

Towards a Transformational Strategy

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We are living in times of great instability and crisis. Everywhere there are troubling signs of collapse: mass shootings, widespread unemployment, potentially irreversible ecological devastation, and the consolidation of wealth into fewer and fewer hands. The



interpenetrating crises within the economic system, the ecological system, and the system of empire are pushing the 1% to implement massive austerity programs, militarization, and further disenfranchisement of oppressed communities. But not everything is gloom and doom. In the face of the ruling class's savage attacks, heroic struggles are breaking out around the world against the manifestations of imperialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy.

While these crises have called the legitimacy of ruling class hegemony into question, it is by no means guaranteed that popular forces will succeed in rescuing the world from the tyranny of the 1%. We are living in a period in which, as Antonio Gramsci once observed, the old order is dying while the new phase is still struggling to be born.

Even though the ruling class faces instability and internal strife, they are armed to the teeth and are committed to holding onto power at any cost. What happens in the next period of history will determine the future of the planet and humankind.

From Resistance to Strategy Development

In response to the worsening conditions in our communities, and driven by a deep desire to change the systems that have made conditions so bad for our people, many social movement activists have taken up the work of organizing resistance. This work is critical. But it's not enough. We need our fights to add up to something beyond resistance.

So often activists in reform fights say, "I don't think that we'll ever achieve liberation, but I want to do what I can." The problem with this attitude is that it closes us off to seeing and seizing opportunities to take unimagined leaps forward. After all, who would have dreamed in the beginning of 2011 that by the end of the year people across the country would be occupying public space to denounce the tyranny of the 1%? Or that fast-food workers across the country would be walking off their jobs to demand a living wage? Or that undocumented youth would be intentionally getting detained so they could organize resistance inside detention centers?

Holding onto the hope that we could win, that we could radically transform society, is difficult, but vital. That hope and audacity can change the way that we organize, fight, and build movements. The problem is that it is almost impossible to keep hope alive if we don't have a plan to win.

Strategy is one of the fundamental building blocks for all successful revolutionary movements. In revolutionary periods throughout history well-developed strategy has enabled organizers to cohere different sectors of society into a unified movement of movements that was able to defy the odds and transform society. Each of these strategies was as unique as the conditions from which it emerged, and the most successful evolved over time as those conditions changed.

There are no successful cookie-cutter strategies. What worked in one place, at one time, will not necessarily work in another. That said, while every strategy must grow out of its own particular

time, place, and conditions, there are some common features of successful revolutionary strategies. Broadly speaking, they:

1. Articulate a vision of a transformed society;
2. Examine the characteristics and conditions of society's social and economic groupings;
3. Project a revolutionary historic bloc by assessing which social sectors have the most vested interest in transforming society, which might support that vision, and which have the power to carry out that transformation;
4. Evaluate the balance of power between organizations and the interests those organizations represent;
5. Assess the cultural, social, economic, and political hegemony;
6. Name collective goals to be achieved by advancing the larger strategy; and
7. Identify key fights in which to concentrate forces.

The Need for the Left

Historically, it has been leftists from different resistance struggles that have come together to forge a broader strategy for liberation. Although left forces in many parts of the world are taking bold steps to navigate the twists and turns of the current period with effective strategy, such a left does not exist in the United States today. There are important left organizations and formations in this country, but a coherent and audacious left in the United States will have to be reconstituted if this role is to be fulfilled.

The task of reconstituting a radical and relevant left in the United States faces many serious challenges. Despite these challenges, there are reasons to be hopeful. Along with mass organizations rooted amongst exploited and oppressed sectors, a successful revolutionary movement today will require one or many left formations that learn from the errors of twentieth-century left organizations. In order to be successful this next left will need to be:

1. Strongly rooted amongst key social sectors and geographical regions in order to accurately ground its analysis of the objective and subjective conditions;
2. Capable of strengthening existing social movements. It will need to be respectful of popular organizations and movements, relating to them not merely as conveyor belts or competitors, but as partners that have unique and valuable contributions that are needed to advance the struggle and pave the way for the emergence of a free society;
3. Able to bring the distinct demands of various social movements together into a single political project in ways that those movements see themselves authentically represented. This requires the ability and desire to listen to the wisdom that exists amongst comrades, other activists, and unorganized people;
4. Capable of identifying key fronts of struggle where collective action can shift the balance of power and create new openings; and
5. Constantly searching for opportunities to expand popular protagonism* and democratic participation—both inside left organizations and in society in general.

This is a different kind of left than the self-proclaimed vanguard model that was so prevalent in the twentieth century. New types of left formations are beginning to prosper in countries like Greece, South Africa, Venezuela, and Bolivia. These political instruments are helping to establish new models and new practices that we have a lot to learn from, despite our different context in the United States.

Developing grounded strategy for liberation, and developing cadre capable of carrying out that strategy, are two central tasks of building a liberatory movement of movements in the United States today.

Leaning Forward

History is not flat. It ebbs and flows like the tide. Recent events in Egypt are a prime example of this. After decades of isolated workers' strikes and organizing against police brutality, a movement erupted that mobilized millions of people. In a matter of weeks, the people of Egypt deposed a U.S.-backed dictator who had been in power for decades. The tasks for revolutionaries change depending on the nature of the period in which they're working. During ebbs, we engage in fights, build our forces, and prepare to advance. Most struggles during these periods take place within a political context that is not to our advantage. During flows, we advance. We surge forward. These periods of flow often correspond to structural crises and offer revolutionaries opportunities to gain ground and shift the terrain for future struggle.

We believe we are in a period of flow in which crisis is likely to expand. Instability will become the norm. In response, the ruling class will likely exert their power through violence and intimidation more than through concessions and persuasion. This will lead to more action from the right-wing as well as from popular forces. Global instability will allow many nations outside of the first world to explore building alternatives outside of U.S. imperialism. This will be especially true in the Global South.

In these moments revolutionaries can begin to make possible what until recently seemed impossible. These moments hold untold challenges and opportunities. In order to advance, revolutionaries must be prepared. History suggests that progressive advance will require a strong and skilled left. In order to help meet that need we have begun building LeftRoots, a national formation of left social-movement organizers and activists who want to connect grassroots struggles to a strategy to win liberation for all people and the planet.

We do not yet have a fully developed strategy, but based on a cursory assessment of the current conditions and the imbalance of political forces in the United States, LeftRoots has developed an outline of some of the tasks needed to strengthen the position of the left, weaken the position of the right, and win the trust and loyalty of important sectors of U.S. society:

Build popular organizations. Mass organizations are the basic building block of all revolutionary movements. These organizational forms allow people to rebuild community; to make connections between their own struggles, the struggles of their neighbors, and their connections to the system; and they allow people to take collective action. Too often, these organizations have been seen as conveyor belts feeding information and resources to more strategic parts of the movement. We believe that these organizations must be vital participants in any liberation movement. Popular organizations generate energy, innovation, and wisdom that must be respected and supported.

Wage counter-hegemonic fights. As the crisis continues to deepen, people will rise up and take action, calling for change. In different places these actions will have different demands. It is the responsibility of a renewed left to support and strengthen those fights, but leftists need to be

mindful of not falling into the pitfalls of populism. The next left must seek to make what seems impossible now, possible in the future. This left must offer analysis, suggestions, and material support with the aim of deepening those fights where possible to undermine ruling class hegemony and to nurture a liberatory hegemony.

Build alternatives. In addition to participating in and supporting popular struggles, a renewed left must engage in and support efforts to build alternative institutions and practices that could help serve as some of the building blocks of a post-capitalist society. In all of these activities we must work democratically, showing respect, accountability, tolerance, and love for the people and the planet.

Engage in the battle of ideas. A renewed left must ground itself in a vision of a free society. We call this vision “twenty-first-century socialism” in an effort to signal the need to break from capitalism and to avoid repeating the errors of the twentieth-century socialist experiments. This vision will inform the development of a clear strategy of how to get there. The left must also engage in the battle of ideas. We must present our vision of a free society in ways that connect with people’s very real frustrations with capitalist society and their ambitions for a better future. Along with the frontline struggles and alternative institutions, this work will lay the basis for a new common sense.

Forge a revolutionary social bloc. Any successful effort to challenge and build alternatives to the capitalist, racist, and sexist world order will involve millions of people around the world. The strategic alliance between the working class and communities of color form the two wings of the bloc that can lead a successful challenge to the ruling class in the United States. Building democratic organizations rooted in working-class communities of color provides the greatest guarantee that the interests of these sectors is at the center of the perspectives, programs, and demands of the movement. Because their interests demand an end to the tyranny of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism, building organizations rooted in these sectors is of strategic importance. However, the left’s attention cannot focus on these sectors exclusively. The left must cultivate a vision, organizational fronts, and demands that forge a new identity, a new social bloc that sees its interests as being served best by an alternative to the existing tyranny of the 1%. Winning over and engaging other sectors of society—without betraying the interests of the most exploited and oppressed sectors both here in the United States and around the world—is one of the central strategic tasks of a renewed left.

Connect with struggles around the globe. Any liberatory movement based in the United States must recognize the imperial privilege that this country has and continues to profit from. Justice and liberation cannot be achieved at the expense of the global community. International solidarity and global equity must be a driving principle of any liberation movement. The next left will look to build connections to social movements around the world and to link our local struggles to the efforts of other activists struggling on different terrain towards our common objectives.

Renew our movement culture. To make such a revolutionary project possible, we need a renewed left culture based on respect for political and ideological pluralism. This is deeply connected to the dialectical process of breaking from the alienation so pervasive in the capitalist system. As we struggle to transform society, we must also struggle to transform ourselves. This will happen through conscious work at individual and collective levels, just as it will happen through collective struggles for human solidarity as we recover parts of ourselves that have been long atrophied in an environment of consumerism and individualism.

Build democratic participation and revolutionary protagonism. The capitalist democracy promoted by the U.S. empire is a hollow perversion. Democratic protagonism rejects the idea that democracy is simply about one magical moment of decision-making. Through our exposure to

systems, we all learn and develop particular skills and attitudes. Social relations under capitalism undermine and diminish our capacities. On the other hand, participatory democracy takes into account all of the steps leading up to the making of the decision, thereby promoting people to be protagonists, the makers of history. As Karl Marx noted, the key to revolutionary practice is not simply being in a different circumstance, but also in helping to make that changed situation. The next left must take up different practices and procedures to develop everyone's capacities so that we can all play leading roles in shaping the decisions, workplaces, communities, and world in which we live.

Deepen our capacity to respond to ruptures. The first years of this decade have witnessed an unprecedented level of ecological catastrophe, social upheaval, and popular mobilization. Much of this action is a direct response to social, economic, and political contradictions and the ruling class's self-serving attempts to manage those contradictions—since it is not in their interest to fully resolve the contradictions. As long as these social, economic, and ecological contradictions continue to grow, more upsurges and mobilizations are likely to occur. The task for a renewed and reinvigorated left will be to support and offer facilitative leadership in the midst those reactions. Individual leftists acting independently cannot accomplish this task. Nimble and coherent, collective action of leftists multiplies and amplifies the impact of social movements and of the left so that crisis can be transformed into opportunity—the opportunity to begin making real our vision of a more just, equal, sustainable, and antagonistic world.

While this outline marks a particular approach to building a liberatory movement, we recognize that it is just an outline. It is not a strategy. Within this outline, there are a lot of unanswered questions: what is the class structure of U.S. society? Which classes and social groups have the power and potential to lead and participate in a historic bloc for liberatory transformation? What regions have the most potential to advance the struggle? What might be the role of rural-urban alliances in a liberation movement? How do the re-emergence of the racist right, the expanding role of state-sponsored infiltration, and criminalization impact movement building efforts? Given the financial crises impacting state and local governments, what campaigns and targets give us the best possibility to advance? The list goes on.

Ultimately, more research and analysis will be necessary in order to ground our analysis in the real conditions and class structure of the U.S. empire, and we believe that by doing this work, we will be able to make this outline a strategic tool with goals, objectives, and criteria that can help strengthen the struggle for a free society.

LeftRoots is not acting alone to achieve these objectives. We are both a project and an organization. As a project, LeftRoots aims to work with others to help nurture the re-emergence of an ideologically sharp, tactically adept, and strategically clear left that can help spark and be of service to massive social movements confronting and building alternatives to imperialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. As an organization, LeftRoots is a political home for a grouping of social-movement leftists that we consider to be key to the emergence of the next left in the United States.

Building Beyond the Social Movement Left

As we've discussed, any successful revolutionary movement will involve conscious and organized left forces. It is equally important that the left include the participation and leadership of those from the very social sectors that make up the leading forces in the liberation struggle: working-class people, people of color, women, queer, genderqueer, and young people.

Clearly, this is not what the self-identified left looks like right now. For the left to be successful will

require a radical shift in who sees themselves as a part of it. Though we are far from this reimagined left, there are hundreds of leftists out there, many of us playing key roles in social movements rooted in the popular sectors, that will play a central role if the U.S. left is to expand its power and influence.

These leftists who are deeply engaged in social movements must play a leading role in renewing and reshaping the left in the United States. This will not be easy since social movement and base organizing work are relentless and can be all-consuming, but it's necessary. Leftists in social movements are uniquely positioned to bring together the lessons and experiences from various frontline struggles to expand on old ideas and practices and innovate new ones.

Many do not see the revolutionary potential of the social-movement left. We are like the bees of the movement world. Many flight experts don't understand how bees actually fly. According to their calculations, their wings are too small to be able to carry their relatively large bodies. Undeterred by the naysayers, bees fly around and play a critical role in supporting the ecosystem. Bees cross-pollinate. They carry pollen in the same way that social-movement leftists so often cross through the silos that constrain our movement work, bringing information and lessons from one movement to another.

Bees are social creatures. They draw their strength from acting in cooperation with the other bees in their colony. One of the most dangerous impacts of the increased use of pesticides is that many of those chemicals are drugging bees to such an extent that they are not able to find their way back to their hives. Isolated and separated from their homes, bees are dying off in alarming numbers.

Due to many different reasons including the impacts of Cointelpro, the neoliberal assault, and the weakening of the global left, social-movement leftists in the United States have been trying to figure out answers on our own, hoping our efforts would add up to something more. But isolated and unable to collectivize our power and impact, we have come up against the limitations of nonprofits and the trade union movement.

LeftRoots is building a political home for social-movement leftists in the United States to come together to build a collective identity and to develop transformational strategy that can help unleash the power of the people. This, we hope, will contribute to sharpening the left edge of social movements and reinvigorating the left in general.

Footnotes

* "Protagonism" is a term that we first came across in the work of Marta Harnecker who noted its usage among social movement activists throughout Latin America. We have adopted the use of the term within LeftRoots even though there is no direct translation in English because, like no other term we've come across, "protagonism" names an approach that has the potential to strengthen social movements inside the United States.

The concept builds from the literary term "protagonist" which refers to a character who takes ownership over her destiny and drives the narrative forward by taking action. In a similar vein, we understand protagonism to be the democratic engagement that builds our individual and collective capacities for transformative change and, in doing so, combats our fundamental alienation from the means of production, from the products of our labor, from each other, and from ourselves.