

# Bernie, Biden, and Hegemony

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Biden's recent electoral success, with each day placing him closer and closer to officially winning the Democrat nomination for president, brings to mind places like Amsterdam, a small city in upstate New York, where abandoned buildings are as common as weeds sticking out from cracks in the sidewalk.

Like many cities upstate and around the country, Amsterdam had once been a manufacturing hub, offering stable work for working people, including migrants from Puerto Rico. But over time, due to the needs of global capital, the factories have been shut down, left to loom over homes and empty streets, like remnants from an ancient civilization that were just dug up.

As a reporter working in Amsterdam a few years ago, I recognized that the problems people were facing there echoed what I'd seen in other places like Southeast D.C. and even areas closer to home such as New Brunswick, New Jersey. These are communities that have been gutted by neoliberalism, where working people, especially Black and Brown, have witnessed their communities buckle under deindustrialization and neoliberal policies that have been enacted by politicians like Joe Biden.

Lester K. Spence, political scientist at Johns Hopkins University and author of *Knocking the Hustler: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, defines neoliberalism as the "general idea that society works best when the people and the institutions within it work or are shaped to work according to market principles," adding,

We see this idea in public policy—in government attempts to privatize public resources (either by explicitly selling them off or by treating them as if they were privately rather than publicly owned). We see this idea in common sense accounts that routinely suggest businesses are better than governments at providing a range of services. We see this idea in seemingly non-political techniques designed to make individuals, populations, and institutions more entrepreneurial. What I haven't done is define what I mean by "the neoliberal turn". There was a time, decades ago, when the ideas, policies, and techniques associated with neoliberalism were viewed as radical. Now? Domestically and

internationally we've got something close to a neoliberal consensus with political parties that are often on the opposite ends of the spectrum agreeing on the necessity of neoliberal policies, ideas, and techniques of government.

Joe Biden's career is the epitome of such destructive policies, from enacting unfair bankruptcy laws to supporting global trade deals that have disempowered workers across the world. Yet, Biden is projected to be the nominee with Bernie Sanders having suspended his campaign.

Despite this, we must remember that the fight for economic liberation was never solely about winning an election. Our fight for economic liberation was always bigger than Bernie. The primaries should, therefore, be a reminder that building a counterhegemonic force is necessary if we hope to sustain support for Left-wing politics at a mass level and if we want to prevent another Biden or a Trump from emerging ever again.

Ultimately, a counterhegemonic project, which means shifting the country from a right-wing agenda, must prioritize developing our own Left-wing institutions as well as developing campaigns that provide the space for groups of ordinary people to begin breaking away from neoliberal and capitalist dogma.

## **NEOLIBERALISM & INSTITUTIONAL DEBRIS**

Regardless, the Sanders campaign has been a unique and inspiring electioneering model. Powered by grassroots movements, the campaign has been fighting on critical issues for the Left, from universal healthcare to abolishing ICE. The campaign has inspired countless young people to fighting for labor and economic justice and rights, thus setting the stage for a burgeoning Left movement for decades to come.

Unfortunately, the Sanders campaign hasn't been as successful as it needed to be in overcoming the hurdles placed before it by the neoliberal political and economic order. The obstacles the campaign has experienced and the rise of Biden reveal the power of neoliberal hegemony in the U.S.

Hegemony, a concept developed by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, is the idea that there are ruling ideologies that permeate entire societies. In the U.S., one of the ruling ideologies has been neoliberal capitalism, the notion that protecting the "free market" and economic development are natural and positive for everyone. Not only is this belief system accepted by Republicans and conservatives, it is accepted by those claiming to provide a different political and economic vision for workers. Most Democrat party leaders, even those who desire some social safety net, believe in neoliberalism's core tenets that more government is cumbersome and that people need to work for everything.

Ruling ideologies don't become ruling ideologies out of thin air or by chance. Neoliberalism's rise was achieved through a combination of strategic institution-building and coalition-building as well as missed opportunities by labor.

When neoliberalism as a concept was beginning to emerge by the years following WWII, mainly among academics, the dominant economic system was Keynesianism, the belief that government has a role in fixing market failures, which includes investing in schools and infrastructure, and supporting civil institutions like unions. Keynesianism, which provided the intellectual blueprint for the New Deal, helped stabilize economies across the world. It allowed for working people, especially white, to recover from the Great Depression and to gain important workers' rights and protections.

Still, Jim Crow and forms of white supremacy and sexism remained rampant at Keynesianism's peak.

In the post-WWII era, as historian Nelson Lichtenstein reveals in *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, the labor movement had become bureaucratized and complacent. The prevailing discourse among labor leaders and their political allies was to integrate Black and Brown workers and white women into the New Deal, extending them some benefits that mostly white male workers had already been receiving, while ignoring the necessity of class struggle.

“Most labor leaders were Kennedy-Johnson liberals, but in the 1960s that was just the problem,” Lichtenstein stated, “They stood in an increasingly stolid and unresponsive center, not on the dynamic frontier where they had once defined, and stretched the limits of conventional politics.”

At the same time, the most right-wing among the corporate elite were planning their ascent to power. They provided a platform to neoliberal academics like James Buchanan, helping him and others in spreading the neoliberal gospel by having them dress up biased neoliberal conclusions about the economy as “scholarly” research. Gradually, an intellectual infrastructure was built, ready to swoop in as another economic crisis emerged in the form of a recession by the mid-1970s.

Given that the influence of the Left on major civil institutions, especially unions, had been gutted through red-baiting and that the major unions themselves had stopped educating their members on the need for class struggle, conditions were ripe for a new ideology to take root. Exploiting the crisis, neoliberal think tanks continued to form and disseminated so-called “research” to the media about how deregulation and tax cuts were the solution and how unions and government spending were the main problems behind the country’s economic woes.

Nancy MacLean explains in *Democracy in Chains*,

It is hard to imagine such a clan upending the known world within a few decades, but chance won them a wider hearing. It came with the troubling economic events of the mid-1970s, which undercut the credibility of the prevailing approach to political economy. The worst and longest recession since the Great Depression, followed by a mystifying period of stagflation and compounded by new competition from abroad, enabled the wider right to draw more and more corporate leaders into action. They wanted not just to rein in regulation and taxation, but also to dethrone the dominant paradigm of Keynesian economics that was at the core of the midcentury social contract.

A constellation of think tanks and corporate funders was organized, consistently elevating the neoliberal discourse into the mainstream press and creating the conditions for figures like Ronald Reagan to gather momentum for their own electoral campaigns. Reagan himself was a cunning political observer and the perfect vehicle for the neoliberal agenda. Reagan was skilled at smuggling in neoliberal politics to a broader audience, especially as he ran for president, by directing white worker animus against Black Americans and by attaching the neoliberal agenda of deregulation and tax cuts to an existing conservative states’ rights platform. Through Reagan, and figures like him, neoliberalism was able to draw on popular support.

Simultaneously, the neoliberal network of institutions, from think tanks to billionaire-backed “grassroots” organizations, grew stronger. Think tanks provided the research for the mainstream press to share with their unwitting audiences as they trained a younger generation in the merits of neoliberal thought. Other organizations managed to create and maintain a pipeline between neoliberal-minded policymakers and government, such as judgeships across the country. Soon, neoliberal values, such as the privatization of almost all public goods as being a net-positive, became the norm inside government, with neoliberal organizations learning to reinforce their message and

their growing amount of power across major civil and government institutions.

Political scientist Alexander Hertel-Fernandez explained in *State Capture*,

Numbering at around 2,000 state legislators and several hundred large companies, philanthropies, and conservative advocacy groups, ALEC pushes policy ideas, written by politicians, conservative activists, donors, and businesses, on state legislators. Those ideas are supported, in turn, by the research, communications, and media advocacy of the State Policy Network think tanks, as well as the grassroots activists, electoral contributions, and media campaigns provided by Americans for Prosperity, through its federated presence in over 36 states and volunteer rolls numbering over 2 million

What the Sanders campaign was forced to overcome was not only Biden and other center-right politicians but a neoliberal hegemonic political and economic order that's been in power over the past few decades, from Reagan through Clinton to Obama. It is a neoliberal hegemonic order expressed through a mainstream press antagonistic and cynical toward any hint of systemic change. It is a neoliberal hegemonic order in which leaders from across the partisan divide are more annoyed and upset about creating a moderate social democratic state rather have four more years of neoliberal and far-right demagoguery.

Forty years of neoliberal propaganda, seeping into every pore of our political culture, has also produced a population whose political imaginations have been restricted with many alienated from the feeling of hope and change and with others, including workers, buying into the negative propaganda about themselves and about their co-workers. Indeed, there are workers who believe that capitalism is the only way forward and that everyone must simply fight for their own and that if you can't make ends meet you have no one else but yourself to blame. At times, I've even caught myself feeling ashamed for not being able to make enough money.

The cultural critic Mark Fisher termed this reality "capitalist realism," a concept he expanded upon from other writers. Due to the neoliberal capture of major institutions, like the media, and what is fed to us by those we elect and trust, our political imaginations of what is possible have been hijacked, that when we close our eyes and try to envision a new world, we still see the vestiges of capital or in times of crisis, we involuntarily believe in hyper-individualism. Fisher explained,

It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.

Consequently, we cannot expect to generate massive and enduring support for candidates like Sanders at the national level, let alone momentum for radical class struggle, without directly challenging neoliberal hegemony.

We counteract neoliberalism through building our own constellation of institutions, our own think tanks that saturate the media with reports supporting workers' rights, our own independent media supporting one another to spread the idea that government can be the solution so long as its major institutions are not controlled by corporate interests, our own intellectual infrastructure that can train and pipeline Left-wing policymakers and advisors into government and of course, through supporting and building up Left-wing unions.

There are already examples of institutions that can help in building a counterhegemonic force. Such institutions can be found online, from *Means TV* to *Democracy Now!*, as well as journals and magazines such as *Jacobin*, *Dissent* and *In These Times*. There are also think tanks like the Progressive Policy Institute that run narratives counter to what ordinary Americans are barraged with on a daily basis from the popular culture and media.

The purpose of these institutions is to radicalize the broader public. This is more important than ever as most Americans are now forced to navigate the political and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A crisis can open up space for anti-capitalist and socialist ideas to take root. Yet, such ideas and values can only spread across the broader public when the Left continues to strengthen their counterhegemonic institutions. Otherwise, a crisis can instead lead to an even worse form of oppression and capitalist exploitation.

Gramsci understood this dynamic, having stated,

The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population are not capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained.

To beat back neoliberalism and all other right-wing political and economic forces, we must remain determined in establishing and maintaining a robust Left-wing intellectual infrastructure.

## **NEOLIBERALISM & POWER FROM BELOW**

Building an intellectual infrastructure among those invested in creating policy and media institutions is only half of what is required to sustain a counterhegemonic force against the status quo. The other half is the art of organizing within communities that can shift peoples' thinking and can empower ordinary people into once more recognizing what they deserve and that they can fight for it.

Since 2016, I myself have been learning to organize as a member organizer at my faculty and grad worker union, the AAUP-AFT at Rutgers, as well as an organizer at the Central Jersey Democratic Socialists of America. Aside from learning more about the communities I'm in across the central New Jersey region at a deeper level, the experience of being an organizer has also introduced me to so many amazing and determined organizers, who have been doing this a lot longer than I have, and whose insights and experiences I believe can aid in developing power for the Left, for movements seeking racial, gender and economic liberation.

Anna Barcy is a labor organizer in the city of New Brunswick, which is at the heart of Middlesex County and the main hub for Rutgers University. New Brunswick is also a city that has a growing concentration of Latinx immigrants and Latinx Americans, many of whom are working-poor and working-class. Like most cities in New Jersey, New Brunswick has seen its gap between those who have the least — mostly immigrants and Latinx Americans — and those who have the most, which now include young professionals, continue to widen, with the city's officials and property developers

investing in the construction of luxury housing and restaurants that cater to high-end consumers while basic needs and services for working people have been left to deteriorate..

Still, Barcy's goal and the goal of fellow labor organizers in the area has been to continue building collective power since that's what ordinary people have that the capitalist classes do not. The capitalists have the resources but we, as workers, have sheer numbers on our side.

"So right now, I am working to bring together folks in the food service industry, specifically to try and create organizing that not only addresses economic concerns but serves as a community building venture," Barcy explained.

Barcy, along with other organizers focused on the intersection of labor and immigrant rights, have been helping organize immigrants of color and Latinx American workers inside restaurants, who are often at the back of the restaurant, cooking and cleaning, while those who are most often white and working at the front of the restaurant as servers and greeters. For many Latinx workers, the obstacles and indignities they face are at a higher intensity, from having to face racism from management to enduring other forms of marginalization, especially for those who are undocumented. There is also the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault against women in the industry.

The mission, according to Barcy, is to not explain to workers, whether at the front or the back, what they need to fight over or what to believe in but instead, to listen to them and to build campaigns that elevate their understanding of the experiences they've already had.

"It's not our job to educate people on what's wrong with the world, so much as to help contextualize," they said.

You don't change minds by simply telling others what to think or believe in, even if that person would materially benefit from a new line of thinking. The way to break through someone's fear or sense of alienation is to show them what's possible, by generating questions that get them thinking through their own experiences as a worker while connecting with other workers who are also sharing a similar ideological journey.

Mark Hopkins and Jenna Siegal are organizers who also understand the value in tapping into peoples' capacity in shifting their thinking and inoculating themselves from further neoliberal propaganda.

Hopkins is a prison abolitionist and researcher in the region. He recognizes the pervasiveness of pro-capitalist thought in society, despite its economic and political contradictions being exposed like faulty computer wiring.

"People treat the functioning of capitalism as human nature," Hopkins stated.

This kind of thinking is also expressed among marginalized groups. It may not be as explicit as what one would expect from someone who's been raised in an upper class, predominantly Anglo culture, wherein capitalism is explicitly named as a force of good. Still, values that hold up capital can reveal themselves among workers of all backgrounds. One can find workers who believe that they must compete against other workers or believe someone's inability to become financially stable is that person's fault.

Therefore, bringing working people together is radical and necessary when realigning people from the alienation caused by neoliberalism to them sharing feelings of trust and empowerment. People can be integrated into a community of workers by connecting their personal experiences as a worker

to what others have faced and finally, to a broader systemic critique.

“I’m very much a relational organizer,” Jenna Siegal explained, “I get to know someone as a human being and talk through their material circumstances about what’s going on, whether it’s at their job or something outside their employment.”

Siegal has worked in labor as well, mainly on issues affecting teachers and faculty. Throughout her journey as an organizer, the key to success has been to probe groups of workers about what it is they’re facing and feeling and why. It is a gradualist approach of building trust and nudging people along skillfully.

“First and foremost, it’s always organic,” said Hopkins, adding, “That being said, I usually talk to people about their personal lives, and I introduce those bigger ideas interchangeably.”

There is a fine line most organizers must thread when developing class power and community. There is one extreme some term as the vanguard mentality among organizers, wherein one develops parties and party leaders who simply lead. This can include leadership forming organically from among the masses, willing to take the necessary steps to move forward. There is some merit to this. After all, whether among workers or management reactionary ideas abound, such as white workers clinging onto white supremacy or male workers generally disregarding space and autonomy for female workers. These are ideas that can’t simply be conceded to because they emanate from the masses. These are ideas that some form of leadership will have to find ways to address.

However, purely vanguard politics fail since it’s almost always paternalistic and whatever egalitarian feelings there are among the masses is predicated on who’s leading them rather than everyone sharing a political vision that they themselves understand and accept in a deeper way. Furthermore, this type of organizing belittles the capacity for the masses to change and to recognize their own collective power. This is why organizers like Barcy, Hopkins and Siegal are very much supportive of building up political consciousness as a collective rather than relying only on a few people who could lead. Breaking away from neoliberal thought requires a personal investment in changing oneself and understanding the reasons why and this cannot be achieved by just someone telling a worker what to think or what to feel. This personal investment and belief have to emerge from workers accepting the reasons for doing so and by re-training themselves through campaigns and by changing their habits. Gramsci recognized this potential of hearts and minds changing through collective struggle.

“But when the individual can associate himself with all the other individuals who want the same changes,” Gramsci wrote, “and if the changes wanted are rational, the individual can be multiplied an impressive number of times and can obtain a change which is far more radical than at first sight ever seemed possible.”

The educational and anti-capitalist scholar Paolo Freire understood too the value in planting seeds among the people through political education and campaigns rather than telling people what to do. Showing rather telling develops a new kind of behavior which then changes how one thinks about the world around them. For example, creating campaigns in which workers are themselves calling on other workers to join in, or having workers and community members listen to one another and canvass together or organize at their workplace together can open up new ways of relating to one another and new ways of viewing themselves.

This isn’t to say there is no role for leadership or no role for some to end up doing more of the organizing and strategizing than others. What’s different from a more vanguard type mobilizing is that the distinctions between organic leadership and other workers and community members is more blurred. And that the role of the organizer is not so much to tell others what to believe in but

more so, to empower them to make decisions on their own eventually, to create their own campaigns, to fight for their own liberation.

“The leaders must believe in the potentialities of the people, whom they cannot treat as mere objects of their own action,” Freire wrote, “they must believe that the people are capable of participating in the pursuit of liberation.”

At our own DSA chapter, we pursue campaigns, such as organizing around tenants rights and a rent suspension or by building power among immigrant communities impacted by the fascistic policies of ICE that intend to bring people together, that try and get people thinking about their material positions and how they can change them as a collective.

“The thing that’s going to tie you to someone’s politics is an understanding of where they fit in the whole scheme of things,” Barcy explained.

Tapping into the capacity for people to shift their thinking and actions is about tapping into the person’s experiences and having them connect to other people. For those who are from more marginalized backgrounds, this could mean tapping into a person’s experiences in regards to racism and sexism specifically.

Hopkins has managed to discuss broader systemic issues such as abolishing prisons by identifying with people on their shared experiences of being Black in the U.S.

“If you understand your blackness in America, you immediately have to begin unlearning what America has been teaching you,” he said.

Combining street-level relational organizing with organizing broader institutions at the national and state level will help create spaces for Left-wing insurgency and to shift the country away from our current neoliberal political discourse or from something even worse.

Whether or not Sanders had won, the goal and the need would still have been for us organize to end capital and the process of doing so was always bigger than any political campaign. By organizing institutions and organizing workers against neoliberal thought and practice, we continue to seed feelings of empowerment and collective power which can lead to even more worker uprisings like we’ve already seen from teachers and more recently, from workers forced to respond against the extreme cruelty of capital during a pandemic. Building such pressure will take time, however, and will require many of us organizing and adapting as the country reels from crisis after crisis.

Overall, the struggle against capital has not been defeated, just because Sanders was unsuccessful in his bid for the presidency. Instead, what we’re witnessing is more and more people becoming engaged with the notion of worker struggle. Even in the midst of hardship, people often do what they can to maintain their communities, whether they’re in Amsterdam or Baltimore, Camden or New Brunswick. Right now, in response to the pandemic, many workers are choosing to strike rather than accept the deteriorating conditions they’ve been forced to work in.

“My underlying belief is that I have so much faith in the working class because I’ve seen them win over and over again and our biggest concern is that we’re not celebrating those wins and not putting those at the forefront,” Siegal exclaimed.