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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“Luxemburg” continues on page 3

protections of workers in capitalist labor contracts recognition of collective bargaining rights, legal However, what was achieved by increases in wages, demand for the value of their labor as a commodity, the value of production was a *bourgeois* demand: the exploitation. How so? Their demand for a share of of capital deepened through workers’ struggle against built up within capitalism; but only the contradiction workers’ movement for socialism. Socialism was not the contradiction between the means and ends of the social relations in capitalism was recapitulated in industrial forces of production against their bourgeois For Luxemburg, however, the contradiction of the dispensable figment, a useful enabling fiction. of socialism, whereas the goal of socialism was a the movement for socialism was the achievement and the gradual “evolution” of socialism. For Bernstein, was the overcoming of the contradiction of capitalism the growth and development of the workers’ movement capitalism. This contrasted with Bernstein’s view that a self-contradictory expression of the contradiction of growth of the workers’ movement for socialism was by the development of a new contradiction, namely the been further developed, exacerbated, and deepened social relations and the socialization of production had original contradiction of capitalism, between its chaotic stage of her time with the pamphlet *Social Reform or* Luxemburg made her great entrance onto the political

Antinomy of reformism
“movement” and “goal.” recognition, by posing the question and problem of the Revisionists had occasioned this critical self-Luxemburg expressed her sincere “gratitude” that state power by the workers’ party for socialism. Hence, the dictatorship of the proletariat as the seizing of critical endorsement of Lassalleanism in regarding political revolutionism. Kautsky followed Marx in a reformist economic evolutionism versus the Lassallean its one-sided pitfalls in the opposition of Revisionist, properly recognized—“dialectically”—in order to avoid history of the workers’ movement. So it needed to be mistake but rather a necessary stage manifesting in the capitalism. In this way the Lassallean party was not a “with” it way in the transformation of society beyond political action and seizing of state power—if only to from capitalism. But this was a contradiction that state; and it was society that needed to be emancipated contradiction: An unfree society gave rise to an unfree achieving a “free state” in political revolution was a self- in recognizing the Lassallean goal of the workers and politically. For instance, Luxemburg followed Marx discontents and struggles within it, both economically capitalism itself that manifested in the workers’ own

as a real contradiction: an antinomy and dialectic of Luxemburg, as a Marxist, approached this problem. Rather than taking one side over the other, democratic parties.

state capitalism through the governance of social-perspectives—giving rise later to 20th century welfare-reformists actually converged in their political this antinomy, the Lassalleans and the economicist a state *capitalism*. Indeed, despite or rather *due to* in a “state socialism,” Marx regarded this rather as Where Lassalle subordinated economics to politics “economic determinism” that subordinated politics neglecting the *contradiction* between them in an the political “mechanically” and “undialectically”—the social to the economic, and relating the social to ontologized the economic over the political, reducing to the Revisionists who prioritized and indeed the achievement of socialism; whereas for Marx political ontology of socialism was complementary are both subjects and objects of society. Lassalle’s an eminently *dialectical* formulation, since humans “governing of men” to the “administration of things”—socialism. Engels called it the transition from the “dictatorship of the proletariat” that would lead to this would be merely a transitional revolutionary to the achievement of socialism; whereas for Marx workers taking political power would be tantamount ontologized the political struggle. For Lassalle, the *of things* to behave *like human beings*.” Lassalle thus labor unions, which he called merely the “vain efforts derogating the economic action of the workers, rejecting made the mistake of opposing the political against and the means to advance it beyond itself. Lassalle had followed Marx and Engels, whose recognition was regarding the party as a manifestation of contradiction, Luxemburg, in her critique of the SPD through Kautsky, and Bernstein’s Erfurt Programme.)

discover the significance of Engels’s critique of Bebel, participation in the life of the SPD was to unearth and one of Rosa Luxemburg’s earliest achievements in her it, in the “Marxist” Erfurt Programme itself. Indeed, and was still present, according to Engels’s critique of Lassalle seemed to haunt subsequent developments Erfurt Programme of 1891. Nonetheless the ghost of Lassalleanism was more clearly enunciated in the SPD’s the SPD towards its conscious direction beyond mere London” (that is, Marx and Engels). The development of shoulders at the difficulty of pleasing the “old men in Liebknecht and August Bebel, could only sprug their *Programme*,” in which Marx’s own followers, Wilhelm But this had elicited Marx’s famous *Critique of the Gotha* Gotha, attained Marxist or “revolutionary” leadership. became the SPD, had, through its fusion of 1875 at The social-democratic workers’ party in Germany, what it as an emergent phenomenon of the late 19th century. the social-democratic workers’ party, but rather joined Lassalleanism and Marxism. Marxists had not invented class—evincing a potential contradiction between its as the “permanent political campaign of the working roots in Ferdinand Lassalle’s formulation of its purpose

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transformation and the achievement of socialism? Its preserving capitalism—rather than for revolutionary from its outset a force for counterrevolution—for But had the social democratic workers’ party been demanded socialism.

Lassallean party
bourgeois property-rights in labor as a commodity—proletariat—a working class expropriated from its production and hence its only meaning is the expression of the *need for socialism*. The very existence of the but only the crisis of bourgeois society in industrial is because for Marx “capitalism” is nothing in itself, of capitalism centered on the proletariat itself. This outside but from within. As such, the contradiction Revolution—contradicted bourgeois society, not from “proletariat”—the working class after the industrial as manifestation of the need for change. The Marx followed Hegel in regarding contradiction recognition of the dialectic within socialism itself. relation of socialism with capitalism required a bound up in that contradiction. A proper dialectical of the contradiction of capitalism and as such was itself For Marx, this meant that socialism was the expression

its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and establishes itself as an independent realm in But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself

Such formulations recurred in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* a couple of years later:
explaining to it the meaning of its own actions. in awakening it out of its dream about itself, in making the world aware of its own consciousness, for . . . The reform of consciousness consists *only* in We merely show the world what it is really fighting foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are from identifying our criticism with them. . . . We do struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and the SPD towards its conscious direction beyond mere politics, participation in politics, and therefore *real* one-sided realisation of the socialist principle. . . . Hence, nothing prevents us from making criticism of arising to confront it because it is itself only a special, doctrines—such as those of Fourier, Proudhon, etc.—inevitable that communism has seen other socialist by no means identical, and it is not accidental but

the abolition of private property and communism are infected by its antithesis—the private system. Hence humanistic principle, an expression which is still communism is itself only a special expression of the as taught by Cabet, Dèzamy, Weitling, etc. This communism, but actually existing communism I am not thinking of some imaginary and possible dogmatic abstraction; in which connection, however, themselves. Thus, communism, in particular, is a bourgeoisie property-rights in labor as a commodity help the dogmatists to clarify their propositions for than the external obstacles. . . . [W]e must try to The internal difficulties seem to be almost greater movement that:
on Feuerbach [1845]. Marx had written of the socialist well as in *The German Ideology* and its famous *Theses Manuscripts* and *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], as Joseph Proudhon in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophic* critique of everything existing,” to the critique of Pierre-1843 letter to Arnold Ruge calling for the “pithless socialism when he was in his 20s, from the September ([1818–83] own formative dialectical critiques of In this, Luxemburg followed the young Karl Marx’s Dispute as an occasion for this critique.
Luxemburg took the controversy of the Revisionist took part; Marxism demanded its own critique. and “goal,” in which the dialectic of theory and practice was dialectic of means and ends, or of “movement.” through which this contradiction was expressed. There contradictory and its political party was the means working class’s struggle for socialism was itself self-“undialectical,” this is what she meant: That the way. When Luxemburg accused Bernstein of being Marxism itself was grasped in a critical-dialectical *dialectical* understanding of class and party, in which Marxist approach to the political party for socialism—a her most enduring contribution to its history: her to the heart of Luxemburg’s own Marxism, and to necessary to have “class struggle” at all? This goes What did it mean to say that socialist politics was

Critique of socialism
turns it into a class struggle.”
spirit and the content of our socialist struggle, which Marxsm: “It is the final goal alone which constitutes the old Rosa Luxemburg [1871–1919] clearly enunciated her movement is everything, the goal nothing.” the 27 year-which Eduard Bernstein infamously stated that “the in the notorious theoretical “Revisionist Dispute,” in Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), participating

Chris Cutrone

Rosa Luxemburg and the party

Luxemburg, continued from page 1

and the acceptance of responsibility of the state for the conditions of labor, including the acceptance of the right to political association and democratic political participation in the state, was not the *overcoming* of the problem of capital—that is, the overcoming of the great divergence and social contradiction between the value of capital and wages in industrial production—but rather its exacerbation and deepening through its broadening onto society as a whole. What the workers received in reforms of capitalism was not the value of their labor-power as a commodity, which was relatively minimized by developments of industrial technique, but rather a cut of the profits of capital, whether directly through collective bargaining with the employers or indirectly through state distribution of social welfare benefits from the tax on capital. What Bernstein described optimistically as the socialization of production through such reforms was actually, according to Luxemburg, the “socialization” of the *crisis* of capitalist production.

The workers’ party for socialism, through its growth and development on a mass scale, thus increasingly took political responsibility for capitalism. Hence, a new contradiction developed that was focused on the party itself. Was its purpose to manage capitalism, or rather, as Luxemburg put it in her 1898 Stuttgart speech, to “play the role of the banker-lawyer who liquidates a bankrupt company”? Luxemburg posed the political task of the socialist party in *Reform or Revolution?*¹ succinctly:

It is an illusion, then, to think that the proletariat can create economic power within capitalist society. It can only create political power and then transform *(aufheben)* capitalist property.

The proletarian socialist party was the means for creating that political power. This differed from the development of bourgeois social relations in feudalism that led to revolution:

What does it mean that the earlier classes, particularly the third estate, conquered economic power before political power? Nothing more than the historical fact that all previous class struggles must be derived from the economic fact that the rising class has at the same time created a new form of property upon which it will base its class domination.

However, according to Luxemburg, “The assertion that the proletariat, in contrast to all previous class struggles, pursues its battles, not in order to establish class domination, but to abolish all class domination is not a mere phrase.” This is because the proletariat does not develop a new form of “property” within capitalism, but rather struggles economically, socially and politically, on the basis of “bourgeois property”—on the basis of the bourgeois social relations of labor, or of labor as a commodity. What the working class’s struggle within capitalism achieves is consciousness of the need to overcome labor as a commodity, or, to transform capital from bourgeois property into social property that is no longer mediated by the exchange of labor. This is what it meant for Marx that the proletariat struggles not to “realize” but to *abolish* itself, or, how the proletariat goes from being a class “in itself” to becoming a class “for itself” (*The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847) in its struggle for socialism.

For Luxemburg, the achievement of reforms within capitalism accomplishes nothing but the greater practical and theoretical realization, or “consciousness,” of the need to abolish labor as a commodity, since the latter has been outstripped by industrial production. The further economic, social, and political reforms only dramatically increase this disparity and contradiction between the economic value of labor as a commodity and the social value of capital that must be appropriated by society as a whole. In other words, the workers’ movement for socialism and its institution as a political party is necessary to make the otherwise chaotic, unconscious, “objective” phenomenon of the economic contradiction and crisis of wage-labor and capital into a conscious, “subjective” phenomenon of *politics*. As Luxemburg wrote later, in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy* (AKA the “Junius Pamphlet,” 1915):

Socialism is the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind. For this reason, Friedrich Engels designated the final victory of the socialist proletariat a leap of humanity from the animal world into the realm of freedom. This “leap” is also an iron law of history bound to the thousands of seeds of a prior torment-filled and all-too-slow development. But this can never be realized until the development of complex material conditions strikes the incendiary spark of conscious will in the great masses. The victory of socialism will not descend from heaven. It can only be won by a long chain of violent tests of strength between the old and the new powers. The international proletariat under the leadership of the Social Democrats will thereby learn to try to take its history into its own hands; instead of remaining a will-less football, it will take the tiller of social life and become the pilot to the goal of its own history.

Why “violent tests of strength”? Was this mere “revolutionary” passion, as Bernstein averred? No: As Marx had observed in *Das Kapital*, in the struggle over the “working day,” or over the social and legal conventions for the condition of labor-time, workers and capitalists confronted each other, both with “bourgeois right” on their side. But, “Where right meets right, force will decide.” Such contests of force did not *decide* the issue of right in capitalism, but only channeled it in a *political* direction. Both capital and wage-labor retained their social rights, but the political arena in which their claims were decided shifted from civil society to the state, posing a crisis—the need for “revolution.”

1848: state and revolution

For Luxemburg, the modern state was itself merely the “product of the last revolution,” namely the political institutionalization of the condition of class struggle up to that point. The “last revolution” was that of 1848, in which the “social question” was posed as a crisis of

the democratic republic. As such, the state remained both the subject and the object of revolutionary politics. Marx had conflicted with the anarchists in the First International over the issue of the need for “political” as well as “social action” in the working class’s struggle for socialism. The Revisionists such as Bernstein had, to Luxemburg’s mind, reverted to the pre-Marxian socialism of anarchism in abandoning the struggle for political power in favor of merely social action. In this, Luxemburg characterized Bernstein as having regressed (like the anarchists) to mere “liberalism.” What Bernstein like the anarchists denied was what Marx had discovered in the experience of the revolutions of 1848, namely, the necessity of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and hence the necessary political separation of the workers’ “social democracy” from the mere “democracy” of the bourgeois revolution, including the necessary separation from the “petit bourgeois democrats” who earned Marx’s most scathing scorn.

While liberals denied the need for such “social democracy” and found political democracy to be sufficient, anarchists separated the social from the political, treating the latter as a fetishized realm of collusion in the bourgeois state and hence capitalism. Anarchists from the first, Proudhon, had avoided the issue of political revolution and the need to take state power; whereas Marxists had recognized that the crisis of capitalism inevitably resulted in political crisis and struggle over the state. If the working class failed to do so, others would step in their place. For Marx, the need for workers’ political revolution to achieve socialism was expressed by the phenomenon of Louis Bonaparte’s election in 1848 and coup d’état in 1851, which expressed the inability of the “bourgeoisie to rule” any longer through civil society, while the proletariat was as yet politically undeveloped and thus “not ready to rule” the state. But for Marx the necessity of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was that the “workers must rule” politically in order to overcome capitalism economically and socially. Marx characterized Louis Bonaparte’s politics as both “petit bourgeois” and “lumpenproletarian,” finding support among the broad masses of capitalism’s discontented. But according to Marx their discontents could only reproduce capitalism since they could only at best join the working class or remain dependent on the realization of the value of its labor as a commodity. Hence, there was no possible withdrawal from the crisis of bourgeois politics and the democratic state, as by libertarians and anarchists, but the need to develop political power to overcome capitalism. For the capitalist wage-labor system with its far-reaching effects throughout society to be abolished required the political action of the wage laborers. That the “workers must rule” meant that they needed to provide political leadership to the exploited and oppressed masses. If the organized working class did not, others would provide that leadership, as Bonaparte had done in 1848 and 1851. The means for that was the political party for socialism. As Luxemburg put it in her 1898 Stuttgart speech:

[B]y final goal we must not mean . . . this or that image of the future state, but the prerequisite for any future society, namely the conquest of political power. This conception of our task is closely related to our conception of capitalist society; it is the solid ground which underlies our view that capitalist society is caught in insoluble contradictions which will ultimately necessitate an explosion, a collapse, at which point we will play the role of the banker-lawyer who liquidates a bankrupt company.

The socialist political party was for Luxemburg the means for this necessary achievement of political power. But the party was not *itself* the solution, but rather the necessary manifestation and concretization of the *problem* of political power in capitalism and indeed the problem of “society” in itself.

1905: party and class

Luxemburg took the occasion of the 1905 Revolution in Russia to critique the relation of labor unions and the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in her pamphlet on *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906). This was a continuation of Luxemburg’s criticism of the reformist Revisionist view of the relation of the economic and political struggles of the working class for socialism, which had found its strongest support among the labor union leadership.

In bringing to bear the Russian experience in Germany, Luxemburg reversed the usual assumed hierarchy of German experience over Russian “backwardness.” She also reversed the developmental order of economic and political struggles, the mistaken assumption that the economic must precede the political. The “mass” or political strike had been associated with social- and political-historical primitiveness, with pre-industrial struggles and pre-Marxian socialism, specifically anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism (especially in the Latin countries), which had prioritized economic and social action over political action. Luxemburg sought to grasp the changed historical significance of the political strike; that it had become, rather, a symptom of advanced, industrial capitalism. In the 1905 Russian Revolution, the workers had taken political action before economic action, and the labor unions had organized out of that political action, rather than the reverse.

The western Russian Empire was rapidly industrialized and showed great social unrest in the 1890s–1900s. It exhibited the most up-to-date techniques and organization in industrial production: The newest and largest factories in the world at this time were located in Russia. Luxemburg was active in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in the Russian part of Poland, through her own organization, the Social-Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL). The 1905 Russian Revolution was precipitated by a *political* and not “economic” crisis: the shaking of the Tsarist state in its losing war with Japan 1904–05. This was not merely a liberal-democratic discontent with the arbitrary rule of Russian absolutism. For Luxemburg, the Russo-Japanese War was a symptom of capitalism, and so was the resulting crisis of Tsarism in Russia triggered by this war. The political strike was, as she put it, a revolt of “bourgeois Russia,” that is, of the modern industrial

capitalists and workers, against Tsarism. What had started out in the united action of the capitalists and workers striking economically against the Tsarist state for liberal-democratic political reasons, unfolded into a class struggle by the workers against the capitalists. This was due to the necessity of reorganizing social provisions during the strike, in which mass-action strike committees took over the functions of the usual operations of capitalism and indeed of the Tsarist state itself. This had necessitated the formation of workers’ own collective-action organizations. Luxemburg showed how the economic organization of the workers had developed out of the political action against Tsarism, and that the basis of this was in the necessities of advanced industrial production. In this way, the workers’ actions had developed, beyond the liberal-democratic or “bourgeois” discontents and demands, into the tasks of “proletarian socialism.” Political necessity had led to economic necessity [rather than the reverse, economic necessity leading to political necessity].

For Luxemburg, this meant that the usual assumption in Germany that the political party, the SPD, was “based” on the labor unions, was a profound mistake. The economic and social-cooperative actions of the unions were “based,” for Luxemburg, on the political task of socialism and its political party. This meant prioritizing the political action of the socialist party as the real basis or substance of the economic and other social action of the working class. It was the political goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat through socialist revolution that gave actual substance to the workers’ economic struggles, which were, for Luxemburg, merely the necessary preparatory “school of revolution.”

Luxemburg wrote her pamphlet while summering at a retreat with Lenin and other Bolsheviks in Finland. It was informed by her daily conversations with Lenin over many weeks. Lenin had previously written, in *What is to Be Done?* (1902) [a pamphlet commissioned and agreed-upon by the Marxist faction of the RSDLP as a whole, those who later divided into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks], that economism and workerism in Russia had found support in Bernsteinian Revisionism in the SPD and the greater Second International, trying to subordinate the political struggle to economic struggle and thus to separate them. In so doing, they like the Revisionists had identified capitalist development with socialism rather than properly recognizing them as in growing contradiction. Lenin had, like Luxemburg, regarded such workerism and economism as “reformist” in the sense of separating the workers’ struggles for reform from the goal of socialism that needed to inform such struggles. Luxemburg as well as Lenin called this “liquidationism,” or the dissolving of the goal into the movement, liquidating the need for the political party for socialism. In *What is to Be Done?* Lenin had argued for the formation of a political party for the workers’ struggle for socialism in Russia. He took as polemical opponents those who, like the Revisionists in Germany, had deprioritized the necessity of the political party, thus deprioritizing the *politics* of the struggle for socialism, limiting it to economic action.² The political party had thus redeemed itself in the 1905 Revolution in Russia, showing its necessary role for the workers’ political, social, and economic action, confirming Lenin and Luxemburg’s prior arguments against economism.

Luxemburg regarded the lessons of the 1905 Revolution in Russia to be a challenge to and hence a “crisis”—a potential critical turning point—of the SPD in Germany. Continuing her prosecution of the Revisionist Dispute, Luxemburg argued for the concrete necessity of the political leadership of the party over the unions that had been demonstrated by the 1905 Revolution in Russia. By contrast, the tension and indeed contradiction between the goal of socialism and the preservation of the institutions of the workers’ movement—specifically of the labor unions’ self-interest—which might be threatened by the conservative reaction of the state against the political action of the socialist party, showed a conflict between movement and goal. The Revisionists thought that a mass political strike would merely provoke the Right into a coup d’état.

Demand for redemption

Walter Benjamin, in his draft theses “On the Concept of History” (AKA “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 1940), cited Luxemburg in particular when describing history itself as the “demand for redemption.” Not only did Luxemburg raise this demand with her famous invocation of Marx and Engels on the crossroads in capitalism of “socialism or barbarism,” but as a historical figure she herself calls out for such redemption.

The conflict in and about the party on which Luxemburg had focused was horribly revealed later by the outbreak of war in 1914, when a terrible choice seemed posed, between the political necessity to overthrow the *Kaiserreich* state to prevent or stop the war, and the need to preserve the workers’ economic and social organizations in the unions and the party. The war had been the *Kaiserreich*’s preemptive coup d’état against the SPD. The party capitulated to this in that it facilitated and justified the unions’ assertion of their self-preservation at the cost of cooperation with the state’s war. This self-preservation—what Luxemburg excoriated as trying to “hide like a rabbit under a bush” temporarily during the war—may have been justified if these same organizations had served later to facilitate the political struggle for socialism after the Prussian Empire had been shaken by its loss in the war. But the SPD’s constraining of the workers’ struggles to preserve the state, limiting the German Revolution 1918–19 to a “democratic” one against the threat of “Bolshevism,” meant the party’s suppression of its own membership. Past developments had prepared this. The Revisionists’ prioritization of the movement and its organizations over the goal of socialism had been confirmed for what Luxemburg and Lenin had always warned against: the adaptation and liquidation of the working class’s struggles into, not a potential springboard for socialism, but rather a bulwark of capitalism; the transformation of the party from a revolutionary into a counterrevolutionary force. As Luxemburg had so eloquently put it in WWI, the SPD had become a “stinking corpse”—something that had through the stench of decomposition revealed itself to have been dead for a long time already—dead for the purposes of

socialism. The party had killed itself through the Devil’s bargain of sacrificing its true political purpose for mere self-preservation.

In so doing, supposedly acting in the interests of the workers, the workers’ true interests—in socialism—were betrayed. As Luxemburg put it in the *Junius Pamphlet*, the failure of the SPD at the critical moment of 1914 had placed the entire history of the preceding “40 years” of the struggles by the workers—since the founding of the SPD in 1875—in doubt.³ Would this history be liquidated without redemption? This underscored Luxemburg’s warning, decades earlier, against dissolving the goal into the movement that would betray not only the goal but the movement itself. Reformist revisionism devoured itself. The only point of the party was its goal of revolution; without it, it was “nothing”—indeed worse than nothing: It became a festering obstacle. The party was for Luxemburg not only or primarily the “subject” but was also and especially the object of revolutionary struggle by the working class to achieve socialism. This is why the revolution that the party had facilitated was for Luxemburg merely the beginning and not the end of the struggle to achieve socialism. The political problem of capitalism was manifest in how the party pointed beyond itself in the revolution. But without the party, that problem could never even manifest let alone point beyond itself.

During the German Revolution—provoked by the collapse of the *Kaiserreich* at the end of WWI—Luxemburg split and founded the new Communist Party of Germany (KPD), joining Lenin in forming the “Third” or Communist International, in 1919; to make clear the political tasks that had been manifested and advanced but ultimately abdicated and failed by the social-democratic parties of the Second International in war and revolution. Just as Luxemburg and Lenin had always maintained that the political party for socialism was necessary to advance the contradiction and crisis of capitalism as it had developed from Marx’s time to their own, so it became necessary in crisis to split that party and found a new one. Turning the international war of capitalism into a socialist revolution meant manifesting a civil war within the workers’ movement and indeed within Marxism itself. Whereas her former comrades in the SPD recoiled from her apparent revolutionary fanaticism, and “saved” themselves and their party by betraying its goal (but ultimately faded from historical significance), Luxemburg, as a loyal party-member, sacrificed herself for the goal of socialism, redeeming her Marxism and making it profoundly necessary, thus tasking our remembrance and recovery of it today. **IP**

¹ Speech given at the Stuttgart Congress of October 1898,” in *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 38–39; also available on-line at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1898/10/04.htm>>.

² Quoted in Georg Lukács, “The Standpoint of the Proletariat,” Part III of “Refutation and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1923), trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 195.

³ See also my essay “Lenin’s Liberalism,” *Platypus Review* 36 (June 2011). Available on-line at: <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenins-liberalism/>>.

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the way Jesse did with the Rainbow Coalition. These pro-Bernie organizations are like different factions of the Bernie campaign, fighting for socialism. Bernie is the figurehead, but we are the ones doing the work, donating the money, and wielding the power. We have already influenced the Sanders campaign, as the Sanders campaign has influenced Clinton.

I disagree with Jason about the likelihood of a split in either major party. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party is about to break up right now. We are not in such a deep crisis that these parties have ceased to be useful tools of capital.

Some say “Bernie or Bust,” but then there are also Bernie supporters protesting Trump rallies. If it is Clinton vs. Trump, even the hardcore Bernie supporters would be pushed to support Hillary in order to “fight the right.” Aside from the superdelegates, Hillary is also beating Bernie “on the ground,” through “grassroots” organizing. So, again, are we using the Democratic Party—or is the Democratic Party using us?

JS: The Democratic Party is not using me. To the people who would hold their noses and vote Hillary, I would point out that the ruling class prefers Clinton to Trump. Most elites think Trump would be an incompetent manager of the American capitalist state. Frankly, if the entire working class sat out this election, Trump would lose to Clinton, the supposed “lesser evil,” although in terms of foreign policy, she is not necessarily the lesser evil. I do not think we need to come out hard for Hillary in order to “fight the right.”

BS: I disagree. All this stuff about Trump losing is just propaganda from those who dislike how Trump is trying to redefine the Republican Party. He has unfavorable general ratings, but so does Clinton. Trump has met with the Republican leadership. He will reach an understanding with them and win the nomination. That’s a big problem, because if it is Trump against Clinton, I think Clinton will lose. This has come up during our discussions in Houston. We are trying to avoid this subject because we do not want anything to screw up the coalition we are building through the Sanders campaign. The executives already discussed this. Our view is that people can support or refuse to support Hillary as they wish. We are not going to split over it. The organization itself is more important than how we deal with this question. **IP**

Transcribed by Reid Kollas and Brian Schultz

¹ Jason Schulman, “Bernie Sanders and the Dilemma of the Democratic ‘Party,’” *New Politics* 15 (Winter 2016). Available online at: <[² Julius Jacobson, “The Duality of the Jackson Campaign,” *New Politics* 2 \(Summer 1988\): 5–6.](http://newpol.org/print/content/bernie-sanders-and-dilemma-%E2%80%AB-democratic-‘party’>.”</p>
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The Greek left tradition and the SYRIZA phenomenon

John Milios

AFTER THE OUTBREAK of the global economic crisis in 2008, Greece was actually the first Euro-area country where the neoliberal “shock doctrine” was imposed.¹ This was an attempt to place the fallout of the systemic capitalist crisis on the shoulders of working people. These extreme austerity policies were disputed. A series of mass demonstrations and strikes ensued.

The most important result of these mass movements was the fast disintegration of the political system, mainly manifested in the unravelling of the Socialist Party (PASOK). This party was in power for more than 20 years during the last three decades and negotiated a Troika (IMF-ECB-EU) “stabilization program” for the country that introduced class-ridden austerity policies. Mass movements and popular demonstrations finally led to national elections in May and June 2012, through which the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) became the major opposition party in Parliament. In the early national elections on January 25, 2015, SYRIZA achieved a stunning victory with 36.3 percent of the vote, winning 149 parliamentary seats of the total 300 and, eventually, leading a coalition government with the Independent Greeks (ANEL), a conservative anti-austerity party.

After six months in office, the SYRIZA-ANEL government agreed on a third financing program by the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the IMF, which was connected to a new austerity Memorandum. The noncompliance with the new party policy of 25 SYRIZA MPs, who later formed a new anti-austerity parliamentary group called Popular Unity (LAE), led to the resignation of the government and to new national elections on September 20, 2015. SYRIZA won again with 35.4 percent of the vote, taking 145 seats and forming a new coalition government with ANEL. LAE, with only 2.86 percent of the vote, did not reach the 3 percent electoral threshold and remained without any representation in Parliament.

This article examines the shifts in the policies of the Greek left, focusing on the “SYRIZA Phenomenon,” from the standpoint of a Marxist approach to (European) capitalism, relations of class representation, and the historical tradition of the Greek left.

SYRIZA’s history, contradictions, and mutation

SYRIZA was formed in 2004 as a coalition of SYN [a left party formed in 1992 and stemming mainly from the Eurocommunist tradition] and twelve other political groups of the Left, at least five of which belonged to the so-called “revolutionary extra-parliamentarian left.” The formation of SYRIZA was the final step of a process that started in the year 2000, when most of the political groups that later formed SYRIZA co-existed in the Greek and European anti-globalization movement shaped during that period. Several thousand Greek leftists participated in the Genoa “Group of Eight” Summit protest, from July 18 to July 22, 2001, possibly the biggest European anti-globalization demonstration ever, the majority of whom were members of the political organizations that later formed SYRIZA.

SYRIZA started as a fairly loose coalition of different left currents, whose coexistence allowed them to be represented in the Greek central political scene and Parliament as an opposing left pole to the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). A turning point in SYRIZA’s history was the national elections of 2012, when it became the main opposition in Parliament. It was transformed into a unitary party comprised of different ideological streams in July 2013 on the basis of the resolution of its first founding Congress.² However, SYRIZA never developed a new synthesis, remaining a “party of political unity” that resembled a united front of different fractions and influential cadres.

Although comprising more than ten tendencies or streams of thought, SYRIZA practically differs from four major traditions: [a] the left post-Stalinist tradition [which contains tensions between former pro-Soviet and Eurocommunist sub-traditions]; [b] the extra-parliamentarian left tradition [which contains tensions between the Trotskyist, the Maoist, and the radical Eurocommunist sub-traditions]; [c] the tradition of the alter-globalization movement of the early 2000s, which practically influenced most parts of SYRIZA, as all parties and political groups that formed SYRIZA had participated in the Greek and European Social Forums; and [d] the reformist social-democratic tradition, which was strengthened after the 2012 elections and the disintegration of PASOK that followed. As SYRIZA came at that time the main opposition in Parliament, a part of its leadership, mostly stemming from the post-Stalinist KKE or/and SYN tradition, adopted a reformist stance, contending that the party should shift towards “pragmatism” in order to win the next elections. A new narrative emerged within the party that distinguished between the “old SYRIZA of 4 percent” and the “new SYRIZA of 27 percent” [after the 2012 elections]. This tendency was further strengthened by the fact that many former PASOK cadres and members entered SYRIZA.

In the June 2014 elections for the European Parliament, SYRIZA led with 26.52 percent of the vote. It was clear by then that SYRIZA would form, or at least be the leading partner in, the new government to come after the next national elections. Arguing in favor of “effectiveness” and “safeguarding electoral victory,” the majority of SYRIZA’s leadership started flirting with center-left politicians and small center-left political formations (e.g., with the Democratic Left, a party formed in 2010 after splitting from SYRIZA). At the same time, in the party’s official language in the mass media, the slogans and the “immediate political targets” of SYRIZA started changing. The slogan “For a Government of the Left” was gradually replaced by “Government of National Salvation”; “Redistribution of Power, Wealth and Income to the benefit of the Working Majority” was displaced by “Productive Reconstruction of the Country”; all programmatic positions regarding the democratic

control of society and the economy by the people as well as the development of self-directed, co-operative productive schemes were put aside; and even SYRIZA’s proposals for taxing the rich were cast away.

This shift to pragmatism was reflected in SYRIZA’s electoral program issued in September 2014, the so-called Thessaloniki Program. As M. Lebowitz correctly argues:

In place of any anti-capitalist [let alone, socialist] measures was a National Reconstruction Plan which focused upon restarting the Greek economy through public investment and tax reduction for the middle class. Recovery and growth [along with a negotiated moratorium on debt servicing] would rescue the Greek economy and allow it to ‘gradually’ reverse all the memorandum injustices, ‘gradually’ restore salaries and pensions and rebuild the welfare state. Economically, the Thessaloniki Programme was based upon Keynesian [not even post-Keynesian] theory, and it supplemented its focus upon aggregate demand stimulation by proposed measures to deal with the humanitarian crisis (e.g., subsidies for meals, electricity, medical care and public transit for the poor and unemployed).³

It is true that a lot of SYRIZA cadres, members, and supporters considered the Thessaloniki Program to be a tactical move, in the sense that it described only the first steps of a radical program of democratic change that would evolve gradually, albeit steadily. This program was supposed to stop austerity policies and secure a deal with the official lenders of the country (the EU, ECB, and IMF, which were called the “Troika” and are now referred to as the “Institutions”) in order to cover the financing needs of the Greek public sector. However, a few weeks after the formation of the new government, and especially after signing the preliminary agreement of February 20, 2015, it became clear that Greece’s leaders were simply proposing a milder version of the austerity Memorandum in their negotiations with the “Institutions.”

In the government formed by Alexis Tsipras after the January 25 elections, several important ministers were appointed, including the Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis, who did not originate from SYRIZA or any left tradition. Shortly after his appointment as Minister of Finance, Varoufakis repeatedly declared publicly that 70 percent of the Memorandum [the austerity “financial stability program”] was favorable for Greece.⁴ However, the SYRIZA government did not come to power supporting 70 percent of the Memorandum. If SYRIZA had made such a pledge, it probably would not be playing the key role on the parliamentary map today. Such notions redefined the SYRIZA mandate and amounted to an attempt to change the social alliances that had supported the historical experiment of a left government in Greece. Moreover, the Ministry of Finance publicly distanced itself from SYRIZA’s rationale. In its *National Programme of Reforms* (Ministry of Finance, April 2015), all the main arguments of the neoliberal austerity agenda were adopted, including the assertions that economic growth relies on exports and that all wage increases undermine competitiveness.

Furthermore, the Minister of Finance himself always spoke in favor of a strategy that would supposedly lead Greece to a “growth stage” benefiting all classes. His declaration at the Twentieth Banking Forum of the Union of Greek Banks on April 22, 2015, was characteristic:

In the year 2015, after five years of catastrophic recession, where ultimately everybody is a victim, there are only a few cunning people who have profited from this crisis. The era in which a government of the Left was by definition contrary to the milieu of entrepreneurship has passed. If we get to a point when there is growth, we can start talking again about conflicting labour and capital interests. Today we are together.⁵

In the midst of such an ideological and political climate, the Greek government reached an intermediate agreement with the lenders on February 20, 2015, which included a four-month extension of the Memorandum signed by the previous government.

The February 20 agreement made clear that the Greek government was negotiating within the European neoliberal austerity framework, and merely seeking a “fig leaf” to conceal its compromises. This “fig leaf,” which has often been described as the “red lines” of the Greek government, consisted of a moderate program of “ending the humanitarian crisis” [through such measures as energy subsidies and food-stamps for the very poor] and rejecting any direct nominal reduction of wages and pensions, while maintaining the existing restrictions with regard to mass lay-offs and low VAT coefficients for certain mass products in the Greek islands. This became even clearer after the promulgation, on June 5, 2015, of the Greek proposals to the “Institutions.” The government surrendered its program [even the Thessaloniki Program] and was attempting to get an agreement that would simply leave intact the existing neoliberal institutional and economic framework, with no further austerity measures affecting low and medium incomes.

However, the “Institutions” never accepted the Greek government’s “red lines” and shaped a plan to further finance Greece while deepening the existing neoliberal policies (including wage and pension cuts), eventually codified as the “Juncker plan.” The negotiations went on for five more months, during which time the Greek government did not receive any of the owed tranches by its lenders, whereas it continued paying all of its debt obligations to the ECB and the IMF, totaling over seven billion euros and more than three percent of GDP, until the final depletion of all public funds and the delay—by necessity since the government had practically run out of cash—of Greece’s payment to the IMF on June 30, 2015. On June 26, the Greek Prime Minister Alexis

Tsipras proclaimed a referendum on the “Juncker plan,” and, on June 28, the government decided to impose restrictions on the withdrawal of deposits from Greek banks (the “bank holiday” and “capital controls”), as the ECB refused any increase in the Emergency Liquidity Assistance provided to the Greek banks, which could have met the needs of the anxious depositors who withdrew their savings after the proclamation of the referendum.

The election campaign for the referendum had clear class and social characteristics, which had not been seen in Greek politics for decades. There were two “Greeces” fighting each other. On one side, there were roughly the poor, the wage-earners, the unemployed, and many small entrepreneurs fighting for No, while on the other side were the capitalists, the managerial class, the higher ranks of the state, and so on, agitating for Yes. Ultimately, a broad coalition of the social majority saw the referendum as a chance to express their commitment to opposing austerity and neoliberalism. The Greek people voted with the banks closed and in an atmosphere of fear in which it was routinely declared that voting No would lead to disaster. There was also intense word-mouth blackmail from employers pressuring workers to vote Yes. Yet, despite this fear and propaganda, 61.3 percent voted No.

The Greek government transformed the No vote of the Greek people into a Yes vote in Parliament, in consensus with the conservative and center-left opposition and, on July 13, 2015, signed an agreement with the “Institutions” in Brussels which practically duplicated the “Juncker plan.”⁶ The government itself described the agreement as the result of “blackmail” by the dogmatic European elites⁷ and a “defeat” due to the negative relations of forces in the “struggle” between Greece and the “Institutions.” However, 32 out of the 149 SYRIZA MPs, mostly members of the party’s “Left Platform,” voted in Parliament against the agreement, while six abstained from voting. Finally, on August 20, 2015, the Prime Minister decided to resign in order that new elections would be proclaimed. In response, 25 SYRIZA MPs, under the leadership of former Energy Minister Panagiotis Lafazanis, broke away and formed a new party, Popular Unity (LAE).

The official SYRIZA approach to the negotiations and the “demands of the Institutions” perceived austerity and the Memoranda either as simply “an economic mistake,” in the sense that they are not able to boost growth, or as an attack on the Greek economy and society by “foreign interests.” Within this framework, the final capitulation of SYRIZA to the “Institutions” was interpreted as a “heroic fall in an uneven battle” that can eventually be reversed through “equivalent measures,” such as combating corruption and reforming the state, put forward by the “left government.”

Is austerity a “false policy”?

The question that arises from the above analysis is the following: Why have the European “Institutions” never deviated from their austerity agenda, at least since the outbreak of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008? Furthermore, why did the Greek capitalist forces and their allies fight with such a fanatical frenzy for the Yes vote in the July 5 referendum in support of the “Juncker plan” and a third Memorandum?

The answer is clear: Austerity is not a “false policy” but rather a class strategy for promoting the interests of capital against those of workers, professionals, pensioners, and economically vulnerable groups. In the long run it aims at creating a labor model consisting of fewer rights and social protections, low and flexible wages, and the absence of any meaningful bargaining power for workers. On the surface, austerity appears as a strategy for reducing entrepreneurial costs. It reduces the labor costs of the private sector, increases profit per (labor) unit cost, and therefore boosts the profit rate. It is complemented by economy in the use of “material capital” and by institutional changes that, on the one hand, enhance capital mobility and competition and, on the other, strengthen the power both of managers in enterprises and of security holders in society. As regards fiscal consolidation, austerity gives priority to budget cuts over public revenue, reduces taxes on capital, dismantles progressive tax systems, and downsizes the welfare state. However, these “burdensome costs” for the capitalist class maintain the living standard of society’s working majority.

The institutional arrangement of the Eurozone, with the ECB deprived of the power of being a lender of last resort, deliberately reinforces neoliberal policies. Member states will not always have the necessary Liquidity to pay off bondholders, as is currently the case with Greece. This makes the downsizing of the welfare state a precondition for financial solvency. The ruling European elites have thus voluntarily acquiesced to a high degree of sovereign default risk in order to consolidate their neoliberal strategies. In other words, they have jointly decided to exploit the crisis as a means to further neoliberalize state governance.

The continuation of austerity is always bound up with the relation of contending social forces. Capitalist societies, similar to the inner workings of an enterprise, are battlefields of antagonistic interests. As Karl Marx observed on the limits of the working-day: “The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working-day as long as possible... On the other hand... the laborer maintains his right as seller when he wishes to reduce the working-day to one of definite normal duration. There is here therefore an antinomy, of *right against right*, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights force decides.”⁸

Beyond certain limits, the subjection of all of social life to the unfettered function of markets and the dictate of profitability may be a “political risk” for the neoliberal establishment, since it can trigger uncontrolled breakdowns and disruptions.” This “political risk” was a strong weapon in the hands of the Greek working class, SYRIZA, and the government, and it could have been used to stop austerity and to guarantee an agreement with the lenders that did not violate the January 25 mandate. However, this could only have been achieved under one condition—namely, that SYRIZA and the government maintained the class partisanship of its program and the strategy of “people before profits.” This strategy pointed in an anti-capitalist direction, redistributing income and power in favor of labor, enhancing the welfare state, democracy, and popular participation in decision making; radically reforming the tax system [so that capital and the wealthy strata of society finally bore the appropriate burden]; and implementing

radical domestic institutional changes that establish a new basis for the allegiance of the subordinate classes. However, as already discussed, this strategy was abandoned in the summer of 2014 after SYRIZA was victorious in the elections for the European Parliament.

The evolution of SYRIZA towards the center-left and the new political landscape after the September 2015 national elections

From its very beginning, Social Democracy conceived of capitalism as a system that can be politically managed to be beneficial for both capital and labor. In the words of Eduard Bernstein in 1899: “Democracy is in principle the suppression of class government, though it is not yet the actual suppression of classes.”⁹ On the basis of this approach, Social Democracy slid from its historic strategy of the “peaceful transition to socialism” toward welfare-state politics and Keynesian demand-side macroeconomic growth policies, and, eventually, from there to center-left neoliberal pragmatism.

Social Democratic and

Sanders, the Democrats, and the Left

Jason Schulman and Bernard Sampson

On April 2, 2016, at its Eighth International Convention in Chicago, Illinois, Platypus brought together Jason Schulman of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and Bernard Sampson of the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA), to discuss how the electoral campaign of Bernie Sanders matters for the Left. Coeditor of the socialist journal New Politics, Jason Schulman’s latest book is Neoliberal Labour Governments and the Union Response: The Politics of the End of Labourism. He currently teaches political science at St. Francis College. A native Texan, Bernard Sampson has been a member of the CPUSA since 1977 and visited the USSR in 1981. He is the club chair of the Houston branch of the CPUSA, a member of the CPUSA National Committee, and a precinct chair for the Democratic Party in Houston, Texas. The event was moderated by Danny Jacobs of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of their discussion.

Opening remarks:

Jason Schulman: These remarks are based on a recent article of mine about Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Party.¹ Let us start with the peculiarities of the American political system and its two major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. Nobody on the Left denies they both have bourgeois origins. In the past they functioned more like traditional parties that dictated who ran for office. Beginning in the late 1910s, however, both parties underwent fundamental structural changes that dismantled the political machines. The ballot line is now run by the state.

Political parties in the U.S. are not private associations with strict control of membership and ballot access. Candidates in the Democratic and the Republican parties run on their own program. The platform adopted at the national convention every four years is largely ignored. It is almost impossible for party leaders to ensure that everyone votes in line. In contrast, party disloyalty is a meaningful charge in parliamentary systems. Tony Blair forced Ken Livingstone out of the British Labour Party, for example. That sort of thing does not happen in the United States.

Yes, Democrats are overwhelmingly ruling-class politicians who rely on capitalist wealth. Even the most left-wing Democrats take some money from corporate political action committees (PACs). However, while corporate money buys access to politicians, it does not always influence their votes. The most left-wing Democrats take some corporate money, but are still able to vote the right way most of the time. Our rotten system of private campaign financing, along with the weakness of the labor movement, means that few politicians at the national level can completely avoid corporate PAC money. Campaign finance reform is necessary before a stance like that is remotely viable.

Those who draw from the Marxist tradition are correct to view political parties as representing specific social classes. However, we must take into account that parties in America are not really parties, and that our system of campaign financing is especially oligarchical. Under these peculiar conditions, it is not a betrayal of class-struggle politics to support the most left-wing Democrats. Abstaining from the Sanders campaign would mean missing a unique opportunity to connect with millions of working-class people who are being exposed to terms like “democratic socialism” and “political revolution” for the first time in a positive way, even if Bernie’s interpretation of those terms is more moderate than our own.

All that being said, left-liberals and radical leftists are not poised to take over the Democratic Party. It is hard to transform a state-run ballot line into what we need: a real, independent, left-wing political party, democratically controlled by its members. I wish Walter Reuther and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) had founded a labor party, as they said they would in 1948. They did not, nor did the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and here we are today. At present, organized labor in the U.S. is simply too weak to start a party modeled on British Labour. Even the most left-wing American labor organizations support the Democrats as a matter of course. They are not really in a position to do otherwise.

Our best option, then, is to be critical supporters of the Sanders campaign from within it. If we remain outside his campaign, nothing we say will matter. If we are in the fray, we can explain that we support the campaign even though we have criticisms. We can say that the social-democratic reforms put forth by Sanders are valuable while arguing that it is necessary to go beyond capitalism itself, a goal that cannot be achieved by electing someone president. Operating within the campaign, we can seek to deepen the meaning of terms like “democratic socialism” and “political revolution” in an explicitly Marxist way.

In the end, the superdelegates may represent a problem too large for Sanders to overcome. However, if the superdelegates prove to be the only obstacle to the nomination of Sanders, that might expose how the Democratic Party is a fundamentally *undemocratic* party, prompting the more left-wing Democrats to split. Many think that Trump can split the Republican Party. A split on the Republican side would greatly increase the likelihood of a split in the Democratic Party. I sincerely hope something like this comes to pass and that the Democratic Party does *not* survive the turmoil. Perhaps then we will finally get the genuinely democratic party of the Left that we have needed for decades.

Bernard Sampson: I agree with most of what you said, Jason. I have been involved in the campaign for Bernie since November of 2014. We set up the first website in the U.S. calling for Bernie to win, *Houstonians for Bernie Sanders*, and we have been leading the coalition for Bernie in Houston ever since.

We do not agree with everything he says, but Bernie has found success to a degree no other socialist has. Some people say he is not a socialist, but every socialist defines socialism a little differently. Right now, if you

come out with the maximum demand, the overthrow of capitalism, you are not going to get anywhere.

Running as a third-party candidate is a losing proposition. The main parties can co-opt any third party by tacking right or left. If it were not for Sanders, Clinton would not have adopted half the positions that she now holds. The Democrats and the Republicans are both capitalist parties, but they cannot fully control who runs in their elections. Therefore the Left can work within the Democratic Party, not to take it over, but in order to get publicity and organize a left wing from within it. The Democratic National Convention will work against you, of course. We have already seen how the pro-Hillary establishment has maneuvered in response to the Sanders campaign, but these obstacles can be overcome.

Independent socialists should stay independent, but Sanders is not really a member of the Democratic Party. He has only become one on paper for the publicity. If he ran as an independent, he would be getting even less coverage than he is now. This is not a parliamentary system. As Marxists, we have to adapt to the particularities of the American political system in order to put a curse on both houses.

In the 1840s, early communists in America took part in the founding of the Republican Party. They sought to aid pro-capitalist forces in the overthrow of slavery. Today we face a similar situation with the threat of the ultra right, the military industrial complex, and the Tea Party. American forms of fascism wait in the wings of these far-right forces. Thousands of armed people are members of these groups. It is a very dangerous situation.

We should also consider the future appointment of Supreme Court justices and federal judges. You can march all day, mobilize the people, and pressure legislators. In the end, the Supreme Court will decide what happens and what rights people have. With the disintegration of women’s rights, civil rights, unions, and so on, it is important for democracy and for the advance towards socialism that we think through the consequences of our actions.

As Marxists, we have to look at the objective conditions and adapt our ideas to them. Most people have no understanding of what socialism is. Even among the people who support Bernie, I would say about one in 30 identifies as a socialist. Bernie is appealing to millions of people who do not call themselves socialists. The only way to mold this situation to our advantage is by working in the Sanders campaign.

In Houston, we work daily with the people making the calls, going door-to-door, and coming to the meetings. These people are being exposed to socialist ideas for the first time. We hold a socialist reading group, hand out literature, host movie nights, and so on, in order to intersect them. We do all this in order to build a progressive coalition that will continue whether Bernie is elected or not. If he is elected, we will need millions of people marching and voting in order to pressure liberal Democrats to pass Bernie’s legislative measures. If he loses, we still need a base from which we can keep building the movement.

The Sanders campaign is not like the anti-war movement. This campaign is based on electoral politics, not anarchist demonstrations where people just march, give speeches, etc. People are learning a discipline that the Left tends to ignore: how to get someone elected. The Left spends a lot of time on the ideological struggle, the economic struggle, the trade union struggle, but it often neglects the electoral struggle. The real challenge is to achieve a unity of these different struggles.

Q & A

How do you assess the ultra-right political groups in the United States today? Is the goal to recruit such people to a socialist politics? How does campaigning for the Democratic Party help fight against the ultra right?

JS: It has been difficult to categorize Donald Trump. I do not think he is fascist in the traditional European sense. I doubt he is going to become president, but it is still a big problem that any presidential candidate is encouraging violence the way Trump is. Actively supporting Clinton does not help us challenge the right. Here I might disagree with Bernard and the CPUSA. If Clinton wins the nomination, neither the DSA nor I will be advocating a vote for her. Members in swing states will do what they feel is right, but the DSA will not be out there helping Clinton’s campaign.

BS: Donald Trump is a political genius. He understands that in every country, about 33 percent of the population is made up of degenerates who are right-wing, racist, sexist, homophobic, and so on. They form a base for the right wing of the Republican Party. Attacking immigrants, insulting John McCain, and all of the other outrageous things Trump said were geared toward splitting the Tea Party away from Ted Cruz. These people cannot be won over to Bernie Sanders. They are a bunch of degenerates. Fascists support Trump, even if Trump himself is not a fascist.

If Sanders loses the nomination, he has already said he will endorse Clinton. He is not going to run as an independent. Hillary has voted the same as Sanders 93 percent of the time. I do not like anything about the Clintons. Hillary is a dishonest warmonger. However, as a communist, my struggle is against the ultra right. Should Clinton win the nomination, my struggle is against what could be unleashed if we do not support her. If Clinton is nominated, I might not advocate strongly for her, but *I am* going to hold my nose and vote Democrat. The struggle against Trump or Cruz is too important.

The struggle for socialism is based on victories in the struggle for democracy. We need to win the battle of democracy, as Marx says. Through victories in the battle for democracy, the working class discovers that bourgeois democracy is a sham and that a workers’ democracy, a proletarian state, is the only solution.

The “left wing” of the Democrats is the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC). A split in the Democratic Party would not result in a socialist party or a labor party, but at best in a progressive party, limited to the existing constituencies of the CPC without an expanded working-class base. Regarding the “degenerates,” as Bernard put it, one of the most interesting things about the Sanders campaign has been its appeal to people who feel they are not represented by the establishment of either major party. Doesn’t this show that an independent socialist party might have a much wider reach than a “left split” from the Democrats ever could?

JS: When I brought up a split in the party, I was not primarily talking about the elected officials. Some of the officials might join an independent party if Sanders went his own way. I am mostly concerned with the base, however. A lot of people would be thankful they are no longer in the same party as Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and their ilk.

BS: There will not be a split in the Democratic Party. Bernie will support Hillary, whether we like it or not. The Bernie supporters who reject Hillary are not organized. They are not going to form a separate party. Even if they did, it would not be more politically effective than any other third parties have been.

My name is Christoph and I am a member of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT). Marx noted that one of the key tasks of the proletariat is to take independent action. That is the basic premise for revolutionary socialists. What the comrade speakers suggest is very different. You both spent a lot of time justifying why Sanders is running on a Democratic ticket. I suspect you did that because you have read some Marx, Lenin, and Luxemburg, and deep down you know that there is something fundamentally wrong with what you are calling for.

All the Marxists before us explained to the working class that you must not enter into coalitions with the bourgeoisie, that you have to keep your politics separate, and that the main enemy is the bourgeoisie at home, even during times of war. Those were the lessons of the First, Second, and Third International—the revolutionary Third International, I should say. Yet you have both argued that, due to the peculiarities of the American system, one can just go ahead and join up with the Democrats, one of the parties of the ruling class. The Democrats are bankrolled and controlled by Wall Street. They will always defend the interests of the ruling class.

Sanders is not trying to break with the capitalist party. People who might actually split from the Democrats are being drawn back in! This is the biggest danger with Sanders. He is running on the Democratic Party ticket and therefore is an obstacle to independent working-class action.

JS: Yes, the goal is to create a working-class party that is democratically controlled by its members. I promise, comrade, that I have read as much Marx, Luxemburg, and Lenin as you have. However, I agree with the late Julius Jacobson, cofounder of *New Politics* and a revolutionary socialist. In reference to Jesse Jackson’s bid for president as a Democrat in 1988, Jacobson wrote, “To take advantage of the facilities offered by the Democratic Party primary involves no necessary compromise of socialist principles,” provided that these facilities are being used “as a vehicle for propagandizing a position with an eye on building a movement outside the Democratic Party.”² Jackson failed to do this—and he should be damned for it—but this describes precisely what Sanders is doing.

Your argument, Christoph, is basically a variation on the claim that Bernie Sanders is a “sheepdog” for Hillary Clinton. It would perhaps be credible if there were anything to “sheepdog” in the first place. Unfortunately, right now there is no politically effective movement for an independent left party. If there were, my judgment of the Sanders campaign would be quite different. The Democrat and Republican parties are not real parties. They lack party discipline. One cannot apply class-struggle principles to American electoral politics in such a neat, clear-cut manner.

BS: Well, comrade, I too have read some Lenin, Marx, and Luxemburg. We disagree on how to interpret them. We all want socialism but disagree on how to get there. We need unity in the struggle to achieve socialism, without allowing our differences to keep splitting us. These splits only benefit the ruling class.

Within the Russian Duma, the Bolsheviks themselves were instructed by Lenin to vote for bourgeois liberals under certain circumstances, when the alternative was a representative of the Czar or the Black Hundreds. What party we work within is not a matter of principle, but of tactics. Following your logic, Christoph, we would have to break away from the bourgeois leadership of the Democratic Party within the trade union movement. That has been tried. The independent “red unions” never won a single strike, never won a single victory, because they had to fight against the bosses and against the mainstream union at the same time. We have to change the union movement from within. We need to be wherever the masses are.

What political education does your work within the Sanders campaign provide? How do you work to expose the Democratic Party machine if you are just “fighting the right” and apologizing for Hillary Clinton? How is this not a repeat of the Jesse Jackson campaigns of 1984 and 1988?

BS: Bernie Sanders is a socialist leading a massive movement. That alone is a legitimate reason for our involvement. It is not the same as the Jackson campaign. I worked in that campaign, so I know. In Houston, the Communist Party established the Jackson campaign. We organized the first public demonstration where he came and spoke, at University of Houston, with 10,000 people in attendance. I am familiar with both campaigns and they really are quite different.

While working within the Democratic Party, we aim to expose it as a capitalist party. We want to expose how the DNC is trying to stop a socialist candidate. Until there is an alternative, we also seek to build an independent coalition within the Democratic Party.

I am a precinct chair for the Democratic Party for the second time. I have run for election in the Democratic Party. I would not consider myself a Democrat. I use the

ballot as a tool against the ruling class. If there already were a viable left-wing party in the U.S. and Sanders ran as a Democrat, that would be a betrayal. Right now, the betrayal would be *not* supporting Bernie.

JS: The Sanders campaign is not a top-down, strictly controlled affair the way Jackson’s was. When Jesse realized he did not have complete control of the Rainbow Coalition, he tried to kill it. Nothing like that is happening with the Sanders campaign. “People for Bernie” and all these groups are far more independent than the Rainbow Coalition ever was.

Unlike the Jackson campaign, one of the biggest obstacles for Sanders has been winning the support of non-white voters. What do you make of the racial dynamics around the Sanders campaign?

BS: Bernie has lacked focus on how racism is central to the rule of capitalists. He treats it all as an economic question. Civil rights are the most important thing to a lot of people, so they are sympathetic to the Clinton campaign, even though Bill Clinton did much harm to the African-American community. Older black voters are more strongly tied to the Democratic Party establishment.

JS: This trend is beginning to change. Among voters of color in general, Sanders won rather heavily against Clinton in Washington, Alaska, and Hawaii. Moreover, a disproportionately large number of black people have lost the right to vote due to our racist judicial system and the voter identification laws that the Republicans have passed. I think many of these disenfranchised people would have chosen Sanders over Clinton.

Bernard, I appreciate your clarity and honesty on a number of points: Bernie is not going to run as a third party candidate, the most likely outcome of the campaign efforts surrounding Sanders will be directed towards supporting Clinton’s presidential bid, and this struggle is primarily about fighting against the right, rather than fighting for socialism. Why do so many leftists who support Sanders tend to be evasive about these facts?

BS: With regard to the last point, the issue is that socialism is not on the agenda right now. The revolutionary transformation of the state from one class to another is not on the horizon. I wish it were! Right now we are in the very first steps of building a movement that could eventually challenge state power. Communists should be honest. There are a lot of different groups on the Left orienting themselves toward Sanders in different ways. Socialist Alternative takes some positions inclined toward Sanders, but it is not clear to me exactly where they land. The Freedom Road Socialist Organization is against Sanders, but ends up supporting him anyway because they cannot ignore his campaign. You see some opportunism here and there.

Is unity always what we should strive for? In the midst of the November Revolution in Germany, it was primarily the socialists, not the Kaiser, who were responsible for killing Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

BS: The leadership of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) betrayed the working class. However, the vast majority of the workers still stood with them. Luxemburg and Liebknecht went along with the Spartacist Uprising against the SPD, even though they thought it was premature. The split between the communists and socialists in Germany was tragic. It led to the rise of fascism. Things could have gone much differently if the communists and socialists had worked together in the 1930s. Instead they attacked each other. The socialists with state power let the communists be killed, while the communists renounced the social democrats as “social fascists.” It was childish.

People on the Left who support Sanders focus on his domestic policy. Out of something like embarrassment, it seems, they tend to ignore issues of foreign policy. What do you think about Bernie’s positions on foreign policy?

JS: Within the context of the Sanders campaign, you can explain to people that we offer *critical* support. We want all the universal entitlements, but should he become president, we will be left-wing critics of him on the basis of his foreign policy. We want him to be more forthrightly anti-imperialist. Sanders is running as a post-World War II European social democrat. That is significantly to the right of my own politics, but in the context of mainstream American politics, he is practically an ultra-leftist. Our job is to take what is currently the left wing of the possible and push it further.

The goal of splitting the Democratic Party has been raised, but it seems to me that Sanders is foreclosing that possibility. Most people are going to vote Clinton if she gets the nomination. Do we bring people to socialism when we work with Sanders, or do we bring people to the Democrats?

JS: Sanders is bringing in a few independents, but the bulk of his supporters are people who vote Democrat anyway. We want Sanders rather than Hillary in the general election because that would constitute a move leftward. There is also the “Bernie or Bust” phenomenon. Some Bernie supporters would vote for Clinton, but not all. If Sanders is denied the nomination only because of the superdelegates, it will expose how crappy the Democratic Party is. Sanders might then consider running as an independent. He might say, “We cannot take over the Democratic Party. We have to start laying the foundations of an independent party of the Left.”

Out of Jesse Jackson’s Democratic Party campaign of 1988, the Vermont Rainbow Coalition came together with people who supported Bernie Sanders in Burlington to form the Vermont Progressive Party, which is an independent left party. This shows how work within the Democratic Party can promote independent working-class politics. I hope something similar emerges out of the Sanders campaign.

BS: Many of those supporting Sanders are voting for the first time. Bernie, not the Democratic Party, is what inspires them. Bernie is not controlling this movement