

Abolition for Affordability

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Socialism is having a moment. The most prominent examples, whose campaigns we supported, mayoral victories in New York and Seattle provided a glimmer of light in the darkness for anyone who scorns the capitalist duopoly. The organizing efforts that landed Mayors Mamdani and Wilson in office were herculean for many reasons, chief among them that they openly associated themselves with democratic socialism, electoral faux pas heretofore.

It is perhaps the variety of socialism or its framing that proved effective. Now famously, Mamdani campaigned on rent stabilization, free buses, and universal childcare, all relatively modest goals that would meaningfully help New Yorkers survive this economic nightmare. On the opposite coast, what inspired Wilson to enter the mayoral race was to safeguard Seattleites' commitment to social housing. In the weeks since, mainstream liberals capitalized on the success of these campaigns by coining the "affordability crisis" and touting corresponding "affordability agendas," as if to take credit for the organizing that produced these wins, as if they were allies all along. (They weren't.)

The affordability crisis is simply racial capitalism operating as intended. That people cannot afford their lives is the designed outcome of an economic system that hoards resources for billionaires, exploiting workers to insulate the overwhelmingly white ruling class. Tariffs and stock-market declines were only ever going to harm workers and renters, not the corporations themselves. It is because they refuse to confront the capitalist contributors to expensive eggs, much less exorbitant rents and for-profit healthcare, that so-called affordability agendas are doomed to fail. And it is socialism, in turn, that would render affordability for all.

New York DSA poster child, Mamdani delivered an impressive performance on the debate stage in June last year during which he sanitized his candidacy by promising, "I will not defund the police." In Seattle, Wilson, too, has committed to expanding unarmed crisis response and community safety, but, mirroring Mamdani, insists on enabling police forces to persist according to their training, especially in the context of a growing homelessness crisis. It may now be politically tenable to run on socialism, it seems, but abolition remains a step too far. If only we understood that the first requires the second.

Abolitionists do. In a sense, capitalism is the economic way of talking about settler colonialism, the propagation of which required the stolen labor of enslaved Africans and stolen lands of Indigenous people through erasure and genocide. Slavery is a colonial enterprise. It is not sheer cruelty that inspired the capitalist state to enslave but its economic function to grow and uphold white property.

And the more resources the capitalist state accumulated, the more it sought to protect it through violent means: a steadily formalized and militarized police force.

A major precursor to American policing is the slave patrols: the weapon by which the ruling class exacts its anti-Blackness for the purpose of ensuring exploitable labor to maximize profits. The contemporary movement to abolish the police (and all carceral systems of state violence and social control), therefore, constitutes the punctuated but unbroken continuation of the historical movement to abolish slavery. One might expect, then, that anyone who denounces slavery would reject the battalions assembled to sustain it.

No one owns the definition of socialism, of course, but its elevation in the popular consciousness relies on an antithesis to capitalism. Everyday people may not comprehend the nuances of assembling socialist governance, but, increasingly, they understand that capitalism is why their rents are too high, quality healthcare is reserved for the affluent, and a college degree is no longer worth it. If capitalism explains the affordability crisis, socialism is the antidote. Due to law enforcement's function of protecting capital and exacting social control, however, to insist on a socialism that keeps the police state intact is logically inconsistent. "[A]ny strain of the socialist movement that does not hold as central the general politics of antiracism and police abolition is incoherent and self-defeating," says Brian Bean. Moreover, it reinforces the stereotype about the DSA you would think they hope to avoid: a predominantly white institution more comfortable for Ivy-League philosophy bros than Black and Indigenous revolutionaries. This pro-police left may be a socialism, but it is a white socialism if so.

As intimated above, we are unsurprised that Mamdani and Wilson have shied away from even "defund" talking points and sincerely wish their administrations well. We want them to succeed. What really deserves the Left's attention is the ideological rift represented by those who assert a socialism that will cozy up to mass incarceration versus those who understand socialism as an anticapitalist, anticolonial, abolitionist struggle for collective liberation better suited for the lineage of Black revolt. Such is the movement tradition with which we identify. If anyone really does seek success for Mamdani and Wilson, we must remember that the road to socialism was paved by abolitionists.

Fortunately, those same abolitionists offer us guidance that would benefit any mayor who listens. Take, for example, the notion of "nonreformist reforms" discussed by Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Sure, many of us believe the world would be better off if we disappeared law enforcement tomorrow even if we had not yet cultivated the conditions for genuine community safety today. But nobody expects that to happen. Instead, we must take steps in the direction of liberation; some steps reinforce the carceral state while others undermine it. Socialists can expand the police state by repurposing some as pretend social workers under the guise of community safety and betray their abolitionist forebearers - they can choose white socialism. Or we can rob-hood police budgets to invest in what people actually need to be safe: to afford their lives.