Rebuilding the Left

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Rebuilding a U.S. socialist left requires, first of all, coming to grips with the full magnitude of the social crisis and decline in this society.

Income and wealth inequality, widening since the 1970s, have reached levels not seen since the Great Depression. Real wages remain stagnant or declining while massive debts are crushing "underwater" homeowners and college students. Job creation since the 2008 crisis has been disproportionately concentrated in low wage positions with unpredictable schedules that cause stress and anxiety, especially for workers attempting to care for their families. On top of the unstable employment situation, around 20 percent of us are providing unpaid care to an aging adult, and many of us are struggling with physical or mental health issues without adequate health insurance.

As we face daunting economic and personal challenges, we also find our support network shrinking and our communities fractured. Mass incarceration and deportation have destabilized many poor and working-class communities. The approximately 2.4 million people currently behind bars represents a massive disruption of families and communities, especially African-American communities which are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration. Similarly, the more than two million deportations carried out under the Obama administration has devastated immigrant communities. Tens of thousands of children of those deported now face an uncertain future and the possibility of long-term separation from their parent(s). At the same time, the churn of neoliberal "development" in the form of privatization and gentrification deprives communities of public neighborhood schools and safe affordable housing.

Bourgeois politics have taken increasingly ugly forms, fuelled by a toxic ideological brew of greed, racism, bad religion—and mountains of unregulated political cash—manifested in state voter-suppression laws and the drives to close abortion clinics; the spread of "right to work" laws to northern states (Michigan and Indiana); and the rest of the poison spread by the Koch brothers and the *American Legislative Exchange Council*. The municipal bankruptcy of the city of Detroit with all its vicious consequences may be the largest so far, but certainly not the last.

All this takes place against the backdrop of a growing cascade of environmental disasters, local, national, and global. The logic and necessity of capital accumulation, and what's considered "growth" under the regime of capitalist production, mean that this system cannot and will not halt the destruction of the environment. If this system itself isn't challenged and overthrown in time, the environmental crisis (actually, multiple crises) will accelerate until it becomes an actual obstacle to "growth"—at which point the measures likely to be imposed on the population, the means of enforcing them, and the prospects for human civilization are not pleasant to contemplate.

The left has the analytical tools to understand the deep roots of the capitalist crisis, and on the whole uses them reasonably well. In principle, furthermore, the conditions of social decline should provide openings for the left and for the growth of socialist politics—indeed, in the wake of the

2008-09 financial meltdown, “socialism” famously received favorable polling results among young people. It’s fair to say that millions of people in the United States perceive that there’s a general crisis—more than just separate and discrete issues—and feel it sharply impacting their own lives, their families, and their futures.

The Occupy movement, mass protests and actions against the Keystone XL pipeline and fracking, the outpouring of hundreds of thousands for the September 21 Peoples Climate March, the October 10-13 weekend mobilization in St. Louis demanding justice for Michael Brown, and numerous local struggles large and small, show that people are not silent or passive in the face of the system’s serial atrocities. And the deep hostility in the U.S. population toward another military adventure, thankfully, limits the options of the current president and the next one to put “boots on the ground” back into Iraq or elsewhere.

This potential must be viewed, however, against the stark reality that the left itself has nothing like the capacity to beat back the continual assault on working people, on African Americans, on immigrant communities, on public education, and on essential social services. Our existing organizations, taken individually or even all combined, have nothing like the social or political weight or leadership capacity to act as an authentic “vanguard”—not to be confused with the posturing of ideological currents aspiring to play that role. And this problem, of course, is self-reinforcing as the vast layers of working-class and oppressed peoples are less likely to be attracted to a left that can’t win big gains for their communities and themselves.

How can the left rebuild itself to become the force it needs to be? In Solidarity, we are engaged in two mutually supportive tasks: building movements and bringing them together, along with uniting the remnants of the left.

Solidarity from our inception has emphasized the importance of left unity in action wherever that’s feasible, and of socialist regroupment when agreement on basic principles make it possible, without demanding unanimity of opinion or artificially enforced “discipline” on every political question. We have attempted to act accordingly both in left unity initiatives and inside our own organization. But breaking down sectarian intra-left barriers, however important and necessary, is in no way sufficient for reconstructing a socialist left that matters.

That’s why we need to build social movements, taking them seriously and on their own terms. As mass movements progress, the leadership and consciousness that develop can form a firm foundation for a relevant left.

It may sound old-fashioned, but we believe that *the labor movement especially remains key*. If the general state of unions in the United States is shockingly weak by historic standards, that only reinforces a hard fact: *the weakness of working class politics and organization imposes a low ceiling on the possibilities of significant reforms, to say nothing of fundamental change*.

That does not mean now, nor has it ever meant at any time, that struggles like Black liberation, the women’s movement, indigenous people’s struggles, or any other democratic fight, should “wait for the working class” or hold back on their demands for fear of disrupting a mythical “class unity.” Quite the contrary, those struggles are inevitable, progressive, and democratic in their own right, and may also have a catalytic impact on sectors of the working class. And no one ever won their rights by waiting for someone else to do it for them.

There’s one example at least of a movement that’s made significant gains in a politically reactionary period: the LGBTQ struggle, particularly in the arena of equality within mainstream institutions, notably the right to marry; to some degree in housing and job discrimination; and in winning the

evolution of a much less hostile culture toward queer people and issues, although much more remains to be fought for and won.

Nonetheless, reviving the nearly moribund labor movement is essential to any overall strategy for serious reform let alone socialist left reconstruction. Our views on "A renewed strategic perspective on socialist work in the labor movement" are outlined in a document posted here.

Without going into details here, it's important to say that the union movement must be rebuilt, but cannot be expected (nor would we want it) to look like the organized labor movement and apparatus of the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s. The enormous changes in the structure of the U.S. working class and of work itself, and the demands imposed by the social crisis itself, demand that a reconstructed labor movement be radically more democratic, inclusive, and armed with a far more inclusive social justice agenda than that of decades past. That agenda will need to cover the gamut from universal single-payer health care, to defending immigrant rights, to a conversion to renewable energy and environmentally sustainable economy—taking on the system that forces millions of workers to choose between having a job or a habitable planet.

The socialist left needs to project that kind of labor movement vision, and engage in the hard work of helping make it happen. A picture of what kind of movement is possible—and how those movements relate to left refoundation—can be seen in the Chicago Teachers Union strike two years ago, spearheaded by an energetic rank-and-file union leadership in which socialist activists play a meaningful role.

To achieve the strike's limited victory, CTU built a powerful alliance with parents and especially with Black and Latino communities far in advance of what most union leaderships have even contemplated. This entailed not just a positive program for quality education, but more—it demanded and achieved a level of sustained teacher membership involvement on a scale that most traditional union leaderships have considered to be impossible, unnecessary, inconvenient, and indeed threatening.

Even in the case of this magnificent struggle, "all proportions guarded" is a necessary caution. This was a defensive strike, which succeeded only partially in the struggle to stop the plague of school closings and "turnarounds" in the destructive drive of "Mayor One Percent" Rahm Emanuel and President Obama's education czar Arne Duncan. CTU's Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) had raised the union above that ceiling imposed by the general weakness of working-class organization in the United States, only to encounter another ceiling: the undemocratic Chicago political system. Among other things, this meant that CTU found itself isolated from other public sector unions or the rest of the Chicago labor leadership that's tied itself to the Emanuel machine. Nevertheless, the alliances built in Black and Latino communities and the local left catalyzed by the strike continued to gather momentum, sweeping CTU President Karen Lewis into position as a strong challenger to Rahm. A left was building around her campaign, which hoped to turn that ceiling into the floor for further political organization.

But as the situation unfolded, it presented new barriers and challenges resulting from fragmentation within the labor movement, social movements, and the left generally. How does a union, isolated and defensive in the wake of the mayor's post-strike counter-offensive, prepare itself to expand offensively into political activity? How does it maintain the democracy, inclusivity, and social justice agenda CORE built within the union as it enters the undemocratic, exclusive arena of bourgeois politics? How does it avoid splitting the left side of the ticket, coordinating with other movements entering that same bottleneck at the ballot box? Movements we work with can often end up in competition with each other for resources, media attention, or capacity, especially in times like the current crisis where working class people are asked to "make more with less." And any victories

riding on the efforts of one organization or social movement working in isolation cannot last in the long run. This indicates the necessity of a left refoundation perspective that seeks to break down barriers—both material and ideological—between movements and socialist organizations. The continued future success of any one movement requires it.

Even as Karen Lewis has withdrawn from the race due to a serious illness, the questions brought up by her campaign and the continued pull into local political action by CTU's post-strike setbacks commit us to this perspective. We can safely estimate that, in times of state-administered austerity, future successes from rank-and-file-led unions will come up against the same ceiling of political action against that state.

There are other examples that give us glimpses of possibilities still to be realized: the potential for alliances between Occupy forces and West Coast longshore workers, the unions that came out in support of the Peoples Climate March (a revival, perhaps, of the "Teamsters and Turtles Together" of Seattle in 1999?), the continual growth in turnout for the biennial conference and "Troublemakers Schools" held by *Labor Notes* for activist layers in labor and allied movements, and the two straight months of mobilization-turned-organization in Ferguson, Missouri, that have pulled in unions and garnered recognition of a new generation of black activists in public attention.

Solidarity looks for ways to engage with comrades, whether from other socialist organizations or independents, in projects to help move such possibilities forward. For example, our Ecosocialism Working Group participates in the exciting, relatively new System Change Not Climate Change (SCNCC) initiative that's building a left presence in the environmental movement.

We're exploring how the left that's engaged in independent political action can build on the successes of Kshama Sawant/Socialist Alternative campaign in Seattle, the Howie Hawkins campaign for New York governor and other Green Party campaigns around the country, and the powerful example in Jackson, Mississippi, that was so tragically cut short by the untimely death of Chokwe Lumumba. We're certainly hopeful that a national progressive campaign might emerge in 2016 posing an alternative to the dreadful reactionary candidates sure to be the Republican and Democratic nominees, but it's far too early to assess those prospects.

Our own efforts and those of others, to be sure, are barely a start of what will be required to take on the ruling class offensive in both its neoliberal and far-right forms. The crisis is way bigger than we are, and in one way or another it is leading toward some form of social explosion. Whether that may ultimately take the positive form of mass strikes and new movements, or any number of destructive and reactionary forms resulting from hopelessness, cannot be predicted, but may in some measure depend on what we do now.

Footnotes