

Building the Infrastructure for a Strong Left

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Alex Kolokotronis is a 1st year PhD student in Political Science at Yale. He self-identifies as a libertarian socialist and is interested in studying anarchist movements, post-state forms of governance and public power, and associationist self-managed socialism. He is the co-founder of Student Organization for Democratic Alternatives (SODA), a group dedicated to implementing participatory budgeting and participatory democracy at the university level. Participatory budgeting is a directly democratic process by which ordinary people get to deliberate and decide how to allocate a designated budget. He previously worked in Worker Cooperative Development with Make the Road New York and the New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives.

Interview by Sean Keith

In the following interview, Alex and I talk about building the infrastructure needed for a new Left political party, how the Left relates to participatory budgeting and workers cooperatives, how leftists should balance using different tactics to pursue their goals, and the details regarding the Democracy at Work organization he recently founded in New Haven, Connecticut.

Sean Keith: In the *Jacobin* piece entitled “A Blueprint for a New Party,” Seth Ackerman discusses the possibility of creating a new party by (ironically enough) exploiting some of the loopholes of Citizens United and establishing a 501(c)4, a non-profit, tax-deductible, social welfare organization that can freely engage in political activity. This 501(c)4 could receive unlimited amounts of money and spend unlimited amounts of money on sponsoring candidates.

These candidates would not be bogged down by arcane ballot rules and instead would run without regard to label and adapt to local circumstances (some cases Green, some cases Dem, some cases Independent, etc). At the end of the article, Ackerman acknowledges that filling out the paperwork is not enough – rather, a large chunk of the labor movement would have to get behind it, or some sort of organizational base.

How can we build this organizational base to facilitate this new party? Does it just have to be through labor unions and labor participation? Could you see the organizational base stemming from workers cooperatives and participatory budgeting councils (what you call in one of your blog pieces “autonomous-participatory organization”)?

Alex Kolokotronis: Honestly, I think talk of a new party in the immediate term is at best overstated, and at worst a diversion from what must really be built: an infrastructure for and of the

Left. A new party is not that infrastructure. Also, I should be clear about what I mean when I say infrastructure. I mean a collection of people, spaces, and mechanisms that something like a party – but of course not necessarily a party – could draw upon to maintain and enhance its capabilities and strength.

The one place where this infrastructure can and should be built is on college campuses. For one, college campuses are not as exclusionary as they once were. Or, at least, the claim has become stronger that everyone should have an opportunity for post-secondary education. More widely, we might say there should be a general focus on youth organization. The Right has been very good at this, and its importance is stressed in the very influential Powell Memo.

Second, there is largely a vacuum in Left organization on college campuses. The assertion that there is a vacuum is counter-intuitive, as many consider colleges and universities to be hotbeds of left-liberal and socialist ideas. Yet, what's notably lacking is a strong national-level student organization that does more than simply debate left-liberal and socialist ideas, but acts on them. There are small examples of student organization that try to do this, but, again, at the national-scale it is lacking.

Student activism typically ranges from identity politics groups, to those that behave as quasi-think tanks or lobbyists. Student activism generally lacks a program for the site of the campus. This is not to erase the efforts and successes of hard-fought divestment campaigns. Yet such campaigns aim more at how universities relate to other institutions, and are coalitional at the national-level.

All of these things are important, but to galvanize those who have recently become politicized, a concerted effort to establish mass student organization is needed – and one that actually teaches and trains its members through the pursuit and implementation of policies it advocates for.

This is where I think participatory budgeting and worker cooperatives come into play. One thing I learned from the Student Organization for Democratic Alternatives (SODA) campaign for participatory budgeting in the City University of New York (CUNY) is that striving to implement participatory democracy also generates a collective and individual imperative for members to learn skills in rule-making, budgeting, facilitation and more, to actually make it happen. By altering intra-campus relations, students and their allies come to craft institutions that are relatively horizontal, and actively serve as a model for generalizing and scaling up participatory processes.

In advocating for and implementing participatory budgeting, students create an institution that concurrently provides them with skills that they will take into other arenas. This is why I believe student and youth organization can serve as a source of social power for the Left. The campus can provide space for the Left, and initiatives like participatory budgeting can simultaneously introduce ideas of participatory democracy, as well as the skills and dispositions needed to make it happen. If a student organization with national reach were to adopt such an approach, then we could see a whole generation of activists trained in a type of institution-building that carries over into labor unions, public policy, academic research, and business development (like worker cooperatives or multi-stakeholder cooperatives). In other words, a type of institution-building that centers the experiences of working class and marginalized people, and in such a way that provides mechanisms for the popular classes to exercise direct power.

Participatory budgeting and worker cooperatives are not only intrinsically valuable, but are strategic inasmuch as they do what I outlined above. Furthermore, participatory budgeting and worker cooperatives have become more of a focal point of advocacy for coalitions and groups like Movement for Black Lives, Cooperation Jackson, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, various immigrant rights organizations in New York City and the Bay Area, and other groups that often organize along the

lines of identity.

The value of this can't be understated. In cities like New York City that have implemented participatory budgeting, one thing that has been a barrier is an available pool of talent that could increase the number of neighborhood assemblies, that ensure power in participatory budgeting is further diffused from the City Council and city agencies, and that allow the process to be scaled from something last year's expenditure of \$36 million to a future in which it is something like \$3.6 billion of the municipal budget. These things take capacity, and such capacity can be built on campuses with a willing youth.

SK: Why do you think that many on the Left deride participatory budgeting and the workers cooperative movement as worthwhile endeavors? (David Harvey is scoffed at by many over at *Jacobin*, for example.) Are there dangers of a Left that pontificates about political visions without first focusing on building an organizational base?

AK: For our purposes here, I would say there are two critiques of participatory budgeting and worker cooperatives that have one overarching theme: they – and other solidarity economy institutions – are a distraction.

The first critique is that these institutions are not a means by which to create class consciousness.

Some Marxists, for example, view worker cooperatives as economic units that – within capitalism – can only promote “petty bourgeois” dispositions. Second, some see participatory budgeting as an outright failure to create popular power.

What has been a failure is for the Left to take charge of the design of participatory process to ensure that the popular classes are able to exercise direct power, and that such processes are not just a rubber stamp on elitist policies.

The failure is not to take existing discourses, institutions, and tendencies, and radicalize them. Participatory budgeting and worker cooperative development are part of such a set. The danger here is that the Left sets itself to action without being in dialogue with people about a different vision of polity and power, and as such quickly loses any legitimacy in being capable of providing an alternative. Many like to talk of alternatives but do not engage in the work of learning about what those may be, implementing them, adapting them, and radicalizing them. Now, more than ever, people are looking for alternatives. We need to be clear about what those are.

SK: My vision for the new American Left in the Age of Trump is a broad, big tent committed to a democratic vision of socialism and willing to use a variety of tactics to get there (it would range from social democrats on the "Right" to anarchists and communists on the Left – I think DSA could serve as a forum for this and replicate the best features of the old Socialist Party before the party's right-wing driven, sectarian implosion, but that is a longer discussion for another time.)

How do you see participatory budgeting and workers cooperatives existing alongside other tactics like running local candidates? How do we strike a proper balance between using different tactics (organizational base first then elections, elections then organizational base, etc.)? Can they exist symbiotically?

AK: This is very case-by-case. I think a big key is going to those associational, intermediary, and interstitial spaces – whether these are governmental or not. On the governmental end, in New York City, we have Community Boards, and in New Haven we have Management Teams. Leftists should go to spaces like these, at least initially, to understand what the basic needs of the community are. If

they can convert these ostensibly neighborhood institutions, great. If not, there will still be an understanding of what needs any organization will have to respond to, whether it is currently being responded to, and which issues can serve as a basis for membership recruitment while tailoring such to goals of implementing participatory democracy.

On the more non-governmental end, we might look to Brooklyn, NY. There a tutoring worker cooperative called Sunset Scholars was developed by Center for Family Life (CFL). Through its other services in the community of Sunset Park, CFL recognized that Chinese and Latinx youth needed to be provided with more effective learning opportunities to increase high school graduation rates.

To bring the question back, organizations like DSA must come to understand the very particular needs of respective communities, and put forward “democratic socialist” solutions to those needs. Such solutions can be crafted through active multi-channel community input and advocated for. In those cases where advocacy, demonstrations, and lobbying are not enough – or even when they are enough, and so legitimacy has been gained – this can be leveraged to run for office on a platform of wider and more diverse forms of participatory democracy.

SK: Can you talk a bit about your recently formed Democracy at Work – New Haven organization? What is its overall vision and goal?

AK: For a while I have talked with friends in the worker cooperative movement about the need for some sort of popular platform or organization to allow people to advocate for economic self-management. It appears that Democracy at Work can serve as such, and founder Richard Wolff was himself one of the first ways I was introduced to worker cooperatives.

I think the key for advocates is not to rush out and try to create start-up worker cooperatives, and this is something myself and others want to emphasize with the New Haven chapter of Democracy at Work. Having done it in the past, I can say that startups are very time-consuming and labor intensive for the cooperative developer. Our energy is more wisely spent on creating mechanisms by which to convert existing businesses into worker cooperatives. Thousands of baby boomer small business owners are retiring, and many have no one to pass their business onto. This is an opportunity for advocates to step in and say, “Hey, why don’t you give or sell your business to the workers?” There are many appeals that can be made from just a business or community perspective, such as tax incentives in the former, and maintaining the integrity of business and the community for the latter. Converting existing healthy businesses with already trained workers is a way to quickly increase the number of worker cooperatives in the United States, without burning people out.

SK: Thank you, Alex. This was much appreciated.

To learn more about Alex’s academic and political interests and endeavors, see [here](#). And to learn more specifically about Student Organization for Democratic Alternatives, see [this Nationpiece on Building Student Power Through Participatory Budgeting](#).