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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](mailto:review_editor@platypus1917.org). All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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*"Political party" continues on page 2*

Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reformer, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an attempt on society and stigmatized as "socialism."<sup>2</sup>

of the dictatorship of the proletariat that Bonapartism was so important for Marx to characterize Louis Bonaparte's success as both "petit bourgeois" and "lumpen-proletarian," as a phenomenon of the reconstitution for capitalism after its crisis of the 1840s. Bonaparte's success was actually the failure of politics; and politics for Marx was a matter of the necessity of the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists. Bonapartism was for Marx a "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" but not in the sense of the rule of the capitalists, but rather in terms of the political necessity of the state continuing to organize capitalism on a bourgeois basis and the imperative for bourgeois civil society. After all, as Marx put it in *The Brunnare*, "in Bonaparte's coup, 'bourgeois fanatics for order [were] shot down on their balconies in the name of order.'" It was a "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" in the sense that it did for them what they could not. Marx wrote that,

Marx's current: in letter of March 5, 1852, Marx  
 contribution had been recognizing the necessity of the  
 "dictatorship of the proletariat." Bourgeois thought,  
 Marx wrote, had already recognized the existence and  
 struggle of classes: indeed, the existence and  
 struggle of classes—the struggle of the workers against  
 the capitalists—had been recognized by bourgeois  
 thought in terms of liberalism. Recognition of the class  
 struggle was an achievement of liberal thought and  
 politics. Marx thought that socialists had fallen below  
 the threshold of liberalism in avoiding the necessity  
 of both the separation of classes in capitalism and  
 the necessity of the class struggle resulting from that  
 division for society. Socialists blamed the capitalists  
 rather than recognizing that they were not the cause  
 but the effect of the self-contradiction of society in  
 capitalism. So Marx went beyond both contemporary  
 liberal and socialist thought in his recognition of the  
 historical necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat  
 revealed by capitalism.  
 Marx wrote this letter in the wake of the *coup d'état*  
 by Louis Bonaparte and his establishment of the Second  
 Empire. It was the culmination of Marx's writings on  
 the 1848 revolution and its aftermath. Weydemeyer  
 was Marx's editor and publisher for his book on *The 18<sup>th</sup>  
 Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.  
 Later, in his writings on the Paris Commune in *The  
 Civil War in France*, Marx summarized the history of  
 Louis Bonaparte's Second Empire in terms of its being  
 the dialectical inverse of the Commune, and wrote that  
 the Commune demonstrated the "dictatorship of the  
 proletariat" in action. How so?  
 Marx's perspective on post-1848 Bonapartism was  
 a dialectical conception with respect to the necessity

## Opening remarks

Lib's revisionist history of Lenin and Bolshevism and the CGB member Mike Macnamara's book *Revolutionary Strategy* (2008), the latter occasioned by the formations of the Respect Party in the UK and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste in France. Today, perhaps the most significant question facing the 'Left' internationally is all the way back to Marx's dispute with the anarchists in the First International: What would it mean for the Left to take "political action" today?

Today the issue of "political party" seems to generate more problems for the Left than it solves. Formalized political organization would appear indispensable for long-term viewpoint beyond the ebb and flow of movements. Yet the role of the party in sustaining activity and discontents over time—of building towards a revolution—as much had, at best, an ambivalent legacy, leading as anything to rationalized politically ineffective strategies or giving cover for various forms of opportunism (e.g., reformism, careerism, etc.). Today through the necessity for social transformation could be developed within society—as opposed to an end in itself. Yet, the growing default of politics without parties seems equally unable to do more than give license to the vicissitudes through which capitalism changes, but inevitably persists. There appears no escape from the question of political party for the Left.

What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion and a session with the audience. Full audio of the panel can be found at <http://playpups1917.org/22/what-is-political-party-for-the-left/>.

in spite of many different political currents and tendencies, the most significant question informing the "Left today is the issue of 'political party.' Various 'Left only' initiatives have been taking place in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent downturn, following Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, alongside continuing 'post-political' tendencies inherited from the 1980s-90s, including perspectives such as Hardt and Negri's Empire, Multitude, and Commonwealth. John Holloway's Change the World without Taking Power, the Invisible Committee's The Coming Insurrection, the California student protestors' Communique from an Absent Future, the formation of SFRZA in Greece, and the new party Podemos in Spain, rejecting the organized 'Marxist Left' as well as the established labor unions as part of the existing 'political caste.' In Germany, Die Linke appears poised to break into high political office. At the same time, there has been a growing crisis of the largest 'orthodox Marxist' ('Trotskyist') political organizations in the Anglophone and Western European countries, which have been characterized as the 'crisis of [actually existing] Leninism' in the developed capitalist countries. New publications have emerged such as Jacobin magazine, 'N+1, and Endnotes journals, as a new 'millennial Marxism.' And there has emerged a related discussion of the legacy of Marxism in principles of political organization going back to the second international

description reads as follows:

On April 11, 2015, at the closing plenary of the 7th annual Playpus Affiliated International convention in Chicago, Chris Currence of Playpus, Mike Macnair of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), Adolph Reed, Jr. (University of Pennsylvania), and Tom Riley of the Internationalist Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) spoke on the topic "What is a political party for the Left?" The panel

Chris Cutrone, Mike Macnair, Adolph Reed, Tom Riley

# What is political party for the Left?



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then is the project of building the Left. Then we can talk about what its institutional expressions should be like. I am inclined to think that at some point you’ve got to have a disciplined party. The bourgeoisie for its part shares that view: They have two of them. How do we go about building or rebuilding the Left and what sort of issues, projects, alliances make sense for that?

It would be helpful for us to discuss in a sober way the recent mayoral election here in Chicago, because this was one of the moments of intervention. It was in a significant way a complicated class project, but contained within it a working class-based challenge to neoliberalism in the city of Chicago. I want to make clear what I mean by neoliberalism: capitalism that has effectively dominated working class opposition. And I’d stress that perspective because another problem that we have in the U.S., mainly inside the trade unions, of is a trope that consciously or not represents that 30-year truce, from the 1940s–70s, that our side was able to extract from the bourgeoisie as a new nature, a new moral order.

So much of our protests and objections now take the form of the image of greedy bankers and big, ugly capitalists like Wal-Mart as violating the social compact—and this compact became nature somewhere between 1935 and 1946. I think that part of the project of building a Left, which is where we are, is largely a cadre-based project of creating constituencies for the kind of political vision that I suspect everybody in this room can come together over. One of the ways we do that is challenging the view—and this will come from many progressive spokesmen—that what we are seeing now, this neoliberal thing, is a new departure from the Keynesian consensus. This is capitalism; this is what capitalism is. And it is a capitalism in which we are not strong enough to force any concessions. This is important for popular political education, which is the most important task in the project of building a Left, to find ways to get that message out. And that can’t be done through corporate media either. There are no shortcuts.

Part of the kind of organizing we need to do has to make clear that what we are talking about is capitalism: What is causing the pain and insecurity among working people is the natural logic of capitalism. After we have done that, after we have some constituencies, some base, and some fights, then it can be time to talk about building a party for the Left in the U.S. Until then we’re putting the cart way before the horse.

**Tom Riley:** I think the question of what kind of party we should seek to build depends on what we objectively want to achieve, because different forms of political organization are appropriate to seeking different outcomes and different tasks. We in the IBT believe the basic task facing humanity is the expropriation of the capitalist class on an international basis, and the destruction of various military and security apparatuses that serve to protect these capitalist classes. It is not a feasible project to establish socialism through persuasion or incremental reform because the capitalists are not going to cooperate in their own destruction. It’s going to take a convulsive social revolution, and this is a precondition for reconstructing a rationally planned, ecologically sustainable, and equitable social system where those who labor rule. And that is what socialism should be.

The U.S. and other imperialists countries are a very long way from a proletarian social revolutionary prospect. But that is the task for those who are serious about a socialist future. There is no alternative. We have more than 200 years of experience to draw on, reaching back to Gracchus Babeuf, Filippo Buonarroti and the “Conspiracy of the Equals” in the 1790s. There have been failed attempts to overcome the capitalist hegemony, ranging from the Putschists and the Blanquists, the electoral cretinism of social democracy, to the Popular Frontist two-stage strategy adopted by the Soviet Union—the Stalinized Communist International in 1930s.

Lenin sketches four key factors in a successful workers’ revolution in the conclusion of his text “*Left-Wing\* Communism*.” First, the ruling class, confronting a crisis, is unable to solve it using its traditional methods. This begins to polarize the ruling class in different factions pursuing different policies, which largely tends to paralyze the whole class. Second, the intermediate social layers between workers and capitalists begin to lose confidence in the viability of the ruling regime. Third, the working class begins to exhibit a combative attitude, and begins to look for solutions outside its experience in capitalism and the established structures that have endured under capitalism. These factors were present to a greater or lesser degree in the Paris 1968 events. What was missing was the fourth factor, the decisive one: that is, the existence of a mass revolutionary workers party with a tested and confident leadership.

Leon Trotsky observed in one of his writings, “The class taken by itself is only material for exploitation. The proletariat assumes an independent role only at that moment when from a social class in itself it becomes a political class for itself. This cannot take place otherwise than through the medium of a party. The party is that historical organ by means of which the class becomes class conscious.” I think that is self-evident.

Marxists conceive of the organization on an international scale. The object has to be a creation of a single world party with national sections. The basis of such a party has to be a common political program, that is, a system of ideas that addresses the fundamental problems that confront humanity in general, and the working class in particular. One of Trotsky’s favorite maxims was, “It is not the party that makes the program, it is the program that makes the party.” There is only one time in history when the revolutionary party has led the working class in a successful seizure of power. Despite the fact that this occurred almost a century ago in a predominantly peasant country, the fundamental elements of the political organization’s strategic orientation that made that success possible—which distinguishes the Bolsheviks from the mainstream Social Democrats of the Second International—remains of vital significance

for the future. It is our view in the IBT that serious revolutionaries should model their activity on the Bolsheviks’ success rather than the repetitive failures of reformist gradualism, multi-class alliances, and the all-embracing formlessness of episodic new phenomena that appear in the New Left or Occupy, which turn out just to be the square wheel reinvented.

Leninism is not currently popular among most young people who do not like capitalism. That was not the case when Adolph, Mike, and I were young. This is actually because it is seen as old-fashioned or authoritarian—hierarchical. Leninism is indeed hierarchical, in the above layers of organization, layers of personal authority, the chains of command, and bodies that have the imperative to issue instructions that are binding on lower bodies and on individual members. In Leninist organizations you just do not do what you feel like, that is what discipline is. As for authoritarianism, of course, there is Friedrich Engels’ famous observation in his dispute with Bakunin that, “The revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is, it is the act of one part of the population imposing its will against others by the mean of rifles, bayonets and cannon.”\* Anybody who wants anything to be done will have to impose their will on those who presently impose their will on us. If you do not like that, then you do not belong in a Leninist organization.

But a Leninist organization is more than that. It is like a healthy workers’ state: It has to be characterized by feedback that gives the rank and file the means to determine the policy and strategic direction the organization is moving in, to change and adjust policies when the situations develop, and, if necessary, to replace leaders that are found to be deficient. That is indispensable, and if you don’t have that, you will end up with something that looks more like Bob Avakian’s group, the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA.

Any political movement that exists inevitably has a leadership. The question is, does it operate openly or secretly, behind the scenes? That is the choice. A socialist movement must be serious about not only challenging the ideological domination of the capitalist elites and agents, but also developing the capacity to overcome the resistance in the existing state apparatus in order to carry out the expropriation of the ruling class. This requires what Lenin described as the construction of a “combat organization,” the prototype of which 100 years ago in Russia had some roots throughout the working class, and also extended its reach into every level of society that it could possibly contact—including particularly the ranks of the armed forces. When the opportunity presented itself in the midst of the crisis of World War I, the Bolsheviks successfully outmaneuvered the equivalent of the FBI and Homeland Security, and put together a coalition with other radical formations, including anarchists and Social Revolutionaries. They successfully carried out the insurrection that seized power for the working class and established a new state power.

The October revolution in 1917 was the greatest event in history. Ultimately, the revolutionaries were defeated, but this was a powerful example that actively organized the parties embracing hundreds of thousands of workers in sections of the Communist International. That was their highest priority. They had an international perspective from the beginning and they understood that their revolution could only succeed if it spread. The organizational model they developed during the first four congresses of the Communist International—where Lenin and Trotsky were in charge, not Stalin—is not a secret. In our view it remains fundamentally valid in all important respects. The fact that we are a very long way for creating such parties does not make them any less necessary.

And how does the Platypus Affiliated Society stand on all these questions? The sort of party needed today is no different from what it was 25 years ago when Chris bounced out of the degenerated, former Trotskyist Spartacist League (SL). It’s my impression that Chris was wrong on the substantial programmatic difference he had with SL leadership, and that was the question of whether or not the Marxists should militarily side with the Saddam Hussein regime against the attack of U.S. and associated imperialist militaries. Of course we should have. Of course revolutionaries should always side with neo-colonies when being attacked by imperialists. That’s a no-brainer.

The SL for at least a decade had a tendency to play hardball with any kind of internal dissident, whether from the left or the right. The group’s leadership developed a plan that it would short-circuit the necessary but very time-consuming process of having open political struggle. But this loses people. The result is that the organization in the short term has greater efficiency and more clout, but in the long term, it loses the capacity for internal discussion and debate. That discussion was characteristic of Lenin’s Bolshevik party throughout its life, or Trotsky’s Left Opposition, and even of the SL in its pre-degenerate form. By the late 1980s, the SL had hardened into what we call “Jimstown,” named after founder Jim Robertson, in which the leadership’s logo was “Our party: Love it or leave it.” New recruits were taught the formula of the importance of internal discussion and debate, but they squashed out just that. On the basis of his experience, Chris and his comrades have apparently concluded that the SL version of Leninism had some deep flaws that needed to be transcended. They looked and perhaps found that the rest of the Left was in one way or another just as bad. But in fact the SL in this period was not a genuinely Leninist organization. Therefore, I think the founding members of Platypus were fundamentally mistaken in their assessment of the Leninist and Trotskyist tradition. To be fair, Platypus has shown some respect in their reading lists for elements of the tradition they reject.

Most people in this room think that there is very little prospect of forming a viable left party in this country. I’m sure that the consensus is that it’s impossible to imagine recreating a mass Leninist international. There’s no question that this is an extremely remote prospect at this point in our history. But if we are serious about undertaking action for fundamental social change, which is for getting rid of capitalism and replacing it by socialism, it surely makes sense to start from what is objectively necessary rather than from what seems to be achievable in the framework of the present circumstances we confront.

Responses

**CC:** My first comment is with regard to the distinction between politics and policy, which is very obscure nowadays. Policy refers only to *what* to do, whereas politics refers also to *who* is going to do it. This distinction is major, and raises the question of the party: Whom are you organizing to do what?

With respect to Mike’s comments, I want to point out some things about this category of “working class political economy.” Was Marx elaborating a working class political economy or was he in fact critiquing the working class’s political economy inherited from classical bourgeois thought? Marx tries to overcome the antinomy of what he called the “petit bourgeois socialism” of Proudhon and a left Ricardianism, and show that this expressed the dialectic of capitalism itself. I suppose this is a controversial statement, but Adam Smith, as a liberal, defended labor unions. In *The Wealth of Nations*, he advocated for the necessity of collective action by the laborers. Also, antagonism is not the same thing as contradiction, in Marx’s sense.

With respect to Adolph, I want to raise the question of building the Left and how to do it, and also the question of its being premature now to have a party project. I would say that perhaps what’s necessary is not a labor party but a socialist party. The banner of socialism needs to be raised as a goal. A formulation Lars Lih has given to describe the Kautskyan party of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is “the union of socialism and the workers movement.” In other words, socialism as a bourgeois ideology, and the union of that ideology with the workers’ movement. In that respect, socialism has collapsed—not only the workers’ movement, but also the concept of socialism itself. For Marx, capitalism was class struggle. And without class struggle, you don’t have capitalism. Today, instead, what you have is what the Frankfurt school called “the rackets.” It was interesting that they formulated this concept in the period precisely when FDR disciplined the capitalists. The disciplining of the capitalists was the way capitalism was preserved.

With respect to Tom, on a personal note, there was no political break between me and the Spartacist League. I had no problem upholding defense of Iraq against the U.S. It was actually my personal demoralization in two things that happened: namely, the LA Riots, and the election of Bill Clinton. I would say that a propaganda group is not a party. A propaganda group is essentially a formation that may be appropriate to a historical moment of splits and regroupments like the 1970s (perhaps it wasn’t), but surely it is not appropriate in the 1990s up to the present. We do not live in an era of splits and regroupments, and therefore the propaganda group model comes up against its limits.

**MM:** On the question of possibilities, which both Adolph and Tom raised, I think it’s interesting, not so much in the sense of SYRIZA-Podemos-Die Linke, but with Rifondazione in Italy during its height in the 1990s. With the right initiative in the right place and the right time, it is possible to trigger very rapid development. That is actually what happened with the Bolshevik party: the unified propaganda groups in 1901–1903 did so.

I have common ground with Tom in the sense that there’s no use in trying to recreate a social democratic party. The problem is that there is already a social democratic party in the first place. Secondly, the social democratic parties have also moved to the right, ceasing to be social democratic parties because the world economy pushed them. So we need to go for actual Bolshevism. The problem with the tradition of the IBT, of the SL, and of Trotskyists in general is that it is not actual Bolshevism. Actual Bolshevism is a party in which the question of what line in 1917 was fought out in the public press, between the public press of the Central Committee and the public press of the Vyborg District of the Party. It’s a party in which Lenin says to Zinoviev, when they want to say, we were going to stop this uprising by exposing it to the Menshevik press, “You have the right to oppose it in the party press, but not in our opponents’ press.”

The problem is not just the IBT. I was a member of a Mandeliste organization and we also had debate with the most limited control, conducted internally. The consequence of that is you are not educating the cadre, nor the working class. In Bolshevism everything is conducted in front of the working class as a whole, so far as possible. We must go for a revolutionary party. But a party that is revolutionary in character does not mean a variant on Bakunin’s “invisible dictatorship,” which is what essentially the Trotskyists, the Maoists, and the far Left in general interpret Bolshevism to be.

**AR:** One of the issues for concern is that we need to take extra care—within the tradition of Leninism certainly—to avoid the temptations of teleology, which can often slide close to theology.

In a recent convention in Toronto, SYRIZA, Podemos, and Die Linke were discussed. But what is more vexing for a lot of people on the Left is that you have to think about the ALBA countries, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay and to some extent Argentina. I’ve noticed that there was a tendency among elements of the Marxist left to score those regimes savagely from the outset because they made concessions to the *realpolitik* in those states, and with the balances of class forces that are necessary for them to win and hold power. If we read the contradictions in which those regimes are enmeshed with a teleological roadmap, then there is no point in doing it. The bourgeois classes in each state thought that they could just denounce the governing regime that gave society over to the broke losers. But in the second or third term they figured out that they could not win an electoral majority that way. But there’s been enough of a change in Latin America that Obama can’t just send down Special Forces to instigate a coup.

The punch line is that the way we have to build the Left in the U.S. right now is to agitate for socialism. I agree. The first thing we have to do is fight for stuff like decommodifying housing or expanding the decommodification of public services: transportation, education, etc. But not in that language, but in terms of the way ordinary people understand it. That gives us the foundation of a common perspective, of common

interest, and gives us some interpretive standard that we could try to build on. At some point it becomes clear that is what socialism is.

And when we have enough of a movement that emerges in support of an agenda like that, then, organically, a potentially revolutionary mass party will emerge. But it can’t be under the presumption of the conditions of 1917, 1949 or—close to my heart—1958 in Cuba. The conditions today are completely different. I mean the character of state power, especially in the U.S., is entirely different. The objective always has to be—especially in a mass society like this—to find ways to unite the many to fight the few. And that’s where the socialist party can come from.

**TR:** Actual Bolshevism—and the reason I mentioned it is because it was the organizational model codified in the first four congresses of the Communist International, and because that is the organizational model that we recommend—is actually the organizational model that Mike does not think is a good idea. He doesn’t support the organizational resolutions of the Comintern. It’s not a good idea to encourage members to leak plans for an insurrection when things hang in the balance. Mike thinks that is OK. I think it’s OK to hide that from the workers. I don’t want to be involved in an insurrection run by people who are prepared to print details about it in their paper. To me that does not make any sense.

To Chris, in response to the propaganda group perspective: Maybe there is not going to be a revolution very soon. It’s often very difficult to know what is around the corner and sometimes things are much closer than you think. I was not really despairing at the LA riots. I just thought about the enormous amount of anger that is stored up in American society, among the people who were suffering the most. What a tragedy it is that this can’t be tapped in some organized way, so that it instead takes this chaotic and nihilistic expression.

But I would recall for comrades that, in January 1917, Lenin wrote a letter from Switzerland in which he said, “We, the older generation, won’t live to see the revolution, because there is not much going on.”

A propaganda group, about the size of the SL when Chris left, led three successful general strikes in 1934: one in Toledo, one in Minneapolis, and one in San Francisco. What they all had in common was there were small groups of cadre formations that kicked them up. One was the Workers’ Party, and one was the Trotskyist group led by James P. Cannon. Small groups of people can achieve significant things sometimes, even our own small group. We were able to initiate a successful eleven-day boycott of apartheid cargo in the West Coast of the U.S. We got letters from South African trade unionists who were living underground praising us and saying how encouraging this was. That continued to resonate throughout several years. In 2008, the same people managed to organize a one-day shutdown of every port on the West Coast to protest against the war in Iraq. That happened because of a very small group. It’s entirely possible that a group of 200 people in the US could make a huge difference, but they have to put up with authoritarianism and hierarchy—in a democratic framework.

**Q & A**

*I wanted to highlight the differences in the question of what is to be done. Tom is very explicit: build a Leninist party. Adolph says, for the time being, we need to build a movement, and somehow the movement at some future point will become a party more or less like a social-democratic party such as the Labour Party. I remember some tangential experience with the U.S. Labor Party in New York, and it was just a bunch of sectarians fighting with each other. Tom is looking to the Third International, and Mike to the Second International. Chris’s response seems gnomic, as it is on one hand a Leninist interpretation of history similar to Tom’s, but obviously he is not advocating to build a Leninist party in present circumstances. So, what is the imagination? How would the other panelists respond to the divergences and intersections in each of your perspectives?*

**CC:** I push back again on the propaganda group model. At various points in history, various tendencies or organizations, or even small political parties, can be seen as playing the propaganda role. But the question of politics returns: Who is going to do what, and who are those people—the issue of the cadres. The question is how you would develop long-term militant cadres today, and on what basis. Who would they be and what is the long-term goal? The premise of Platypus’s being ecumenical in these conversations is that each of these perspectives in this discussion contains an aspect of the truth. Yet relating those aspects to the truth in a way that produces results is exceedingly difficult. Why? Because we have accumulated historical baggage that we have to work through. There is obvious inhibition about doing any of the things that are being proposed, let alone all of them, because in fact all of them would have to be done.

**MM:** I don’t recognize the characterization of me as simply wanting to repeat the Second International. I want to repeat *an element* of the ideas of the Second International, which is to say, the line of Bebel as opposed to the line of Luxemburg. Luxemburg’s line was in fact a piece of Bakuninism, which carried with it the “invisible dictatorship” character of the SDKPIL in Poland. The far left has been repeating their path, which simultaneously did not build cadres and separated itself from the actual class movement. On other hand, the Second International, the character was that, the majority, the Kautskyites, believed in socialism in one country—that is clear from the Erfurt Program. And they believed they could take on and use the existing bureaucratic apparatus of the state. And for both of those reasons, not the stuff about dialectics, they were wrong. So what do we do now?

We are in a situation where the people who have forces, who have potential to launch initiatives which could take off, are at the moment launching initiatives of the sort that are more or less guaranteed to end in tears. Our policy in the CPGB is to go into those



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initiatives and try to make them less likely to end in tears, while making them more likely to create a Communist party and an internationalist movement. That is what we can try to do.

It’s not the case that nobody is launching initiatives to try to create broader unity; there are a series of initiatives. Characteristically, they are designed to avoid the questions of whether you are for or against taking office under capitalism, and whether you are for or against internationalism. They want to dodge those issues because they think it re-poses the question of reform or revolution. We need to overcome that attempt to rerun the 1940s.

**AR:** My starting point is in the U.S., where we have nothing. Nothing that exists here that is at all like a Left. Nothing for us to debate about, nothing for us to fight over.

The New York Labor Party was a disgusting, reprehensible warren of squabbling sectarians. We began the experience with this perspective: There is talent and sharp critiques, grounded critiques of capitalism, in the American trade unions. Much of the intermediate levels of trade union leadership were people like us who came out of the New Left, or Maoist organizations, even. They learned how to organize with actual standing among actual workers. They have a long history of successful organizing and of fighting against the bosses. That is where cadre-building comes from and begins, with people who have some organizing talent, some political sense.

In Chicago, the Chicago Teachers Union is the linchpin to building a left movement for those reasons. They have a critique, they have a standing, not only here with their own members but elsewhere, and organizing talent. I was at the Solidarity convention on a panel with James Slaughter. A nice, well-intentioned guy asks me, How do we know we will not end up like the British Labour Party? I told him, if we are lucky enough to be successful enough to have that as a problem sometime, we would be a wild success! You have to crawl before you walk, and walk before you run. Where I start is the brute fact that there is nothing in the U.S. that counts as a Left. The party emerges out of a movement—it does not create it, and we need to get access to the class, and the class is in the trade union movement.

**TR:** Chris asks, How do you develop long-term cadres, today? You do it the same way you developed them in the 1960s, ’40s, and ’20s—we are just operating on a much smaller scale since there is not much of a pool to draw from.

The Left is in bad shape today. But when you get an intelligent young person who begins to understand that the only way out is socialist revolution and is willing to make personal sacrifices for it—we are talking needles in a haystack here—people can make that journey. And there are such people out there. I do not think it is impossible that there are another 200 people trying to do something similar. The sooner you win over the serious people, and have a small amount of clout, then you start looking for places to develop a following in the working class. Do not hide the fact you are a socialist (except in the beginning), and then you start recruiting, that is how it is done. It is not rocket science. It is difficult, but it is doable. And we still have lots of people around who have done that. Of course we will all be dead in twenty years—act quickly!

*Chris, your remarks seem to suggest that you see the formation of a socialist party in the U.S. as plausible in the near to mid-term future. Of course, the risk that Adolph seems to be pointing toward is that such a formation would become just another Marxist grouplet with a paper program—or an internal program more likely. In order for that risk not to be an obstacle that would forbid any such attempt, what would it take to actually overcome that?*

**CC:** I want to say something about the conjunctural moment of this conversation, the way it was framed for this panel. One reason we didn’t include the Latin American Pink Tide is that it predates the economic crisis of 2007–8, and so has a different dynamic at work. Not for any other reason. Mike already mentioned this, but in the case of SYRIZA and Podemos what’s posed is a potential replacement of bankrupt social democratic parties. In the case of Greece, it is clear that PASOK ran up against a wall, and SYRIZA is there to fill the void, and is objectively constrained to fill that void very precisely, i.e., they have to recruit the former PASOK bureaucrats as a constituency. The fact that the party question is raised in this way, the question of European social democracy in particular, is sobering. That brings it down to Earth, and so is about neoliberalism and its late coming to the Continent. So it does raise the question of social democracy, of what it means to reconstitute social democracy in its current bankruptcy, but long after its historic bankruptcy, and so it raises these questions of politics and of socialism. I just want to put that into the mix because a few short years ago, in 2008, when the seventy-fifth anniversary of the New Deal was being celebrated, I think there was a neo-Keynesian illusion—I don’t know if it was so much a neo-Fordist illusion of nationalism—which, to bring it all the way back around, raises the question of what we mean by “capitalism.” This bridge between neoliberalism and capitalism—and we can’t use one term to substitute for the other—is why the history of Marxism might be important, why Marxist political parties might be important, precisely for understanding the relation between capitalism and socialism. That’s where people don’t know what “socialism” means, what Marxists understand in a very practical way. In other words, that Lenin and Luxemburg welcomed the industrialization of the Russian Empire in the 1890s, wrote dissertations on it, and said, “This is the way to socialism.” Rather than a Narodnik peasant-based socialism that would avoid capitalism. That question does come up—what do we mean by socialism—but what do we mean by *capitalism*? We complain about it, but what do we mean by that, actually? That would be the only point in rescuing the heritage of Marxism.

I will say this negatively. I mentioned my demoralization after the election of Bill Clinton as being a formative experience for me; in other words, when I

look at young people today—“Millennial Marxism,” or “Marxish-ism,”—I say, “Is this neurasthenics for the Democrats? Will this be some elaborate rationale for ultimately voting Democratic?” It could be something else, however it does not seem to be spontaneously tending in that direction.

I find a loss of nerve over at *Jacobin* headquarters with respect to their simple republication of ISO *Socialist Worker* articles. Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of *Jacobin*, started out trying to overcome the difference between the DSA and the ISO. Instead he is just consummating with the ISO in a way that is rather unfortunate. I know Bhaskar has Platypus on his mind when he says things like they are not a pre-political project, but a political project, because they want to engage with the activists: the ISO. Is there an alternative to that? That is why I define it negatively.

It seems to me that we are in a period of being disencumbered of a lot of terrors of previous generations of the Left, including the New Left. At same time we can still learn from the generations of the New Left, because they tried to do something that, after the 1980s, people did not even try to do. That goes back to Tom Riley’s point, “small groups of people can do something.” Sure, but we have not seen that, we have only seen the institutionalization of the death of the Left since the ’80s: the academic and the activist left, with a *modus vivendi* between the two. It has really been entrenched, meaning both academic leftism and activist leftism are what Adorno called “pseudo-activity.” He was farsighted and saw that the New Left was heading in that direction. Yet between Adorno’s time and when it actually took place, in the 1970s, something else was going on. I do not know if we can make use of the organizational experience of that generation. The danger is naturalizing what has taken place since then, namely academicism, activism, and post-political neo-anarchism that you saw with the anti-globalization movement. That is why I define it by a series of negations. As Peggy Lee put it, “Is that all there is, my friend?”

**AR:** I will add to the litany of what is going on with Bhaskar’s operation at *Jacobin* magazine, which combines the play-anarchists, real anarchists, libertarians, posers, and the Brooklyn coffeehouse left together.

What can I say? I think that a problem with contemporary leftists, in the absence of any sort of institutional traction, is the tendency—maybe exacerbated by the blogosphere and its material pressures—to disconnect the idea of being on the Left and being an activist from base-building, from trying to broaden the base.

A few years ago I saw at Treasure Island, a grocery store in Hyde Park, Chicago, a very earnest young woman with a tote bag that had a quote I later learned was from JFK: “Any one person can make a difference, and everyone should try.” And I immediately went back to my home and added my first email signature, “And yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?” That is the problem.

I think, again, that the NY Metro Labor Party chapter is a perfect illustration of the problem you see in every big city: Seeing oneself as a leftist has come to substitute for the exact kind of cadre building that Tom and I have been talking about. So I think it is a mistake to look among the world of the *Jacobin* readership and people like that to find new recruits. It makes a lot more sense to go into the machine shops or into other union locals. If you want to find your so called millennials—and I would like to remind us those are advertising categories not organic groups—it is just better to bypass the Left, even for the project of creating socialists. Go into the working class and work with people in the working class.

Insofar as leftism has become an identity it actually gets in the way of building the kind of politics that everybody in this room wants to build. And that is the fundamental reason that I say that it is premature to talk about party building. The working class party has to be anchored in the institutions of the working class. It seems like a silly truism. One of the differences between earlier eras and today is that people like us could once contend ourselves to the institutions of the working class and become embedded in them. There is also the problem of what I have called recently Ivy League techno-syndical trade unionism.

**MM:** Everybody on the Left in Britain would tend to say, “Forget the rest of the Left, it is all a bunch of sectarians, or petit-bourgeois,” or whatever insult. “Go straight to the working class.” And then you go out to the estates, and whom do you find there, or in the factories? The rest of the Left!

It is true that identity politics have a dead-end character, but actually where that dead-end character has a powerful base is in the trade union movement. Not since the 1970s, but at least since the late ’80s, with the defeat of the Miners’ strike. The problem is that when you go out there, somewhere there is none of the rest of the far left, you will find the damn Labour Party—Labour Party activists who turn out to be a lot more goddamn left-wing than their leadership. If you go from England to continental Europe you find that there, too.

So maybe it is a peculiarly U.S. problem that the conditions for creating the party do not exist—there are loads of parties, which are real forces capable of doing things like Tom talked about—but where is it going? It is not going in a direction that is creating any relief against the capitalist class.

**AR:** And really here they become solipsistic enterprises, and get in the way.

*I would like to ask a question about electoral politics and trade unions, going back to the example of Chicago’s most recent election, with Democratic mayoral candidate Chuy Garcia. Here, in the absence of grounds for the socialist party, we had the unions funneling money into surrogate, pseudo-political organizations. I say “pseudo” not to be antagonistic, but because they really do not have a political feel to them. They are about warm and fuzzy working families type of things. So we have people interested in politics and who want a political experience, in the absence of some kind of organization to collect this experience—to create some kind*

*of collective history and collective knowledge. But instead we have people being turned into canvassers with the latest talking points. If now is not the time for organizations to have some kind of collective transfer of experience, how do we interact with trade unions, with their political efforts, and deal with this phenomenon where we have to interact with the state politically? Do we just liquidate and go into these surrogate organizations, or do we try to form more left-sounding organizations, where we do not come out as socialists but instead try to mediate between trade unions and electoral politics?*

**CC:** In terms of the danger of putting the cart before the horse, whether it is cart or a horse, it needs to be some *thing*. You do need form to have substance, in the sense that the experience is happening, but it is not being accumulated. So I want to push back against the issue of movementism. We inherit it from the New Left but also from the Old Left, from the 1930s. The Popular Front phenomenon contributes to that, to the idea of “movement.”

I do think that, with movement constituting politics, there could be also the reverse: politics could constitute the movement. The SPD experience in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany was that the party built the unions; the unions did not build the party. And the British experience of the Labour Party is more complicated also than simply the unions building the party, even though it looks very much like it is the party that rests on the Trade Union Congress [TUC]. I think the history is still more complicated.

An old Trotskyist truism is that the “reds built the unions.” And so the question is, What does it take to be a red? I do think it involves some framework for accumulating experience and accumulating organizational practice. So that is why I would still say that the idea of political party formation is not necessarily putting the cart before the horse, because people are still going to be active, they are going to be struggling, and it is going to be some default Democratic Party phenomenon, which I think is dead.

I would reiterate something I said in my opening remarks, which is that the last major political crisis in the U.S. was a crisis of the Democratic Party, a crisis of the New Deal Coalition in the 1960s, and we can learn negatively from that. We cannot look forward to another crisis of the Democratic Party because the Democratic Party today is not what it was, i.e., it was already transformed in that crisis into something else. That affects the way we inherit the legacy of the New Deal Coalition from the 1930s to the ’60s, and the implicit models that the Left lives with from that experience.

**MM:** It is difficult for me to respond to this because it is actually a pretty specific American political issue. My general view is seeing it as a matter of tactics. If people are mobilizing from the trade unions for some attempted political intervention, despite the fact that these measures are desperately unprincipled, try to push back against that boundary of being pro-Democratic Party.

The British Labour Party is the creature of one of the unions, but not the whole of the TUC. It was created by a two-stage process. In the first stage, the small left groups, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) with about 10,000 members and the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF) with about 8,000, started to fight and win local election campaigns. And the circumstance in which the left groups were starting to win local election campaigns created an environment in which it was possible to win the trade unions to back the local election campaigns of socialist groups. Then to win the trade unions at the national level towards the creation of an independent labor party.

The standard history books have it that the trade unions created the Labour Party, but that is an incomplete story. It does seem to me that whenever people say, “Build a labor party based on the trade unions,” they are actually not understanding the British Labour Party. Or the extent to which it was the creature of the affiliated socialist societies, all the way to 1918, which was when the Constituency Labour Party branches were set up.

**AR:** First, I have a somewhat less jaundiced view of Chuy Garcia, even though he is a liberal Democrat. There is a tendency to fetishize electoral action that ironically reads from the middle in two directions. The Democrats say that is all there is, all we could hope for, ever. Then there is a principled Left position that says, “Oh God, you can never engage with or form alliances with people who disagree with you!” They both wind up in the same place.

Sometimes, however, you just have to do stuff like that. It made perfect sense, given where things were, especially after the 2012 strike—after Rahm gets elected—to elect Chicago Teacher’s Union President Karen Lewis and fight against Rahm. We need to analyze, as some people are, why the recent election turned out the way it did and how those lessons can help us move forward in a movement-building project.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner: These guys are out to destroy every bit of social protection that working people in this country have won since the 1920s. And sometimes a “Popular Front approach”—even though frankly that demeans the Popular Front at this point—is necessary to fight back against this stuff and create a little bit of space. And, yes, there is always the danger that, in trying to build the kind of alliance you need to create the space, we will be outflanked. The book I am trying to finish is basically that story with the post-war left. You do not have much control over what happens once you put the ball in play, but you got to put the ball in play and try to make the most out of it.

**TR:** The Democratic Party is the graveyard of the Left in America—it has crippled the entire Left. The turn to the Popular Front in the 1930s was the beginning of the end for the Communist Party. By adapting to the American bourgeoisie through its Democratic Party face, it liquidated most of the political capital they had acquired through providing the shock troops to build the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the first place. The no-strike pledge activity in World War

II softened them up for the McCarthy purge, which then drove all the reds out, and they became very unpopular. Unfortunately, the American working class was too unsophisticated to tell the difference between a good Trotskyist and a bad Stalinist; they did not care what kind of communist you were. That weakened the American working class immensely.

There was a resurgence of sorts in the 1960s with the New Left, but the New Left was crippled by a lack of historical understanding. The New Left imagined that it was all new and that we could do everything. We wanted to be original. Eventually, experience taught a certain layer of the New Left that actually there had been more to the Old Left than we had thought, and it was necessary to make a return to the working class and inject some social politics. They were the best of the New Left, and there were thousands of them who were serious and committed people who went into the factories. Few remain, but there are some.

The role of the Democratic Party was extremely important in corralling and liquidating the mass base. There had been a few hundred thousand people involved in the New Left at some point. The critical moment in its destruction was the McGovern campaign where we got the far left of the Democratic Party, like George McGovern, who really hated the war, and was practically, almost sworn to be, a “socialist.” Kind of like Chuy Garcia, who is “practically a socialist”—even though he wants to hire a thousand more cops and wants to cut workers’ pensions. He seems to be the best we can hope for, and we have to make historic concessions to him, but still the other guy is even worse. And with that kind of thinking, we can only be defeated. It is necessary to make headway toward smashing capitalism. Then people have to be prepared for struggle, and we cannot always choose the easiest path—the path that seems to be of least resistance.

You can be extremely thirsty out in a boat at sea, so thirsty that you decide that you are going to have just a little bit of salt water. You know it’s not good for you, but you are so thirsty and this is a genuine emergency, so you are going to have a glass of seawater: You vote for Garcia. But guess what: It does not make it better, it only makes it worse. It makes you weaker, so you have to have another glass of salt water, and, before long, you are dead sooner than you would have been if you had waited to see if you would drift to shore and get some real water.

**AR:** That is a cute analogy but does not tell us what to do.

**TR:** Do not vote for people who want more cops and to cut pensions just because the other guy is worse—but that is Trotskyism for you.

**AR:** Sure is—but there is nothing wrong with Trotskyism that cannot be cured! **JP**

*Transcribed by Nikos Manousakis and Clint Montgomery.*

1 Karl Marx, “18th Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte,” in The Marx-Engels Reader (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 603. Available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>>

2 Ibid.

3 Rosa Luxemburg cited in Michael Harrington, “Marxism and Democracy,” Praxis International 1:1, April 1981.

4 Ibid.

5 Marx to Friedrich Bolte, November 23 1871, available online at <[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_23.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm)>

6 See chapter 10 of Capital, volume 1.

7 Leon Trotsky, “What Next—Vital Questions for the German Proletariat,” The Militant (April 1932), 4. Available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/01/whatnext4.htm>>

8 Fredrick Engels, “On Authority,” in The Marx-Engels Reader (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 733. Available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm>>



Political Party, continued from page 1

values, Louis Bonaparte and others who took their cue from him abjured them all. 1848 was a parody of the bourgeois revolution and indeed undid it. The “tragedy” of 1848 was not of bourgeois society but of proletarian socialism: Marx described the perplexity of contemporaries such as Victor Hugo who considered Bonapartism a monstrous historical accident and, by contrast, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who apologized for it as some expression of historical necessity, even going so far as to flirt with Louis Bonaparte as a potential champion of the working class against the capitalists, a dynamic repeated by Ferdinand Lassalle in Germany with respect to Bismarck, earning Marx’s excoriation. Marx offered a *dialectical* conception of Bonapartism.

Frankfurt Institute for Social Research director Max Horkheimer’s essay on “The Authoritarian State” was inspired by Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which were his draft aphorisms in historiographic introduction to the unwritten *Arcades Project*, concerned with how the history of the 19th century prefigured the 20<sup>th</sup>: specifically, how the aftermath of 1848 was repeating itself in the 1920s–30s, the aftermath of failed revolution from 1917–19; how 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism was a repeat and continuation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bonapartism. So was Stalinism. Horkheimer wrote that the authoritarian state could not be disowned by the workers’ movement or indeed separated from the democratic revolution more broadly. It could not be dissociated from Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat, but could only be understood properly “dialectically” with respect to it. The authoritarian state was descended from the deep history of the bourgeois revolution but realized only after 1848: only in the crisis of bourgeois society in capitalism, which made the history of the bourgeois revolution appear in retrospect rather as the history of the authoritarian state. What had happened in the meantime?

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the problem of the Bonapartist or authoritarian state needed to be addressed with further specificity regarding the phenomenon of “state capitalism.” What Marx recognized in the “necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat” was the same as that of state capitalism in Bonapartism. Hence, the history of Marxism after Marx is inseparable from the history of state capitalism, in which the issue of the dictatorship of the proletariat was inextricably bound up. Marx’s legacy to subsequent Marxism in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) was largely ignored.

The question is how the Lassallean social-democratic workers’ party that Marx’s followers joined in Bismarckian Germany was a state capitalist party, and whether and how Marx’s followers recognized that problem: Would the workers’ party for socialism lead, despite Marxist leadership, to state capitalism rather than to socialism? Was the political party for socialism just a form of Bonapartism?

This is the problem that has beset the Left ever since the crisis of proletarian socialism over a hundred years ago, in World War I and its aftermath. Indeed, socialism has seemed to be haunted by this historical verdict against it, as state capitalism, and so disqualified forever as a politics for emancipation.

Marxism fell apart into mutual recriminations regarding its historical failure. Anarchists and council-communists blamed “Leninism”; and “Leninists” returned the favor, blaming lack of adequate political organization and leadership for the grief of all spontaneous risings. Meanwhile, liberals and social democrats quietly accepted state capitalism as a fact, an unfortunate and regrettable necessity to be dispensed with whenever possible. But all these responses were in fact forms of political irresponsibility, because they were all avoidance of a critical fact: Marx’s prognosis of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” still provoked pangs of conscience and troubling thoughts: What *had* Marx meant by it?

We should be clear: State capitalism in the underdeveloped world was always a peripheral phenomenon; state capitalism in the core, developed capitalist countries posed the contradiction of capitalism more acutely, and in a politically sharpened manner: What was the *political* purpose of state capitalism in post-proletarian society, rather than in “backward” Russia or China and other countries undergoing a process of industrializing-proletarianizing? How did socialism *point beyond* capitalism?

Organized capitalism relying on the state is a fact. The only question is the *politics* of it. Lenin, for one, was critically aware of state capitalism, even if he can be accused of having contributed to it. The question is not whether and how state capitalism contradicts socialism, but how to grasp that contradiction *dialectically*. A Marxist approach would try to grasp state capitalism, as its Bonapartist state, as a form of *suspended revolution*; indeed, as a form of suspended “class struggle.” The struggle for socialism—or its absence—affects the character of capitalism. Certainly, it affects the *politics* of it.

A note on neoliberalism: As with anything, the “neo-” is crucially important to distinguish the “neo” from the thing. It is not the liberalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> or even the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a form of state capitalism, not an alternative to it. Only, it is a form of politically *irresponsible* state capitalism. That is why it recalls the Gilded Age of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the era of “imperialism,” of the imperial—Bonapartist—state. However, at that time, there was a growing and developing proletarian movement for socialism, or “revolutionary social democracy,” led by Marxists, in nearly all the major capitalist countries. Or so, at least, it seemed.

Historical Marxism was bound up with the history of state capitalism, specifically as a phenomenon of politics after the crisis of 1873—for this reason, the history of capitalism is impacted by the absence of Marxism 100 years later, after the crisis of 1973. After 1873, in the era of the second Industrial Revolution, there was what Marxists once called the “monopoly capitalism” of global cartels and financialization, organized by a world system of states, which Marxists regarded as the “highest (possible) stage of capitalism.” It was understood as necessarily bringing forth the workers’ movement for socialism, which seemed borne out in practice: the history from the 1870s to

the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated a growth of proletarian socialism alongside growing state capitalism.

Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, against social-democratic reformists who affirmed this workers’ movement as already in the process of achieving socialism within capitalism, that, “[T]he proletariat... can only create political power and then transform [aufheben] capitalist property.”<sup>3</sup> That *Aufhebung*—the “dictatorship of the proletariat”—would be the beginning not the “end” of the emancipatory transformation of society. As Michael Harrington noted, drawing upon Luxemburg and Marx, “political power is the unique essence of the socialist transformation.”<sup>4</sup> It is this political power that the “Left” has avoided since the 1960s.

In this country, the United States, the liberal democratic ideal of Jeffersonian democracy, the idyll of the American Revolution, was shattered by the crack of the slave-whip—and by the blast of the rifle shot to stop it. Jefferson’s election in 1800, through which he established the political domination of his Democratic-Republican Party, was called a “revolution,” and indeed it was. It defeated the previously dominant Federalists. What we now call the Democratic Party, beginning under Andrew Jackson, was a split and something quite different from Jefferson. The Republican Party, whose first elected President in 1860 was Abraham Lincoln, was a revolutionary party, and in fact sought to continue the betrayed revolution of Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans—avowedly so. It was the party of the last great political revolution in American politics, the Civil War and the Reconstruction under Ulysses S. “Unconditional Surrender” Grant that followed. Its failures demonstrated, as the revolutions of 1848 had done in Europe, the limits of political and social revolution in capitalism: it showed the need for socialism. The last major crisis of U.S. politics was in the 1960s “New Left” challenge to the ruling Democratic Party’s New Deal Coalition that had been the political response to the 1930s Great Depression. But both fell below the standard of Radical Republicanism. It is something less than ironic that the Democrats have been the most acutely counterrevolutionary of Bonapartist parties. This despite John F. Kennedy’s declaration in 1960 that the strife of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—expressed by the Cold War struggles of Communism and decolonization—was an extension of the American Revolution to which the U.S. needed to remain true.

The history of the state in the modern era is inextricable from the politics of revolution. The crisis of the state is always a crisis of political parties; crises of political parties are always crises of the state. The crisis of the state and its politics is a phenomenon of the crisis of capitalism.

The question of Left and right is a matter of the degree of facilitation in addressing practically and consciously the problem of capitalism, and the problem of capitalism is inextricable from the state.

The notion of politics apart from the state, and of politics apart from parties is a bourgeois fantasy—precisely a *bourgeois* fantasy of liberal democracy that capitalism has thrown into crisis and rendered obsolete and so impossible. Capitalism presents a new political necessity, as Marx and his best followers once recognized. —Anarchism is truly “liberalism in hysterics” in denying the necessity of politics, in denying the need for political party.

In the absence of a Left, politics and the state—that is, capitalism—will be led by others. In the absence of meeting the political necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, we will have more or less, hard or soft, and more or less irresponsible capitalist state dictatorship. We will have political irresponsibility.

To abandon the task of political party is to abandon the state, and to abandon the state is to abandon the revolution. It is to abandon the political necessity of socialism whose task capitalism presents. It is to abandon any politics at all, and leave the field to pseudo-politics, to political irresponsibility. The “Left” has done this for more than a generation. What would it mean to do otherwise?

**Mike Macnair:** I am going to pose the party question as a simpler problem than Chris’s introduction does. It is partly a question about the necessity of a party while rejecting certain incrustations of so-called Leninism. But it is also about rejecting a concept of party that is a reinvention of Bakunin’s “invisible dictatorship.”

I will start with a proposition which is abstract and general: The human being is a political animal which lives in, and forms, social groups in relation to which disagreements and collective decision-making come naturally. The formation of groups, subgroups, groups within groups, etc., is endemic and not merely limited to capitalism.

I will give a few examples of “sort-of-parties,” like Optimates and Populares in the late Roman Republic. In late antiquity the conflicting group interests of “barbarians,” (the military) “bishops,” and secular bureaucrats like John Lydus are overlaid with policy disputes, like peace or war with the Vandals. Factional struggles within a late imperial regime are thus reflected in “party-ish” groupings. In late Anglo-Saxon England, crosscutting coalitions aligned and realigned with differences of policy choices: Are you for the reconstitution of Knut’s North Sea empire of England and Scandinavia? This sort of debate on different issues is perennial.

A capitalist constitutionalist state order goes further, to imply endemic political parties. Guelphs and Ghibellines in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian city states, Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Netherlands, and most clearly Whigs and Tories in England from late 17<sup>th</sup> century and onwards.

The underlying question, which remains in the system of parties, is that there are necessary common actions, and there are necessarily disagreements about these necessary common actions. Capitalism and its liberal ideologues, Whig ideologues, and other ideological variants, constantly imagine that you could have capitalism without the state. The opposite is in fact true, as the hidden hand imagined by Mandeville does not work: The reality is that capitalist markets tend to fly to chaos and disorder, and the stronger the civil society, the stronger the State has to be.

Hence, parties function as a mechanism to integrate

the lower orders—in particular the petit bourgeoisie—behind the capitalist elites. But the party question, in spite of the fact that the party system is an institution of constitutionalist capitalism, is also an opening for the working class. The working class as *a class* requires collective action. It’s the elementary feature of the working class that the working class is not in possession of the means of production; it therefore needs collective action in order to defend its elementary interests.

Illegalizing trade unions is easy for capitalism and normal, as it goes back to the Confederacies of Masons Act [1425] in England, and endless anti-trade union legislation. Illegalizing political parties will force the regime to abandon the constitutional form of the representations of the capitalist class fractions through political parties, and the integration of the petit bourgeoisie. It will instead resolve into the real Bonaparte form, which is the single-person auctioneer of laws, of state contracts, and policies. The consequence is that it’s harder for the capitalist class to ban all forms of collective action—at least to ban political parties—and the working class’s need of collective action can find expression in political parties, even under conditions where trade unions are either banned or thoroughly subordinated to the operations of the state.

Further on the question of general laws. This is just a piece of Marx: The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is conducted at a guerrilla level—at the level of economic struggle, of the strike struggle—but when the proletariat fights for general laws to impose its interests, it fights to impose its political economy on the society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Marx commented of the Ten Hour Day Act (Factories Act 1847) that “In place of the pompous catalogue of the “inalienable rights of man” comes the modest Magna Carta of a legally limited working-day.”<sup>6</sup>

The question of working class political action, the question of the party, is a question of a politically *independent* party of the working class. This is foundational, because the existence of political parties is a necessary contradiction within capitalist constitutionalism, into which the working class as a class can enter. And by entering into it, the working class as a class can project its own political interests. That does require that we be for an independent working class political party. And that means not just organizationally and economically independent, but *politically* independent.

The Labour party, for example, is not independent because it precludes itself by its constitution from thinking beyond continued capitalist growth. It’s not that the Labour party in order to be politically independent would have to commit itself to Leninism and revolutionary overthrow, positively; it’s that the Labour party commits itself to the monarchy, to the international state system, the United Nations, and the continued functioning of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. By committing itself to the continued functioning of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, it ceases to be independent of the capitalist class. By committing itself to the nation-state, it commits itself in effect to the Devil’s choice of autarky, which for Britain would mean mass starvation, just as for Greece.

If SYRIZA went for the “pull-out-of-Europe” ideology—like how Costas Lapavistas proposed full autarky, the introduction of rationing, general nationalization of everything—then Greece would not be able to feed itself from internal resources. That policy of socialism in one country is hopeless. The same is true of Britain. So then your alternative is how to make the nation-state succeed in the capitalist competition of nation-states, by entering into the agenda of British and American competitiveness and follow that road down.

I am a pragmatist, like Toby Chow and Walter Benn Michaels, but I don’t think, pragmatically, that their pragmatism will work. Keynesianism and the welfare

state were the product of Soviet tanks on the Elbe, the products of the Russian Revolution, and going back before that, products of the mass social democratic parties before 1914–18. These developments created conditions in which the capitalist class was afraid of bankers hanging from lampposts, afraid of losing everything. Only by making the capitalist class afraid of losing everything is it likely that they will make concessions on the scale of those in the post-war period. That is yet another reason why we need a political party that does not commit itself to demanding nothing more than a larger slice of the cake.

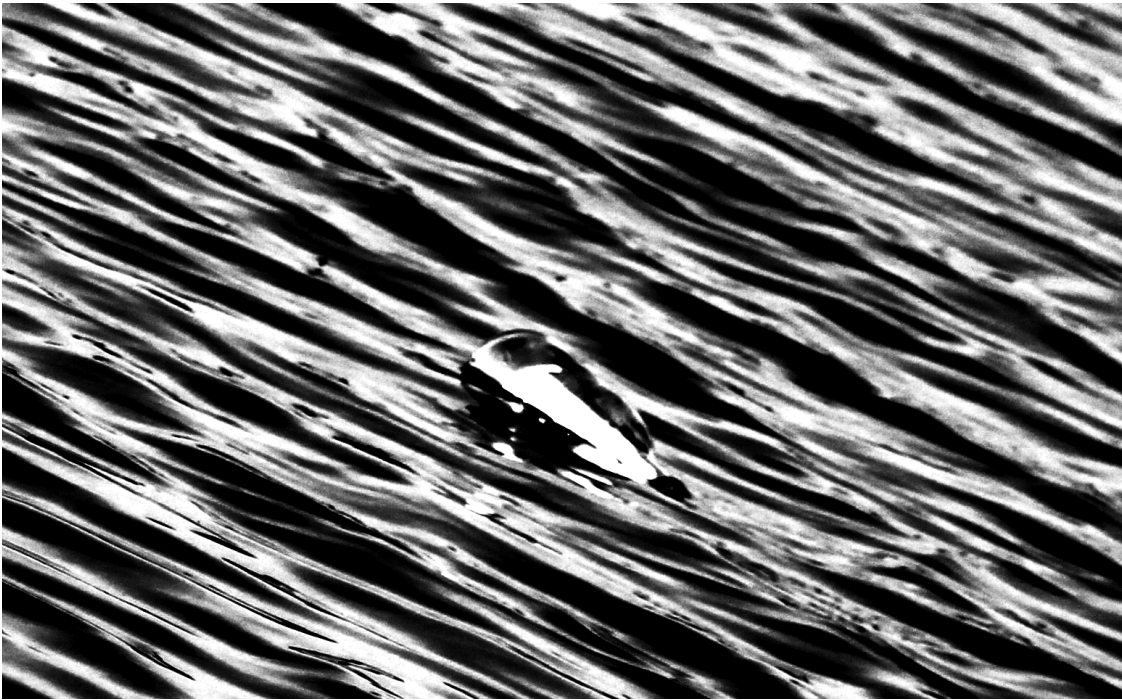
**Adolph Reed:** I think that the party question is a premature question for the Left in the United States at this point. A beginning to talk about things like a party for the Left is the fact that there is simply no Left in the US. There are leftists, but if you think of a Left like a political force—as an entity capable of intervening in the political struggles, to challenge or even alter the terms of political debate—then there is no such force in American society, and there has not been one as long as I can remember. What happened instead is that for a variety of reasons, a lot of which have to do with the shift in understanding of politics from institutionally based strategic activity to a more individual and expressive activity, there has been a redefinition of what counts as a Left.

Over the last 30 years, what people have come to think of as a Left—to the extent that it has been disconnected from challenging contradictions and inequalities rooted in capitalist political economy in the U.S.—has been redefined as something else that has no popular base. It doesn’t seek to generate a popular base and doesn’t have a strategic orientation. Part of a problem is a legacy of leftists—the New Leftists of the 1960s—and the atrophy of extramural political activity. I am going to talk about what happened, between 1945 and 1975 in American politics, to bring that outcome about. The atrophy of extramural Left activity, and the migration of those of us who came out of the New Left into the universities and embracing various Left theoretical discourses, became increasingly disconnected from the working class and working class politics. The notion of the pursuit of class power, state power as a project of the Left, not only fell off the table of consideration but was positively and actively rejected. I can’t tell you how many settings in which I have been in the last decade where a general discussion of the need for a disciplined center, political and strategic intelligence, to guide class war, just gets hinted at—and next you hear from the academic leftists, “Oh no! You cannot talk about a vanguard party. Look at how bad that turned out last time!” The atrophy of the Left builds on itself.

We have a right wing that understands politics and also how to generate constituencies around a social vision. It’s tougher for them in principle than it is for us because their capacity to build something that looks like a winning alliance is dependent on bullshitting people. They cannot construct a majoritarian alliance on the basis of their class program. Here we are: We have no institutional capacity as the Left, and no space for a working class-based critique of the workings of American capitalism in American politics at this point.

Now, I spent 50 years of my life trying to build a working class party, and we made very clear from the beginning that we were not trying to organize the Left, we were not trying to build a left party, but we were trying to build a working class party in the trade unions. We can talk about what happened with that experience, but for now, I will say as a shorthand observation that our history with that experience is what has absolutely convinced me that the idea of a popular Left party in the U.S. is premature. So what we need to think about

*“Political Party” continues on page 3*



# THE PLATYPUS REVIEW READER

## 2007-2014

The Platypus Review Reader focuses on the first years of the Platypus Affiliated Society’s project of hosting the conversation on the death—and potential rebirth—of the Left. The book contains a selection of 50 articles from the Platypus Review distributed across ten headings: Marxism in the 20th century, the anti-war movement, the legacy of the New Left, Israel-Palestine, the election of Barack Obama, the economic crisis, art, the history of Marxism, Lenin, and the #Occupy Movement.

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