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between white indentured servants and African slaves, and it utilized explicit racism as the main strategy for dividing the working class. From colonial times onward, the white working class has been imbued with a false consciousness. While the relative benefits of whiteness are undoubtedly real, the price of this racism has been a lowering of living standards of all workers, as racism in the working class has helped bosses to break strikes, divide work forces, undermine union solidarity, and generally exert control. The Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World grappled with this problem. Obviously, these divisions served only the interests of the bourgeoisie in building a barrier to a mass working-class party in America.

This brings us to the current presidential race, where we have the main contenders representing the twin parties of U.S. imperialism, with no working-class alternative in sight. On February 10, the day after the landslide victory of Bernie Sanders in the New Hampshire primary, *The New York Times* described his triumph as a rebuke to the political establishment. Progressive pundits have speculated that socialism is making a comeback. Alongside Donald Trump, Sanders has been a source of attention and debate over the last year. It is undeniable that he has helped to popularize the term “socialism,” especially among young people. A poll from January showed that respondents under the age of 30 preferred socialism to capitalism by 43 to 32 percent.¹ In a country with an established social democratic party, the Sanders phenomenon may well have occurred within that framework. But Sanders is no socialist, and he is in fact campaigning to represent the capitalist Democratic Party. He has no organic connection to the labor movement. In contrast to Debs, who went to prison for opposing the imperialist war machine in World War I, Sanders is openly supportive of American imperialism. He backed the war in Afghanistan and has embraced Obama’s foreign policy.

Sanders has appeal among many young people because he wants to restore progressive taxation and implement a higher minimum wage at fifteen dollars an hour. He advocates free access to healthcare and higher education, all of which are demands that resonate with millions of workers and students. Yet he does not think that the working class should be organized and mobilized through its own party—not even a reformist one—in order to achieve these and other goals. In fact, the Sanders campaign ultimately strengthens the Democratic Party because he brings the disaffected voters back into the fold. He becomes yet another obstacle to the building of an explicitly working class party in the U.S. Nevertheless, the Democratic Socialists of America and the Communist Party support his campaign. Various supposed Trotskyists are also supporting the Sanders campaign in the hope that it will set off a shift to the Left. Socialist Alternative, for example, is calling for “a massive mobilization of workers and youth to stand up against the establishment’s attempt to shut down the movement around Sanders,” which it calls a “political revolution.” This shows Socialist Alternative’s willingness to ignore reality. If Sanders does not secure the nomination, his supporters will either support Hillary Clinton, or they will have to jump ship, perhaps endorsing the Green Party. Precisely because the whole thing has occurred within the framework of the Democratic Party, there is no real socialist alternative.

The Sanders campaign is no springboard to the creation of an American social democracy, let alone a genuinely socialist workers’ movement for revolutionary change. For revolutionary socialists, the political consciousness of the working class is key to a socialist future. Such consciousness does not arise spontaneously. It requires political struggle against the existing illusions of the mass of workers by those who grasp the fundamental proposition that the capitalists have interests fundamentally opposed to those of the working people and other oppressed layers of the people. Working within the political machine of the capitalists can never serve to advance the struggles of the working class. That requires the construction of a different machine—a political party—to fight for working people.

Brian Tokar: I want to talk about the political situation in the U.S. as well as the ongoing crisis of the Left and our potential role in it. In the course of that discussion I will certainly touch on the questions of social democracy and potential ways beyond it. Of course, to speak of social democracy in the U.S. context is inherently problematic because we have never had a genuine social democratic party; we have never had a labor-centered party in any meaningful way. Therefore, the touchstone for thinking about social and economic changes in the U.S. context remains the New Deal reforms of the 1930s and 40s. A model that goes back 80 years continues to be the reference point for discussing what the Left can and cannot accomplish. At the same time, we have right-wing forces that seek to overturn not only the New Deal, but all of the social progress of the 20th century.

In this very difficult situation, I find myself close to a position that Noam Chomsky articulated, along with many others, during the Bush years of the early 21st century: We need to defend the minimal but sometimes very meaningful social progress of the last hundred years, while understanding its limits and developing movements that can push beyond those limits. A significant obstacle confronting us is the way in which aspiring social democrats, or, more realistically, progressive-leaning Democrats, have consistently supported neo-liberal policies, growth-oriented economics, militarism, and austerity in its many forms. One example of this problem is the dilemma that climate activists face in terms of Obama’s energy policies, which appropriate some of the rhetoric of the grassroots climate movement and articulate a somewhat progressive position in the international context, while still systematically supporting the expansion of the fossil fuel industry. Another example, particularly relevant to this discussion, would be how the Green Party has evolved politically in the U.S. Although the current candidate of the Party, Jill Stein, in many ways represents the best of green politics, the movement that she leads is one that has consciously turned away from representing the wishes of social movements. With the Ralph Nader campaigns of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Green Party adopted a

mainstream approach to electoral politics. The Green Party, which used to function primarily as a network of activist locals, was pushed and even manipulated into this reorientation by those with fundamental interests in pursuing a bourgeois approach to electoral politics.

This brings us to Bernie Sanders. As a Vermont activist for 35 years, I know Sanders very well and have been engaged in many debates and struggles with him. What I want to emphasize is that he has always been very much in the tradition of New Deal progressivism. To substantiate his brand of democratic socialism, the only models he has ever consistently pointed to are the Scandinavian countries. From the beginning Sanders has been equivocal on the question of U.S. militarism; whereas he has consistently opposed its most extreme excesses, such as the war in Iraq, he has supported other policies promoted by the U.S. military-industrial complex. He has accomplished some important things, especially in terms of involving new audiences in a discussion about the implications of extreme economic inequality in this country. Sanders plays a positive role as a spokesperson for some of those issues, but there is no focus on the core problems of capitalism, no discussion of the contradictions inherent in private ownership of productive capacity or of land, no discussion of meaningful steps toward worker control, and no discussion of genuine alternatives to capitalism.

Probably the best piece of writing I have seen in the last couple of months on the current malaise of the Left was an important article by Jerome Roos, the editor and founder of *ROAR*, an online journal which, in my view, has been the most articulate voice for the various uprisings that have emerged around the world in the last five or six years. In his article, “Toward a New Anti-Capitalist Politics,” Jerome Roos writes the following:

As the future collapses in on itself and the left’s revolutionary aspirations wither on the vine, it is the weakness of our clenched fist and the paucity of our collective imagination, far more than the “natural laws” of their invisible hand, that now makes the end of the world appear more likely than the end of capitalism. It has become painfully clear that, if the left is to truly chart a way out of capitalist barbarity, it will have to first reinvent itself.²

Roos goes on to compare the revolutionary political tradition of the 20th century with social democracy, that “other great project of the 20th century left,” which “has not stood the test of time much better [than the revolutionary left].” He writes,

Across Europe, center-left parties that once dominated the national political scene have long since devolved into the servile lackeys of capital and the submissive technocratic handmaidens of the reactionary right. Reduced to the status of junior partners in grand coalitions and European institutions whose overarching vision of the future appears to be one of permanent austerity, social democracy has been so thoroughly hollowed out as to fundamentally undermine even its own prospects of survival—the specter of “Paskifolkization” [is] now looming large over most center-left parties.³

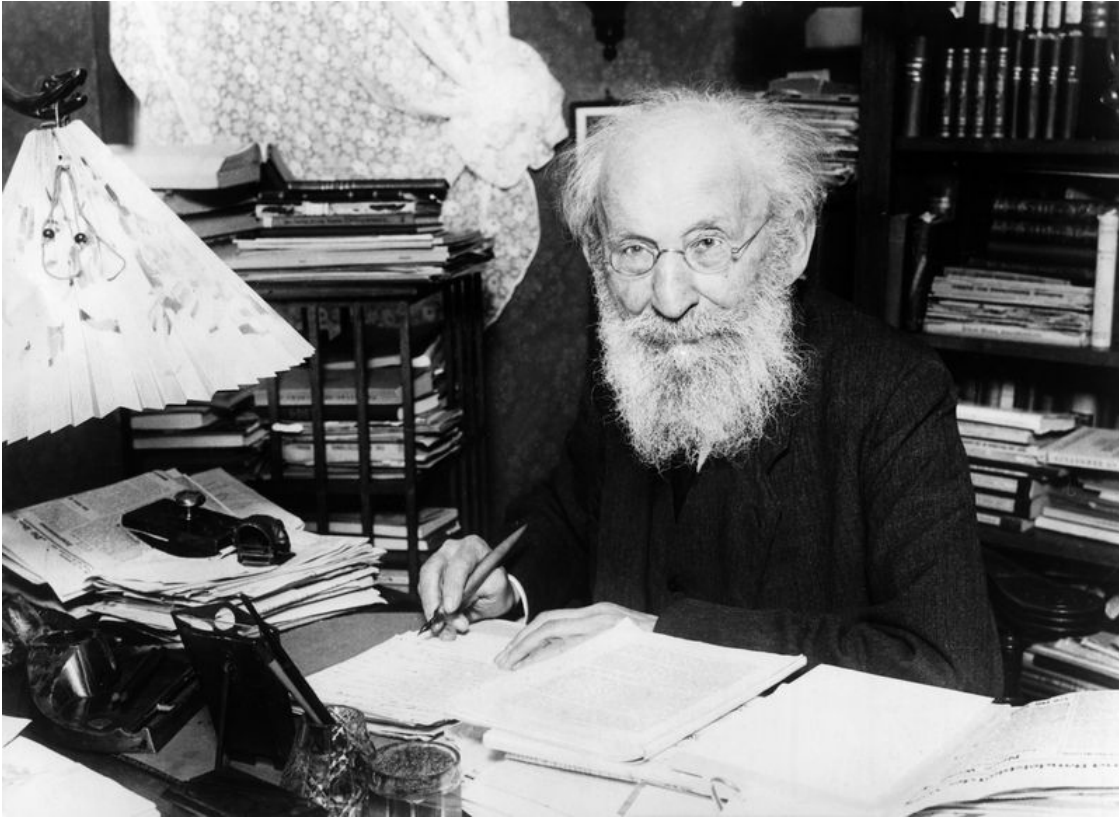
Roos refers to PASOK, the Greek socialist party that has been completely absorbed into the system, but on this note we could also consider the sad legacy of SYRIZA, which began as a genuine expression of social movements.

What Jerome Roos proposes, and what most of us working in the tradition of social ecology propose, is moving beyond the kind of left-populism that Bernie Sanders speaks for, toward a new politics that draws on the inspiring insurrectionary movements of recent times, whatever their limitations: the Arab Spring, Occupy, and kindred movements in Spain, Turkey, and elsewhere. From such examples we aim to develop a strategy that fights for reform in a fundamentally non-reformist way, by raising rather than lowering expectations and articulating demands that we know the system is inherently incapable of satisfying in order to move discussion forward, while embracing existing movements around the world. Reclaiming the idea of the commons and new cooperative models of economics, we want to achieve the longstanding goal of a movement of movements on the Left, drawing upon the renewed assertion of direct democracy at the local level but also moving beyond that, toward confederations of what David Harvey calls “rebel cities.” To this end, we embrace some of the stages first articulated in Murray Bookchin’s political strategy of “confederal municipalism” in the 1990s and further elaborated in a book of his later political essays, released by Verso just last year, called *The Next Revolution*.

As we speak, this constellation of ideas is an important inspiration for the Kurdish movement on the northern border of Syria that is under siege by both the forces of ISIS and the forces of the Turkish state, which has always seen the Kurds as a fundamental threat. Nevertheless, in this awful wartime environment, the Kurds are developing a model like that of confederal municipalism. It offers an inspiring example of what is possible in the world today. Drawing upon these examples and many others, I think we have the possibility, and the responsibility, to renew a genuine revolutionary tradition for this century and beyond.

Bill Peitz: I want to approach this topic a bit differently. First of all, I think social democracy was a flawed project from the beginning. Although it achieved successes at the time, there was a reason why Marx, in reference to the French “Marxists” of the 1870s, said, “I’m not a Marxist. That much I know.” Regarding social democracy, it seems appropriate to paraphrase another famous quote from Marx: History repeats itself; the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Repetition, but as farce, is what we see with social democracy today.

How does one replace the capitalist political system that is currently in power? Ralph Miliband, in his classic book, *Marxism and Politics*, said that there have always been two different traditions: the parliamentary road to socialism and the insurrectionary road. The parliamentary road to socialism at best leads to parties that get into office, but not into power. The Swedish Social Democrats held office for the better part of the 20th century, and the best they were able to come up with



Leading theorist of German Social Democracy, Eduard Bernstein, on his 80th birthday, in 1930.

was a kinder, gentler form of capitalist exploitation, which nonetheless involved exporting their problems to the Third World. Social democracy in its classic 19th century sense has failed. It has *definitely* failed if its ultimate goal was to achieve socialism. If the goal is to have more social welfare programs, to have welfare capitalism, and to be a kinder and gentler America, as George Bush, Sr. once said, then social democracy has a role. Perhaps not an insignificant role. But social democracy will not lead to a fundamental transformation of society.

What about the insurrectionary road? That has led to disasters of its own, as revolutions transpired in underdeveloped countries where there was not the material basis to form socialism. Even in a country that might have a basis for socialism, the insurrectionary road tends to isolate the most politically conscious layers from the mass of people; it tends to substitute a vanguard for the mass of the population. Social democracy wants to substitute itself for the mass of the working class, which it then reduces to a group of passive voters. With the insurrectionary road, the danger is that the mass of the population is reduced either to fold soldiers or to people standing on the sidelines applauding.

In light of the failure of social democracy and of most insurrectionary projects, we need to find a way off the horns of the dilemma. I hate to use this expression, due to its association with New Labour and Tony Blair, but we do need to find a “third way.” We need to combine the best of the insurrectionary and the social democratic political traditions in a new way. We do not want people getting comfortable in cushy parliamentary offices and tossing out a few crumbs to the poor, nor do we want to romanticize the heroic guerrilla and fantasize about going to the hills like Che and Fidel did.

I do not claim to have any perfect, ready-made answers to these problems. However, I believe we need to rethink the socialist project in terms of how we would achieve it, and this requires looking for mass actions that would broadly involve the population. I think, for example, of the writings of Rosa Luxemburg on the mass strike. What I have in mind is a socialist project that does not plan to seize power by military force per se and does not intend to take over office by getting voted in, but rather seeks to mobilize the masses and to fulfill Marx’s early dictum that the liberation of the workers must be the work of the working class itself. Such a project would lead mass actions, in a potentially revolutionary situation, in order to establish a viable political force that could stop capitalism and replace it with socialism. Along these lines, one thinks of the example of the Paris Commune.

So far, my remarks have mostly concerned social democracy in the 20th century. I want to end with some thoughts about the present: What is the problem with social democracy, even radical social democracy, in the 21st century? On this score, Greece is a perfect example. SYRIZA, an avowedly radical, if not revolutionary party, had campaigned and won support based on its promise to fight against austerity. They went to the people for a mandate to stand up and fight. When the people gave them that mandate, they thanked the people and then promptly surrendered, because they knew that accepting such a mandate would mean going beyond just fighting austerity. They would have to take on the powers of the capitalists in Europe. They ultimately decided they would rather remain in office than risk everything on a dice throw for power. I think you see the same phenomenon happening in Portugal, where the Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party throw their support to the discredited Portuguese social democrats. Meanwhile, splits are forming within Podemos in Spain, with some groups saying, “We can’t support the discredited ‘socialists,’” and others saying, “Well, we have to be practical.”

Collectively, we need to rethink things on the basis of models that mobilize the people, that involve the masses and in particular, of course, the working class, be they workers in the factory, field, or office. Without that, one is left with isolated groups that can be bought off, if they find some measure of political success, or simply crushed if they do not. These, I think, are the problems that stand out when we look at the failures of social democracy.

Responses

JS: In response to Christoph talking about the absence of a mass social democratic party in the U.S., I want to recommend Robin Archer’s book, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* It raises the problem that the reasons commonly given for the lack of a social democratic or labor party in the United States also apply to some degree in Australia, and yet Australia had the first labor party government in world history. In regards to SYRIZA, which both Brian and Bill talked about, I want to recommend articles which appeared on the website of the journal I coedit, *New Politics*. Barry Finger wrote

some important articles on what they could have done upon taking office, during the negotiations. Not every horrible outcome was preordained. Moreover, I am just not sure what it would have meant for SYRIZA to take power within the context of an impoverished Greece. If one attempted to create a Greek workers’ state in the absence of a socialist international supported by the masses, that state would be the victim of economic sanctions and fall apart very quickly. Bill invoked Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike*; if we want to go back to thinking about strategy, back to a time when social democracy meant something very different than what it means now, there are worse things one could do than to reread *The Road to Power*, which was Lenin’s favorite book by Kautsky. *The Road to Power*, *The Mass Strike*, and Gramsci’s *The Modern Prince* are the three most important books on Marxist political strategy that one could read.

CL: I do not often agree with Jason, but he did say something I had to agree with earlier in his remarks regarding Jeremy Corbyn, who is not at all radical but stands out because of what the Labour Party had been like. Before Corbyn, social democracy under Tony Blair, or in Germany under Gerhard Schröder, actually undid previous reforms, making it worse for the working class. They made a name for themselves administering austerity measures; in fact, Schröder’s government attacked the working class of Germany with a ferocity that no conservative government would have dared. A social democratic government could get away with that, because the workers still retained some illusions, misplaced though they were, that the social democrats represented something like a workers’ government. In contrast, the Corbyn types stand out, because at least now they do not say, “We’re going to attack you right away.” They get elected on a reformist illusion of “soft austerity.”

As to what Brian said, I did not comment on the Green Party because I do not see them as a social democratic formation. I would agree, however, that they have undergone a transformation in the U.S. and elsewhere. Perhaps the longest journey they have traveled is in Germany, where they have implemented austerity measures. What is relevant about the Greens today in the U.S. is that their focus is not even on what the workers are doing, but rather how to make capitalism “greener.” In their point of view, big capitalists are bad, while small, local capitalists are good. They are not anti-capitalist at all. The Green Party does not even represent social democracy, here or in any other country.

BT: The great Italian revolutionary Errico Malatesta once said, “Everything depends on what the people are capable of wanting.” That applies not only to the broad mass of the population, but also to the organizers of left movements. Presidential election years historically have been extremely *demobilizing* for the Left. To understand the Sanders campaign today, we can look at the legacy of Jesse Jackson’s campaigns, which aroused tremendous hope on the part of the Left in the 1980s, or the Nader campaigns in the 90s. Neither the Jackson nor the Nader campaigns contributed anything tangible to the Left in this country. In organizational terms, certainly, those campaigns did not strengthen the Left. I would go further and say that even in terms of mobilization they did not help. The Jackson campaign raised the tremendous hope of a “Rainbow Coalition” bringing together a variety of progressive social forces. Instead, the Rainbow Coalition came to an end as soon as Jackson dropped out of the Democratic Party. Unfortunately, our experience with Bernie Sanders in Vermont suggests a very high likelihood that the same thing will happen this election cycle. Sanders has always had a hands-off relationship to the Progressive Party in Vermont, which is a significant force in state politics inspired by Bernie’s term as mayor in Burlington, but from which he has distanced himself. More generally, Sanders has an ambiguous relationship with social movements on the ground. If we want an independent left, it is really going to be up to us to make that happen; people like Bernie Sanders will never do that for us.

WP: What we have to do is try to win the battle of ideas, to put forward counter-hegemonic concepts, in a Gramscian sense, while we develop a strategy that can lead us forward, but also establish organic links with the masses. This means we need to be open to debate. We have to try to move beyond office-holding on the one hand and utopianism on the other. At the same time, we should not be too modest. We should fight for reforms, particularly when they mobilize people. I think of the “Fight for \$15” as something that people can grasp, but that pushes people to think the future can actually be better. I have not focused on Bernie Sanders and the presidential elections because they are going to be

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over soon. Win, lose, or draw, we will have to deal with whatever reality is given to us, and we should not think in only a short timeframe. Building popular support for a genuine socialist project is going to be a long march.

Q&A

Bill, you commented on two roads, the parliamentary one and the insurrectionary one, but I think more in terms of a German problem and a Russian one. I think the elephant in the room is the question of Leninism and the Bolshevik Revolution. There is a theme I keep hearing at leftist events: We need to think of new strategies, we need to do something different. I have become quite cynical about this, as I have the feeling that all the ideas on the Left are quite old, and that maybe there has not been any really new ideas since around 1940. What we actually see is a great deal of the recirculation and retrying of ideas that had been better articulated in an earlier period. Even this new appeal of social democracy is really more about an exhaustion of identitarian politics within the Democratic Party. Are there really any new ideas on the Left right now?

I would like to add to the previous question. I was struck by the idea that there has never been a mass social democratic or socialist party in the United States, because of course there was—namely, the Socialist Party of America, before World War I. Certainly, it was bigger than anything that has come subsequently. So I want to raise the question of pre-World War I history; in other words, I want to avoid naturalizing the 20th century and that experience, which includes the question of Leninism, perhaps as opposed to Lenin per se. How does history before World War I fundamentally differ from the history after World War I, when thinking about these political models?

JS: It is foolish the way certain parts of the Left demonize Lenin. Perhaps that sounds funny from someone who is supposedly a social democrat, but here I agree with Lars Lin and Charles Post. I do not think that, as it turns out, Lenin was really such an original thinker as to merit his own “ism.” I talk more about this in a review of Paul LeBlanc’s *Unfinished Leninism* (2014) in the current *New Politics*.⁴ As for the pre-World War I Socialist Party in the U.S., it is as close as we ever got to a mass party, but it was never strong enough to displace the Republican or Democratic Parties.

BT: Leninism and the notion of a vanguard party represented a fundamental wrong turn that eviscerated the democratic traditions of the Left. It represents a simplification of the entire Marxist tradition, both in theoretical and political terms. Some recent scholarship that goes back to Marx’s writings on our relationship to nature reveal two more ambiguous understandings of the role of production and point to a liberatory project quite different from Leninism. As to the question about new ideas, the reemergence of a politics from below, symbolized by the movements of the last half-dozen years, is a significant new direction. It draws on ancient traditions in a way that marks a significant departure from the failure of left strategy in the last hundred or so years.

CL: The Socialist Party in the U.S. before World War I was significant, but what killed it off was the Russian Revolution. The best elements in the Socialist Party took a different path. They decided to follow the Communist parties, precisely because the Bolsheviks had proved successful in the revolution, and this contributed to the demise of the Socialist Party.

WP: The best way to find a source for new ideas is to examine history and think through what worked and what failed in the past. The Socialist Party of America and the SPD were not just political parties running in elections. They had singing societies, bicycle clubs, red Sunday schools, workers’ libraries, and so on. They tried to create a separate counter-hegemonic world for their supporters, and this shows great insight on their part. Their influence was much broader than the Party itself, because—I know this might sound hard to believe—a lot of people just do not care that much for politics. It is important to be able to educate people through things that are not strictly political. Of course, in the modern context it would not make sense to form choir societies, as times have changed. Recruit four or five hot indie bands to the Left, however, and we might be in business.

In the 1890s and early 20th century, there was an international workers’ movement. How do you envision reviving social democracy without a revival in an international workers’ movement? Do you see it happening through economic activity, or through various actions, often based around electoral politics, that push for legal reforms? The latter seems to be the case now. There are not very many places where a strike would be used to organize workers, these days, even though that is how key industries in America were organized in the heyday of social democracy.

BT: We need to embrace working class politics in the traditional sense, but we also need to see beyond it. I say that as somebody intensely involved in trade union work in an academic setting and who believes very strongly in the continuing importance of the labor movement as part of a broader left. However, at a time when production has been relocated to authoritarian centers, typically in the global south, where workers have almost no ability to organize, even as the role of human beings in the production process has been severely diminished by technology, a lot of traditional notions of the inherent power of workers as workers has already been stripped away. We need to think much more broadly about people’s movements. The “Fight for \$15” is a positive example not just because I hope people get a 15 dollar an hour minimum wage. I see it primarily as an effort to organize the unorganized and one of the lowest paid, traditionally least empowered sectors of the working class. That creates an opening to a different way of thinking about the role of labor movements in the broader context of social movements and people’s movements.

WP: The explicit strategy of the “Fight for \$15” cam-

paign is not to try to pressure governmental units into passing laws. It is great if that happens, but what they are trying to do is target different corporations, specifically McDonald’s, to make them raise their wage to 15 dollars an hour, which would then have a bump-on effect on the rest of the fast food industries. That places like California and New York are talking about raising the minimum wage over a period of long years is an attempt to head off the spontaneous movement and corral it in legalistic ways. The campaign has a good strategy because it is not just relying on politicians and legislation.

CL: Yes, in the heyday of social democracy we had mass parties and the Socialist International, and today we have nothing like this. I guess that means the job will be extra difficult! It also means that we are in a situation where the workers will simply be compelled to take steps in the right direction because there is no other way. In response to the crisis, the Greek working class went out in the streets to strike, sometimes bypassing instructions of political or trade union leaders, most of whom wanted to wind things down. I do not think it is impossible for something like that to happen in the U.S. Sometimes, people are compelled to step out of what is perceived as normal, appropriate, or ordinary behavior. The “Fight for \$15” is a valuable effort in trying to organize some sections of the working class. To make the “Fight for \$15” successful requires the transformation of the trade unions, which are sometimes a base of support, but sometimes an obstacle. A successful struggle will have to impact the trade unions themselves. The existing leadership needs to be replaced with a class-struggle leadership in order to drive the struggle forward.

When you ask the wrong questions, it is difficult to get the right answers. While Platypus has raised a number of important questions, I think it is already clear to most people that social democracy, as a revolutionary force, has been dead for a very long time. The question that was raised about new ideas is probably the most important thing. I read Mao’s essay, “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?” In Marxism, the short answer to that question is to study historical materialism to develop the correct ideas. Anybody who looks at the conditions today with the economic crisis and the transformation of the nature of the working class and unions—that is where the answers are to be found, by investigating the economic crisis and the nature of the working class. Here we have hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, in motion, as a function of the Bernie Sanders campaign, and it just is not “good enough” for the Left. Revolutionaries move among the masses and organize revolution. Why would a revolutionary stay away from hundreds of thousands of people? Bernie is not Lenin; we are. We are the ones who should be loved amongst these people. Are we the revolutionaries speaking on this panel not connecting with the masses!

CL: Well, because we have been invited to speak on this Platypus panel. Connecting with the masses is only possible if you have a mass party. Otherwise you are reduced to a small audience, sometimes even smaller than the one we have today. You tend to focus on the people who have relatively high consciousness, who have already grasped some of the ideas, who can connect to what is objectively necessary. When the level of class struggle is low, you connect with people in smaller circles. The Russian Emancipation of Labor League had a total of eight people at their founding conference, yet that was the starting point for a movement, and for an organization that took power in Russia some 40 years later.

We would like to connect with the masses. But in or- amine history and think through what worked and what failed in the past. The Socialist Party of America and the SPD were not just political parties running in elections. They had singing societies, bicycle clubs, red Sunday schools, workers’ libraries, and so on. They tried to create a separate counter-hegemonic world for their supporters, and this shows great insight on their part. Their influence was much broader than the Party itself, because—I know this might sound hard to believe—a lot of people just do not care that much for politics. It is important to be able to educate people through things that are not strictly political. Of course, in the modern context it would not make sense to form choir societies, as times have changed. Recruit four or five hot indie bands to the Left, however, and we might be in business.

WP: The question that occurs to me is, why hasn’t the Left devised a strategy, however tentative, to talk to the Sanders supporters once his campaign is over? If he is denied the nomination, who will explain what that says about the ways the primaries operate in this country, the undemocratic nature of the Democratic Party, and so on? If he somehow became president, who will explain why he cannot implement any really socialist ideas, due to the structure the U.S. Constitution imposes upon the government? In other words, we need to take this as an educational moment for people who are excited by the ideas. That is what we have to think out.

There is the failure of social democracy before the First World War, but there is also the attempts by the New Left to engage in politics around social democracy. Do the panelsists see that as having presented an opportunity, or was it a false start, with flawed premises from the beginning?

BT: The efforts of the New Left and to some extent of the Green Parties in various countries sought to express the social movements of the 1960s, both inside and outside the system. The notion of the party “standing on two legs” was the terminology back in the 1980s. In Germany, with the failure of the more insurrectionary New Left tendencies in the 1970s, people like Joschka Fischer began arguing that the Left needed to “take a march through the institutions,” that is, leftists needed to embed themselves in the institutions of mainstream society. The Greens came out of this background and, at least in the early years, tried to live up to the ambition of being a voice for the movements. However, the Green Parties quickly became polarized, as people within them adopted a strategy of realpolitik that led to coalitions with the social democrats. Fischer himself became a foreign minister in the 1990s; along with Bernie Sanders, he supported Clinton’s bombing of Serbia. The other tendency, describing itself in Germany as “fundamental oppositionists,” sought for the Greens to continue to be a voice for social movements.

Here in the U.S., with the Nader campaigns in 1996 and 2000, the existing Green networks were taken over

by tendencies with mainstream electoral ambitions that pitted them against the more left-wing voices within the Greens. At that point, most of us who aspired to a more holistic strategy oriented to social movements walked out. That was the closest thing we have had, either in the U.S. or internationally, to a political party that expressed the New Left. Where does that leave us today? We need to adopt a very different kind of strategy in terms of how we think about forming confederations of movements from below, aspiring to be a real counter-power to the ruling forces.

I want to link the title of this panel, “The Death of Social Democracy,” with that of our conference, “What is Socialism?” Marx pointed out in the 1840s that it was, in fact, capitalism that was pointing beyond itself towards socialism. Later it became clear that the Social Democratic Party, emerging out of the workers’ movement, was the conscious factor in history, to the degree it could deepen and further the tendencies in capitalism that pointed towards socialism. Is our society pointing towards socialism? What tendencies would an inheritor of the historical project of social democracy, as the subject that brings about socialism, have to take up?

It seems to me that the problem we face is not exactly that we have no new ideas. There is certainly a great deal of practical creativity in terms of how people respond politically to their circumstances. Rather, the issue is implicit in what was brought up before, about the fact that we seem to be in an unprecedented situation and cannot simply hope for a replay of the rise of the labor movement. We are plagued not by a lack of new ideas, but a lack of historical consciousness. What interested me in the responses to the question about the difference between the Left before and after the First World War was not whether you thought Lenin was a major thinker or not, but that you accepted the premise of the question, which is that the Russian Revolution changed history and still, in an important sense, remains the dividing mark.

We are facing new circumstances, but only part-way, and we do not quite know how to address the fact that the detritus of history is around us in the form of sectarian organizations, all of which are linked in various ways to a post-1917 historical imagination. In some highly attenuated way, this is even true of the imagination of a revived social democracy and a “new” New Deal. I want to reassert earlier questions in those terms. What would it mean to redraw self-consciously the lines that already divide the Left? And to do so in practical terms?

Jason Wright, for the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT). One of our responsibilities as Marxists and as intellectuals is to be the historic memory of the working class. In a very basic way, that means recognizing that the Democratic Party is the graveyard of social struggle. What happens with a Bernie Sanders is a repeat of what we have seen before with Jesse Jackson, George McGovern, and Eugene McCarthy. What happened with SYRIZA should not surprise anyone familiar with the history of the British Labour Party. There is an anecdote of Aneurin Bevan’s, a left-wing Labourite, about the general strike in the 1920s. That struggle was not “defeated,” it was surrendered. The Prime Minister called in leaders of the trade union movement and Labour Party. He said to them, “Well, gentlemen, the government could fall tomorrow. This is a crisis. Are you ready to take power?” They opted to wind down the general strike.

It is nice to hear Rosa Luxemburg getting some praise. Luxemburg’s The Mass Strike, The Political Party, and the Trade Unions is an interesting and good work, despite being subjected to Stalinist capitalism; Luxemburg is firmly in the revolutionary Marxist tradition; however, the split between communists and social democracy happens so late in the German context that the revolution fails. The communists did not break away as early as, say, 1903, when the fissure starts developing in the Russian context, and thus there was not sufficient time to prepare. Why did that happen? Because Luxemburg tried to solve things within the framework of the “party of the whole class.” Do you think that any socialist movement today that purports to be a “party of the whole class” can actually lead to human liberation?

JS: The productive forces of capitalist society have developed to such a degree that socialism is on the agenda, in terms of its technical feasibility, and has been for a rather long time. Modern information technology would make democratic socialist planning much easier than it ever was before. Our current dilemma is a function of political circumstances and political will. I want to correct the comrade from the IBT; the SPD was not supposed to be a party of the whole class. At the very least Kautsky and Bebel, its leaders, did not conceive of the SPD as a party of the whole class. You can argue that it evolved into that, and I do think that happened, but that was not how it originated.

CL: Objectively speaking, yes: Society is pointing towards socialism. We have had plenty of examples of what happens if the transformation towards socialism is further delayed. Two World Wars and the possible destruction of our planet are pretty good reasons to think that socialism is necessary. So, what is missing? Guess what I am going to say... It is the subjective factor, the party of the proletariat, that has been missing for a long, long time. Because it has been missing for so long, we are largely looking at a history of defeat for the working class, which breeds pessimism and a fear of trying what did not succeed before. I recognize those feelings and those thoughts. But you know what? They are not very useful. I repeat: The only question that we need to solve is how to lead the working class. That is the biggest problem facing us: to forge a party that wins the confidence and allegiance of the working class, through proven leadership and proven successes, big and small. That alone will offer a way toward socialist revolution.

BT: In every period of history there are tendencies toward socialism and tendencies toward reaction. In response to the question about de-industrialization, one of the important things that the Left tends to forget is the fundamental adaptability of capitalism as a system. Capitalism as we know it today is qualitatively different than it has been at previous stages of history, and in many ways capitalism has coopted many of the desires of the people, at least up to a point, when it comes to

feeling like they have more control over their lives. I think most people, deep down, realize that the capitalist attempts to offer that control are illusory. At the same time, people get lost in the spectacle, to use a phrase from many decades ago, and the spectacle is that much more dazzling now. We cannot continue to be fighting against capitalism’s past crises, but must realistically face the present one. But we need different organizational models to do so. The traditional political party model that most of the Left adopted has clearly been a failure. The working class and the mobilized people as a whole come from many sectors of society. The working class, as traditionally defined, does not have the same power to shut down capitalism that it once had. We need a much broader, more holistic, and more empowered movement of movements, from below, to attain the level of consciousness needed to get us to a qualitatively different place.

WP: Technologically, economically, and historically, socialism is certainly on the agenda. So then it comes to the subjective question: the Party. I agree that we need a party, but not one that tries to represent everyone. We do not need a party of the whole class but rather, to quote Lenin, a party of a new type, though that does not necessarily mean that we need the so-called classic “Leninist” party, of which several hundred probably exist in the U.S. alone. We need to find a party that can somehow overcome this gulf between trying to represent everyone, trying to be all things to all people, and parties that are so narrow they cannot draw in the masses needed to form a vanguard. We need a party that leads the working class to emancipation. I do not have any clear answer on how this would be done, but we cannot keep putting old wine in new bottles. We have to find a party that suits the circumstances of our times and the culture of our times, a party that actually has an impact. This will not be achieved by a mass electoral social democratic party, nor by the sectarians who say, “We have all the answers!”—Read this brochure on the genesis of Pabloism.” **IP**

Transcribed by Brian Schulz and Adam Rothbarth

- 1 David Herreshoff, *The Origins of American Marxism, From the Transcendentalists to De Leon* (New York: Monad Press, 1969), 48.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, chapter 10, section 7, available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm#7>>.
- 3 The results of the YouGov poll are available online at <https://d25d2506stb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/46721ta5ys/tabs_OP_Socialism_20160127.pdf>.
- 4 Calvin Priest, “Nevada Goes to Clinton—Sanders Looks to Super Tuesday,” *Socialist Alternative*, February 24 2016, <<http://www.socialistalternative.org/2016/02/24/nevada-clinton-sanders-super-tuesday/>>.
- 5 Jerome Roos, “Towards a New Anti-Capitalist Politics,” *Roar Magazine*, available online at <<https://roarmag.org/magazine/anti-capitalist-politics-21st-century/>>.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Errico Malatesta, “An Anarchist Program” (1920), available online at <[http://eagainst](http://eagainst.com/articles/errico-malatesta-an-anarchist-programme/)

Build political independence, don’t tail after the ruling class!

A response to John Bachtell

Bruce E. Parry



W. E. B. Du Bois documented class consciousness among the slaves and their decisive role in defeating the slavocracy in his 1935 book, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*

COMMUNIST PARTY USA (CPUSA) chairman John Bachtell argues that the main danger—overriding all—is the danger of the extreme right.¹ Bachtell points out that the CPUSA has been sounding the alarm on this danger since the 1980s. In doing so, the CPUSA has consistently urged people to vote for the Democratic Party candidates and not support third party efforts in the cause of defeating the extreme right. The CPUSA has thereby taken up the position of the (not so) liberal wing of the capitalist class. The role of revolutionaries is to lead the working class. To follow the ruling class is not to lead but to tail after its leaders. Through this strategy, the CPUSA has discouraged and prevented the political independence of the working class since the 1980s.

The CPUSA has tailed the movement and the Democratic Party and waited for workers to spontaneously come to understand the need for an independent party. Bachtell writes that at this time a third, independent party is not viable within the two-party system. He defends the Democratic Party as a “loose” multi-class alliance against the extreme right (à la Dimitrov in the 1930s and in other periods). He claims this multi-class alliance is necessary to defeat the extreme right.

The key link is not to fight the extreme right. The key link is breaking the hold that the Democratic Party and the vast majority of union leadership have on the working class.

The Sanders campaign accomplished three things crucial to American workers. First, it has raised the question of socialism and put it firmly on the political agenda. Regardless of whether we agree on the definition of socialism, Sanders has raised the issue and that allows revolutionaries to discuss and explain socialism. Second, Sanders has raised the question of opposing the one percent—the ruling section of the capitalist class—to a legitimate political position for workers to take up. In identifying the real problem facing this society, Sanders has educated broad masses of people and done what the Left has been trying to do for years. Third, in pointing the finger directly at the capitalist funding of both the Democratic and Republican Parties, Sanders has begun the admittedly nascent but very important process of politically splitting from the mainstream parties and establishing independence from them.

How do we fight the right? Should we depend on a powerful working class movement or on the liberal section of the bourgeoisie? The working class learns from experience. It can begin to learn to fight the one percent and the bourgeoisie through the Bernie Sanders campaign. Supporting Hillary Clinton sends the opposite message.

We are in a new political situation: we are witnessing the beginning of the splintering of the political parties. The Republican Party is splintering into moderate, Tea Party, and populist wings. The Sanders campaign has begun the splitting of the Democratic Party to the left. The role of revolutionaries is to encourage this. The possibility of political realignment is as great now as before the Civil War or in the 1930s. Third or even fourth parties could emerge as viable, national forces. On the Left, such a party would be formed in part from the Democratic Party, in part from the independents, and in part from sections of the Republican Party. This would give revolutionaries a “people’s party” to work in and with which to challenge the “extreme right.” It would be a place to further build working class consciousness.

What is a multi-class alliance?

An alliance is a *conscious* union formed for mutual benefit. When speaking of a multi-class alliance and the working class, this implies some level of class consciousness on the part of those working class forces forging the alliance. But there is no class consciousness in Bachtell’s “alliance.” Bachtell writes, “For those who recoil at the notion of a multi-class alliance, consider that our nation’s history is replete with such examples.” He mentions as examples the U.S. Civil War, the Russian Revolution, the fight against fascism during the 1930s and 1940s, and—in the present—the question of climate change. Let us examine each.

The concept of the United Front is one of the most misunderstood and misused concepts on the Left today. The United Front, put forth by Georgi Dimitrov, leader of the Third International during the 1930s, was one of the clearest examples of a conscious alliance—in

that case, between the communist-led workers and the social democratic-led workers (and some others) against the fascists. It was a necessary compromise by the Communists to fight an enemy that was so powerful that the unity of the working class against fascism was of the utmost necessity. Today, by contrast, the concept of a multi-class alliance is used on the Left (and by Bachtell) to mean working within any movement or organization that happens to be multi-class. This hides the crucial role of class consciousness in the development of the revolutionary potential of the working class.

The period of the U.S. Civil War was not a united front against slavery and there was no multi-class alliance. The real political realignment took place before the Civil War: when the Republican Party was formed in 1854. The *economic* contradictions between northern industry and southern slave-based agriculture became so acute that they forced a *political* resolution, which led to the formation of the Republican Party. (We are in the beginning of such a period of political transition today, driven by the contradictions between industrial production based on machinery and human labor and automated production based on electronics and robotic labor.) In 1860 the ruling class of the South—the slavocracy—declared war on the northern industrialists when the Republicans won the White House. The interests of the northern workers and the slaves were clearly aligned with those of the industrialists and were fought out on the Union side. It was not an “alliance” but rather a similarity of interests that manifested politically in the Republican Party. The northern workers were, for the most part, not class conscious, they fought because they knew slavery was wrong and challenged their economic interests. The slaves did have some class consciousness—they recognized themselves as slaves—and fought to end bondage.

The Russian Revolution was a multi-class alliance of the toiling masses, the proletariat and the peasantry. The Tsarists were overthrown in February 1917 by the bourgeoisie, led by Kerensky. That government was in turn overthrown by the Bolsheviks in the Great October Revolution. The Bolshevik program included a program for the peasantry—an exploited and oppressed class like the proletariat—and won the peasantry to the revolution. Among the Bolsheviks, there was never a question but that the proletariat was the leading aspect of that multi-class alliance. As the struggle developed, the kulaks (the bourgeois peasants) became the object of class struggle, again between the toiling masses on the one side—the proletariat and the toiling peasantry—and the bourgeoisie on the other. That is fundamentally different from an alliance of the toiling classes and the capitalist class.

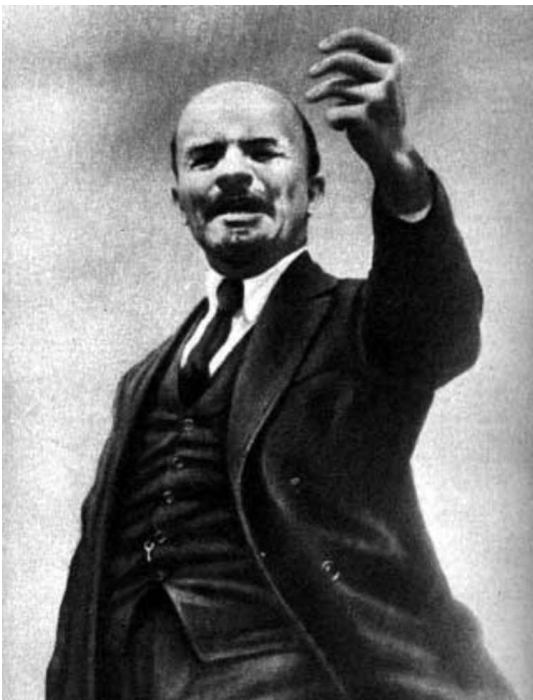
Finally, Bachtell points to the splits in the ruling class over the climate crisis. The economic basis for this split lies in in the objective economic interests of the fossil fuel industries and the green-energy industries. The interests of the working class lie with reversing the damage to the climate and ending the domination of the fossil fuel industry. This is not going to be accomplished by following the more liberal section of the ruling class, but only by a class-conscious working class overthrowing capitalism and building a socialist society.

The need for a people’s or working class party

A “people’s party” would not be a multi-class alliance; it would be an anti-corporate, multi-class *party* in which working class interests could be made explicit. It is worth noting that Sanders recently called for a working class party. This is a further development and would not be a multi-class party. The question is whether such a working class party can be built at this time.

The program of the revolutionaries must be based on the objective and subjective political situation of the workers. Objectively, the workers are in the Democratic and Republican Parties. Subjectively, they know something is wrong economically and socially, but they do not know what to do about it. They do know that the current crop of politicians is not solving their problems. The workers are looking for leaders who have solutions or who are at least willing to move in a different direction from the mainstream political hacks.

The question is: are the workers ready to form a workers’ party at this juncture? If a leader such as Bernie Sanders emerges who is willing and able to form a national working class party, that would be a great leap forward. On the other hand, if what emerges



Lenin fought for the political independence of, and class consciousness within, the working class.

is a people’s party, consisting of anti-corporate elements from all sections of society that would be an intermediate but important step forward. A people’s party at this time would establish the conditions for a working class party later, but it would be a compromise with the actual level of consciousness among the workers. A mass socialist party would require an ideological component—belief in socialism—in order to join. A workers’ party would be for all workers, whether they are socialist or not, and therefore broader. Whatever emerges, revolutionaries must be prepared to work within the political formations at hand to move the process forward. Such formations will develop through stages that take time.

The question boils down to trying to discern what exactly is the next stage of development of working class consciousness and organization, to what the workers are willing and able to do. Sanders has called for reforming the Democratic Party along the lines of his social-democratic program that favors the working class. He is forcing the mainstream leadership to make a choice. We know where Sanders stands. He is not tailing the mainstream leaders. By forcing them to choose, he maintains the political initiative in uniting the anti-corporate forces.

A “people’s party” or (if possible) a workers’ party would not be the same as past third parties. In the past, one of two situations existed. In the late 1940s, the Progressive Party seriously challenged the hegemony of the two party system. At the time, however, capitalism had the ability to expand—a point made by Nelson Peery in *Platypus Review* #81.² Economic expansion took place in the 1950s and 1960s as capital defeated the Left and expanded across the globe. That period of expansion—along with considerable violent force, including numerous assassinations—allowed the capitalists to defeat or defuse any working-class-led movements in the U.S. By the mid-1970s capital had reached the geographical limits of expansion. During the years around 1990 the expansion of capital was completed with the defeat of socialism. Since then, third party movements have continued to be isolated and have failed because they were not able to mobilize broad sections of the working class. They were unable to split off sections of society based in the major parties on behalf of the third party efforts. The workers clung to the organizations they knew.

During the last quarter century, however, the capitalist class has succeeded in all but defeating the union movement, eliminating the social safety net, abrogating the basic rights of people, terrorizing the population, spreading fear, destroying the ecology, and making war on millions of people. For many of those years, the working class largely believed that its interests lay with the misleaders of the Democratic and Republican Parties and the unions. Those purporting to lead the working class—including the CPUSA—told them to vote for the “lesser of two evils” and then “hold their feet to the fire” (make them carry out the workers’ demands). That never happened. The elected officials of both parties carried out the program of the capitalist class.

The Great Recession and continued social deterioration have begun to break the mainstream politicians’ and union leaders’ hold on workers. They are beginning to see that these misleaders do not have real solutions. Thus, the conditions for national third party politics are now in place. This requires us to accept and embrace the power that we have as workers and revolutionaries. Making the extreme right the overriding danger gives up working class power and hands it to the ruling class. It subordinates the role of the working class and revolutionaries to the interests of the capitalists. Today the generals of the working class army are on the other side! This appears to include the CPUSA.

The realities of class politics today

There are only two classes in the U.S. and in most of the world: the working class and the ruling capitalist class. The danger of the extreme right and/or neoliberalism is the danger of the ruling class. The scientific and technological revolution based in electronics is undermining the capitalist system. Modern technology accounts by some reports for as much as 88 percent of job loss in the U.S. over the last decade. The capitalists no longer need “excess” workers in a world dominated by permanent unemployment. More than two billion people are living on less than two dollars a day, including many in the U.S. These workers no longer simply constitute a reserve army of the temporarily unemployed to be thrown into production as needed. With permanent unemployment, the capitalists are not going to pay to reproduce the whole working class, only those they need. This is the economic basis for the continual shift of capitalist policies to the right since the mid-1970s. If the interests of the ruling class are to move toward further austerity then that will be done by Trump or Clinton. If the interests of the ruling class are to move to fascism, then that will be done by Trump or Clinton.

The objective conditions for socialist revolution are in place. What is missing are the subjective conditions for revolution: working class consciousness. But raising working class consciousness is the role of revolutionaries. We are the Lenins of today; our role is to imbue the class with an understanding of its historic role. This process must be approached in stages, moving the working class along a particular line of march toward political independence and political power. This means independence from the Republican and Democratic Parties.

How do we build a mass “people’s party?” The key right now is to build on the organizational efforts begun with the Sanders campaign. His campaign has mobilized millions of people. In the past, such efforts have been allowed to wither and die. As revolutionaries, we need to

do everything we can to ensure the continuation of these organizational efforts. We need a people’s party that is both electoral and integrally connected to the struggles on the ground. It must be a viable national party based the anti-corporatist section of society. It would further put forth the very issues Sanders has begun to raise and help develop the need for independent class politics.

Many on the Left define sections of the Republican Party as the “extreme right,” but it is important to recognize that the Republicans have won important sections of the working class to their side. These sections cannot be abandoned, but must be won to working class interests. The CPUSA identifies the neoliberals in the Republican Party as the extreme right and has called for following the Democrats in every election since 1980 in opposition to this section of the Republicans. The term “neoliberalism,” however, hides the fact that it is just a name for capitalist ideology, implying that there is an “acceptable” capitalist ideology other than neoliberalism. In using the term, the CPUSA (and others following the same line) fail to build a recognition that there is a working class ideology and program separate from that of the ruling class.



Bernie Sanders has raised the question of socialism for the masses, pointed to the capitalist class—the one percent—as the enemy, and graphically demonstrated the corporate ties of the Democratic and Republican parties, tasks the Left has been trying to accomplish for years.

Working class ideology is different from identity politics, which deals with specific multi-class groupings of people based on their identity as women, people of color, sexual orientation, etc. Outlawing or curtailing discrimination based on a person’s identity builds the illusion of bourgeois democracy. It does not outlaw or curtail the exploitation or oppression of workers, whether they are women, people of color, or of a specific sexual orientation or identity. In fact, the reason capitalism can never eliminate sexism (male supremacy), discrimination (white supremacy), or discrimination against those of certain sexual orientations or identities is that the working class section of those groupings will continue to be oppressed and exploited. Class politics aims at not just eliminating discrimination against the working class (which by definition is impossible under capitalism) but raising the working class to the level of ruling class.

The role of Revolutionaries

There is another crucial role of revolutionaries: to form an organization of revolutionaries. The role of such an organization—and there is not one now—is to coordinate revolutionary activities. It must ensure that revolutionaries carry out the tasks before us. It guarantees the education both of the revolutionaries and of the working class. It must work to develop and implement a strategy that can build and develop working class consciousness and the working class movement. This is different from and in dialectical relationship to a mass political party. It is important that conscious revolutionaries are connected and coordinated in their efforts. Their efforts consist of both instigating workers into action and educating workers on their objective (real, concrete, independent of personal opinion) position in society and the possibilities facing society. To do this, revolutionaries must be where workers are, in every organization workers are in: political parties and organizations, social clubs, unions and other economic organizations, and in cultural forums.

The situation has never been better for revolutionaries. This is not the time for timidity! It is the time to be bold and move forward in building political independence of the working class from the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, the union leaders, and ruling class itself. It is necessary and possible to build a viable, national third party based in the anti-corporatist sections of society.³ It is through demonstrating what is possible that workers develop class consciousness. It is the role of revolutionaries to foster this development. This process must continue no matter the outcome of the 2016 elections. **IP**

1 John Bachtell, “The 2016 Elections: A Response to Baszak and Henwood,” *Platypus Review* 85 [April 2016], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2016/03/30/the-2016-elections/>>.

2 Nelson Peery, “The Most Revolutionary Weapon: An Interview with Nelson Peery,” *Platypus Review* 81 [November 2015], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2015/11/29/revolutionary-weapon-interview-nelson-peery/>>.

3 Luis Rodriguez is active both politically and in the cultural arena. See Luis Rodriguez, “Indispensable or Irrelevant: Which Way for Communists? A Response to the Nelson Peery Interview,” *Platypus Review* 85 [April 2016], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2016/03/30/indispensable-irrelevant-way-communists/>>.