promoted within the larger left, one that he calls a “misplaced hope” that is “sadly being employed to prop up liberal notions about the utility of electoral politics to the [broader] left ...[and which] uphold and promote the false notion that capitalism can be tamed and reformed through electoral politics.”

More troubling for social movement work in Jackson is that the Lumumba administration has come to power at a moment where the local government faces what Akuno calls a “Syriza trap.” This is a dynamic often faced by the left in power whereby it is forced to administer the very austerity they fought to oppose. Currently in Jackson, as Bruce Dixon writes, the central business district is now under state control, the privatization of its schools, the water system and the destruction of black neighborhoods for development projects is “nearly imminent,” and an “emergency management regime coming to strip elected city government of the ability

to do much of anything without approval from bankers” is likely to be imposed. What will come of this remains to be seen.

However, the key question is that of the use of electoral politics to advance social movements and in a recent Labor Notes panel presentation (transcript below) Kali Akuno states the dynamic in unambiguous terms: “I think the social movement development work that got us to this point, I think is gradually being eroded and then sidelined and there’s much more of an emphasis being placed on now on how to sustain ourselves in office.” As Kali wrote in Black Agenda Report the focus on winning elections “negates the pursuit of autonomous power, the execution of a radical program, and the building of a revolutionary vehicle.”

With that said, the wider left is wise to take a great pause and critical examination before using Jackson as an electoral model to be emulated. This strategy is a well-worn path and something around which we suggest the radical left should rightly be wary.

**“Doing Politics Differently”
Panel Discussion Presentation
by Kali Akuno**

2018 Labor Notes Conference, Saturday, April 7, 2018

Note: Due to audio issues the opening 30-60 seconds of the presentation were not recorded. Akuno stated that while he had prepared comments for the presentation the other speakers prior to him raised important issues that he felt should be debated.

Now what does it all mean? In our case in Jackson, and I’m going to speak for myself, because we are in a place right now where there’s an intense level of debate within the movement itself about what is the way forward, what are the strategies and tactics to move what our principal aims and objective are? And there’s a fundamental question: Are we still on the same page about what the fundamental aims and objectives are?

Speaking for myself, as one of the key thinkers and framers of the project [the Jackson-Kush Plan] for whatever that’s worth, for me, starting with that notion that the system as its constructed as it’s been set up since the

founding of the settler-colonial project, is inherently a reactionary project and cannot and would not tend towards democracy. So that’s the basis from where I started from and from which these politics emerged from.

So the first piece is, I’m pushing to try to create as much democratic space as possible for the social movement without necessarily the expectation that winning office or even trying to accomplish certain reforms is actually going to get me where I’m trying to go.

The social movement in communities actually developing the capacity to govern themselves is more the final aim and I think a lot of times electoral politics gets in the way of us really aiming and pushing ourselves and those who we love, and work with, and live with, towards that other direction. And I would argue that some of our electoral pursuits have veered us away from that in Jackson as well, at least in this current iteration of the politics of the last couple of months, or last two or three years I would say.

That said we’ve laid out a couple of things like the four solutions [reference to a previous panelist’s discus-

sion of four responses to tackling issues around state power] and I think that was a good summation. In our case I think we've tried to do the bottom three, two, three and four [which are to forego electoral politics or use an "occupy model;" reduce importance of elected officials and build alternatives; and build different relationships between elected officials and movements] and tried to do them all simultaneously and I think we have an uneven record in that regard. And our project if you look at it, particularly looking at the Jackson-Kush Plan, I think you'll clearly see the outline of the two, three and four that we were trying to work on and build. The critical piece has always been who and what should be in the lead? That's a question that we have struggled with.

At this point I would honestly have to say that the dominant forces both internally and externally have been around electoral politics, and I think that that's an error. This is Kali speaking, and I think that that's an error. I think the social movement development work that got us to this point I think is gradually being eroded and then sidelined and there's much more

of an emphasis being placed now on how to sustain ourselves in office, how to build alliances that will enable more of our candidates to be able to retain themselves in office. In the wake of those compromises — and in effect that's what they are I would argue — as you make those types of compromises you will wind up jettisoning more and more of your program. The critical piece probably of what you're asking [refers to a question from the audience] is I think that our development in this day and age of a clear program that we can rally working class and oppressed around is fundamental and primary: far more so than pursuing or even trying to elect people to office.

Because there's still the fundamental question of where are we trying to go, which is different than what we think is possible. And I want to pose that very clearly and distinctly as two different things. I think when we move our engagement to what we think is possible we move our politics within the limits of the system as it exists and aren't looking to push beyond what exists. And I think we clearly live in an era where, straight up, the world that the

US was able to impose upon the world after WWII — that world is crumbling, it's crumbling fast and crumbling hard. And unlike many people I don't think Trump's election was an aberration. Whoever was going to be in office this term, whether they were going to be an outright racist, or not, was still going to have to work on renegotiating the terms of empire. That was going to have to be done — capital dictates that, not any of the politicians themselves. So somebody was going to have to do the dirty job of getting the NATO partners to cover more of the money. Can we renegotiate terms of trade with China and can we reposition the world around climate change in a particular way to do certain types of offsets and financial flows? That was on the agenda period, regardless of who was going to sit in that seat both in the presidency and the two different structures of the supposed legislative branch, which doesn't really do that much anymore.

That reorganization was going to be forced upon us anyway. The question is how do we begin to build a politics that exceeds that and understands the limitations and understands the chal-

lenges that exist right now are actually, I would pose to us, key opportunities if we allow our imagination to see it that way? Right now I think the biggest challenge that we have is we know there are millions of people in this country who are pissed off, righteously pissed off: do we have the ability to reach them? Do we have the ability to offer them a program that speaks to their immediate interests and towards a better future? That is to me the critical piece that we don't have a consensus upon and I think some of the limitation is our own imagination and we're still stuck trying to figure out how to get the most out of the present system as opposed to let it die, let's create the new, what do we need to do to think do we organize ourselves to get to that point. And I think that's a deeper, fundamental question I want to see us look at.



10

WHY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ARE DETRIMENTAL TO MOVEMENT BUILDING

By Arun Gupta

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www.counterpunch.org on August 7,
2015*

Many reasons have been put forward for why the left should be involved in Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination:

he can win, his candidacy can pull the party or at least the political debate to the left, it's a chance to talk socialism with millions of Americans, it can build left organization and capacity.

Supporters of Sanders on the left (which I define as explicit anti-capitalists) think there is no real downside to his campaign. Now, many find Sanders' positions generally refreshing, myself included, but that's not enough. The real issue for the left is what role does his campaign play in organizing, and it's indisputable that Sanders will herd movements into a Democratic Party beholden to Wall Street interests. Sanders makes no bones about this, saying he will support the eventual nominee, which will almost certainly be Hillary Clinton. Even if leftists who back Sanders sit out the general election that is of no consequence as they will have served their purpose of building a base of support that will be put to work for Clinton.

But there is another danger from Sanders' campaign as a Democrat. Far from building movements, it can fracture them.

Exhibit A is Sanders' response to Black Lives Matter activists who confronted him at the Netroots Nation conference on July 18. Protesters wanted him to speak about structural racism, but Sanders kept pivoting to economic issues. After saying "Black Lives of course matter," Sanders segued to income inequality, which provoked one audience member to retort, "A class analysis does not take the place of a racial analysis." When the moderator asked him about white supremacy, Sanders offered some grim facts about Black life in America and said he would "create millions of decent-paying jobs ... make tuition at public colleges free [and] reform our trade policy." As he spoke a woman responded, "Jobs and college don't stop the police from killing me. Trade policy doesn't keep the police from killing me."

One video shows the activists doing what activists have always done: demanding that power address issues people's lives depend upon. Sanders blew it, but to his credit he has since changed his tune. He is the first candidate to discuss the death of Sandra Bland. Sanders also went beyond his

previous calls for community policing, which is flawed because it treats all disorder and public safety as a policing problem, and now says we need to tackle mass incarceration, mandatory minimum sentences, drug policy, the militarization of police, and use-of-force policy.

That might be the end of the story except for the divisiveness it left in its wake. Some Sanders supporters recognize he has a blind spot with race. Others circled the wagons, arguing Sanders should get a pass because he was a SNCC organizer in the 1960s. But politics is not like being a rock star where your fans adore you for old hits like marching with Dr. King or hanging with the Sandinistas. Politics is about what you will do, and that's precisely what Sanders failed to address at Netroots Nation.

A more substantive argument is based on Sanders' politics, not his history. In June Seth Ackerman argued in *Jacobin* that "Bernie Sanders' signature issues aren't 'white' issues" because the number one concern among people of color, according to polling data, is economic issues championed by Sanders. A week later Matt Bruenig advanced

the same point. (After the Netroots Nation episode, Ackerman doubled down and Bruenig stuck to the same argument.)

It is tempting to use class as an umbrella covering race because it is simpler to say Wall Street is the root of all evil. From an organizing standpoint most whites shut down when confronted with structural racism and white supremacy. This is not to justify the defensiveness, but it is difficult to have fruitful discussions around race in U.S. society. Nonetheless, most leftists understand economism is as much of a dead end as identity politics. Decent-paying jobs and free public education would not have saved Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Sandra Bland, Samuel DuBose, and countless others obliterated by a society that defines their existence as a threat.

Economic reductionism is ill thought out. It cannot explain why the white working class is so invested in whiteness. It does not guide us on how to unravel the intertwined material and cultural phenomena of structural racism. It revives discredited ideas, such as the Communist Party's short-lived position in 1919 that the "racial oppres-

sion of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other.” And it’s just bad politics to tell a group of people, especially ones in a dynamic social movement, that they don’t know their own history or community.



The fact that the first real pushback from leftists against Black Lives Matter is around the 2016 election reveals how electoralism can induce activists to side with elites against the grassroots. Left-wing supporters of Sanders believe his campaign is a unique chance to advance the cause of socialism. As such, they will be inclined to ignore if not defend every bad position he takes. The backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement that percolated through the web and social media following the Netroots Nation confrontation has less to do with the specifics of the incident and more to do

with the sense the activists were somehow derailing a rare chance to advance socialism for everyone.

Leaving aside that Sanders is pushing for Keynesian policies, not socialist or even social democratic ones, his campaign is antithetical to movement building. It’s top down, centered on one person, with no process or space for popular input to discuss his political failings, the limits of electoralism, or other strategies. After 2016 Sanders is not going to turn over his organization with its apparatus, lists and expertise to the left. Past experience — Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, Howard Dean’s Democracy for America, Barack Obama’s Organizing for Action — shows candidates retain tight control over their organization. Even in 2000, when Ralph Nader ran as the Green Party’s presidential nominee, but did not exert control over the organization, he failed to benefit the party despite the 2.9 million votes that he garnered.

Expecting a presidential campaign to solve the problem of organization is magical thinking. Leftists who join the Sanders campaign still need an existing organization to recruit for. As for

talking socialism with the public, those options will be limited as campaigns tightly control volunteers, making them hew to talking points and scripts. It's also a pricey way to have a conversation as Sanders hopes to raise \$50 million before the primaries begin. (It may make sense for union insurgents to back Sanders, but that's only because they are part of pre-existing organizations they are trying to reform, and their main target is labor leaders who are in bed with the Democrats.)

Moreover, the nature of presidential campaigns prevents an honest debate. If Sanders endorsed reparations for African-Americans or admitted white supremacy exists, his rivals would demolish him. This creates an unresolvable conflict. The more activists push Sanders to acknowledge legitimate demands, the more defensive his supporters may become, hardening the divide. If anything, Black Lives Matter activists proved being outside Sanders' campaign is more effective than being on the inside as they were the ones who compelled him to address racial issues he had been ducking.

Prior to this, in his May 26 announcement, Sanders failed to mention criminal justice, the drug war, or even say immigration. His communications director shrugged it off as you "can't talk about everything in every speech." This dismissiveness is curious given that Blacks and Latinos are 35 percent of self-identified Democrats.

This is part of a pattern with Sanders of skirting discussions of state violence against non-white communities and nations—or endorsing that violence. In his campaign announcement Sanders said, "We must be vigorous in combatting terrorism and defeating ISIS." Last year he backed Israel's horrific war on Gaza, endorsing the continuation of the defining conflict in the most important geostrategic region in the world. Sanders is one of the most dovish members in Congress, but there is no mention on his issues page of the Pentagon's budget, drone wars, Islamophobia, or the "war on terror." The Sanders campaign is deliberately excluding issues central to Muslims, Arabs, and many Asians in the United States, again, with little dissent from his supporters. Calling it "realpolitik" is a euphemism for throwing entire

communities under the campaign bus. The socialist principle of internationalism appears disposable as well. As far as realpolitik goes, how will Sanders implement progressive economic policies when he won't touch the massive pot of federal dollars going to the military and surveillance state?

If America is the land of the get-rich-quick scheme, the American left is the province of the get-power-quick scheme. It's always looking for the one tactic, the one protest, the one election that will change everything. Building power that's strong and flexible takes years in the trenches developing organization, trust, community, leadership, action, and theory. Taking an electoral shortcut to power means fracturing movements as those with the least power are pushed to the sidelines. Leftists may thrill at finding a "socialist" horse on the electoral merry-go-round, but if they hop on board they'll be the ones taken for a ride.

This is a substantially revised version of an essay that ran on Telesur.

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11

SOCIALIST FACES IN HIGH PLACES: SYRIZA'S FALL FROM GRACE AND THE ELUSIVE ELECTORAL ROAD

By Enrique Guerrero-López and Adam Weaver

Originally published in www.truthout.org on August 7, 2015

As various segments of the US radical left begin planting their flags in the electoral arena, Syriza's recent fall from grace should serve as a stark reminder of the unfulfilled promise of the electoral road to socialism.

Syriza's rise to power elicited widespread praise from the left internationally, inspiring renewed enthusiasm for the possibilities and promise of "mass left" party building in and outside the United States. At a rally celebrating Syriza's electoral victory in Spain, Pablo Iglesias, secretary general of the Spanish anti-austerity party Podemos, declared that "the sun of hope rose over Greece."

Yet "the sun of hope" began to set on Greece almost as quickly as it rose. Shortly after taking office, Syriza, the "Coalition of the Radical Left," formed a coalition government with the right-wing, anti-immigrant Independent Greeks (ANEL) party, followed only months later by the predictable surrender of the government to a new round of harsh austerity imposed by Greece's creditors.

Syriza's precipitous fall from grace echoes a long line of dashed hopes and

broken promises on behalf of the Greek left in parliament. In 1981, seven years after the collapse of military dictatorship, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) rose to power in a landslide victory, capturing 48 percent of the vote, with the motto "National Independence, Popular Sovereignty, Social Emancipation, Democratic Process." Under the charismatic leadership of Andreas Papandreou, Pasok established a modern welfare state – raising wages, improving union rights and creating a national health system. After two consecutive terms in office, however, the popularity and left character of Pasok dwindled as it passed a series of austerity measures. Today, after multiple terms in power, Pasok is a shadow of its former self, widely blamed for the current economic crisis, rampant clientelism and political corruption.



The inevitable degeneration of the left in political power is often couched as a

betrayal, as a “sell out” narrative of politically compromised leaders and parties falling victim to forces outside of their control. But the problem isn’t that an individual politician or party has sold out; it’s that they’ve bought into a project of political alchemy – the quixotic quest for the right mix of key ingredients that can magically transform the state into a vehicle for socialism.

However revolutionary the party, program or politician may be, no matter who you vote for, the capitalist state always gets in. To maintain their legitimacy and control, those who take state power effectively assume the role of general manager of capitalism.

The ability of the state to carry out its activities – whether it’s a “socialist” state, neoliberal democracy or a dictatorship – depends on the health of the economy, where the state draws its revenue through taxation. In other words, the state makes sure the right conditions are in place for capitalism to thrive, protecting and preserving private property, regulating capital flows, incentivizing certain businesses over others, and so on.

For those who dare disrupt this social order, the state also maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, both domestically and internationally. Syriza’s deployment of riot police to quell protesters only a month after taking office is one of many examples of the left using state violence to maintain social order. As Mikhail Bakunin once noted, “When the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called ‘the People’s Stick.’”

Socialist parties and politicians are not immune or exempt from fulfilling this role of the state. Greece is not a historical anomaly. In fact, the historical record is rife with socialist forces taking state power – by ballot or bullet – with high hopes and big promises, only to replicate many of the conditions they so adamantly opposed.

Once in power, socialist governments are particularly vulnerable to the disciplining forces of international monetary bodies and capital flight (as took place in Greece and other countries), an internal military coup, outside intervention by imperial powers or all of the above. These forms of power are unelected and generally operate inde-

pendently of whomever happens to be in government.

Yet, despite the glaring limitations of taking state power, the lure of electoralism has not lost its luster on the radical left.

In the wake of Occupy and amid the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, a growing chorus of US leftists is beginning to sing the familiar song of electoralism, albeit in different keys. Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the election of Kshama Sawant to Seattle's City Council have sparked a new round of calls for an independent "mass party of the left" in the United States, with some calling for a tactical engagement with the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign.

Advocates for a "mass party of the left" often point to the ability of electoral campaigns to shift public discourse. Yet recent history shows that our resources would be better spent influencing the terms of public debate through social movements. Within a matter of months, both Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter radically transformed public debates on capitalism, white supremacy and state violence –

something decades of third party campaigns have failed to achieve.

Promoters of electoral strategies also claim that third party campaigns can and should complement social movements. While certain issues and movements are elevated by third parties that would otherwise be ignored by establishment parties, the demands of running left candidates tend to funnel limited resources from social movements into fleeting and mostly unsuccessful bids for public office. Also, what little infrastructure gets built on the campaign trail tends to dissipate quickly after Election Day.

For those who manage to win, the reality is that the vast majority, if not all, left parties that take state power become increasingly reformist, bureaucratic and ultimately concerned with preserving their position in power, which typically has the effect of demobilizing, defanging and developing a dependency relationship with social movements, not strengthening them.

While we need to struggle on many fronts, not all sites of struggle are created equal. The state is a shifting and contested site of power, one that plays

a critical role in shaping the conditions under which we all fight, but ultimately it is a bureaucratic structure of top-down rule over society, not a vehicle for liberation.

The dismal record of putting “socialist faces in high places” shows that there are no shortcuts or quick fixes on the long road to liberation. Only by building power from below – in our schools, workplaces and communities – do we create the building blocks of a new world.

—

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12

ASSESSING THE PINK TIDE

By Jeffrey Webber

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When Ecuador gained independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, the country did not launch a social revolution that would overturn colonial society's racism and inequality. Instead, the elite descendants of Span-

ish conquistadores now ruled on their own behalf rather than for the Spanish crown. For those beneath them, much remained as it had been.

Thus a popular slogan of the early republican period emerged in the graffiti lining the walls of Quito, the capital city: the last day of despotism, and the first day of the same; or, as Luis Macas, a leading indigenous activist remembered it in a 2010 interview with me, the last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

This expression captures something essential about the first decade and a half of twenty-first-century Latin American politics. Indeed, some on the Left have celebrated the most recent period of the region's history as Latin America's Second Independence, referring to the region's relative autonomy from the domination of the United States and the crudest dictates of orthodox neoliberalism.

But the nineteenth-century Ecuadorian slogan resonates in ways that suggest a more somber view. At the end of the latest left experiments in Latin America, the chasm between what this challenge to neoliberalism promised

and what political-economic strategies left and center-left governments actually adopted is clearer than ever.

From the Streets to the State

Latin American social movements between 2000 and 2005 emphasized direct action, grassroots participatory democracy, and the de-professionalization of politics. The assembly form became a privileged site of deliberative decision-making. Popular organizations combined confronting the state with building new forms of self-governance that prefigured the post-neoliberal, and in some cases post-capitalist, societies they hoped to forge.

When progressive parties assumed the mantle of state leadership over the mid-2000s, however, the social movements were limited to “subaltern participation,” which Mabel Thwaites Rey and Hernán Ouviaña define as the pacifying incorporation of popular sectors into the gears of the capitalist state, rather than “autonomous and antagonistic participation,” in which they maintain their capacity to disrupt and to lay the groundwork for emancipatory transformation. The necessary

struggle against, within, and beyond the state transformed into a moderated struggle captured by the state.

Social movements lost sight of the connection between specific popular organization dynamics and the revolutionary horizon of transforming capitalist society in its totality. Modest reforms and increases in consumptive capacities became ends in themselves, rather than the basis for more audacious structural ruptures with the existing order. The new left governments channeled the momentum of social change from below rather than encouraging an ongoing rebalance of class forces that would favor the laboring classes.

Left governments cannot capture a capitalist state's actually existing apparatuses and straightforwardly retool them for any purpose besides the reproduction of capitalist society. That, however, does not mean that we should think of the state as merely an instrument of the bourgeoisie. Within a specific national territory, and within the limits of capitalist reproduction, the state represents the balance of class forces. The positive aspects of state services — public education,

health care, and so on — are the accumulated legacy of past popular struggle, always unevenly achieved and under threat of reversal. Ultimately, the state cannot be transformed from within given the fundamental role it plays in reproducing dominant class relations and the mode of capitalist exploitation.

There may be a revolutionary road to post-capitalism that begins with left forces assuming electoral office, but, as Panagiotis Sotiris has argued, such a process would quickly lead to an organic crisis of the state and fierce counterattack by bourgeois forces. What began with elections would then become something else altogether.

Anticapitalist revolution requires the purposeful creation of new forms of solidarity and self-management, the institutionalization of new social and political forms of struggle, and the extension of modalities of popular power from below, outside of, and against the bourgeois state, even if left parties and social movements do participate in the electoral terrain of competition.

With the exhaustion of the current progressive cycle in Latin America, the po-

litical moment will likely become much darker before it gets brighter. If, however, today's popular movements — those fighting the parliamentary coup in Brazil, or taking on the Macri government in the streets of Argentina, or aligned against the authoritarian government in Honduras — presage struggles to come, the tide will turn again, creating conditions more favorable to the popular sectors' self-activity.

But what form this next left assumes in the medium term, and whether it can transcend inherited habits and institutional patterns, will depend in part on its ability to ruthlessly assess the last fifteen years.

Passive Revolution

Gramsci describes passive revolution as a period marked by the unequal and dialectical combination of restorative and transformative tendencies. Transformative dynamics work to change social relations, but these changes are ultimately limited. The fundamental structure of social domination persists, even if its political expressions have been altered.

The last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

The specific class content of passive revolutions varies within certain limits — that is, popular demands (the transformative tendency) are incorporated to different degrees within a structure that ultimately sustains the foundations of the status quo ante (the restorative tendency). Passive revolutions involve neither the total restoration of the old order nor radical revolution.

Instead, they generate a dialectic of revolution/restoration, transformation/preservation. Capacities for social mobilization from below are co-opted, contained, or selectively repressed, while the dominant classes' political initiative is restored. Meanwhile, conservative reforms appear in the guise of impulses emerging from below, thereby achieving the dominated classes' passive consensus.

Rather than an instantaneous restoration, the balance of forces changes at a molecular level until the capacities for popular self-organization and self-activity are completely drained through co-optation, bureaucratiza-

tion, and so on. This process guarantees passivity to the new order and controls what mobilization occurs, if not encouraging complete demobilization.

At the end of Latin America's most recent progressive cycle, we can discern the sharpest periods of transformation and of restoration over the last fifteen years of left resurgence as well as characterize the epoch since the late 1990s as a whole.

Explaining the End of the Cycle

Some have responded to the fading of center-left hegemony in Latin America with denial. Broadly speaking, two versions of this position dominate. First, from a social-democratic perspective, the Right's resurgence — evident in Mauricio Macri's 2015 election in Argentina, the conservative opposition's congressional victory in Venezuela that same year, Evo Morales's failed attempt to run for a third consecutive term as Bolivian president, Rafael Correa's decision not to seek reelection in Ecuador, and Brazil's parliamentary coup a year ago — appears as a string of relatively superficial setbacks.

“For the past 15 years,” Mark Weisbrot writes in an emblematic intervention,

“Washington has sought to get rid of Latin America's left governments; but its efforts have really succeeded, so far, only in the poorest and weakest countries: Haiti (2004 and 2011), Honduras (2009), and Paraguay (2012).” The region has more independence than ever, and the poor are better off now than at any time in recent decades.

The Latin American left, Weisbrot argues, overturned economic and political relations with the behemoth to the north, constituting a “second independence” after it secured freedom from Spain and Portugal two centuries ago. Riding on this legacy, Weisbrot predicts that the region's progressives are “likely to remain the dominant force in the region for a long time to come.”

Such a perspective sees the recent close-call results of the second round of Ecuador's presidential contest as further evidence of Pink Tide continuity. Correa's successor, Lenín Moreno, won 51.6 percent of the vote, defeating retrograde conservative Guillermo Lasso, who garnered 48.8 percent. Downplayed is the fact that Correa's government shifted to the right in re-

cent years, was in open conflict with the indigenous movement and public sector unions, and was suffering a decline in popularity as the economy sunk into serious recession with the end of the oil boom.



In the 2006 and 2013 general elections, Correa won in the first round with 57 percent of the popular vote. In 2017, Moreno, Correa's vice president from 2007 to 2013 and clearly a continuity candidate, won only 39 percent in the first round — falling shy of the 40 percent needed to avoid a second round, despite a fractured right-wing opposition. While less calamitous than a Lasso victory would have been, it is very likely that Moreno will introduce new austerity measures, prioritize debt repayment, and maintain Correa's development program of capital-

ist modernization in the extractive sectors of mining and oil.

Social democrats never believed that revolutionary change was possible or even desirable in twenty-first century Latin America. As a result, they have interpreted the shift to the center of the political spectrum by left and center-left governments over the last several years as an adaptation to reality, a prudent course of moderation. These governments and the social movements that support them must accept the inevitable and make a virtue of necessity, following Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's and Dilma Rousseff's lead in Brazil. The only possible alternative to neoliberal capitalism is a regulated and humane capitalism — other desires are either nefarious or naïve.

A second denialist track claims a certain Marxist pedigree. It emphasizes the state's centrality as an agent of social change and aligns itself closely with the Bolivian, Cuban, and Venezuelan governments, and sometimes to those in Uruguay, Nicaragua, and, until recently, Brazil and Argentina. The Left's apparent setbacks appear, from this point of view, as symptoms of the natural ebbs and flows of the revolu-

tionary process — part of the anticipated dynamics of advance and retreat, unsurprising unless one has innocently expected a linear revolutionary ascent.

This group interprets the growing tensions between left governments and social movements — as long as they stay in agreement with the government's objectives — as creative and revolutionary impulses that ultimately help transformative processes mature. The state managers and loyalists in these administrations reduce independent opposition from the Left or from indigenous organizations to machinations of imperialist powers or the domestic right. Indeed, they see left-indigenous movements as little more than the willing allies or useful idiots of empire.

Despite periodic hiccups and policy reversals, left governments are understood to be building advanced, industrial capitalism in the region, thereby creating the conditions for a slow transition to socialism. Such change does not drop from the sky, nor is it achieved over night. The transitional phase will last decades, perhaps centuries.

Both of these narratives misunderstand the Latin American context. The global economic crisis made a delayed landing in the region, and the center-left's hegemony is now in sustained and protracted retreat. New right-wing formations are appearing, but they cannot offer an alternative hegemonic project.

This is a novel period of political impasse, structured by deep continuities in underlying patterns of regional accumulation and Latin America's still-subordinate position as primary commodity producer in the international division of labor. A balanced assessment of these progressive governments and the social movements that preceded them cannot restrict itself to unidimensional criticisms of American intervention and belligerent right-wing movements, even when these represent crucial components of the story.

Instead, we might start with the Latin American left's trajectory since the early 1990s, paying particular attention to the shifting balance of forces between the popular classes, ruling classes, and imperial forces across the last twenty-five years. From a nadir in

the early 1990s, an extra-parliamentary left gradually renewed itself during the economic crisis of 1998–2002, which eventually became a political crisis for right-wing governments throughout much of South America.

This movement left's radicalism, particularly in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, was subsequently moderated in various ways as movement actors began participating in elections, center-left and left governments rose in the mid-2000s, and China's dynamic accumulation drove a worldwide commodity boom. Progressive governments consolidated into what Eduardo Gudynas calls the "compensatory state," in which wealth is redistributed but does not change society's underlying class structure or seriously confront profitability and property regimes — a model that depends on strong commodity prices.

The global economic crisis initially had a relatively weak impact on the region, particularly in South America. But by 2012, the tide had shifted, and crisis rolled through the region. With a downturn in commodity prices, easy rent for redistribution disappeared,

and center-left governments became austerity managers, alienating both the sections of capital that had reconciled themselves to progressive rule and the regimes' traditional social bases.

This dual retraction of support provoked a decline in center-left hegemony and the uneven appearance of new right-wing social and political movements. Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela are prominent exemplars of this new reality.

Looking Back

These center-left governments achieved myriad social gains. Alternative regional integration projects began to develop in opposition to American dominance. The Argentine Supreme Court declared laws that granted immunity to leading figures of the dictatorship unconstitutional, and constituent assemblies in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador inserted some transformative elements into their countries' new constitutions.

Politically, the contrast with the repressive governments in Colombia, Peru, Paraguay, Honduras, and Mexico is stark. Ideologically, anti-imperialist

discourse was revived, and, in some places, strategic debates over socialism and paths of transition to post-capitalism proliferated.

Progressive governments used the bonanza of export rent to fund targeted social policies for the poorest social strata, to increase and sustain employment rates (albeit typically in insecure and low-paid jobs), and to boost domestic consumption. The popular classes' living conditions measurably improved. Poverty went down, and income inequality fell slightly. (That said, this also happened in some countries in the region led by right-wing governments, as a cursory comparison of International Monetary Fund figures for Colombia and Brazil reveals, and the region remains the most unequal in the world.)

The pace of privatizations slowed and was even reversed in some economic sectors in a few countries. Spending on basic social services and infrastructure in poor urban neighborhoods and marginalized rural areas increased. These governments expanded access to basic free education and, in some cases, democratized access to universities.

In the words of Ecuadorian sociologist Pablo Ospina Peralta, Latin American progressivism offered “something,” however minimal, in the face of the “nothing” that dominated in the decades of neoliberalism that preceded it.

But, as the global economic crisis seriously began to pinch state revenues, even these slight gains were slowed or reversed. As sociologist Franck Gaudichaud observes:

[The] social, political, and economic cycle of medium duration seems to be slowly exhausting itself, although in multiform and nonlinear ways. With their real (but relative) advances, their difficulties and important limitations, the different experiences of very distinct progressive governments of the region . . . appear to be running up against significant endogenous problems, robust conservative powers (national as well as global), and lack of direction and unresolved strategic dilemmas.

Looking Ahead

A new period is opening up, likely to feature more intense forms of right-

wing rule that, lacking societal consent, will rely on militarized and repressive domination. But the Right cannot solve the structural problems underlying the region's economics.

This new period will be marked by economic, social, and political instability, by renewed interventionism from the United States, and by deteriorating living conditions for the majority of Latin American populations.

Progressive governments are increasingly trapped between popular demands for the continuation of recent social gains and the intensifying discontent of foreign and domestic capitals that had learned to live with center-left hegemony when there seemed to be no other option.

In the present scenario, none of these governments have the ideological, organizational, or political capacity to take the kind of audacious steps against capital — like nationalizing banks, monopolizing trade, enacting agrarian reform and mass employment schemes, enforcing environmental regulations, boosting popular consumption, and controlling money laundering — that might realign them with their popular bases of support.

These “governments fear popular mobilization of their own bases of support,” Guillermo Almeyra notes, “more than being toppled by the Right, which is on the offensive.”

The cycle of progressivism in Latin America has demonstrated that the mass mobilizations against neoliberalism in the early part of this century and the subsequent occupation of state apparatuses by progressive governments of different shades cannot structurally transform society, the state, and the economy on their own. Indeed, the occupation of the state often domesticated social movements and tamed their desires by partially incorporating their demands into an underlying framework of continuity.

This observation hardly vindicates the radical autonomist view of changing the world without taking power, of ignoring state power and buckling down in defensive islands while the Right governs the sea. The new situation demands a sober assessment of the period, an interrogation of established revolutionary truths, and ongoing, open-ended discussions of the strategic lessons to be drawn.

“When major historical processes come to an end, and in turn major political defeats transpire,” Raúl Zibechi explains, “confusion and despondency set in, desire intermingles with reality, and the most coherent analytical frameworks blur.”

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13

WHAT WOULD CORBYN DO?

By Gabriel Levy

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Che Guevara is so last year. It's Jeremy Corbyn on the T-shirts now. And he has a gig coming up at Glastonbury.

Corbynismo has turned the British political circus upside down.

The Tory party, having been reduced to a parliamentary minority after its disastrous election campaign, is struggling to contain the anger provoked by the Grenfell Tower fire. People are reacting to the cruel injustices on which this vile government thrives.

Some Tories see continuing Theresa May's "leadership" as the best hope for at least retaining a hold on government. Others have the knives out for her. None of them seem to have a clue about how to deal with the Brexit talks. The Tory chaos is a wonderful reminder that our enemies, too, have weaknesses and suffer crises.

Corbyn and the Corbynistas – the mostly young people swarming into Labour – have helped to produce this impasse for the Tories.

For a start, the Corbynistas played a prominent role in the campaign to get young people who had never voted to register.

Then they shifted the election campaign agenda away from Theresa May's rancid "strong and stable" slogan, to focus on austerity, National Health Service cuts and education. Things that matter.

Another turning-point was the publication of Labour's election manifesto, easily the most left wing one since the 1970s. It won support both from young first-time voters and much (but not all) of Labour's older working-class support base.

Now, with the Tory government wounded, perhaps fatally, the prospect of another election, and of a Corbyn-led government, is being discussed in the establishment's own media. Every one of Theresa May's inept blunders brings up the question: what would Corbyn do?

To answer that properly, I think it's important to remember the constraints under which Corbyn operates. They could be put under four headings:

- **The parliamentary system.** Labour has lost its grip on Scotland's parliamentary seats, where until 2015 it could be guaranteed almost 50 seats. Obviously this is the legacy of Blairism, its embrace of capital and its criminal disregard for working-class Scots. They felt, and feel, betrayed by the Labour Party that had historically represented them. Labour regained some Scottish seats this year, but in fu-

ture it will have to compete with the SNP, and now the Tories, in Scotland.

Labour's one-party fiefdoms in parts of England were also cracked open in 2015, by UKIP. While, thankfully, UKIP collapsed in this year's election, the organic connection between Labour and its support base has been disrupted.

So, say people who do the parliamentary arithmetic, the chances of Labour winning an absolutely majority (326 or more seats) remain very very slight.

It is quite possible that, if Corbyn ever got as far as forming a government, he would be haggling with potential coalition partners – including the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. (That's presuming that he would be unwilling – in contrast to [his predecessor Gordon Brown](#) in 2010, apparently – to deal with the proto-fascist Democratic Unionist party.)

■ **The Labour Party machine.**

Those who populate it despise Corbyn and much of what he stands for. While I suppose they would be happy with reversing some of the Tories' more extreme austerity measures, many of them can be relied upon to obstruct

many of Corbyn's more radical policies, such as raising the minimum wage, renationalisations and acting against zero-hours contracts. This machine dominates the Parliamentary Labour Party. Corbyn will rely on their votes, too, for getting stuff through parliament.

The machine is also organically hostile to the sort of alliances that many Corbynistas see as natural. It [expelled three long-standing Labour party members](#) for the horrendous "crime" of supporting a non-Labour anti-cuts candidate against Jeremy Hunt, the revolting Tory health secretary. While the Greens stood aside for its candidate in Brighton Kemptown, one of the town's constituencies (and didn't get so much as a "thank you"), Labour did its best (but failed) to unseat Caroline Lucas, the Green MP for Brighton Pavilion.

■ **Corbyn's political pragmatism.**

During the election campaign, Corbyn dealt with the perils of being a left-wing leader with a right-wing machine, in part, by shifting his political ground. As the [New Statesman's deputy editor Helen Lewis pointed out](#), Corbyn "went into the election promis-

ing the most right-wing Labour policy on immigration in more than 30 years”. He “embraced” the NATO military alliance. On keeping Trident and on keeping the monarchy, he said (truthfully) that his own views were at odds with Labour’s manifesto.

How much more pressure would Corbyn be under to bend his views, if he became prime minister?

■ **Corbyn’s political formation and closest collaborators.** Corbyn has always been associated with the “old” Labour left, that believed that socialism could be achieved through parliament, and was strongly influenced by the Communist party and its post-1990s remnants. He was steadfast in support of working-class struggles right through the 1970s and 1980s, and never hesitated to take a firm stand e.g. on opposing British military violence in Ireland, without regard to what the political circus thought.

But Corbyn also, like Tony Benn before him, always believed in left parliamentarism. And he always saw the Stalinist-led Soviet Union as a bastion (albeit imperfect) of human progress. (See comments at the end of this arti-

cle.) The remnants of this world view – that regimes that oppose US imperialism, no matter how dictatorial, are somehow on our side – has led him to espouse horrible views on e.g. the war in Kosovo in the 1990s or the role of the Assad government in Syria. Members of Corbyn’s inner circle, such as the former Guardian journalist Seumas Milne, more firmly embrace Putin-esque campist politics.

The closer Corbyn gets to getting elected, the more important it is to be clear about how these constraints operate.

Alexis Tsipras, who was buoyed by a surge of militancy when he became prime minister of Greece in January 2015, was similarly constrained. Within a year he was negotiating a deal by means of which the IMF and other international lenders to the Greek state imposed an austerity regime of unprecedented severity.

A lesson of that experience, in my view, is that we must not let the social movements developing in the UK now – in opposition to austerity policies, and around such issues as the Grenfell Tower fire and racism – become levers

in Labour's hands, as it plays the parliamentary game. That will limit those movements, cramp their vision, undermine their creativity.

It's not as though we don't have some British history to learn from, too. While universal suffrage and other democratic rights were the outcome of working class people's struggles, parliamentarism was historically a mechanism of social control. ([More on that here.](#)) The Labour Party functioned as part of that mechanism.

The social movements now taking shape could not only confront the heartless, headless Tory government (for however long it lasts), but also find the means to transform society in a way far deeper, far more profound, than the limited things that can be achieved through parliament. It would be a tragedy if Corbynismo becomes a way of hitching these movements to the parliamentary bandwagon.

John McDonnell, Corbyn's deputy, [says that the Labour party is now "changing into a social movement"](#). I don't think so. Sure, Corbyn addressed huge, inspiring rallies before the elec-

tion. But election rallies don't by themselves make a movement.

Any social movement must surely be much bigger, politically wider, and adventurous in its view of changing the world, than the Labour party. One answer to "what would Corbyn do?" is "that matters less than what we do, now". GL, 20 June 2017.

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14

THE PARTY IS HAUNTING US AGAIN

By Shawn Hattingh

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Karl Marx once said that history repeats itself, first as a tragedy then as a

farce. A case in point is that in South Africa sections of the left are once again calling for a mass workers' party (MWP) to be formed to contest elections – this they believe will bring us

closer to revolution. History says otherwise.

Of course the new calls for a MWP stem from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) breaking from the African National Congress (ANC). As an outcome NUMSA is exploring the possibility of setting up a MWP to contest elections. Many Marxist and leftist influenced organisations, but also cadres within NUMSA, are therefore providing reasons why activists should be interested in such a party.

Some of the reasons they have been giving in support of forming such a party have included: a good showing by such a party will strengthen struggles; a MWP party can unite the working class; a MWP can provide the working class with the correct ideological line of march; a MWP in the legislature – whether at a local, provincial or national level – will be able to make mass propaganda for the cause of socialism; gains and pro-working class policies could be secured by contesting state power; a MWP heading the state could provide greater welfare; and if a MWP gains control over the state it could nationalise key industries, bring-

ing socialism closer. Others, while advocating for a MWP, have taken a slightly different view influenced by the notion of ‘revolutionary parliamentarianism’ and they argue such a party could enter into parliament to expose the sham of parliamentary democracy and the current state; and that through this it could supposedly open the eyes of the working class, bringing revolution nearer and setting the stage for a so-called workers’ state.

Looking back over the history of MWPs, which first appeared as social democratic parties in the nineteenth century, none have fully lived up to the promises cited above. Throughout history no MWP has united the working class. This is because within working class politics different traditions have existed and an anti-party and anti-electoral strand has always existed. For a period between 1870 and 1920 it was the dominant form of revolutionary politics amongst the working class. In fact, the First International, which existed from 1864 to 1871 and aimed to bring working class organisations internationally together, split around the issue of MWPs and electoralism; with some including Marx go-

ing the MWP path and a majority rejecting parties and electioneering in favour of anti-state revolutionary politics through anarchism/syndicalism.

Today in South Africa there are also many activists, certainly within community organisations and struggles, that are anti-party and anti-electoralism. The vast majority of these activists are not anarchists (given the very limited influence of anarchism in South Africa), but have a deep mistrust of political parties, and politicians – even left-wing ones – entering into the state. This comes from experience. A new MWP, therefore, will in all likelihood not receive this section of the working class's support. Thus, a MWP, given history and given the anti-party sentiment of a section of the working class in South Africa, will not bring unity to the working class.

Gains for the working class have also very seldom been brought about simply by MWPs winning elections or even gaining hold of state power.

Rather struggle, including strikes, protests, revolts and revolutionary upheavals, have led to the working class winning gains from the ruling class. How the working class first won an 8 hour

working day is a prime example of this. Two of the first states to concede to an 8 hour work day were Germany and Spain. In these countries it was not due to the clever parliamentarian work of MWPs, nor them having state power, that led to workers winning an 8 hour work day; but rather massive struggles outside of the electoral realm and against the state by the working class.

In Germany the 8 hour working day was implemented in 1918. It, sadly, was implemented not because of the sterling work of a MWP, but rather was legalised as part of a betrayal by a MWP – the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) – of a working class revolution. At the time the SPD still claimed to be Marxist and said it wanted to overthrow capitalism while promoting and practicing electoral politics. In November 1918 workers, sailors and soldiers in Germany were establishing councils and were pushing for a genuine form of socialism based on direct democracy. It looked as if there was a possibility of them overthrowing both capitalism and the state. In this context a MWP, the SPD, made a deal with the ruling

class in Germany. It defended capitalism in return for gaining state power. As part of this it set up army corps that were loyal to it and even supported and deployed the right-wing paramilitary Freikorps to put down and break the revolution. The SPD-controlled unions also agreed to prevent workers seizing the means of production in exchange for capitalists recognising these unions and agreeing to an 8 hour working day. It was thus the spectre of revolution, eventually crushed by the SPD in alliance with right-wing paramilitaries, which led to the 8 hour working day being conceded to and legislated for in Germany.

Likewise, in Spain the 8 hour working day was not implemented due to a MWP pushing for it in parliament. It resulted from the concessions the ruling class were forced to make as a result of massive pressure from a 44-day general strike in 1919 by workers in anarchist/syndicalist unions. Indeed, the working class has never won any benefits without struggle and to think simply electing people from MWPs into legislatures will bring gains is dangerous.

More importantly, no MWP in history has come near to establishing socialism, even when they have headed up a state. This holds true even for the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union under a so-called workers' state. In other words, no MWP has ever brought about a society where exploitation and alienation has been ended; where direct democracy in the workplace and in society in general has flourished; where all forms of oppression, including racism and sexism, have been ended; where there are no rulers and ruled; where the divisions between mental and manual labour are broken; where the economy and wealth are socialised; and where society is based not on profit, but on meeting all people's needs through democratic planning. In the cases of the SPD and the Bolsheviks in power, they even actively fought against this. Thinking that a MWP could begin to deliver on socialism, therefore, ignores the facts of history. Those advocating for a MWP in South Africa should perhaps bear this in mind.

Centered towards state power

One of the central reasons why MWPs have not brought about a genuine

form of socialism – as opposed to reforming capitalism or embarking on state capitalism – is their orientation to contesting and capturing state power. Indeed, many of those advocating for NUMSA to form a MWP have taken words such as those of Leon Trotsky to heart when he said: “Every political party worthy of the name strives to capture political power and thus place the State at the service of the class whose interests it expresses”¹. The problem with such thinking, and a fatal flaw within the logic of MWPs, is that the state cannot simply be taken over by the working class and wielded as a revolutionary tool, even if it is a so-called workers’ state.

States can’t be used for liberation

The reason for this is that states emerged to ensure that elite minorities could and can wield power over a majority. States, therefore, came into being when societies based on class first arose. The purpose states were built to fulfil was to ensure that an elite could rule and accumulate wealth through using the state they controlled to keep a majority subservient, op-

pressed and exploited. As such states have always been tools and instruments of elite rulers and their class. This defining feature of all states means they can’t be used for liberation; it is not the purpose for which they arose. In fact, if there was no inequality or class rule, states would not exist.

How states work to ensure that the ruling class maintains power and wealth can easily be seen under capitalism. Today we have huge states that ensure the interests of the ruling class (capitalists, politicians and top officials in the state) are protected and furthered. Through the state’s legislative, judiciary, economic, military and policing arms, the state always protects and enforces the property interests of this class by protecting and enforcing minority property ownership, whether it be private and/or state-owned property. Along with this, states today legalise exploitation along with attempting to create an environment in which capitalism can generally function. These massive institutions cannot be simply wielded in the interest of the working class. Indeed, their function is to keep the working class oppressed.

Of course states use ideology and propaganda to ensure the working class accepts its own oppression. One source which states often perversely use in an attempt to ideologically neuter the working class is the fact that they provide some welfare and socially-useful services. Of course states, as discussed above in relation to the 8 hour working day, were forced to provide such services due to massive working class struggles and, often, the real threat of revolution. As such, welfare represents a gain of past mass struggles. Nonetheless, states and the ruling classes controlling them were also willing to make concessions based on the calculation that to do so would limit the possibility of future revolts. States then, for propaganda purposes, falsely claimed that it was their 'benevolence' that led to welfare. This is then used by states even today in order to claim they exist for the benefit of all classes. In other words they use the provision of welfare to try and mask the fact they exist to enforce class rule by an elite minority. What is, of course, not mentioned is that the need for welfare only exists because of class rule and capitalism; and that the resources states spend on welfare ironi-

cally also originally derive from the exploitation of the working class. A MWP in state power providing greater welfare does not overturn this reality.

The greatest weapon states – and the elite that control and influence them – have for ensuring class rule is the legal monopoly they have on violence.

When strikes or protests escalate states deploy the police and even military to put them down. Even peaceful protests and strikes often face police repression. If open revolt against capitalism or class rule breaks out, states have always reacted violently, even to the point of waging civil war. Under the Soviet Union, even under Lenin and a so-called workers' state, this too took place. There the state was used to violently defend Bolshevik rule and the privileges of those who headed the state. For example, the Soviet state ruthlessly put down strikes in Petrograd in 1921. Many of the workers involved were questioning the lavish lifestyles that Communist Party officials and managers were living. Later in the year, the Soviet state also used the military to crush a revolt in Kronstadt – those involved in the revolt questioned Bolshevik rule because the Bolshevik

leaders had become an elite. These workers wanted the state to be replaced by a genuine form of working class democracy based on worker councils (Soviets). Far from being used as a weapon of liberation, MWP's therefore have a history of using the state to violently ensure their own rule once in state power – as such they have not brought about socialism. The question for South African activists is: would a MWP in state power in South Africa really act differently?

States too are also capitalist entities in their own right. Many states still own factories, farms, mines and banks and in these workers are oppressed and exploited. A prime example is how the South African state exploits workers in Eskom. But such exploitation is not limited to South Africa. Workers in factories owned by the Venezuelan state also face exploitation and oppression. Indeed, major struggles have been fought in the steel factories owned by the Venezuelan state. No state throughout history, even when MWP's have headed it, has allowed socialism to blossom or the working class to genuinely control the means of production.

Even under the Soviet Union, it was a state bureaucracy that controlled the means of production. The working class remained oppressed and exploited and under the heels of the Bolshevik-controlled state. As a matter of fact, it was the Bolshevik Party in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917 that created this situation: it nationalised factories that were taken over by workers, it destroyed workers' self-management and replaced it with one-man management and it destroyed working class democracy in the Soviets. The Soviet Union, therefore, was not a socialist state, but rather a form of state capitalism – it never allowed the working class to have genuine workers' self-management/control. If a MWP nationalised the means of production in South Africa this would not be socialism. Consequently, to call on people to form and vote for a MWP in South Africa on the basis it will nationalise the means of production runs the risk of fostering a false belief amongst the working class that nationalisation equals socialism. The reality is under nationalisation, the state would own and control factories, banks, farms and mines; not the working class. In-

deed, if the working class genuinely had power and control over the means of production there would be no need for a state and nationalisation – states only exist because a few need to enforce their rule and control over the economy.

The centralization of states has consequences

In order to carry out the rule of an elite, all states have been centralised and hierarchical. As such, orders in all states flow down a chain of command. Only a few can and do rule. To carry out instructions from above, large bureaucracies always develop. This too attracts opportunists and careerists, as through states individual wealth and power can be accumulated via large salaries, patronage networks and corruption.

The reality is so even under a parliamentary system. Most high-ranking state officials, including generals, director-generals, police commissioners, state legal advisors, state attorneys, judges, managers and CEOs of parastatals, officials in the various departments and magistrates are never elected by the people. They are not an-

swerable to the working class, but to their line of managers. Most of their decisions, policies and actions will never be known by the vast majority of people – the top-down centralised structure of states ensures this. Even if a MWP was formed in South Africa and came to head some form of state, it could not change the centralised nature of the state. Centralisation and the state go hand-in-hand.

Likewise it is parliamentarians and the executive (presidents, premiers, mayors and all their ministers) that make and pass laws; not the mass of people. In fact, parliamentarians are not truly accountable to voters (except for 5 minutes every 5 years) and this is so even where MWPs have entered into parliament. While a MWP may occasionally make noise in parliament, there is actually a very long history around the world of parliamentarians of MWPs acting in their own interests, including voting for high salaries and betraying the working class. This is because parliamentarians, even from MWPs, don't receive mandates and are not recallable by the working class. The way parliamentary democracy functions means parliamentarians

vote and decide on policy and legislation within the confines of legislature – they don't go back to the working class to gain approval for their actions. Those advocating for a MWP in South Africa, therefore, consciously or unconsciously avoid revealing this truth to the activists they are trying to convince.

States and rulers

States, too, generate an elite and a section of the ruling class. This is central to the reason why MWPs going into the state and electioneering will not and cannot deliver socialism and an end to class rule. When people enter into top positions in states – including, historically, in so-called workers' states – they gain access to the means of administration and coercion and to new privileges. Being part of a few who have the power to make decisions for and over others and the ability to enforce those decisions, creates a position of a ruler. As such, the centralisation of power, which defines states, generates an elite. This can be seen in Venezuela today where a so-called MWP heads up the state. There top state officials rule, they receive large salaries and they have joined the rul-

ing class. Power there does not lie in the hands of the working class. It would be no different if a MWP were to come to head the state in South Africa.

Consequently, even where MWPs have come to gain state power and even when they have headed what many Marxists have called a workers' state in the early days of the Soviet Union, the leadership of these parties have become a new elite. They have, therefore, either become a new ruling class outright or they have joined the existing ruling class. Indeed, even if a MWP elected to only pay its parliamentarians, top state officials, ministers and President/Prime Minister/Chairperson an average workers' wage, they would still be rulers, they would still have power and they could still decide on policies and law and enforce those. The working class would still not have power.

The state cannot, therefore, be used to bring about socialism nor end class rule. It is preposterous to think that by entering into top positions in the state that a MWP can bring about socialism or even constantly make gains for the working class. The centralised and hi-

erarchical nature of all states throughout history, even so-called workers' states, means this is not possible.

States and elite rule are synonymous with one another. This means that a new MWP in South Africa, because of its tactics of centering towards the state, is not going to lead the working class to socialism and end class rule. It may change the faces of the ruling elite, but it will not get rid of the rule by an elite few.

The dangers of a MWP

MWPs and electioneering, consequently, hold many dangers. The orientation towards the state and electioneering carries the danger of creating illusions amongst the working class that the state can be used for liberation. This is a danger even in cases where advocates arguing for the MWP say that it should only stand in elections to expose the class nature of the current state. In such cases it is unlikely such tactics will bring the revolution closer. Indeed, why call on people to vote representatives into a state when you know it is a sham? Far from leading to people seeing the state as part of the problem, it is likely to create illusions. Consequently, it also

leads to the possibility that the working class will view elections, rather than mass struggle, as a focus of their energy. Indeed, many MWPs have diverted people's energies away from struggles, strikes and protests towards electioneering with disastrous consequences.

The idea of the MWP also carries the risk that the working class will shift the focus from building their own organs of struggle towards building a new party. In fact, if NUMSA is to play a revolutionary role, the task of NUMSA comrades is to transform their union into a revolutionary union. That means fighting in the union, too, to make it radically democratic. If a MWP is formed in all likelihood this won't happen – precisely because energies will be diverted into creating something new, the MWP. Likewise, it is also likely that mass struggles and organising in the townships will wane as energies too will be diverted away from building on what already exists into building a MWP.

The greatest threat that MWPs and their orientation to electioneering and the state (even a so-called workers state) pose is promoting the idea

amongst the working class that freedom and salvation will come from above and not through its own existing organisations and struggles. Indeed, it promotes the idea that a MWP can substitute for the working class; and that if a MWP had power it would bring freedom. The reality though is liberation won't and can't, by definition, come from above or through substitutionalism. If socialism is to be created it will be created by the working class through its own actions, organisations and struggle and not through the state and a MWP. Indeed, only the working class can liberate itself; and given the nature of states it, by definition, can't come through such structures.

Rather build a revolutionary working class counter-power

Another path, instead of a MWP, which the working class could go down is to rather build its own revolutionary counter-power against not only capitalism, but also the state and all forms of oppression including racism and sexism. Throughout history there have been instances where a counter-power has been built by the working class itself, including Russia during 1917, Germany in 1918, Spain

in 1936 and South Africa in the early 1980s. It is, therefore, possible for the class itself – without the so-called guidance of a MWP and without a MWP taking state power – to build its own counter-power. This is perhaps a more long term project and perhaps even a harder task than building a MWP, but it is a task that the working class will have to embark upon if it is to have power in its own hands one day.

The advantage of building a counter-power, though, is that history shows that it could be built through the organisations and movements the working class itself has already begun to create, be it community organisations, unions and worker committees. To build a counter-power the working class would, though, have to strengthen these movements and organisations and transform them into organs of working class direct democracy. They would also have to be infused with a revolutionary politics that aims not just to transform the state and capitalism, but to replace these with a new society.

To build a counter-power though does not mean ignoring the struggle for immediate gains. The working class

needs better housing and a decent lifestyle today and can't simply wait for the revolution to have the basics of life. As such the struggles for the things that are needed today to improve the lives of the working class, which includes placing demands on bosses and politicians because they have stolen from the working class, is vital. Indeed, things like corruption, repression and poor delivery can only be resolved in favour of the working class by the working class organising itself outside and against the state and placing demands on and even imposing its will on the bosses and state through mass direct action. Importantly though, it cannot also relax if the ruling class do provide such concessions. Rather, winning immediate gains has to be used as a school of struggle and immediate gains have to be used to build on towards revolution.

As part of this, the working class also needs to build towards the goal of seizing the means of production directly through its own organisations and structures; and from there socialise the means of production to meet the needs of all. It can't rely on a MWP or

state to do so; because then another power other than the working class would in fact control the means of production. History shows that the means of production can be seized directly by the class in revolutionary situations; for example in Russia in 1917 many factories were seized by the working class and were briefly run by workers' themselves using democratic committees in order to plan production – unfortunately these were destroyed once Lenin and the Bolsheviks consolidated their so-called workers' state.

Instead of MWPs and hoping elections or even a workers' state might bring gains or even revolution, the working class needs to build democratic revolutionary organs and fight so that one day it can take power in society itself and run society through direct democracy without a party instructing it or a state. This can be done using federated organs of direct democracy like worker councils, community assemblies and committees to allow everyone to have an equal say in how society is run. MWPs and voting in parliamentary or municipal elections brings us no closer to building such structures of counter-power. Rather all it

does is run the risk of generating further illusions in the state and it risks keeping the working class in chains far into the future. The working class has been in chains for far too long; it is time for the class itself to begin breaking those chains. Only it itself has the power to do so.

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