

In Appreciation of Leo Panitch

December 23, 2020



The sudden death of our friend and comrade Leo Panitch has led to an extraordinary outpouring of sadness and appreciation across the world. Very few intellectuals on the left have had the intellectual impact on progressive thinkers and activists that Leo has had, as the flood of testimonials shows; and fewer still have in addition personally trained a comparable network of scholars of the highest calibre who are now carrying forward his distinctive project of critical – and self-critical – research and teaching in dozens of countries. Leo also combined research and teaching with engagement with activists in parties, trade unions and social movements: he knew and was consulted by leaders on the left in several continents, but was also known and admired by the rank and file who flocked to meetings whenever he showed up in Johannesburg, Athens, Frankfurt, London, Rio, New Delhi and elsewhere.

Leo's contributions to left thought and strategy have been reviewed in several places since he retired from teaching, and will need to be reviewed and celebrated again when there is time to do it properly. His influential and prize-winning magnum opus, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (co-written with Sam Gindin and published by Verso in 2012) summed up his most important and original arguments on the real nature of globalisation and its meaning for the domestic politics of the countries in that empire from the 1970s onwards. His last book, *Searching for Socialism: the project of the Labour New Left from Benn to Corbyn* (co-written with Colin Leys and published by Verso in March this year, and now available for free as an e-book) analysed the strategic and tactical problems of the left in the Labour Party from the 1970s to 2019, drawing also on the experiences of the left in other countries, especially Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. And then there is Leo's 35-year editorship of the international annual, *The Socialist Register*, 'the intellectual lodestone of the left', in which Leo regularly wrote significant essays himself.

Here we include just two appreciations, from London and South Africa.

From Ursula Huws, the author of The Making of a Cybertariat:

Still raw from the shock of the news, I feel the need to express some thoughts about the devastating loss of Leo Panitch from our midst. He was a man of unbounded generosity, integrity and principle, in his personal as well as his intellectual and political life.

A personification of Gramsci's 'pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will', he was far too clever and politically astute to imagine that the revolution was around the corner, yet unwaveringly positive in his support for socialism and solidarity with those in struggle.

He is known by some as the intellectual heir of Ralph Miliband, taking over the editorship of the Socialist Register Miliband founded, and editing it, in partnership first with Colin Leys and then with Greg Albo. He participated, from his hospital bed, in the launch of the 2021 Socialist Register by Zoom just three weeks ago (characteristically upbeat, despite the knowledge that he was seriously ill with multiple myeloma, though the COVID infection and pneumonia that were to kill him so quickly had yet to occur).

But the Socialist Register was only one part of his public life. It is indeed hard to imagine anyone else on the planet with such a vast overview. He did not just have a horizon-to-horizon knowledge of the literature but was also personally acquainted with many of the greatest political thinkers of our time. He used to boast about how rarely anyone turned down an invitation to contribute to Socialist Register, attributing that to its history as a non-sectarian source of quality analysis. In fact, I suspect, it was Leo himself they did not want to say no to. The warmth and charisma that he radiated made everyone want to be included in it. And he bore no grudges, often inviting people with whom he might have had serious disagreements on some issues to contribute their ideas if he thought these ideas deserved a hearing.

That characteristic modesty meant that he rarely worked alone. His partnerships with Colin and Greg were paralleled by another very deep intellectual and personal partnership with Sam Gindin. Both hailing from Winnipeg, they had known each other since student days and collaborated closely over many years, including co-authoring the magnum opus *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*. I often tried to find the details of the extraordinary joint labour process by which this seamless partnership operated, with no visible joins between the two great brains which seemed to operate as one. I have to put it down to some miracle of chemistry. But such collaborations were not just literary. Leo also invested enormous energy in the building of institutions. First at Carleton University's Institute of Political Economy, then at York University in Toronto, he created environments where serious political thought could thrive, bringing together leading Marxist thinkers - during periods when Marxism was demonised elsewhere - to create centres of excellence and forward thinking in political economy.

In so doing, he created safe havens where voices could be heard that were silenced in other parts of academia, where the ravages of neoliberalism were taking their toll, using the resources he could raise to sustain networks and support younger scholars. These were spaces that attracted bright young PhD students from across the world and Leo put a huge amount of his energy into supporting them personally as well as intellectually and politically, inviting them into his home as well as patiently commenting on their drafts.

He came into my life in the mid-1990s. I was visiting Toronto for other reasons and Sheila Rowbotham suggested I look him up. I was invited round for brunch, to which he had also invited others he thought I might like to meet and by the end of the day I had already agreed to write an

article for Socialist Register - an article that, I afterwards realised, gave me the first chance to write in my own voice since the 1970s, giving me a new public persona. From then on, he gave me unflinching (though not always uncritical) support and I felt sustained and honoured to be part of his life.

In 2015, I happened to be in Toronto at the time of his 70th birthday party. It was an amazing gathering, bringing together family and friends from many parts of his life. Everybody I spoke to seemed to bring a different perspective on Leo but all were loving. At one point, much to my surprise and embarrassment, I was asked by Leo's friend and colleague from Ottawa days, Donald Schwartz, to propose the toast. I am often quite good at improvising such things but this time I made a complete hash of it. I was so angry with myself that I spent the next two or three days writing in my head the speech I should have made. I had arrived fresh from a conference (organised by the UDC) in which many earnest young radical scholars had been discussing the future of work, and of socialism, and what I wish I had said was that in leaving the conference and arriving in the Panitch home I had moved from the abstract discussion of it to the reality of how socialism should be lived. That, in the company of so many people who had known Leo so much better than I did and for so much longer it felt very presumptuous to speak at all. But it was nevertheless a great privilege to be there, embraced in the welcome of the Panitches (including Leo's wise, brilliant, generous wife Melanie, his wonderful children, Vida and Maxim and grandchildren) in a place where there was not only a generous, unstinting sharing of ideas, but also of love. And much more. Today I do not have adequate words.

How he will be missed.

From Patrick Bond, prolific writer, activist and professor in Cape Town:

As far away as Johannesburg - literally halfway across the earth from Toronto - the shock waves reverberate and the tears flow. The news is so terribly distressing for everyone who ever came across a comrade who could draw upon such a bottomless well of the socialist ethos: generosity of spirit, clarity of vision, mastery of political history, eloquence of expression, and builder of community. What a gap this leaves in the world's indy left, for us all to try to fill - and if we do so even partly in the tough period ahead, it will be thanks to our ability to dwell on infinite warm memories of Leo, with such power.

Here in South Africa, his influence was always a delight and salve, starting around 1992 when - always with Sam amplifying at the right moment, and John Saul having earlier tilled the radical soil, too - Leo visited, providing those *tour de force*, ruthless-critiques-of-everything he had mastered. We were desperate to understand the perils of leading labour strategists' tragic adoption of competitiveness within world capitalism, of the unions' rightward drift and then corporatist slide, of African nationalism's and social democracy's limits, of radical social movement potentials, and of the retreat of so many ex-left intellectuals underway here, too. No one could provide these with the force, depth, scope and ironic chuckle that Leo did. That year in *SR*, he and Ralph Miliband charted a broader course that from right early on, I found to be of lasting relevance for the class and social struggles that lay ahead here:

"An approach distant both from ultra-leftism on the one hand and from the politics of accommodation of social democracy on the other will need to be elaborated and developed, given clear and relevant, short-term and longer-term policy meaning and institutional focus. This approach entails an involvement in immediate struggles over a multitude of current issues: in the current moment of economic crisis the most important must be bold programmes for economic recovery which are oriented to employing people directly in the expansion and improvement of the public infrastructure [and in South Africa's case, basic needs goods]... While no such programme will allow

one country to escape by itself from the economic crisis, this programme could mitigate the effects of the crisis, and lay the basis for a more ecologically sound, socially just, productive economy in the future. It would contribute, moreover, to giving people a sense that something can be done about the crisis, which is the key to further popular mobilisation in even more radical directions.”

That advice stayed with me and many others ever since. Indeed over the years Leo also helped to interpret and deconstruct not only our intellectual and labour traditions, but South Africa’s capital-C Communist legacy, for example shaping socialist praxis with the young rebel reds Vishwas Satgar and Langa Zita during their 1998 visit to Toronto (from p.66 here). And the founder of the Alternative Information and Development Centre in Cape Town, Brian Ashley, just rang me a few minutes ago to contemplate Leo’s just-as-powerful influence with a different set of comrades whose political roots were revolutionary and often Trotskyist. A leading South African marxist-feminist who did her PhD at York Politics, Melanie Samson, often recounts how she drew so much from his seminars about our local debates, too. Those are only a few examples. From all sides: full respect.

During their last trip to Joburg about five years ago, Leo and Sam had not lost a step. They drove home their points not only at academic meetings – here’s a great lecture Vishwas and Michelle Williams hosted through their *SR*-style Democratic Marxism series – but in crucial sites of strategic confrontation, especially a most extraordinary session at the largest union’s headquarters building in March 2016, with hundreds present, in what might well have been the most sophisticated yet passionate political debate those metalworker leaders have ever witnessed. Dating to the early 1990s, Leo and Sam always helped that crucial union and everyone knew they could review working-class strengths and weaknesses with such profound wisdom. But Leo also knew Leninism so well, and ran rings around some of the ersatz-vanguardist versions he had to confront that day – even growing red-faced with fury at times, since so much was at stake (sigh, it didn’t end well in subsequent years and his warnings were so prescient in retrospect). During that visit, Leo and I negotiated a studio discussion about neoliberalism for listeners of the main national radio station’s morning show, for a full 20 minutes; it was absolutely hilarious, probing with friendly barbs the country’s deepest divides, using the international comparisons we urgently needed then, as President Zuma’s anti-imperial talk-left walk-right dancing was at its clumsiest.

And over the past decade or so, Leo helped my Rio-based ally Ana and I to continually enrich the application of Brazil’s subimperialism theory – in a book about the BRICS he contributed to in 2015 (from p.61 here), at 2016 Beit Zatoun and York workshops, and later in *SR*. And we won’t ever forget how even with the nuanced differences, Leo’s own view of imperialism’s capacity to assimilate G20 elites for Washington-dominated multilateralism’s sake, shaped us inexorably. Even when disagreeing, he invariably raised our confidence to keep working on an appropriate semi-peripheral Int’l Poli Econ. And in hotter disputes – ... um, like, “crisis? what crisis?!” in the Empire seminar – it was the greatest fun to test lines of argument with a comrade so sharp, funny, tireless and forgiving.

I wrote Leo emails on several dozen occasions over the years, asking for advice; never was I disappointed. He hosted me in 2003-04 in my first sabbatical. His and other *SR* comrades’ exceptional networks, wide-ranging commitments and ability to craft the *SR* alongside Colin and Greg left me breathless with gratitude on countless cold Sunday mornings during annual November editorial meetings in a SOAS seminar room. Making links between comrades always pleased Leo so much, and so many of us were beneficiaries. I can’t thank Leo and the Toronto comrades enough, for the hospitality and the permanent sense that thanks largely to Leo’s institution-building power, York Politics has been our lefty Mecca literally for decades. Melanie and Leo were so gracious letting me stay in such a warm, welcoming house on occasion, a place so well known to the world’s lefty visitors.

Hamba kahle – travel well – comrade Leo Panitch. Long live your spirit in us all, long live.

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