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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The Platypus Review

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WHAT IS POLITICAL PARTY FOR THE LEFT?

Leo Panitch

Jackie Barkley

Antoni Wysocki

Carlos Pessoa



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capacity to the organization. These people have control positions of power, where they serve in a permanent organizations thus end up putting certain people in needed for family or private life. Even revolutionary after working long days and doing all the other things you are not going to do it in the few hours you have left that, basically, trying to change the world is not a hobby. *Program* (1875), for being too statist. Michels argues much earlier, in his famous *Critique of the Gotha* program of which Marx himself had already criticized Michels looks in particular at the SPD, the founding such organizations also become oligarchic? ranks of the working class community. How and why did and leadership that was unusu ally, elected out of the outside of the state with highly democratic constitutions happens to working class parties, which were created these parties will be oligarchical. Less clear is what winning the right to vote, among other rights. Of course where the working class, women, and others are thus to garner legitimacy for themselves, in a society they use parties as a way to secure a mass base, and This is not surprising for the parties of the ruling class; that all parties are essentially run by oligarchic elites. what he called the "iron law of oligarchy." He observes what released in English in 1915, in which he formulated wrote a book called *Political Parties*, published in 1911 The remarkable European intellectual Robert Michels of the political actors at the time. ultimately led to results quite contrary to the intentions other, as well as the conditions that, in many cases, form of politics succeed, in a certain period, over the than looking at the actual conditions that made one history in terms of what is written on the page, rather tends to go back and read Sorel or Lenin and interpret Did Sorel make the wrong choice? The idealist method voluntarist question, "Did Lenin make the right choice? to the building of parties. This cannot be reduced to a But this form of organization grew marginal in relation problems and provide the basis for changing the world, itself lead to the resolution of the most pressing social the factory, or the office, or what have you, this could in factory. The idea was that insofar as you could capture employers and the struggle for workers' control of the the state, instead emphasizing direct engagement with syndicalism, which was suspicious of the politics of America, Latin America, and elsewhere was anarchis of left-wing organization in much of Europe. North At the turn of the 20th century, a widespread form what happened, and why. historical materialist analysis, we can try to understand developed between 1870 and 1920, and, aided by good,

to the history of what happened to the organizations that lead a violent revolution against the state. We can look difficult or impossible, it has organized a vanguard to get into the state or, in situations where that proved sense of identity. Of course, it has also been about trying state. It was about self-organizing and creating that training workers to lead the assault on the bourgeois just getting electoral representation and more than in creating the class, in forging a sense of identity as always played in actually organizing people into a class. what we often miss is the active role that parties have wanted to contest power at the level of the state. But Some parties have emerged out of trade unions that activists who may or may not come from that class. themselves and the role in organizing that is played by which workers, and especially urbanized workers, find by the interaction between the material conditions in automatically or spontaneously. Class is produced class as just a "collective," as something that happens was not thinking, and we should not think about, the 1830s, who were organizing in the Silesian region. He London amongst exiles kicked out of Germany in the German Workers Educational Association operating in a class, he was thinking about the Chartists and the of all communists is to organize the proletariat into When Marx said in the *Manifesto* that the first task another and provide a collective life for one another. organize in order to seek collective benefits for one organizations just to survive. It became necessary to throws people into the necessity of developing collective difficult to organize on a class basis, and increasingly families from community bonds that had made it social relations, loosens workers and working class with the way that capitalism dissolves precapitalist class. The birth of these organizations had a lot to do first time permanent organizations of the subordinate women. But, in that fifty-year period, you saw for the There have always been bread riots, usually led by subordinate class. There have always been slave revolts. organized, representative political bodies of the for the first time in human history permanent, self- great many countries in that period, there emerged association and the right to vote that took place in a of capitalism and in the struggles for freedom of Between the 1870s and 1920, in the development working class labor party. thinking through the history of the socialist, communist, the topic of political parties as historical materialists, be or how I would like to define it. We should approach the abstract, idealist way, asking what a party ought to do so in Leo Panitch: The best way to address the questions

the question of the political party. parties. It appears there is no way for the Left to escape either passively or actively to place its hopes in other Worse still, without parties of its own, the Left is forced which capitalism changes, but invariably persists. more than give sanction to the vicissitudes through default—politics without parties—seems unable to do both theoretically and practically. And yet, the current could be developed within society, is difficult to envision through which the necessity for social transformation not as an end in itself, but as a means for the Left, on). Today, the idea that political parties could serve, of opportunism (e.g., reformism, careerism, and so ineffective strategies and giving cover for various forms rationalization and institutionalization of politically at best, an ambivalent legacy, often leading to the process of building towards a revolution has had, sustaining activity and discontents over time in the and flow of movements. Yet the role of a party in for building a long-term perspective beyond the ebb Formal political organizations appear indispensable generate more problems for the Left than it solves. However, the issue of the political party seems to to take political action today? the First International. What would it mean for the Left all the way back to Marx's dispute with the anarchists in significant question facing the Left internationally goes anticapitalist in France. Today, perhaps the most Mike Macnair—the latter occasioned by the formations (2008) by Communist Party of Great Britain member and Bolshevism, or the book *Revolutionary Strategy* 1889–1914, as in Lars Lih's revisionist history of Lenin organization going back to the Second International, regarding the legacy of Marxism in principles of political to as neo-Kautskyskism, discussions have surfaced Around the political tendency sometimes referred *Endnotes*, as exponents of a new "millennial Marxism," publications have emerged, such as *Jacobin*, *n+1*, and

Leninism in the developed capitalist countries. New has been characterized as the crisis of actually existing Anglophone and Western European countries, in what Marxist (Trotskyist) political organizations in the there has been a growing crisis of the largest orthodox to break into high political office. At the same time, "political caste." In Germany, Die Linke appears poised established labor unions as being part of the existing Greece and the formation of Podemos in Spain, which have witnessed the growing prominence of SYRIZA in protesters' *Communiqué from an Absent Future*. We *World Without Taking Power*, the Invisible Committee's expressed by Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, *Multitude*, to influence leftists, as seen in the perspectives tendencies inherited from the 1980s and 90s continue and the Arab Spring. At the same time, post-political subsequent downturn, following Occupy Wall Street place in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and party. Various "left unity" initiatives have been taking informing the Left today is the issue of the political tendencies, perhaps the most significant question In spite of many different political currents and

Introduction

platypus1917.org/2015/01/24/political-party-left-haillax/. of the discussion. The full audio is available online at of the event are below, followed by an edited transcript Workers' Party. The introduction and framing questions Post-Marxism and Politics: The Case of the Brazilian member of the organization STAND; and Carlos Pessoa, author of member of Solidarity Haillax; Antoni Wysocki, member of Socialist Project; Jackie Barkley, a founding of Leo Panitch, author of *Renewing Socialism and a What is political party for the Left? The panel consisted a discussion in Haillax; Nova Scotia, under the title.*

On January 21, 2015, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted

Carlos Pessoa

Antoni Wysocki

Jackie Barkley

Leo Panitch

Opening remarks

What is political party for the Left?

Political Party, continued from page 2

Increasingly, they turn to parties of the far right, and it is understandable why they would do so. They make the perfectly rational calculation that *if* politics is indeed a zero sum game—if we cannot improve society as a whole better, if the interests of the rich are unimpeachable—then all that is left is to fight amongst ourselves for the scraps.

Carlos Pessoa: First of all, thank you for inviting me to this talk. I will have a few words about the example of the Brazilian Workers’ Party (BWP). The other panelists took as their starting point the question, “What are the concrete conditions, as opposed to mere abstraction?” I will not necessarily follow that approach. I think it is impossible to have any moment of the discussion about concrete conditions, historical or not, without some sort of abstractive input of theory. One cannot talk about the historical conditions without already putting some theory into play. At the same time, it is impossible to theorize, to abstract, without also incorporating historical examples. I would hope to go beyond this dichotomy between concrete conditions and theory.

As a starting point, we should talk about what the Left is. Personally, I follow the conception that the Left is those of us who do not accept inequality as natural, as a given. Being part of the Left is not so much an identity, but a value; if you attach yourself to those values, then you are on the Left. The same goes for political action and political parties, though personally I am more interested in political actions. What are the ways we can bring different marginalized groups to engage in a political act? When you are able to bring diverse groups within a Left program, that is the moment of politics.

Regarding the political party, my experience has been with the BWP, which has some interesting things to say. It was established in the 1980s, and during that decade it brought together social movements and various leftist tendencies, from Trotskyists, socialists, even social democrats, all in a single party. How was that possible? One of the things that I found from my research was, first of all, the importance of an internal structure that involves rank-and-file members in decision-making. Also important were discursive changes in the analysis of social conflict. We had to move away from class analysis, alone, in order to understand social conflict. This was crucial in allowing groups that suffer due to different logics of marginalization to come to your party. Many see themselves being marginalized by racial structures or by gender structures, and if all they hear from you is about class division, they are not going to join you. This is what we see happening in the BWP.

When you are in the opposition, you can criticize those in power as much as possible and focus on organizing. When you become part of the government, however, you are in another world. In the 1980s, as the BWP moved up, even just to a municipal level, a number of problems emerged. There was a lot of conflict between those members elected to local positions. At least 16 out of

36 officials at the municipal level were clashing. They either left the party or were expelled, which was quite traumatizing for a party that was seen as innovative and promising in Latin America.

I can highlight a few of the underlying problems the BWP faced. The first lesson we had to take to heart is that there are economic, structural limitations on what you want to do. You can perhaps reallocate resources from buying jets to education and healthcare, but at the end of the day, there are limits to the economic results you can expect to achieve. In addition, you have to work with other elected officials, even if they are right wing. Your very presence reaffirms their legitimacy. In a democratic system, you get one election, but you do not have one revolution! You have to compromise with others and try for the best outcome you can get. However, those who are just members of the party do not have to deal with those limitations. They still want your party to do it all: major land reform, increased minimum wage, and so on. One of the things we came to understand within the BWP is the role of social movements, of the groups that keep pressing for all these different goals. They represent nothing except themselves. The most important thing was to bring in the unorganized sectors, so the BWP increasingly focused on creating channels through which the unorganized can participate in politics.

An interesting relationship with the social movements developed. Even the militants for the party within the social movements had to face all these other groups that were not organized but were nonetheless composed of citizens raising demands for clean water, sewage treatment, and so on. There could be tension between the objectives of the social movement and the demands of the unorganized; the latter might come in and say, “You know, I agree that there are a lot of problems concerning race, but what we need *here*, right now, is clean water and better housing.” The lesson was, once you are in power, you have to establish much better channels in order to bring in the unorganized sectors, people who are busy, people who do not have the privilege of attending meetings, discussions, and readings.

All this was happening until the election of Lula da Silva, which is the point where we see a great deal of neglect when it came to creating more participatory channels. The party became too focused on crafting progressive policies. Many left. Ultimately, what prevailed was a politics that, once in power, understood its role only as dealing with the different political forces at play and crafting progressive policies within the existing economic structures. There was no willingness to invite risk by offering a program that talks about major structural changes, be it land reform, or housing, or anything else. In the last election, the BWP had a campaign manager, complete with the typical attitude that you have to win to be in power, and they ran negative ads. That is what they have become.

would be accomplished is the discouragement of people and the discrediting of our ideas.

Jackie’s response is the correct one for when people say that socialism has been “proven” wrong. The difficulty is that we lack effective means of getting that out as a mass message. Here, I think what Carlos was saying about the experience of the BWP is key. The only part of the world that has to a greater or lesser extent been able to resist neoliberalism successfully is Latin America. I would suggest that is because of the mass mobilizations that preceded the founding of the parties that are now in power. In Brazil you had the peasant leagues carrying out land occupations in the 1960s during the dictatorship of the generals 20 years before the Workers’ Party was founded.

Some of the ways we have discussed the question of organization are, to my mind, getting it the wrong way around. As Carlos said, what happened when the Workers Party came to power at the municipal level is essential. They had the experience of mass mobilization providing the groundwork, so it made sense to establish a party, because that party could advance itself through *actions*. Propaganda is never going to work, as we do not have the resources. We have to *show* people, and not just in the sense of setting up demonstrations. Instead, there needs to be collaborative work, in the way that Carlos outlined, long before you have the establishment of any new political organization. The Left should not be worrying about particular organizational models, and certainly not thinking about giving support to existing parties, nor founding new ones. Rather, we should be focused on creative ways to foment resistance in people’s everyday lives, answering their problems in co-operative ways that reject both capitalism and the state.

CP: The key question is, “How do we move from a

Q & A

CP: In terms of the process that is established, in the end there will be the possibility for being “undemocratic,” even if just in terms of time limits. Perhaps we should have a different kind of set up? Something closer to an open mic?

JB: It is important to distinguish debate from decision-making, and I think the greater part of our energy needs to focus on decision-making structures within our organizations. Sometimes it is okay to have representation. At the risk of sounding defensive, which is not my intent, I probably spend 18 hours with people in the group trying to understand how to use 20 minutes in an intelligent, democratic way.

LP: This speaks to one of the detrimental aspects of the consensus practice that the Left has undertaken for the last 15 years. Though the focus on consensus is a necessary response to bad experiences of hierarchical organizations, it makes it very difficult to get anywhere. You cannot really have a discussion or an argument if no one is allowed to speak for more than two minutes. By adopting passive, structureless forms, we have reacted too strongly to the problems of hierarchy in political organization. It is one of the reasons that, at a meeting like this, we leave without a means of connecting with each other organically, organizationally, institutionally.

Leo, you brought up the question of organizing the class as the main task of the party, but doesn’t that also mean organizing the social movements that create the base of that party? We have the successful example of Québec solidaire (QS), a mass party that brings together social movements and a range of left tendencies, including varieties of Leninism and Trotskyism. Could each of you elaborate more on the role of building social movements? Finally, as a side note: Lenin is still very relevant.

CP: I am by no means against social movements, but, in the end, a social movement is aimed at a specific social demand. As I see it, they only become political if and when they come together with other forces. You have a number of social movements, some of them quite influential. The African-American movements were able to help establish the black American middle class. But it is not clear that the Left ever really had a grip on it. For instance, it was not the Left, but George Bush who first appointed black persons in some of the highest, most visible positions of power. People should be able to come to the Left, not just as part of a social movement, but also as individuals. This is crucial if we aim to increase the possibilities for a broader range of people to be part of the Left.

AW: There are structural conditions in place that make it impossible for there to be any genuinely progressive politics within the parliamentary sphere. We first need to change those conditions, but how? The somewhat naïve answer is, by going out and explaining to people the great ideas that we have and how socialism is such a wonderful thing. But, as Rosa Luxemburg once pointed out, there is nothing as idiotic as going door-to-door preaching revolution. What needs to be established among the people is the idea that their lives can be different. We will not do that through interventions in the political sphere, because the victories that we might win occasionally are going to be so partial and conflicting that they end up taking away more than they add. I think we must investigate people in organic communities and their lives in these neighborhoods. Concretely, what problems are the people experiencing? Ultimately, the momentum has to come from within the community itself, in a democratic, consultative way, and the resulting projects absolutely need to be premised on explicit opposition to capital and the state. As a prototype of this, I would point to the land occupations that the MST (Landless Rural Workers’ Movement) has carried out in Brazil. It is a very confrontational tactic that is not appropriate in many places at this time, but I would offer it as an ideal. If we cannot go that far, what *can* we do that

small group of close friends to a broad movement?” To do that, you cannot hold fast to any particular kind of class analysis in order to understand why certain groups feel marginalized. Other people see themselves marginalized due to other logics, such as gender and race, which are not covered neatly by class analysis. If we accept that, we can bring them into a broad leftist program. The most important thing is to fight to create conditions that allow us to question inequalities, whatever they may be.

Yes, we should not only look at what we are excited about, say, what is happening in Greece or Spain. I was once excited about what was happening in Latin America—but now, not so much. If you are always desperate to find a model and say, “Ah, that is the party for our final revolution,” well, it does not work like that. We have to look at what the conditions are, but in so doing, we must learn what we can take from the experiences in Spain, Greece, and Brazil, in order to change. The aim is to increase political action. The political party, in the end, is nothing but an instrument, within the state, that depends on broader political action.

If we want to establish a party, the “iron law of oligarchy” is not, I think, the biggest issue. At least, in Brazil, that was not the most pressing matter. We did not have problems with the fact that this or that official gets paid full time. The main problem we ran up against was that we were under the structure of the state, with limits economically and politically on what we could do. *We have a panel with speeches that took up most of the time of this event. Do I need to say anything more? This process creates a hierarchy. This process is not democratic.*

approximates it? Unions, instead of spending their money and time supporting political campaigns, which is futile, could work to bring Cuban doctors to Nova Scotia to build up rural communities that are crying out for medical centers. They could do that and explain why the Cuban medical model is so successful.

JB: Contrary to what you were saying, Carlos, the Communist Party of the U.S. conducted a great deal of activity in Harlem and across the U.S. in important anti-racist and Civil Rights struggles, historically. Although perhaps for opportunist reasons, the Soviet Union was also supportive of the resistance of African Americans. In terms of what Antoni has spoken about, in connection with reforms, reformism, and electoralism, these questions are cast in a different light in the lead up to a major election. In my day-to-day efforts, I work with extremely vulnerable people. Some of the reforms that come up are not structural and may in fact be quite petty. Nonetheless, these changes that we can achieve through elections, however apparently small, can make for profound differences in many people’s lives.

LP: In terms of the prominence of consensus politics, I recently met in Toronto with people from QS and the student organizations in Quebec, at the initiative of both, and the leadership was very disciplined. They were not running the kind of meeting where anybody could just say anything at will. They went into those meetings in a very disciplined way, and they have also self-consciously developed leadership. That is a key difference that is bringing them a degree of success that has eluded most other groups.

Do you think the issue of opportunism has any relevance in the contemporary Marxist Left?

AW: I am not really sure I follow. I do not have an answer.

JB: Opportunism is an extremely important issue to address. The difficulty is that I consider “opportunism” a characteristic of personality, of individual behavior, and it is a rather different question when located in the political realm.

Leo, you said that parties can be platforms for organizing class consciousness and class identity, but isn’t class consciousness, along with most working class cultures, often quite conservative? Antoni, you said that trade unions should disengage from elections. Yet, participating in a political process, however corrupt, does provide a form of engagement, and as you correctly mentioned, it may alleviate some hardships. That trade unions should disengage from elections and do something like advocate for Cuba is a bold idea, but how would that unfold in the public discourse? What would be the actual consequences?

AW: Trade unions created labor parties, not the other way around. The notion that the labor movement could disengage from the parliamentary political process should not seem so strange. What I am advocating is disengagement from an elite process that has been entirely captured by the ruling class. There are other ways for the labor movement to engage with the rest of us. One of the big problems in rural communities in Nova Scotia is that services are decreasing. If the labor movement, which has a huge organizational capacity and deep pockets, were to get involved with this sort of process, it would be beneficial to everyone.

LP: I think that class consciousness is dialectical. Organizations grow out of a certain awareness and, historically, emerged from a certain class community. Such organizations then engage in the process of deepening and broadening that sense of class. A craft union comes with a class consciousness of a very exclusivist kind. The task of the party, in that sense, is

Responses

LP: Tony Benn led the insurgency to turn British Labour into a transformative party again on the grounds that democratizing the British state and the economy required democratizing the Labor Party first. Though his efforts failed, I got to know him well. I remember talking with him once in the 1980s, at the height of Thatcherism, and he said, “So, is it all over? Is the Left going to rise again?” I said that between the Chartists in the 1830s in England and the rise of the Labour Party, there was a period of more than 60 years. He thought for a minute, then responded, “Well, in that case, I am going to have to live to 130.” In that period between the Chartists and the Labour Party, a lot happened: tremendous union organizing, community building, and new forms of Owenism. A hell of a lot has happened since the period in which my generation saw that the communist and social democratic parties alike had run their course as agencies of change.

We should learn from the mistakes of the past in order to create a new set of institutional alliances and practices, ones that would not take the Bolshevik revolution as *the* pivotal point for all political discussion. A lot of the mistakes made by people politicized in the 1960s, including some of the best cadre and organizers, stemmed from the fact that their politics revolved entirely around building a better Leninism. In the late 20th century, if the crux of your politics is the Bolshevik revolution and its language and you just try to reproduce them in the present, you are inevitably going to marginalize yourself. Such groups were not sectarian, arrogant, or divisive simply because they were bad people; they became all of those things as they became more and more politically marginalized.

I have no doubt that in the 21st century we are going to see repeated attempts to build the type of transformative political organizations that will learn the limitations of previous attempts. One of the great mistakes of the early socialists was to put the achievement of socialism on the same timeline as their own mortality. Of course, we all want to see it in our lifetime—but I know I will not. In that sense we need to be like the craftsmen who started the medieval cathedrals. They started building them in 1100, but they were not completed until 1450.

Jackie is right to say that we should not be Eurocentric, but it has actually been far more common on the Left to romanticize political developments that occur far away from us. Leftists went to Porto Alegre, looked at the participatory budget, and exclaimed, “They have it all figured out!” In 1935, Beatrice Webb went to the Soviet Union at the height of the show trials, saw full employment—and did not see the show trials—and came back to say, “I have seen the future, and it works.” When we go to Venezuela, Bolivia, Greece, Spain, or anywhere else, we need to ask hard questions. What are you running up against? What problems are you confronting? The Left does not want to talk about that very much.

In the early 1980s, I was part of a group called the

Ottawa Committee for Labour Action that built a base in the largely white-collar working class of Ottawa, mostly with those who had jobs in civil service. We kept waiting for a non-Leninist party that was left of social democracy to come along. It never happened. We organized as many people as we could from the non-sectarian left in Ontario and created the Socialist Network, which went nowhere too. It was tried again in the early 2000s with Rebuilding the Left, at the most horizontalist moment, when people were concerned with having consensus-based politics with no political structure, no organization of an ongoing kind. That is happening again; you can see it in the very successful regroupment that has taken place here on the principles that Jackie outlined. Those principles are all admirable, but the same problems will recur.

When Marx broke up the Communist League in 1850, he said there are two kinds of people in this organization: those who think if we do not make the revolution this week, we might as well take to our beds and pull the blankets over our heads, and those of us who think we are engaged in a process that will last 20, 30, or 50 years.

JB: Even though I love the French churches, too, a better comparison for us might be the struggle against slavery in the United States, which took 400 years. People did not think in their lifetime that they would see the benefits of those struggles. What that means for me—and this is a crucial message for the young people in this room—is that you absolutely do not have the right to get tired. Be discouraged, annoyed, and frustrated. Break up, reconnect, break up, reconnect—but do not get tired. It really is a long struggle.

I want to comment just briefly on one of Antoni’s comments about how capitalism appears more virtuous because socialism did not work. From my vantage point, it is important for us to be frank in saying that capitalism is not working, and also that the efforts to create socialism have not worked. People say, “They tried this in China, and in East Germany, and it failed.” We should not be defensive about the complex reasons why those things did not work, but we must have the long-term vision needed to explain the circumstances and social conditions relevant to those failures. Finally, when I talked about the problems of sectarianism and dogmatism, I was not referring to the 19th century, but to the 21st century. I was referring to our own legacy, which includes many difficulties when it comes to engaging in collaborative debate that builds the political structures and theories that we need, rather than the debates that have us competing with each other.

AW: In the address that Leo brought up, at the dissolution of the Communist League, one of the things that Marx mentioned was his opposition to the faction within the League that was keen on taking power. Marx said that taking power would be useless because they were in no position to deliver on the program. All that

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to get beyond those exclusions, to broaden the identity and definition of class. That is what parties used to do, but they no longer are capable of getting people to think in those terms, or to identify that way.

Regarding what Antoni said, I would point out that trade unions did not always produce parties. In the English-speaking world they often did. In many other parts of the world, the parties created the unions. Party activists started many unions. It also used to be the case that trade union leaders were willing to risk legitimacy by openly declaring their politics and identifying as socialists. They were willing to say to the workers, “if you are ever going to get off this treadmill, you need to become a socialist and you need to join this party.” Union leaders don’t do that anymore, even if they are socialists—and many of them are. Many unions today focus on collecting dues and the like, rather than building class politics. I would not want to denigrate the democracy we have, and I think we should be careful about that. What we have was won through long struggle. Freedom of association, freedom of speech, these were not handed down to the people from on high. The people fought for these rights and freedoms. This is not to deny the surveillance state and the many restrictions we face, but there have always been restrictions. I think it is very important that we recognize that there is still plenty of space for class politics in the capitalist democracies.

It seems the panel has ignored the primary two words of Marxism: objective conditions. There has been no discussion of the military industrial complex, corporate power, or climate change. Leo, with your long perspective, Florida will be under water before anything changes. As for class analysis, you already got that through the Occupy movement: There is 1% in one class and 99% in the other class. The 1% does not care at all about the rest of us, just as long as the 99% keeps working to generate profit for the 1%.

JB: It is important to recognize that one of the concrete conditions is the question of the environment. Naomi Klein has often discussed the environment properly in relation to class struggle and capitalism, and that is part of our learning curve. One legacy on the Left is the incorrect idea that unlimited structural, economic progress is actually possible. This false idea was shared with the ruling class. The ruling class hoped to get everything, and many leftists thought that all we have to do is get their stuff, make more stuff, and give it to everybody. But that does not work. There are limits.

AW: In my opening remarks I spoke about corporate control and how there have been changes over the course of the 20th century that have led to the current situation. I did not say that liberal democracy was never, in all times and places, able to deliver some of the goods. What I was talking about was what has changed, so that what was possible before is no longer possible in the same way. As for climate change, I just think we are screwed. The world’s leading authority on climate change, James Hanson, has said there is just no way we are going to avoid the two degrees of global warming that is now taken widely as a benchmark for runaway climate change. But here again I would appeal to the approach I talked about before. What we can do to help is build resilient communities. That way, when the crisis comes and everything collapses, we could be in a better position to salvage something.

LP: Yes, the objective conditions make things very difficult for us. Under pressure, capitalists will allow for reforms that might change some things, but ultimately they are about reproducing capitalism. The welfare state was structured so as to sustain the dynamics of capitalism, which then undermined what people wanted the reforms to accomplish. We have to be very careful about what politics will develop under the pressure of the ecological crisis. What kinds of reforms will be introduced? We are already seeing some reforms already, including the different kinds of “green development” that many colleges are getting so excited about. All of these reforms involve deepening markets, abusing derivatives for carbon trading, and the like. Monsanto is developing new seed types that will be able to grow even in places that are ravaged by climate change. We could end up in a society that looks like *Blade Runner!* In that sense, we need to hold on to being socialists. I appreciate the urgency of the problem, but a great many people are prepared to engage in a politics that falls far short of being socialist, and this is deeply problematic.

CP: I have already said a few things about the importance of class analysis, but, again, I do not think it should be seen as the sole framework through which you analyze conflict in society. There are some who argue that it is not capitalism that is destroying the environment but actually how we relate to nature in general, because we treat nature as something outside of us and do not understand how we fit into the environment. How do we respond to that? Are we going to say, “You got it all wrong, and so you are not welcome in our group,” or are we going to allow for this kind of analysis to be part of the Left? I think the latter is the wise choice.

I am wondering about the need to build long-term movements and the effort and time that requires. Do we have time for that? There is a growing sense on the Left that we are already in a crisis, or a series of crises. It seems that now, for the first time since the New Left, we can say, “Marxist,” “we can talk about capitalism as a problem. But then, why do we see the rise of far right parties across North America and Europe? These anti-immigrant parties seem to be capturing many people’s imagination in this moment of crisis—not the Left.

JB: In connection with building long-term movements, I want to clarify that I do think we need an organizational structure. I am not opposed to forming a party—nor, I think, is the group I work with—but we share significant questions about how to overcome the various problems and issues that come along with that, including the problems Carlos raised in discussing the experience of

the BWP.

CP: I think there are possibilities for us at this moment of crisis. Why do we see right-wing groups and so much right-wing populism flourishing, relative to the Left? Why is it always the right that seems to be gaining the advantage and initiative in the context of a crisis? In light of those questions, we need to think about what we are putting out there. Has the Left said anything about terrorism, for instance? If we do not say anything about such issues, which are things the masses obviously care about, the right will be there, happily providing its viewpoint, unchallenged.

I agree we need to work on many fronts at the same time, in the long term and the short term, but what I could never have imagined, in my lifetime, is the level of destruction that Steven Harper has brought to this country. We have to work on strategic voting. The people in Nova Scotia have to ensure that not one conservative representative here makes it in the next election. Let them be liberals, let them be Green, let them be NDP, but do not let them be conservative. Who is organizing to make sure that happens?

AW: Yes, Stephen Harper is the worst prime minister we have ever had, but he did not just fall from the sky. The objective conditions are what make Harper. If you had a different prime minister, like Thomas Mulcair, he may not move things along in the wrong direction



Lenin delivers a report on the international situation at a meeting of the II Congress of the Comintern, July 19, 1920.

quite as fast as Harper, but he certainly is not going to move in a good direction. You cannot trust any of them. Increasingly, we are hearing this stated openly by the capitalist class itself. The finance minister of Germany recently went on record saying, in effect, it does not matter if SYRIZA is elected in Greece, the policies are going to be the same. The Left Party Premier of Thuringia, Germany bluntly said that he is going to violate the program they ran on and that he is more sympathetic to business than unions, despite the fact that he came out of the labor movement. He said otherwise because it helped him get elected. If the Canadian people want Harper, it will not matter what we say. It is striking in this conversation how people keep acting as if you elect a person of a certain political stripe, or from a certain party, and a great many consequences will flow directly from that. They do not. It depends on the balance of forces in society. If the electorate, the people, are strong enough, we will stop Harper from doing things we dislike. It will not matter whether he is in office. It is a mistake to focus so much on the election.

JB: I belong to a political organization, Halifax Solidarity, that does not share my view that getting rid of Harper at this time is a priority, given the resources we have. One of the things we have not talked about much is how hegemonic ideas develop. I do not agree that Harper is unimportant. It is not just the structures of the state, but also the structures of how people *think*, that have been moving to the right. Harper and what he represents have been an important part of that rightward shift.

A lot of people here and most of the people on the panel seem to be from university settings. Doesn’t that alienate people? Do the different fields of the academy create divides where there might not be real differences? I feel like Rome is burning, and we are arguing over the kind of wood the fiddle is made of.

CP: If we are talking about how not to alienate people, we have to think about something important, yet under-theorized on the Left: What are the elements of persuasion? How do you persuade people to come to your program? Does that happen just by revealing the true nature behind all this marginalization? That alone does not seem to be enough. I remember the 1988 elections in the U.S. and how bizarre it was to see Michael Dukakis, who seemed like a good candidate, intelligent and self-composed, lose the election. Plenty of unionized workers had been against George Bush, but, nevertheless, when Bush started talking about national feeling and the importance of the flag, the very workers who had booed him earlier decided to vote for Bush. Why did that happen? Why did so many vote against their own economic interest? This is something the Left should focus on. We have to learn how to frame issues based on our values and especially on our conviction that inequality is not natural. That may be one of the ways that we can persuade people to come around to a broader political front. It is striking how effective ISIS, or ISIL, can be when it comes to

using social media to persuade people from different countries to join their group. How is this group in the Middle East able to get people to join, while we on the Left struggle?

AW: I am a janitor, and I think that through my interactions with my fellow workers I have some sense of what blue-collar people are like, what they are thinking. Again, one of the things that seems really misguided in this whole discussion is how idealistic it is. It is not as though you go out there and tell people a good idea and suddenly they say, “Now I am converted to socialism.” That is not how it works. For one thing, the Left does not have, and we cannot conceivably have, the resources to conduct that kind of conversation. What we need to do is give people the experience of socialism. We need them to understand it by living it, leaving aside questions about organizational structures, which I see as secondary, at best. Leo talked about how in the trade union movement, even people who are socialists are not comfortable making that clear when that once was exactly the basis on which the Left organized. I completely disagree with Carlos’s emphasis on values. Our values are not different. Everybody in our society has similar values. Everybody thinks it is wrong to take an innocent life, everybody thinks that it is right to help your neighbor. That is not an explanation for anything. The issue is what people think is *possible* in the world. The right thinks that everybody is a bum, and that power is monopolized by the people at the top, and we cannot

change that, so the best we can do is kick whoever is further down the ladder. The Left should be pressing for radical equality and also for a progressive, utopian vision, saying that we *can* do better. If socialists are not doing that, nobody is.

LP: I am happy the university question got raised. Platypus, it seems, is very explicitly an organization that seeks to use the university infrastructure to think through socialist ideas and organize meetings, and this is obviously the case tonight. Up until the 1960s, if you were a Marxist, you would not go to university. You would join the revolutionary party or the communist party. Marxism has indeed become trapped in universities.

Carlos, you talked about how the Left in some respects struggled to relate productively to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Is that because the Left was not open enough to other ways of organizing?

CP: My point was that, in social movements on the Left, especially in the U.S., there is a tendency to stay within one group. African Americans stay in their own groups, women stay in their own groups, and while those movements can be quite influential, of course, it is easy for those groups to be incorporated by the right. If you go to places like the Netherlands, all you see are social movements that are quite clearly part of the right. In the latest elections in the U.S., you can tell the right is catching on, and so now we are seeing more African-American and gay candidates from the right. Social movements are not inherently progressive. It is up to the Left to create the conditions by which the social movements can become part of a left-wing project.

The panel brought up all the exclusions built up by white male industrialists, but we still see those exclusions on the Left, within our own movements, around patriarchy, colonialism, and sexism. We talked about a kind of co-opted consensus model that has supposedly been around for 15 years, but it has actually been practiced by a lot of indigenous communities, for centuries. How can we reevaluate our organizing with the hope of inclusion, when some of the basic premises under which we have been organizing have been deeply rooted in so many exclusions? And when I say “we” or “me,” I say that as a white, settler, cisgender, abled person.

LP: I was the first kid in my family to go beyond a high school education. One of the reasons that I and many like me were so excited to study trade union militancy, why we even romanticized it a great deal, was that we were atoning. We felt some guilt for having stepped out of the class and out of our community. We made lots of claims that we were “representatives” of that community, operating within the university. In all honesty, we really were not. How were we representatives of the working class communities we came from? I mean, what accountability did we really have to those we claimed to represent?

Well, I want to push that idea a bit further, though I

know some people will not like it: Similar things have happened with women and black people in universities, particularly under the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism. There is a lot of political capital involved in women and black people saying, “I represent the alternative to institutionalized racism.” But, really, in what sense were they politically representatives of the masses of people in the black community, or of all women?

In the political organizing work I have done in Toronto, I have found it is not uncommon for students schooled in poststructuralism to come to a meeting and say, “Where are the people of color in this room?” And they are right! But they take no responsibility for actually bringing people of color into the room, for actually trying to organize. They would not even know where to begin, because they have no actual base in the marginalized communities that they claim to represent.

This all relates to the problem of organizing the working class. I once gave a keynote address to the upbraided nurses’ union after their big strike. I delivered this radical speech on organizing hospitals democratically, and they all applauded me. After the break, the first order of business organizationally was to bring orderlies into the union, to bring nurses’ aids into the union. There was *enormous* opposition to the idea of bringing these “unskilled” people into the union.

We cannot make any advance on the Left in this country if we are not making links with socialists in various communities, in the native community. That

is absolutely true. But should we be romanticizing the “democracy” and “inclusiveness” of the native communities? Come on, how do you call it democracy when you have elders or when women are excluded from the circle for having married outside of a particular native group? People need and deserve respect, and there have been plenty of problems in the ways we discuss and organize, but we should not romanticize native communities, nor the skilled “craft-worker” identity of the nurses’ union that I mentioned.

JB: I do not think it is intellectualism, but paternalism, that has alienated people from the Left. It is one of the reasons that the Left has struggled historically with developing propaganda, in the best sense of the word, that is culturally relevant. There are a couple of points I want to make about practicing democracy. We tend, in the white middle-class Left, to be somewhat narcissistic, to be located in our own understanding of the world. This can induce us to say silly things, like the claim that environmental degradation is going to happen with a two degree rise in temperature. For a huge portion of the population, the environmental degradation is already happening. It is just not happening to us at the moment, as advanced capitalist countries still have the resources to make sure most people do not experience that on the day-to-day level.

Democracy means that we have to stop looking at the Left as the center of a set of concentric circles. The critique of the Left by women, by persons of color, by marginalized groups, by aboriginal people in this country—all of that is legitimate. In terms of how to move forward, I am not sure what conclusions to draw. In Solidarity Halifax, we have tried to participate with people in their struggles, knowing that how they experience those struggles is not shared in the same way by all the people working with us. We operate in solidarity with them, and while anyone from those struggles is welcome to join us, we work with them without requiring that they join us. That is a structure we are working with, both theoretically and in practice. Sometimes it is dangerously close to the concept of “separate but equal,” and that is a problem we acknowledge and that we have talked about.

At the risk of sounding “idealist,” I think it is important for us to remember that, whatever the different perspectives on the table, the only reason we are here tonight, and the only reason it is worth engaging in any of the struggles we have talked about, is because people are suffering horribly. They are being controlled by a predatory, horrible ruling class. It is incumbent upon us, urgently, to continue to do our work. **LP**

Transcribed by Tomas Carey and Carlos Matul

Political Party, continued from page 1

on a day-to-day basis of the party press, buildings, and finances. Moreover, whether they are bargaining with employers, trying to work out some *modus operandi* with local city officials regarding demonstrations, or giving speeches in parliament, they are spending more time with members of the ruling class than they are with people in the party or in the communities they came from. Not only do these leaders tend to develop certain attitudes that dampen their militancy, but they also become invested in using organizational resources to secure their positions of power as representatives of the party. They do not want to go back to the mine or the factory floor. Over time, a degree of elitism develops inside these parties, and, with it, the separation grows between the leadership and the masses. This tendency to oligarchy may have been most pronounced in the parliamentary parties, but it was not exclusive to them. At times it was even celebrated as a necessary part of vanguardism in the Bolshevik tradition. For reasons that actually have much to do with the dynamics that Michels identified, none of the classic Marxists, with the exception of Bukharin, wanted to engage with the question of elitism within the party.

I will end with two points. First, jumping ahead to more recent history, I would say that, certainly by the 1960s, the traditional organs of working class politics had become inadequate to the tasks of social transformation. This was partly because of the way the Soviet revolution turned out and partly because of the parliamentarism and the oligarchical tendency of the social democratic parties. Various parties still *represented* the working classes, but they were no longer organizing the class. They were not educating the class, and they were not creating a class identity, even as capitalism was dissolving prior forms of class community. There was an attempt in almost every one of these parties, through the 1970s and 1980s, to turn back to mobilizing and educating the working class, and so to refashion the party apparatus as a transformative institution. But in every instance those attempts failed, from Eurocommunism, to the attempts of the Bennite left to reorient British Labour, to the Waffle in Canada’s New Democratic Party (NDP). They failed because the party apparatus had so much control.

Second, we have since the 1980s seen repeated attempts to develop new parties that very consciously say, “We are post-Leninist, and we are post-social democratic, and our role even when we get into the state is to remain cadre—to remain organizers.” The Workers’ Party of Brazil said this most loudly and most clearly, but they are not the only ones. This is not about winning support for a specific policy but about continuing to organize the unorganized. But, as we see in the history of the Workers’ Party in Brazil, and in the African National Congress Tripartite Alliance in South Africa, even these post-Leninist parties have succumbed.

In this context it is not surprising to see, in the last 20 years, a resurgence of anarchist-syndicalist forms of politics, with an emphasis on horizontalism and spontaneity, that are more localist in their ambitions and identity. But they run up against a problem we have all run up against: If you are not organizing the class in a permanent manner, any momentum you build up with a demonstration or a protest passes away. Insofar as you are not trying to enter and change the state, then you are not organizing people in broader communities and on the broader agendas that seek to transform the world. Societies can only be transformed *through*, not around, the political organizations that hold them together. This is why the questions Platypus has posed for this panel are now on the agenda. After more than 20 years of this type of syndicalist mobilizing, 20 years of this type of horizontalism—from Seattle in 1999 and earlier even, to Earth Day this past September—we have had a politics centered around protests, without those protests leading to organizational politics.

Jackie Barkley: I think there are two risks, and I do not want to idealize either one of these tendencies: One is intellectualism, the other is the rejection of intellectual ideas. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should also say that I had not heard of a single thing in that first paragraph that introduced this event.

I am honored to be on the panel because, though I was invited to speak, the decision for me to speak was made by vote of the group Solidarity Halifax, of which I am a founding member. What is important about this process is that the knowledge I offer is not just coming from me. It is coming from some of my experiences, but really from the shared contributions, ideas, arguments, and discussions with a group of people I am very honored to work with, but not all of whom I agree with all the time.

Before talking about what the party means for the Left or how we develop a party on the left, the question that I want to ask is, “Who is the Left?” That is a really crucial question, one that I think has been the source of much difficulty in the last 130 years. How we answer that question is different depending on whether you are living in Syria, in South Africa, in Drummondville, Quebec, in Los Angeles, in Beijing, in Ecuador. We cannot have a doctrinaire analysis of who is the Left at any particular time.

In what most of us in this room might consider to be the history of the Left, we do have a legacy of authoritarian left-wing organization, which I think Leo discussed, but in a different way than I am naming it. We have the experience of Stalinism, the experience of authoritarian Marxism in China, and experiences of intense dogmatism and sectarianism within our own organizations, in our own relationships to each other on the Left. It is important for us to understand, on a ground level, the impact of dogmatism and sectarianism. In short, it means arrogance, insulting our allies, assuming the worst about our comrades, and treating potential supporters as enemies. This does not mean we cannot disagree with each other, but it does mean that there are types of organizing and certain political styles in our legacy that we need to overcome.

We also have an amazing historic legacy in the traditional left and Marxist history of united fronts: the struggle against fascism; anti-colonial victories all over Africa and Latin America that were won in many places with left-wing ideas, with the contribution of Marxist and

Leninist ideas; and victories over the authoritarian right. In the case of Francisco Franco in Spain, the victory took 36 years. We saw victory over Pinochet in Chile, where people were being dropped from helicopters into the sea. We need to stay close emotionally to the history of both the strengths and weaknesses of our collective legacy.

Another aspect of our legacy is the question of how we understand the working class and the proletariat. One of the important developments in the last 10 and 20 years in our movements has been grasping the idea of inclusivity. Historically, the working class has largely been understood to be white, male, and industrial. As a comrade in Solidarity Halifax reminded me, that has not always been the case, but it is a theoretical and ideological legacy that we carry with us, one that excludes a huge number of people who are part of the vital struggles being waged. Who is the Left? This question does not have to be answered in a definitive way, but it has to be talked about before we talk about the party.

The second question is, “The party—for what?” For me, the party, or any organizational formulations that we are trying to develop on the Left in the present, has to involve the question of democracy. Democracy is hard. It is difficult, it is irritating, but we need to practice it. I do not mean “practice” in the “theory–practice” way; I mean “practice” as in learning how to play the piano. We need to learn how to be democratic because there is nothing in the hegemonic culture in which we live that affirms democracy as positive and appropriate. It is a difficult process of building, uniting, and working with diverse groups of people who are active in movements all over the place. Some people argue that the trade union movement among the working class in Canada is weak at the moment. But one could also look to the developments in aboriginal communities across Canada, through groups like Idle No More, which have demonstrated that a sector of the working class is, in fact, extremely powerful and moving forward at the moment. Does it require further organization? Yes. But it is very powerful, and spontaneously so. The structures that we develop have to match the actual conditions of the places, communities, and groups that we consider part of the working class, viewed inclusively. It is in organizing that you discover what to think about. It is not the case that we think and then organize. We organize, then think, and then we rethink and reorganize.

Another issue is understanding power. We shy away from discussing questions of power for all kinds of reasons having to do with the historic legacy of the Left. But power is the key issue. It is not to lose, but to win, that we strive to mobilize each other. We need to understand the intersection of power and defeatism. We need to understand that power is not the mob. We need to understand that some types of power are electoral, that others are not, and the kinds of power that exist in movements. Venezuela is an interesting example because, in the last 15 years, the process of struggling for power has gone all the way from authoritarian military coup, to electioneering, to political parties of a social-democratic or a revolutionary type that are still based on electoralism. We need to be considering where the party will be located in struggles, even as the location of the struggles vary, from racially segregated communities, to the factory, our homes, our neighborhoods, the mall: the places in which the current reality of our lives, in an advanced capitalist country, actually take place. The location of struggle is no longer strictly industrial, which means there is a leap from trying to understand the past versus the present.

My final point: Canada is where we live. It is the concrete material conditions of this country and this place that we need to understand in order to mobilize at this time. That does not mean the international struggle is irrelevant, nor that it has nothing to teach us. In Canada, if we adopt an inclusive concept of the working class, we see we are actually divided. We are divided by racism, gender discrimination, and anti-colonial struggles. We are divided by powerful cultural forces of individualism, anti-unionism, neoliberalism, austerity, and anti-intellectualism, all of which are consolidated in the United States and exported to the ruling class in Canada, where they are then absorbed by us, drunk in, throughout our day-to-day experiences. We are a country with several nations, with many aboriginal nations, with the Quebec nation, with what some would consider the Acadian Nation of Nova Scotia, as well as the English Canadian nation. These complex national questions, at the forefront of the politics of the 1960s and 70s, have not gone away. In light of the lessons of the past, we must face them.

This is no reason to avoid organizing one, but the word “party” is often associated with careerism and corruption. There are vastly different ideological trends in the movements we are trying to mobilize. In the English-Canadian left, which despite some strong movements has been weak overall since the 1960s, we struggle with the legacy of a completely Eurocentric philosophical model of mobilization, culture, resistance, and revolution. The vast majority of peoples of the world do not experience a European philosophical tradition as positive. While that tradition should not be thrown out with the bathwater, the hegemonic Eurocentric philosophical ideas have not fostered democracy. They have led to colonialism and authoritarian forces. There are dimensions of our—by which I mean “white European”—intellectual and historical culture that need to be retrieved but also reexamined in the context of a complex international movement.

I am proud of being in Solidarity Halifax, and as a part of this group I want to say that we are practicing, in the piano-playing way, aspects of democracy. How to agree and disagree with each other. How to struggle against the attitudes of sectarians, how to deal with debate, how to have differential points of view, how to have attitudes towards struggle, mobilization, and relationships to others outside our group in a collective way that builds trust. This is a long, difficult process, and it is becoming more difficult for the reasons that Leo mentioned: More people in the group are tied to the workday, the responsibilities of family, and the reproduction of labor in the home. It makes organization difficult.



Postcard commemorating the Gotha Congress of 1875, where the General German Workers’ Association, founded by Ferdinand Lasalle in 1863, united with the Social Democratic Workers’ Party, founded by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1869, to form the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD).

Antoni Wysocki: Jackie and Leo have both emphasized the need to look at concrete conditions. I propose to do so by discussing some historical points having to do with the development of political parties as we know them today.

In the 1800s when the word “party” was first coming into prominence, it did not designate an ideological organization in the way that we have come to understand it now, but instead referred to groups of notable and powerful people. It was the influence of socialism, actually, that created this idea that the party stakes out a political position ideologically. With the Bolshevik revolution, socialism was given a tremendous fillip throughout the world, and left parties and organizations globally were able to expand quite strongly. Later, the Great Depression created conditions that made people receptive to the message that socialists were putting forward, and in the Second World War the Soviet Union, allied with Western liberal democratic powers, was the principal bulwark against fascism. For all these reasons, socialism was gaining strength throughout the world during the period from the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 up through to the end of World War II.

During the Cold War, hostility mounted between “actually existing socialism,” as the Soviet Union and satellite countries came to be called, and the western bloc formed by NATO of liberal democracies. NATO found itself disadvantaged in many ways in terms of propaganda. The liberal nations had to apologize for their sins and excesses, such as the support, or at least acceptance, of Jim Crow in the US south, apartheid in South Africa, which lasted through to the 1980s, and so on. The capitalist classes in the liberal democracies had no choice but to take seriously some of the progressive ideas that leftist organizations, ranging from communist to social democratic, were putting forward. The ruling class had to make some concessions in order to advance their position in the Third World, where of course people of color were skeptical of the so-called liberal democracies, which were allowing all sorts of prejudiced and racist policies, whereas the Soviet bloc was at least nominally committed to the idea of fighting colonialism and supporting the right of peoples across the world. Though not equal to the U.S., the Soviet Union had sufficient military and economic might that the U.S. and its allies had to think twice about taking aggressive actions internationally.

At the same time, within the liberal democracies themselves, the industrial working class had organized over the course of those decades and was quite a significant force politically. From the end of World War II until the advent of neoliberalism, these factors strongly conditioned the domestic and international policy of the liberal democracies. For example, in the 1944 federal election in Canada, the liberals had to introduce a raft of progressive legislation because the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the predecessor of today’s NDP, was threatening to outflank them to the left, while the population of Canada was getting tired of the capitalist pretensions of the ruling class.

Towards the middle of the 1970s, and increasingly so in the late 70s and early 80s, the advent of neoliberalism signaled real changes in political dynamics worldwide. The scale of this shift was marked by the elections of neoliberal regimes first in New Zealand, then in the U.S. with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in England, Brian Mulroney in Canada, and so forth. Keynesianism had been the predominant economic approach followed by the liberal democracies, and this was conditioned on the idea that the working class had to be taken seriously as a political force. However, in the 1970s, a new phenomenon known as stagflation appeared, in which you had higher rates of inflation and higher rates of unemployment at the same time. Because Keynesianism had theorized that you should

be able to trade off one against the other, stagflation worked to discredit Keynesian economics. There was a tremendous push by right-wing intellectuals through various kinds of think tanks and institutes to make anti-Keynesian policies into the common sense of the day. Meanwhile, the decline of actually existing socialism was becoming more and more apparent. In rapid course, political parties everywhere around the world began shifting to the right, and you saw the destruction of communist parties.

It is not a coincidence that this happened; it was a matter of objective conditions. Politicians and political parties respond to pressures, and from the 1970s until today, there has been constant pressure from the right, in a variety of forms. It is ideological, in the sense that the whole nature of the media that we are exposed to on a daily basis is constantly telling every single one of us about the virtues of capitalism. That is the common sense we have to contend with, and any political party that wanted to contest that wisdom would have a huge battle on its hands. Funding is a major issue as well. The capitalists know that they have various parties they can rely on, and so the bourgeois parties compete for their favor. Outside of individual contributions, the main source of funding that social democratic parties have traditionally had access to is, of course, from the unions. But, for the unions, the social democratic parties are the only game in town, and inevitably those parties come under pressure from the right also. The unions have to put up with it, because they have nowhere else to go. Social democratic parties know this, and so those parties are subject to the same ineluctable pressures that have been shifting the entire political spectrum to the right

I do not see any way to confront this situation on its own terms. Rather, we need to change the underlying conditions if we want to have any hope of real change. I see nothing to be gained and much to be lost from supporting traditional social democratic parties, particularly ones like the NDP in Canada. The NDP has never really promised that it would lead us to a more progressive society; at most, it said it would take some of the sharp edges off the society that we have. Even leaving aside for the moment the question of socialism, many people make the argument that surely the NDP is at least a little less bad than the other parties on offer. But this lesser-evil argument has a number of flaws. First of all, as a practical matter, when the NDP is elected, it actually finds itself under greater pressure than the traditional bourgeois parties, which do not have to prove anything to the capitalists. In Canada, the conservatives and the liberals are in the pocket of big business, and obviously so. This actually allows situations like the one a few years back, when the conservative premier of Newfoundland, Danny Williams, nationalized the AbitibiBowater mill. A forthrightly conservative administration could get away with this because big business knew that he was their boy, that he was just doing it out of necessity, or to cater to the voters. If the NDP ever tried to pull such a stunt, their heads would roll, as everyone proclaimed it as evidence that they are trying to enact socialism. It is not at all clear that the NDP is capable even of “taking the sharp edges off.”

More important, though, is the fact that all over the world, when ostensibly left-wing parties do get elected, they often have to carry out policies that are simply those of the right. We see this with the Socialist Party in France, for instance. This destroys the faith of the voters in any possibility of real change. The people who are supposedly challenging capitalism and fighting for a more progressive world actually end up doing exactly the same thing as the capitalist parties do, and then people become cynical about fundamental change.