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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*.

The Platypus Review is funded by:

- The University of Chicago Student Government
- Dalhousie Student Union
- King’s Student Union
- Loyola University of Chicago
- School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
- The New School
- New York University
- Stony Brook Graduate Student Union
- The Platypus Affiliated Society

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for socialism more generally. the honor of Marxism and of the workers’ movement in 1914, but rather a matter of principle—preserving of the SPD’s chances against the government’s forces was not a matter of mere tactics, a military appraisal already dead: its past failures accumulated in it. This trying already in 1914. August 4 revealed the SPD as corpse,” that is, dead for long enough that it was rendered it, in Luxemburg’s terms, a “sinking tion with the government in 1914. Its failure to do so thought it was impossible to stage a political confon-Kautsky and other leaders of the SPD feared, why they This is precisely the repression of the SPD that rather than allow it to launch an international war. to launch a civil war against the German government For Luxemburg and Lenin, the SPD was duty-bound worse than nothing, part of sustaining capitalism. struggle for socialism, the SPD was nothing or indeed apart from the immediate application of the goal in the Luxemburg agreed with Lenin that, in itself, and ing—the true struggle for socialism. in the historical moment and of undermining—betray-revolution. Each could accuse the other of opportunism for trying to use the war as an occasion for socialist-ity of the struggle for socialism in the future; and Lenin to defend the SPD in the present, and thus the possibi-Ayatollah Khomeini in the war: Kautsky for voting for war credits complicity in the war: Kautsky for voting for war credits Thus Kautsky and Lenin could accuse one another of



German soldiers being cheered in Lübeck during their advance to the front lines in 1914 during World War I.

Kautsky condemned the Bolsheviks’ overthrow of the Russian Provisional Government in 1917, which stood with the Entente against the Germans. Lenin and Trotsky’s Bolsheviks were regarded by Russian nation-alists as German agents for promoting an armistice, to pull Russia out of the war. But Lenin wanted to pull Russia out of the international war in order for it to par-ticipate in the civil war between the global classes of workers and capitalists.

invasion and occupation, and destruction of the social-democratic workers’ movement was enough to pre-empt such active counterrevolution with the passive counterrevolution of the social-democratic cooperation in all politics there is, as Lenin put it, a “who-whom?” question: who is the agent and who is the ob-ject. The most catastrophic political mistakes the Left has made historically are in terms of this who-whom

What was the specific character of this counter-revo-

lution, and how was it made possible?

There was a famous pair of sayings by the SPD’s chairman, Bebel: “Not one man or one penny for this rotten system!” and “If it’s against Russia, I myself will pick up a gun!”

The German High Command, in preparation for war, took aim precisely at the contradiction between these two statements by Bebel.

The German High Command, in preparation for war, took aim precisely at the contradiction between these two statements by Bebel.

This was not an unreasonable judgment. The ques-tion is whether their compromise was too much, wheth-er the act of ostensible self-preservation was in fact actually an act of self-destruction.

So the issue is *what* was preserved through the com-promise, the surrender to the blackmail of the war?

The German government, which the original Sparta-cus League of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht considered responsible for the war, adopted a strategy of a two-front war—against both the Russians and the British and the French—despite the evident military risks of doing so. They did so in order to ensure the ad-herence of the Social Democrats to the war effort, out of defense against the Russians. The threat of Russian

At the 2014 Platypus Affiliated Society’s annual interna-tional Convention, held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago April 4–6, Chris Cutrone delivered the following President’s Report. The transcript of the presentation and the discussion that followed has been edited for brevity and clarity. A full audio recording is available online at <http://platypus1917.org/sixth-annual-platypus-interna-tional-convention>.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER, what does the crisis and split in Marxism, and the political collapse of the major parties of the 2nd International in 1914, mean for us today? The Spartacists, for example, are constantly in search of the “August 4” moment, the moment of be-trayal of the proletariat’s struggle for socialism by Spartacists went so far as to confess their own “Au-gust 4” when they failed to call for the immediate with-drawal of U.S. troops from Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake there.

So, what happened, from a Marxist perspective, on August 4, 1914, when the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) members of the Reichstag voted to fi-nance the Prussian Empire’s war budget?

Two things: the parliamentary representatives of the SPD went against past resolutions to vote down the war effort of the German government; and the disorganiza-tion of the SPD leadership, what has been called the effective but illegitimate takeover of the party by the parliamentary delegation. No legitimate political au-thority of the party sanctioned this action. In all respects of principle and practice, the SPD was destroyed as a political organization as it had existed up to that point. August 4, 1914, has been called—by the Spartacists— the first great internal counterrevolution in the history of Marxism. This is entirely true.

But it was a counterrevolution conducted not merely by the leadership of the SPD, however they may have abetted it, but rather by the Reich’s government against the SPD membership.

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organization that are developing. Increasingly, the struggle is not employer against employee, but rather the people of this transformed working class against the government, demanding the necessities of life, which is the key struggle that is going on.

I think at any particular point in history there is usually a key link that pulls forward the process in revolution and today, in terms of the mass movement, the key link is developing a third political party. There are no organizations amongst the workers that are capable of fighting the onslaught of neoliberalism, and we have to have some form of organization to defend ourselves. I am active in the Justice Party because I see that as a viable form of organization. The other key link is to de-

Let me switch now to a specific case study I wrote about in my last book, namely, the issues of maritime labor, the workers in merchant shipping, merchant seamen, or the merchant marines. By 1970, unions had taken firm root and had advanced their positions to a considerable degree and fleets dominated the world, namely the British, the German, the Scandinavian fleets, to some extent the American fleets, and the Greek fleets. These fleets were strongly unionized; they had bargained down vacation time, overtime pay, benefits, and recreational centers. And by the 1970s the fleets were opening up the world of maritime employment to more and more women. There was talk, in short, on a real focus on quality of life. In that same decade, how-

plays fewer and fewer workers. This is the example with the jobless recoveries, in which GDP growth, investment, is decoupled from employment and that, regardless of the growth and investment, the rate of labor force participation is dropping. I think two months ago the unemployment rate dropped and that was entirely due to workers dropping out of the workforce. So I think that is a thing we have to grasp and understand while we're in this struggle for workers' employment.

A little bit more on the constituency question: It seems to me that the transformation of the working class is a very important thing to examine, and what we really have now is what some people are calling the precariat, which is a workforce that moves in and out of employment, or is made up of contract workers and underground economy workers. When you really examine the situation today, the struggle for significant reforms is, in a lot of ways, a lot more utopian than the struggle for revolutionary socialism. Under these conditions, the only thing that can really solve the problem is the revolutionary transformation of society. I think that the Democratic Party, at least since World War II and really before that, has been a conduit of imperialist super-profits that have been fed into the working-class and that is how they won the allegiance of the working class, especially in the United States. Once the world-wide economic crisis hit, the Democratic Party served the capitalist class, and it is clear that it is not a real alternative for workers. I think this is why there is a necessity for the growth of a third party.

LF: Göran Therborn noted in the *New Left Review* that the 20th century was something that we could talk about as something that belonged to the working-class, at least in the European and American context. There was an equalization of the living standards, at least compared to what had been before, to a remarkable degree within Western nations. We talk today about the rising inequality and measure that against the 1950s and '60s when there was a much smaller gap between owners or managers and workers than there is today. That is, for much of the 20th century, much of the unions and the Democratic Party were agents of relative equalization. But I don't disagree that this came with imperialism because the same period that saw the equalization within nations also saw a sharp differentiation between nations. But in the twenty-first century, Therborn suggests, what we see is the opposite: that within nations there is a rising inequality, just as we see in the U.S., but compared to what had been the gap between say India or China and the U.S. or the Asian tigers, those gaps have narrowed as say the relationship of Brazil or Argentina to the U.S., those gaps have narrowed. But even within those societies there is great economic inequality that should produce a constituency for a class-based politics. It is much easier, however, for the Democratic Party to straddle the social issues than the class issues—witness the really appalling response to the employment issue by the Obama administration. So I think that there is an opening for the Left, but again to come back to my argument about the seafarers, I think this also has to be done for the most part ultimately in an international or transnational context.

BB: The question of who is the constituency for the revolutionary politics of work is a complicated one because we have two very different strands of work-life going on in this country. We have people who are desperate for work. On the other hand, we have people who remind me of an apocryphal dialogue set in the 1960s between a foreman at an auto assembly line and one of his workers, where the foreman asks why do you come to work only four days a week and the worker says because you can't make a living coming to work only three. So we also have this demand for less work, for refusal of work. Both of those things are part of the constituency, but putting them together is a problem. I do think that—I am going to pick up a little on what Leon said—the formulation that Occupy came up with, the one percent vs ninety-nine percent, was brilliant in terms of thinking about where your constituency might be and not totally inconsistent with Marx's analysis of where capitalism would go.

Finance capital has changed the dynamics of the economy in pretty fundamental ways; it has also changed the political dynamics of the party. So at this point, in political terms, class struggle runs through the Democratic Party. The problem we face in terms of parties is that we are in a federal system, which means it is a winner takes all system, and we are virtually unique among modern industrial countries in terms of this structure, which means if you are going to become a third party, you have to become first or second party very, very quickly or else you remain in the shadows and margins of political life. So the only really good example we have of this is the Republican Party back in the 1850s when it went from being a third party to a dominant political party in this country. If I only knew how to replicate that!

Bill, you outlined a detailed program for solving unemployment and equalizing employment in the country, but you also said that due to the rise of finance capital the political system has been thrown up in the air. So what political formations do you see among working people that could possibly be strong enough to implement the program that you laid out?

BB: With the 2008 election, many of us on the Left who had read the history of the New Deal thought, "wow, it is going to happen again," but we forgot the right was going to resist it and the risk that it might happen again in a much more far reaching manner.

We had Wisconsin, we had Ohio, we had Occupy, and we had the Chicago Teachers' Union. When I spent my eight or nine years in NAM, we adopted Gramsci's political slogan as our mantra, "Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will." So my belief is that at some point, these upsurges—which you can't really organize or create, but you can prepare for—at one point will come together and create this kind of mass movement around work and jobs and a whole lot of things in our lives. Can I tell you how to do it today? No I can't.

LB: Think about the Republican Party in the 1850s when slavery became the central issue of the country. The Whig Party didn't deal with it and it dissolved. The Democratic Party didn't deal with it and the Republican Party was born and, in a short period of time, took over the country. What we're experiencing now is a fundamental

economic crisis. The Republican Party is already splitting, the Democratic Party will be split, and in a short period of time there will be a third party emerging. Now the problem is, whether that party will be a progressive party or a right-wing fascist party, since most of the Left doesn't have an understanding of the electoral process. At this point there is no defense against a right-wing thrust in this country because capitalism is in crisis and it will move to the right and crush any kind of resistance. Right now, you can look around, if you want to rely on the Democratic Party, you're going to be disappointed just like we were disappointed with Obama. You have to have some form of organization.

On my understanding, the Democratic Party was never something to funnel workers' struggles through. Revolutionaries participated in the Democratic Party in order to lay the basis for a working-class motion because that was where the workers were. So it doesn't mean we thought you could accomplish things through the Democratic Party, but that was an organizing approach. The great lesson of Marx is that the objective conditions teach you what is possible—freedom is really the recognition of the necessity of the object.

On this issue of third parties and the Democrats: I wonder what the discussants think of two historical examples. The first is the example of Bayard Rustin in the 1960s in From Protest to Politics, in other words, splitting the Democratic Party around the Civil Rights Movement and turning the Democratic Party into a labor and black party. Rustin was, of course, unsuccessful and what happened instead was we had the Republican-centered strategy and the transformation of southern Democrats into Republicans. The other example is a project headed by Adolph Reed, who was involved in the Labor Party USA in the 1990s, which was an attempt to essentially capture the labor parties' contempt with the Democratic leadership councils and the neoliberal turn of the Democrats in the 1990s, marked by the election of Bill Clinton and Al Gore.

LF: I do think what is important is to think about moments of possibility and paths taken or not taken. For example, it seems clear to me there are a lot more people in motion and frailty about the current political equilibrium than there were in Adolph Reed's Labor Party, which spent much focus, energy and discipline on strategy and didn't have nearly as much effect as the more spasmodic moment of Occupy. Even as a spasmodic moment, Occupy has left an imprint, and you can't understand Elizabeth Warren, or Blasio's campaign, or even Los Angeles' labor-centered, Democratic politics without it. If you follow Rick Perlstein's writings about Chicago, he suggests that there is a possibility of a Left movement combining the CTU and dissenting voices in the immigrant community/African-American community of Chicago as an alternative to Mayor Rahm. I would like to think so too, but I also think that if you think back to the heyday of Occupy, was there an opportunity missed? What was it? We know that things kind of jumped from the Madison moment to Occupy to the CTU, and we can point to lots of points of light and see that this is a period of ferment in this country, but I don't see a clear compass about strategy so much.

LB: I was active in the Labor Party. I think that when you evaluate what happened, you can see that the union leadership was so tied to the Democratic Party and that the Labor Party was so reliant on the unions to finance it, that it became impossible to move forward. It disintegrated with the death of Tony Mazzocchi. Although it is very hard to imagine a progressive third party without heavy union participation, the reality today is that the industrial proletariat is gone, massive workplaces are gone, and the only unions are some of these public sector unions. You have to develop an understanding of the nature of the workforce and the nature of the struggle and what kind of party will be built. It seems to me that it is very difficult to do it with the unions and, if you can imagine a third-party, it's got to be much broader than the old conception of the union based party.

I don't want to get too much into the '60s stuff about Bayard Rustin. I am from that period, my evaluation of him is very negative. I think he corralled people into the moderate sector of the Civil Rights Movement, and it wasn't a genuine attempt to form a progressive party. The fight between SNCC and the more conservative leaders there was clear, and Bayard Rustin was on the wrong side.

So capitalists are replacing labor with capital, laying off a hundred thousand workers, and replacing them with 5 computers and a very skilled computer operator. So that is one response, but what about another response, which is the substitution of cheap consumption for higher wages? Instead of actual money and actual political power, the workers could be given cheap internet, cheap entertainment, and other things.

LB: Aronowitz talked about how the struggle of the workers is what pushes the capitalists to automate production, and I really don't think that is correct. There is an internal dynamic of capitalism that generates competition, the need to undersell competitors, and thus the need to automate. So it's not a voluntary thing that they decide, well, the workers are going on strike, so I think I'll automate; they are forced to automate due to competition. I think that that's the key thing about automation, that you can begin seeing the future of a real society where there is distribution according to need, that we can produce a kind of abundance while taking into account the protection of the planet of course. But the technology now exists that we can supply the basic needs of all the people if the means of production were collectively owned. Yet capitalism is going in the opposite direction. It's impoverishing people, there is growing disparity, which underscores the importance of automation. In a lot of ways it seems like we are being forced to fight just to survive. The government is cutting the entire social safety net and is giving very little.

BB: One of the reasons I highlighted jobs that demand affective time is that they are not easily automated and are very difficult to outsource. You can, however, draw on the international female reserve army of labor and staff some of those jobs and keep the wages low. That remains a reality and a real problem.

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1914 in the history of Marxism, continued from page 1



Cover of the Vorwärts, the SPD's party organ in 1914; the headline reads, "Social Democracy and the War!"

The SPD voted for war credits to the First World War almost 100 years ago on August 4 1914. Lenin was so incredulous at the SPD's vote for war credits that he thought this issue of Vorwärts was a forgery by the German government.

Recently, the anarchist Wayne Price spoke on a Platypus panel about the dual failure of Marxism in the 2nd and 3rd Internationals, claiming that Marxism revealed its authoritarian statism at two clear moments: when Marxists of the 2nd International supported the war in 1914, and when Lenin suppressed other socialists in the Russian Revolution and Stalin did so in the Spanish Civil War.¹ The role of Marxist parties in these instances was to serve the counterrevolution rather than the revolution. The question, then, would be not what Kautsky and Lenin had in common, but how they differed. And they differed most clearly around the issue of the war in 1914, from which their later difference over the revolution in both Russia and Germany in 1917–18 was derived.

The question is the workers' movement for socialism. Kautsky considered it an end in itself, thus retroactively agreeing with Bernstein's Revisionist-reformist view of the "movement is everything, the goal nothing." Preserving the movement meant betraying its goals, whereas Luxemburg and Lenin were willing to sacrifice the movement for the goal of socialism. That is the only reason they opposed the war by opposing the war politics of the various antagonistic governments, to precipitate a global civil war of workers against capitalists. They thus did not reject the war on pacifist grounds, as Kautsky might have done, compromising with it on defensive grounds, but rather identified the war as the necessary expression of, and occasion for, the need for the struggle for socialism.

As it turns out, perhaps the preemptive counter-revolution by the German government through the war must be deemed in retrospect to have been successful. Certainly the struggle for socialism let alone Marxism in the advanced capitalism countries never did recover from it.

Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky tried to make the First World War really into what Woodrow Wilson merely promised, a "war to end all wars." Wilson thought it was to defeat remnant feudalism; Marxists understood rather that it was to overcome capitalism.

As such, Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky launched a civil war: first and foremost a civil war within Marxism itself, between those who accepted the task and those who rejected and thus betrayed the duties of that civil war. That they failed in this is not proof against the task of socialism. Wilson regarded and fought against the Marxists as extremists—extremism bred of political repression in undemocratic states. But of course the conservative and opportunist character of Wilson's politics was different from that of the SPD's capitulation to the war. Or was it? Wilson didn't think that Prussian militarism or Tsarism indicted bourgeois society but were backward violations of its norms. The SPD similarly degraded the war as an abnormality. Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky degraded the war as the norm: the endemic crisis of capitalism raised to a fever pitch. But the SPD and Wilson considered them to be opening the world to greater war and horror, to the greater barbarization of bourgeois society. If Wilson was no socialist, he still considered himself a defender against the threats of both Prussian militarism and Bolshevism to the norms of liberal democratic bourgeois society, which socialists considered the base-line minimum of the standards for a better society. The question and the political dispute was over how to best protect, defend, and promote the principles of that better society, to which all political actors might claim adherence, and what compromises can be justifiable in that pursuit. It is thus not a matter of pure principles but of means to their end, the true dispute of politics.

Nineteen fourteen was not proof of the Marxist analysis of "imperialism" or the demonstration of the horrors of capitalism, or any other such thing: It was the division of Marxism in war and revolution at the *Gottterdammerung* of bourgeois society that haunts the struggle for socialism to this day, the task and duty of civil war from which the "Left" today shrinks, thus becoming a "stinking corpse," now as before.

The war and the revolution are all around us, all the time. As Lenin put it, it is not as conveniently posed as the capitalists lining up on one side and the workers on the other, which would make the task very simple. No: 1914 is still with us to the extent that the workers are on both sides, and both sides could plausibly claim to be on the true side of the struggle for socialism, or at least for a better society, which is what "socialism" after all means.

Nineteen fourteen was the division in the workers' movement for socialism, which was the precondition for the politics of revolution. The fact that we no longer have that politics can be traced back to the problem and task that 1914 revealed.

Q & A

The idea that we've inherited from 1914—Lenin as revolutionary defeatist, and defeatism as Marxist orthodoxy—really represents an innovation. It was not the norm even of

Marxists who opposed the war at the time, e.g. the Zimmerwald Center. Marx and Engels did not take a revolutionary defeatist stance in the wars of German unification or the Franco-Prussian war, but instead tactically adopted different positions in different wars. The idea of a principled revolutionary defeatism came from Lenin's consciousness that bourgeois society had changed in the decades since then. To him, 1914 represented simultaneously the over-ripeness and rottenness of both bourgeois society and the SPD. This is expressed in the theory of imperialism, which is taken to be a new stage of bourgeois society. The problem with the "Leninist" view is that after the long period from 1914–1933, the principle of revolutionary defeatism becomes detached from concrete politics and is upheld simply as a principle. This is especially pronounced after WWII. When this principle is detached from the concrete possibility of a global class civil war, everything is changed.

CC: I want to touch on something that I glossed over in my comments in light of this. On the one hand, Luxemburg and Lenin were on the same side in the war; but on the other, they were on opposite sides. They were both revolutionary defeatists in certain respects. But one of Luxemburg's first critiques of the Bolsheviks in power is of their armistice with Germany. Luxemburg thought that by doing this Lenin would be embracing German militarism. We forget this in light of other criticisms, but it was a live issue at the time. The way these disputes—imperialism, revolutionary defeatism, etc.—are remembered by the Left now is in terms of principles, but in a particular way. Rather, we should raise the issue of the need to split the worker's movement post-1914. Lenin's "principled" assessment of WWI was bound up with this need at his historical moment. It's a principled stance with respect to a certain historical situation, but not principled in the manner of pacifism. It is actually in a way a kind of pro-war sentiment.

When you said, "1914 is still with us," could you relate this to the anti-Iraq war protests? Was there still some kind of consciousness on the Left of the way the problems of 1914 are still with us? If not, what factors stand in the way of raising these problems to consciousness on the Left?

CC: A government going to war takes a huge political risk, even in the case of the U.S. invading a far weaker country. The government could delegitimize itself, and thus release all sorts of problems. But the anti-war protests before the war gave the Left the false impression that there was a kind of mass sentiment, waiting to take advantage if the governments took a misstep in the war. But the anti-war protests didn't have the content the Left wanted to attribute to it. Both these protests and the Left were bound up in a conservative opposition to war, a kind of fear. But in 1914 the situation is quite different—there is the presence of the 2nd International. I brought up Lenin's critique of Luxemburg's *Junius Pamphlet*, where he's basically saying, "OK, comrade, just hold on, these governments are undermining themselves and revolution can still happen." Of course this isn't just based upon the war, but of his perception of the strength of the 2nd International and the SPD. Now where Luxemburg may have been right against Lenin was in thinking that the SPD was a paper tiger. But Lenin had the cooler head with respect to the historical moment.

The main organizers in the 2003 anti-war movement were the International Socialist Organization, Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), and the Workers World Party and its various offshoots like the Party for Socialism and Liberation. So the RCP would show up with their sound system and their rattle-rousers, and they would deliver speeches that sounded like they were out of a monster truck rally—except with Leftist language as their content. They thought the war just showed how fascist the world really is. They were stuck in this 30s frame of fascism versus communism: if you aren't a communist, you're a fascist, and if you don't think you're living under fascism, the war shows that you really are. This is far degraded, neither Luxemburg nor Lenin.

Let's say the U.S. government had been completely delegitimized in the course of the Iraq War, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers were left in Iraq. Do we really think socialism would have been the result of that? Obviously not. What would have happened was a military takeover of the U.S. government, and it would have been popular. People would think the only who can save the troops in Iraq; if the executive and congress can't do it, the military will. There would have been a military coup, a state of emergency; there would not have been socialist revolution—that's for sure.

I want to bring anarchists into the discussion. In 1914, many anarchists opposed the Bolsheviks and supported the war. But nowadays we see anarchists taking up the defeatist position in an even more consistent manner than Leninists. So it seems there is an opposite course over time.

CC: The anarchists who supported the war in 1914 capitulated in the same manner as Marxists in the 2nd In-

ternational. So it is interesting that the 3rd International emerges not only from a split within the 2nd International, but also among anarchists. But today's anarchists and Marxists aren't in a position of political responsibility, so theirs are a pseudo-anarchism and pseudo-Marxism. These people aren't going to capitulate to anything, because they don't have the political responsibility that would force them into a choice. Anarchists in 1914 were actually faced with a political choice.

I would like to raise the issue of nationalism. We have until now talked about the stances of the so-called leadership of the worker's movement—but WWI showed how deeply rooted nationalist sentiments were in the masses. Before 1914 the view was that workers internationally had a common interest that would led them to fight together against their exploiters. But this illusion was destroyed by WWI. As anti-nationalists we need to keep this in mind, as it seems there is the mistaken impression that nationalism can be dispensed with easily. People think that common interests are enough to overcome nationalist ideology. Marxists—Lenin included—thought that it would not be a problem, and so the USSR gave land to various ethnicities. But we could actually say that the nation was the necessary ground for the growth of the workers' movement, and nationalism was deeply rooted in it.

CC: I take exception to this, very strongly. First of all, the question of the workers "supporting the war" is tricky. That young, 18–20-year-old people could be recruited to be very nationalist troops is very different from saying that 30–40-year-old workers organized in the SPD supported the war. There was a cosmopolitan—not merely international—culture among workers before WWI that was actively destroyed during the war. The German government estimated that the SPD was anti-war, but could be maneuvered into supporting one. They thought that as the SPD grew, and as Germany generally became more liberal and democratic, any hope of reordering Europe by military means would be progressively undermined. So the German government blackmailed them with the threat of Russian invasion. So it's not as if the war occurred independently, and the SPD underestimated the workers' support for it. These are much more closely bound up phenomena, where the thinking was of the SPD as a piece on the playing field militarily. None of the workers wanted the war.

The earlier points about Lenin and Luxemburg are important here. I do believe it is correct to say that Lenin had a "cooler head" than Luxemburg with respect to their historical conjuncture. The problem is that regression in a way makes it appear that Luxemburg was right. I think that Lenin's response to nations, nationalism, and self-determination was basically a continuation of a bourgeois-democratic project. But having experienced the 20th century, there is a way that Luxemburg's anti-nationalism seems more accurate. But I think one has to separate oneself

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I think one example that might be interesting to discuss in terms of debating the pros and cons of social democracy is 1980s France, where we did have a social democratic party take power, and according to the sort of mainstream narrative, it faced resistance to a social democratic regulation of the economy that lowered the rate of profit. The push back took the form of social democrats eventually implementing neoliberalism. Two sets of questions: First, if you wouldn't mind commenting on an idea, would imposing regulations or imposing a jobs program in the current society would be sustainable? What is your response to someone like Andrew Kliman who would raise the example of 1980s France in the face of social democracy being spread to the U.S. or other capitalist countries? How can one challenge global capitalism and motivate people, inspire people to take tremendous risks, without pointing towards a revolutionary conception of society? Can we even have some sort of rise of standards without fundamental revolutionary change at this point?

LF: I believe we can. France in the 1980s was a national model. The U.S. is not France; we've already been effectively deindustrialized in many respects. Manufacturing, which is the easiest to transport or outsource, is not the same as the service sector, the health sector, or the food services sector. There is nothing in my view that stops a 15 dollar restaurant wage from coming into existence—that is not impossible, although it is politically difficult. There is nothing that would bring down the system if restaurant workers had a 15 dollar minimum wage. I think there is every reason why that should be on the table, and there are many other examples. I think there are areas where there can be capital flight, but we shouldn't just subscribe to a scary image of capital flight because we think there are so few alternatives, since I think the alternatives are there, but our imagination is failing us.

LB: I am not talking about capital flight, I am talking about fascism. I am talking about fact that the economic crisis is so serious that we have to be aware of what we are fighting. I am a supporter of the fight for 15, the fight to raise the minimum wage, which I think is the cutting edge of the struggle today. But if we think we can implement Keynesian reforms, we are going to run into problems. I think what is going on in Europe, and in the Nordic countries is a lurch towards fascism. Europe has a history of fascism. And while the United States doesn't have that same history, our forms will be different. In Europe the fascist parties are growing like crazy. It's not just Greece; it's England, it's France and in the Nordic countries, it's a reaction to the number of immigrants. I think 1980s France is not the France of today. Today there is a fundamental crisis going on. Everybody knows that quantitative easing is going to be eliminated. Everybody knows that the Chinese have been producing just to employ people and that that model has reached the limits of its development; and they're going to be changing the third plan of what is going this weekend. You know Europe is not recovering from the crisis. We are facing an even worse economic downturn than in 2008.

We desperately need an organization of revolutionaries that can analyze the situation and direct our strategy. This thing that Platypus talks about, that the Left is

from the sense that we know what happened; there can be a kind of historical optical illusion. This issue came up in current debates about Ukraine. Putin said that the Bolsheviks irrationally gave away historically Russian territory to the Ukrainians. But this was a perfectly reasonable belief: Ukrainians, as a separate people, should have the right to self-determination within the overarching bounds of a soviet socialist federation. You can say at this point in history that it was a naïve belief, but it only became a naïve belief. It was at the time a very sane, rational belief that was an extension through Marxism of basic liberal ideas. IP

Q & A transcribed by Thomas Willis.

1. See Wayne Price's remarks for the Platypus panel discussion Radical Ideologies Today: Marxism and Anarchism, at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), March 19 2014. The sound recording is available online at < http://platypus1917.org/2014/03/21/radical-ideologies-today-marxism-anarchism-chicago-3-21-14/.

dead, it's really dead, and you can say, "Long live the Left," but there is very little of it that remains. We are facing a very serious situation nationally and internationally. Religion is appealing to those in Africa, where it's the Catholics and the Protestants, and in the Middle East, where it's the Muslims. The Left is in a very bad shape internationally and in the United States, and we have to have a realistic estimate of what we are facing.

BB: We have a similar kind of debate within CPEG on the question of whether or not there is some kind of terminal crisis of capitalism. Having spent forty-five years as a socialist, I have to say I am very skeptical about that kind of argument. Capitalism, it seems to me, has turned out to be remarkably malleable and resilient, and we can't count on terminal crisis doing our jobs for us, whether that means we create a party or we engage in these reformist struggles. If you take Gorz's notion of a non-reformist reform seriously, something that may sound like a reform in one moment in capitalist history, may be a non-reformist reform because of the constraints of capitalism at that point of history. I think capitalism is like a cat with nine lives: You have to figure out some way to deal with it, and you have to make real history. IP

Transcribed by Daniel Jacobs.

1. Stanley Aronowitz and George Caffentzis, "Technology and the Labor Process," roundtable at Historical Materialism [New York, 2013], recording available online at <http://wearmany.org/a/2013/04/technology-and-labor-process>.

The politics of work

Bill Barclay, Lenny Brody, and Leon Fink

On November 5, 2013, the Platypus Affiliated Society of Chicago hosted a conversation on the Politics of Work at the School of Art Institute between Bill Barclay of the Democratic Socialists of America and the Chicago Political Economy Group, Lenny Brody of the Justice Party and the Network for Revolutionary Change, and Leon Fink, a professor of labor history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The panel was moderated by Ed Remus. The original description of the event reads: “It is generally assumed that Marxists and other leftists have the political responsibility to support reforms for the improvement of the welfare of workers. Yet, leading figures from the Marxist tradition—such as Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky—also understood that such reforms would broaden the crisis of capitalism and potentially intensify contradictions that could adversely impact the immediate conditions of the workers. For instance, full employment, while being a natural demand from the standpoint of all workers’ interests, also threatens the conditions of capitalist production [which rely on a surplus of available labor], thereby potentially jeopardizing the system of employment altogether. In light of such apparent paradoxes, this panel seeks to investigate the politics of work from leftist perspectives. It will attempt to provoke reflection on and discussion of the ambiguities and dilemmas of the politics of work by including speakers from divergent perspectives, some of whom seek after the immediate abolition of labor and others of whom seek to increase the availability of employment opportunities. It is hoped that this conversation will deepen the understanding of contemporary problems faced by the Left in its struggles to construct a politics adequate to the self-emancipation of the working class.” What follows is an edited transcript of the event. A full recording of the discussion can be found online at <http://platypus1917.org/2013/11/06/the-politics-of-work-chicago-11-5-13>



Pin for the U.S. Labor Party.

BILL BARCLAY: I joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the early 1960s when I was in college in North Carolina. I joined the New America Movement (NAM) sometime around 1974; I was on the political committee of NAM at the time of its merger with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee to create the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). I then drifted away from the DSA but returned about four or five years ago to the DSA about the same time I and some other comrades founded the Chicago Political Economy Group (CPEG). I am going to use Joan Robinson’s remark, “the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all,” as my jumping off point. I will first talk about the kind of jobs program CPEG created and I’ll presage that discussion by suggesting it looks a lot like the Nordic social democracy model. Then I am going to come back and look at that line of thought through a feminist lens and talk about neoliberal capitalism.

So let me start with the CPEG model. We spent some time looking at the U.S. economy and came to the conclusion that, as Robinson remarked, the misery of not being exploited at all was the sort of central dilemma. We were in a situation where there was long-term systematic underemployment in this country in 2007 and 2008, that is, before the crisis hit. We in CPEG asked, “Can we design a political program that addresses the problem and also has the potential for transforming the larger political economy?” So we put together a program with a number of points. At first we said, “We want to create a net of 4.5 million new jobs every year for a five year period and these new jobs, this new work, should pay a living wage.” At the time in 2008, when we sat down to design the program, the median wage was eighteen dollars an hour. We said that should be the wage of these jobs. We also recognized that there would be people who would want to enroll in the program over time that would come in without skills, so there would be a training wage of about eleven dollars and fifty cents an hour, as people learned the skills and got access to the chance to be exploited. We said that this should happen in three areas of the political economy: one, this should not surprise you at all, there is the problem of broken bridges, broken roads, schools, hospitals, and all of the physical infrastructure; second area was green technology, green manufacturing, and applications of green technology; and the third area was what we call social infrastructure. This involves the question of taking care of the old and the young, the question of health provision, and the question of education—what are sometimes called the caring occupations. So those are the three areas we said we should have an extensive jobs program that, over the five-year period, creates 22.5 million net new jobs. By our calculations at that time, this would generate access to work for everybody willing and able. Most of this work was going to be in

the public sector. We recognized, of course, that some of these jobs would still need to be through contracts with the private sector, but most jobs would be in the public sector because that is the most efficient way to develop a social infrastructure, and, because we consciously wanted this work to be de-commodified (work that does not require the process of capitalist accumulation as in the private sector). We put this program together in August 2008. The guys who did the heavy number crunching estimated it would cost about 177.5 billions dollars a year, which doesn’t sound like a lot until you remember that after five years, we are spending 887.5 billion dollars each year to run this program. Two months later, Hank Paulson walks up to congress with three pieces of paper and says we need 887.5 billion dollars to bail out banks, granted, that was not upfront but in total. We had worked to try to get legislative reform in.

One way to look at the program is to say that this is a classic Keynesian program where you increase aggregate demand by bringing more people into the workforce. Another, slightly more sophisticated version, looks a lot like the Rehn-Meidner model for the Nordic countries developed in the 1940’s. The Rehn-Meidner model argued that, if you pursue full-employment by squeezing the low-wage sector of the economy, firms would either move up the productive scale or they would go out of business. At the same time, using your increasingly profitable and productive private sector, you would finance a large expansion of the social wage through de-commodified services in a whole variety of areas in the public sector. And that really has been the growth model that most of the Nordic economies have followed for some period of time to a greater or lesser extent.

Now, let me look at the Joan Robinson quote from another perspective, “the misery of not being exploited at all.” Early socialists, to the extent that they considered gender as a category of capitalism, went back to Marx’s distinction between use-value and exchange-value and noted, as Marx did in the opening chapters of *Capital*, that use-values often include domestic labor. Yet household labor doesn’t appear on the marketplace, it doesn’t appear in the sphere of circulation, and it’s not part of the generation of surplus value. And some early socialists wanted to deal with the women’s question by industrializing household labor, to move that labor into the sphere of exchange-value, to use that labor as a source of the accumulation of capital, and to develop class consciousness in emancipated women. Marx and early Marxists didn’t think a lot about the question of class consciousness of people who weren’t directly involved in the process of production. In one of the many ironies of history, which you find in capitalist societies, it appears that neoliberal capitalism in the U.S. has accomplished exactly that. The simplest confirmation of this is to look at what the Bureau of Labor Statistics says are the fifteen out of seven hundred and forty occupations that are going to generate about thirty-one percent of the new jobs between 2010 and 2020. If you look at these types of work, they include whole-healthcare work, childcare, nursing, care for the elderly, working as orderlies or receptionists, and food preparation and serving—these are the kind of jobs, the kinds of use-values, if you will, nominally produced in household economies that are moving increasingly into the economy of the workforce, that are going to be the source of almost a third of all new jobs that are created.

If you look at those fifteen occupations, twelve of them are done predominantly by women in the paid labor force and, in many cases, are overwhelmingly done by women. These occupations also reproduce, in many respects, the household division of labor between who does what kind of work. It probably won’t be a shock to you to also learn that of these twelve occupations, ten of them are paid dramatically below the median wage in the economy as a whole, and often less than two-thirds of the median wage of the economy as a whole. So we have really reproduced many of the same inequalities that we find in the traditional, patriarchal, capitalist household that have just been moved over into the wage economy. And it is interesting if you ask what is asked of these jobs. Of course it is labor time, but I would also argue that it is affective time. And women are seen as more affective—women smile more, women initiate more interactions with other people, and women deflect anger rather than reflect it back. So the idea is that these jobs are women’s work.

Have the CPEG/Nordic model and neoliberal capitalist model converged? Well, on the one hand, in both cases, a lot of traditional household use-values have been taken out of the household political economy and transferred into the wage-labor force, and these jobs are still done predominantly by women. But the differences are actually very significant when thinking about the politics of work going forward. In the Nordic model, what has happened is that these use-values have been socialized and have been produced and consumed in a socialized part of the economy, in de-commodified form. In contrast, in the neoliberal model, what you find is use-values have been privatized in the U.S., and production and consumption is privatized in a wage-labor situation. You can, by the way, find very nice, high-level performers in these jobs. So the Nordic model and the neoliberal model diverge, which in turn, leads to other divergences. If you look at the Nordic countries, you find that the female labor force participation rate is almost as high as that of the rest of the labor force, which is not true in the US. We find a smaller gender wage-gap and interestingly enough, in the Nordic countries in particular, we also find a solution to the question of how to structure one of the remaining very important aspects of household political economy—parenting time. All of these countries,

like much of Western Europe, offer maternity leave on the birth of the child. But these five countries, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, also all require the father to take some portion of the leave or the family loses it, in effect, restructuring the parenting time.

John Maynard Keynes predicted that we would be working no more than twenty hours a week by the year 2000. In 1965, a Senate Committee that thought we would be working fifteen to twenty hours wondered what we would do with all our leisure. But obviously, time has not worked out that way even though from the Civil War to the 1950s, the U.S. working week did decline. Since then we have actually gone in a different direction than Europe. The Nordic countries and much of Western Europe work anywhere from three to nine forty-hour weeks less than we do. Seventy-five percent of people in the U.S. report working more than the forty-hour week; less than twenty-five percent report the same in Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Sweden. The Nordic countries, as they stand today, are probably the best societies ever created by humans to date on this planet. So there are several questions: How did they create them? And I think you have to talk about the dynamics of both gender and class. Second, where are they going? The U.S. knows the answer, but is always cutting back the social safety net, always requiring more work. Third, can we imagine better societies, and if so, how can we get there?

So I’ll conclude by pointing to a couple of areas that are most interesting in terms of what is going on today: the movement among low-wage workers, many of which are women, and in terms of something which is very near and dear to my heart, the effort to generate more revenue to provide for various social needs by things like the Robin Hood tax.

LENNY BRODY: First of all, I would really like to thank Platypus, as this is one of the most important topics for Marxists. Also, a disclaimer: although I am a member of the Justice Party and the Network for Revolutionary Change, I am not speaking for those organizations.

Marx established a scientific way of examining historical development. I think the concept of historical materialism is central to the understanding of revolutionaries and is very important. What historical materialism means to me is that the way things are produced determines how societies are organized. A simple example is that agricultural societies are organized in one way whereas industrial societies are organized in another way. So the key to understanding how societies develop resides with an understanding of how things are produced and the methods of production; accordingly, to understand how societies change, you have to understand how those methods change. I also think that one of the ways of looking at capitalism, along the lines of historical materialism, is that capitalism developed under certain historical conditions and it has gone through certain stages of development. Under other historical circumstances capitalism reaches the limits of its developments and is no longer a sustainable society. And you can see that throughout history, that different societies go through stages of development and then disappear. So it is entirely reasonable, from this point of view, to try and figure out what are the conditions under which capitalism will no longer be an effective, sustainable system of organization.

Marx pointed out, in a famous quote about historical materialism, that when a situation develops, such that society is no longer sustainable, society enters a period of social revolution: I believe that is the situation today. About Marxist economics: I think when Marx talked about the growing organic composition of capital, which means that, as capitalism develops more, and more is invested in machinery, less is invested in labor, he also pointed out that there are countervailing tendencies. The organic composition of capital led to a falling rate of profit, but these countervailing tendencies moderated that. I would like to argue that, under today’s conditions, those countervailing tendencies are minimized and that capitalism is entering into a period when it is no longer



Banner during CTU rally in Chicago raises an important question.

sustainable. That analysis is based in an understanding of the development of technology, of computers, and of robots. During World War II, the growth of computerization and the research into computers accelerated, so that by the 1970s and 1980s, this had swept through the economy and transformed capitalism as we know it.

Some of my own history is relevant to the development of this understanding of automation and computerization.

The upsurge in the 1960s, which basically stemmed from the Civil Rights Movement, reduced by the 1970s to a great interest in Marxism. Several Marxist or Communist parties were formed in the 1970s in opposition to what we called the revisionist, Soviet Party and pro-Soviet Parties around the world. In the mid-1970s, there were three or four of these parties, and I helped to found the Communist Labor Party. One of the leading figures in the Communist Labor Party, a theoretical thinker, was Nelson Peery. He was an older, African-American man, who had been in the Communist Party and oriented the Communist Labor Party around the study of Marxism. At that time, one of the main criticisms of our party was that we were spending all our

time studying and not enough time in an actual movement. In any case, I think that was a very important preparation. What happened is that a lot of us went into the factories in the 60s and 70s and you could tell by the 80s that there were very few factories to go into. The de-industrialization that had taking place was pretty clear. It was during the 1980s that the Communist Labor Party began developing an understanding of this transformation of the working class and the different historical condition that capitalism was moving into.

There have always been utopian novels about how the future will be a time when machines do all the work and humans would have the leisure that they want. I remember how reading *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy really impacted my outlook. By the 1960s, as computerization began to take place, there was a lot of discussion about automation, the work week, and things like that quote from Andre Gorz that talks about this. However, when you look at the economy in the advanced capitalist countries in the 1960s, it should be clear that the workers in those countries were benefiting from the exploitation of the neocolonial world; what these economies were enjoying were what Lenin referred to as “super-profits.” Marx had noted the relationship between the Irish and the British working class and remarked that, until the Irish workers were free, the British workers would never be free, and Lenin was saying the same thing about the exploitation of the colonies. So it was these super-profits that really enabled the prosperity in the post-war period and into the ’60s; super-profits were also what allowed people in the advanced countries to talk about the reduction in the work week and automation, although that was not the case for the rest of the world. Today, globalization and the internationalization of the productive process has changed that situation. You can see the development in the so-called third-world countries and how the standard of the living is being driven down in the U.S., Europe, and the advanced, capitalist countries. There is a leveling out of the international economic situation. It is going in that direction, though it has not already been achieved.

I listened to a recording with Stanley Aronowitz and George Caffentzis where the latter, arguing against the “obsolete worker hypothesis,” stated that capitalism could continue without workers. ‘ Well, that is not the case. The argument I am making is that it is the elimination of the worker and the reduction of the work force that leads to an irresolvable contradiction within capitalism that can’t be resolved. That contradiction is an indication that capitalism is reaching the limits of its development. The other point that he made, which is made often, is that when you look at things internationally, there is a growth of the workforce. Well, that is also not true. When you look at the situation, the industrial development in China, India, and Brazil, they have not been able to absorb the declining agricultural workers. So if you just look at industrial workers, there is a growth of industrial workers, but the labor force participation rate throughout the world has been declining since the 1980s. In fact, it is really clear that the primary problem in China is that the Chinese economy is not able to absorb all the agricultural workers who are pouring into the cities. So the point, which seems like common sense, that the workforce is growing internationally, is not true either.

The current economic crisis is very significant. Capitalism in the 1800s, rising capitalism, was one historical formation. It was followed, in the 1900s, by capitalism as imperialism, which was another historical formation. We have to look at capitalism today as operating under different conditions and ask ourselves what those conditions are and examine what their potential is. The hypothesis that I am putting forth is that capitalism has reached the point where it has entered into permanent crisis. If you look at the recessions from 2000 on, the jobless recoveries, they are not full recoveries. Everybody talks about the fact that these recoveries do not match the previous cyclical downturns and what is happening is that the cyclical crisis of capitalism is beginning to merge with the historical, structural crisis of capitalism, and that capitalism, under these conditions,

is becoming obsolete. It cannot regenerate itself, it cannot sustain society, and society is entering an epoch of social revolution that demands the transformation of our economic system.

The Economic Policy Institute, which analyzes the status of the American working class, noted recently that the labor force participation rate in the U.S. has declined quite sharply since 2000. However, since there have been so many problems in the economy, we can’t really use that as an indicator. Well, it is the indicator of what has happened, although a lot of economists refuse to recognize that fact.

It is clear that industrial society, the industrial proletariat, and the large concentration of workers in the workplace figured in any kind of strategy for revolution that the Marxists in the past wrote about. This is not the case today. To base a strategy on that understanding today is fruitless, since the point of production is no longer the center of class struggle. Unions have become peripheral to the revolutionary process and there are changing forms of struggle and changing forms of