

# Unity for what and with whom? A polemic against left unity



An analysis of the contemporary situation in the United States, the conditions of the left, and a critique of promotion of activity unifying the left. It ends looking to another form of political action in today's environment.

The absence of any organized popular force acting on the political landscape is the defining feature of the previous decades in the United States. The alienation of the general population from politics, let alone liberatory politics, creates great difficulties for any radical aspirations, and shapes the actions of all of those who work to overcome not only their immediate grievances but also the system itself. Historically speaking, these sorts of situations are likely to have been common. Little has been written or discussed about what to do in similar circumstances however, at least little that I've been able to find. Most revolutionaries today look to the lessons and ideas of humanity's revolutionary moments; inspiring and important teachings though the context that gave them their reality couldn't be further from our own.

This wide gap between ideas and action gets played out in countless aspects of revolutionary projects, The difference is so extreme, it takes on tragic and comedic proportions. One of these areas is around the so-called left. Left unity is an obsession frequently stumped for, generally drawing from historical sources in the most radical of scenarios. Looking to history, many fear the tragic missteps of their predecessors who allowed reactionaries and authoritarians butcher whole populations. Left unity is seen as an antidote

against the enemy to unite all the forces of progress and humanity against reaction and tyranny.

There are a number of problems with this way of thinking though. Unity to do what? With whom? Whether a left exists, at least in this country, should be questioned deeply. At the most minimum the left should be seen as aspiring to transform society towards something freer and more equal, and do so by building movements by the exploited and oppressed to fight their own fights. This is incredibly vague and broad and could incorporate gradualist socialists, eurocommunists, insurrectionists, anarchists, etc. Still by that definition there is nearly no organized social force we could identify as left. Many have aspirations, yet nearly no one is actually working with people directly and connecting their politics to that work. Tiny localized examples exist, but in a given city there's likely only one or two small projects. You may see one or the other (action/organizing or political sects with aspirations), but rarely both together. In cities like New York, Oakland, or Portland huge numbers of activists can gather and give the appearance of movement, but when one looks below the surface it becomes apparent that there is little work being done to constitute concretely one's politics, whether insurrectionary or gradualist. By and large political activity in the US remains alienated from the population and merely confined to the circulation of ideas within activist subcultures. Left unity is a particularly bizarre and utopian idea in this context. The pantheon of the left is a series of highly individualistic sects built around the personalities, interests, and cultural circles of small groups of self-defined individuals.

Even going against and setting aside my suggestion that nothing like the left exists in a social form, the why question is strong. Why unify these people? To do what? Generally, the answer is to try and settle scores against rivals or generate some common denominator politics for deferred action (that basically never comes together). The effect of this recirculation of ideas and activities within the cliques of aspiring leftists is that it reinforces small group personality dynamics, and withholds the kinds of experiences that tend to develop people as political actors.

Collective struggle carries with it the potential to transform people and increase their capacities. When people struggle against the dominant form of political and social being, they are brought into conflict with the ideas and the norms of that society. This clash brings to the surface things we don't normally see, and it creates pressure for those fighting to take actions they wouldn't normally take when the stakes were lower. It creates space for reflection and new forms of social organization to emerge in the spots where the social order becomes weakened and disorganized even temporarily.

In a sense, the world of the left is internalized within the power relations of capitalism. Protests, meetings, conferences, and organizations have their place within the defined opposition which capitalism readily contains in stable periods. The obsession with dominating, unifying, and expanding micro-traditions within the left reinforces the reliance on politics as usual and minimizes the potential for participants to encounter new situations and activities that could create new militants and improve existing ones.

If by left unity they mean taking people engaging in activity to collaborate on specific actions because they agree on how to carry them out and can achieve more by doing so, then left unity is obvious. Calls for left unity essentially are

never this though, unless it's to engage in ritualized static forms of left culture like rallies, protests, bookfairs, and conferences. More importantly left groups do not tend to engage in the kinds of actions which would justify unifying (such as collaborating on specific activity within some mobilized social force), which makes the proposal spurious. Even when they do, typically there will not be more than one group engaging in activity you could unify with. The alienation of the left from collective action is the deepest critique perhaps of the disproportionate energy spent trying to unify leftists. In many ways the desire for left unity is an expression of the desire that an idealized left exist to unify. By doing that work you help ensure it will not occur.

These sorts of situations come from trying to escape your situation and put yourself into another, whether religious or borrowed from history. It is a form of political escapism. There is a real need for collaboration to solve the concrete issues that are slamming people across the globe without nearly anyone offering solutions that speak to their situation. Our ultimate work must be to build daily struggle guided by and intimately expressing our revolutionary aims for this society. Only then can we collaborate, and only then will the deep sectarianism of hollow left unity be exposed in practice.