Connecting the Dots

written by Ethan Earle, Albert Scharenberg | January 14, 2015

In the first days of August 2014, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office brought together one hundred influential leftists from across the United States, Canada, and Europe for an "un-conference" on socialist strategies. The retreat was held at the Edith Macy Center, located in Westchester County about an hour north of New York City. Shortly before we arrived on Friday afternoon, a powerful storm swept across the Lower Hudson Valley and knocked out power lines throughout the region. Off the Harlem Line train and through the post-storm drizzle, guests trickled into a conference space that was nearly dark and eerily quiet, lacking the usual whirring of electricity and air conditioning. We took it as a sign: the calm before the storm of socialist strategizing to come.

Over three nights and four days, heads of European socialist parties met with U.S. social movement leaders; Canadian environmental activists exchanged ideas with some of the brightest minds in progressive journalism; labor leaders from across North America touched base with European political strategists. People with fifty years' experience in the struggle handed down knowledge—and received inspiration from—the next generation of fighters for the left. The result? New friends, comrades, and allies. New collaborative initiatives already in the pipeline. New strategies for twenty-first-century socialism? We can't promise that, but we're working on it, doing our part by helping to rebuild the left.[1]

Based Out of Europe

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, or RLS, is an unusual organization. The German *Stiftung* translates roughly to "foundation," but we don't give grants and we're certainly not a foundation in the traditional U.S. sense. Rather we're something of a hybrid: one part civic education and policy institute, one part international operating foundation. Based out of Germany and funded with public money, we have regional offices in 17 countries and a mission to support international dialogue and the strengthening of the pluralist, socialist left. Our New York office has a special focus on the U.S. and Canadian left and also engages the United Nations, particularly in relation to the Global South.

Despite this international scope, our deepest body of experience is drawn from Europe. Our work is possible because of a German law enabling parties represented in the German federal parliament, the *Bundestag*, to direct long-term funding to the development of a foundation with political values close to their own. Our relationship is with Die Linke (The Left), a multi-tendency democratic socialist party founded in 2007 as a merger of the East German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the mostly West German Electoral Alternative Work and Social Justice (WASG).[2] Die Linke currently stands as Germany's third-largest party, behind the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) and center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Its rise has been mirrored across Europe, where a plethora of multi-tendency parties have been winning anywhere from 5 percent to 15 percent in recent elections. Examples include more established parties (such as Sweden's Left Party, Spain's United Left, the Dutch Socialist Party, and the Danish Socialist People's Party); multiparty coalitions (Left Front in France, Left Bloc in Portugal); new formations (most recently the United Left in Slovenia, as well as Podemos in Spain); and at least one party that is challenging for power, the Coalition of the Radical Left in Greece, known by its acronym Syriza.

Syriza is the second-largest party in the Greek Parliament, winner of the recent European elections, and currently running first in all popular-opinion polls. Standing in clear opposition to what they call

“austeritarian” rule by the neoliberal “center,” Syriza has developed an unabashedly socialist policy platform that appeals to a broad base of Greeks who have shouldered the worst of the most recent crisis and austerity response at the European level.[3] It is worth mentioning that this disaffection with the neoliberal center has also driven voters to the right, in the form of the neofascist criminal organization Golden Dawn in Greece, and also to a motley crew of radical-right formations that are making waves in parliaments throughout Europe. In the same vein as the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) aligns itself with the rise of a multi-tendency socialist left, we also see it as integral to our mission to oppose any resurgence of the radical right, with its dark history on the European continent.

RLS Goes NYC

In the United States as well as Canada, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office has found the political terrain to be quite different from Europe’s. At the same time, we see plenty of opportunities to build bridges that can strengthen both sides. Here it is common enough to lament the structural impediments to left electoral participation, the dual dysfunctions of Washington and Ottawa, and the relative disarray of the left. However, in recent times there have appeared a few modest openings for the possibility of a renewed leftist participation in politics. In Canada, Québec solidaire (QS) has established a small but vibrant and increasingly durable socialist pole (7.6 percent and three elected candidates in the 2014 Quebec elections). Leaders from QS exchanged ideas with European party leaders at our August socialist strategies retreat, and talks between the party, RLS, and Die Linke have continued since that time. In the United States, the last years have seen a wave of left victories in cities across the country, from radicals like Jackson, Mississippi, Mayor Chokwe Lumumba to genuine progressives like New York Mayor Bill de Blasio. In the last year our office has organized talks between new Seattle City Council member and avowed socialist Kshama Sawant and Die Linke Co-Chair Bernd Riexinger (Left Forum, 2014), has brought a contingent of radical Mexican trade unionists to meet with New York City Council members, and has hosted a series of public discussions with European socialists to strengthen dialogue and continue to expand the framework of reference for what is possible on this side of the Atlantic.

As with the electoral system, critics have been quick to deride the labor movement in North America. From the right, sustained attacks tracing back at least to postwar McCarthyism have taken a clear toll on the popularity of unions. In addition, structural economic changes as well as homemade mistakes have diminished union membership as well as labor’s ability to defend its own narrative or take offensive positions in new struggles, often resulting in left lamentations. But while attacks remain ongoing and membership continues to fall, there has been a clear progressive shift in a number of union policies that RLS-NYC is working to support. As a case in point, an increasing number of unions are recognizing the imminent need to address climate change. Through our Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) initiative, we bring together unions and labor federations from the United States, Canada, and around the globe to build a community of trade unionists dedicated to fighting for a just, democratic, and truly sustainable energy system. At the People’s Climate March on September 21, 2014, TUED participants from around the globe joined hundreds of thousands of people and an unprecedented labor contingent to demand climate action and show which side of history they’re on. And it hasn’t been just the environment. Labor unions in the United States and Canada have also shown increasing willingness to adopt more progressive positions in such areas as immigration and new labor formations, particularly in the low-wage sector. This has led to new alliances with what we might broadly call the social movement left.

Ranging from Occupy Wall Street to the Ferguson protests; from Quebec’s student movement to Idle No More and anti-pipeline campaigns along the U.S.-Canada border; from the Florida Dream Defenders to the National Domestic Workers to the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network: The admittedly diverse and sometimes even contradictory movement of movements around us is

breathing important energy into the North American left. Some of these formations have been spontaneous while others are the result of years of meticulous organizing; some fight for concrete reforms while others enact transformative visions for what a radically different world could look like. Nearly all suffer from issues of sustainability, whether due to the difficulties of building institutions that last, or alternatively to the nonprofit complex that requires radical groups to walk tightropes for corporate grant money. But taken together we see a clear trend that is very much worth supporting.

As an example of our work in this broad area, over the past two years we have hosted a series of transatlantic housing initiative workshops around the "Right to the City" framework. Member organizations from the United States' Right to the City Alliance have shared strategies with similarly minded groups working on homelessness in Hungary, gentrification in Germany, evictions in Spain, and crisis-induced displacement in Athens, to name a few. Radical activists have met with leftist government officials and policy experts from across India, Brazil, and South Africa to discuss slum clearance, the impacts of mega-events and "celebration capitalism," and how best to cope with displacement when there is no other option. Participants have strengthened their own domestic as well as international relationships while at the same time contributing to a necessary and growing movement around how we conceive of the relationship between the city, the commons, big capital, and human well-being.

Speaking broadly, our work in North America is based on these and similar analyses of the concrete situation on the ground, including a balance of the left's strengths and weaknesses, and emerges from our assessment of where we must—and particularly where we actually *can*—make a difference. The socialist strategies "un-conference" exhibited our dedication to the construction of a big tent for any emerging socialist left—bringing together leaders from diverse backgrounds, ideologies and geographies to connect as people, even if there isn't a clear and immediate "deliverable."[4] At the same time our work on housing and climate change, as well as our focus on labor, demonstrate that we aim to directly impact the critical political issues of our time. Together it makes for a big tent, but this is our ambition: the sects and silos of the twentieth-century left have proven insufficient for the massive task of restructuring our political system and overcoming neoliberal capitalism. We must break down the walls that separate our different struggles so that we may better see our commonalities and find common ground for collaboration. Only then will we be able to move toward strategic intentionality at any sort of mass level. When we at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office say that we are working toward rebuilding the left, and more broadly toward strategies for twenty-first-century socialism, this is what we mean. Another left is possible!

Footnotes

1. For a more detailed account, see our report ("Reporting Back and Moving Forward") and the videos about the event.

2. For more on the development of the Left Party leading up to the 2013 elections, see Cornelia Hildebrandt, *An Inside Look at "DIE LINKE"*, October 2012.

3. For more on SYRIZA, see the article co-written by Yiannis Bournous and Giorgos Karatsioubanis for this issue of *New Politics*.

4. To get a better look at what we mean, check out our video from the Socialist Strategies retreat.