

The “Jobs For All” Issue: It’s Still the Economy and Unemployment Front and Center, Not the Occupy Movement

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Noted socialist writer Upton Sinclair wrote, “It is difficult to make a man understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” That doesn’t just apply to the business and managerial classes alone—I submit, it can also apply to those who are economically comfortable either as workers or as retirees—and thus have no inkling of what it’s like to be one of the working poor, what it’s like to be chronically unemployed and “living” on a mere \$600/month in unemployment compensation, to live constantly desperate. Such as I do. And yes, Upton Sinclair’s remark applies to many a putative socialist as well, and to numerous “activists” in Occupy movements and left groups who don’t have to worry about the economic wolf at the door, at least for the time being.

It is literally shameful the way the U.S. left has ignored the unemployment crisis, either slighting it through silence altogether, or not proposing bold Keynesian measures such as a new WPA, which created 8.5 million jobs in the 1930s and provided paychecks to 9.7 workers then, according to Ucubed, the “union of the unemployed” set up by the Machinists’ union (but which is not conceived as an “unemployed council” such as were established in the 1930s, but merely as a voting bloc to pressure Obama and the Democratic Party to “do right.”). The reformist socialists such as DSA and CCDS only advocate for Obama’s tepid jobs program, which will create merely 1.2 million jobs in an economy with a far bigger workforce than existed in the 1930s. The “revolutionary” socialists are even worse, aiming their fire at the “inadequacy” and merely “reformist” measures that would result from implementing Keynesian measures such as were instituted during the New Deal. So afraid of “saving capitalism,” our “revolutionaries” would rather sacrifice the unemployed upon the altar of ideological purity, thus presenting themselves through their inaction as tacitly “aligned” (though for much different reasons) with the obstructionist Republicans and Tea Partiers—who also don’t want any Keynesian measures applied to help the unemployed by providing decent-paying, productive, valuable jobs that fulfill real economic needs such as repairing infrastructure, and can actually become Green jobs.

Fortunately, there is one honorable socialist exception, the socialist journal and website *New Politics*. I published on *New Politics* online on February 3, 2011 my “Open Programmatic Proposal to the Broad U.S. Left for Directly Dealing with the Present Unemployment Crisis,” calling for a new WPA; in this I was ably seconded by Brian King’s supportive article and history of the WPA, “Jobs for All.” Radical historian Jesse Lemisch also contributed mightily to this discussion with two articles on *New Politics* online, “Occupy the American Historical Association: Demand a WPA Federal Writers’ Project,” and “A WPA for History: Occupy the American Historical Association.” I also briefly discussed Occupy youth and their roles as probably unemployed workers once they leave the student confines in “Carl Davidson, Bill Ayers, and Zig Ziglar Moments.” But these are virtually unique in what is otherwise a blackout of articles and analyses on the unemployment crisis in “revolutionary” socialist publications!

Much of what we read in the revolutionary left press is but a compendium of economic statistics that leads only to the weak, deterministic conclusion that essentially the unemployment and ancillary crises caused by the Great Recession can’t even be seriously ameliorated under capitalism. A “revolutionary” call to passivity in concrete action now while calling for the overthrow of

capitalism in the indefinite future. Certainly not a call for a “Jobs for All” new WPA as we called for in *New Politics*, which, while possibly “saving capitalism from itself” (albeit with *major* restructuring of this “saved” capitalism), would directly benefit millions, galvanize and energize them, and draw them into more militant political action precisely because they would now feel a sense of real hope and empowerment—plus having the material means to live a decent life, not merely scrounge to survive! Same as the (admittedly) reformist and inadequate New Deal did in the 1930s—which aside from achieving real changes in the way capitalism worked, also radicalized millions and pushed the “limits of the possible” much further to the left. Good things, yes? One would really think so, especially on the part of the “revolutionary” left these “revolutionaries” tragically disappoint by only wanting to say “no” to this.

Thus, socialists such as myself, Brian King and Jesse Lemisch who are aware of the horridness of the unemployment crisis and the sting of unemployment are offered only two terrible alternatives: either reformist tailing after Obama’s inadequate approach, or tacit “alignment” with the Republicans against Keynesian measures that would actually work on the part of the “revolutionary” left (although, again, for entirely different reasons), as demonstrated by the *deafening silence* coming from the “revolutionaries”!

While the enthusiasm over the Occupy movements by our quite fragmented and marginalized left is certainly understandable, I very much feel it misses the point; the issue is still the economy, still the unconscionably high unemployment rate, still the ongoing recession that now enters its fifth year, even though it “officially” ended in the summer of 2009. Funny how we didn’t notice it. “Jobs for All” is still the issue, and accepting a rate of unemployment that’s officially 8.3%, and a gross understatement of the actual unemployment rate, unconscionable. It may seem too outré, too New-Dealish to mention it, smacking too much for settling for a “reformed capitalism” rather than overthrowing it (as if *that* were even on the agenda!), but it is precisely what the masses are calling for, it hits at their greatest fears—unemployment if they have a job, continuing despair if they don’t. It is the issue of now, and the left had better realize it.

Even for Occupy activists themselves, unemployment will soon be an issue, if it isn’t already. As I noted in the footnote to my article, “Carl Davidson, Bill Ayers, and Zig Ziglar Moments”: Only 56% of the graduates of the Class of 2010 had at least one job by the spring of 2011 (Catherine Rampell, “Many with New College Degree Find the Job Market Humbling, *New York Times*, May 18, 2011).

Yes, even in our “new, improved” job market, there are still four applicants for every job opening; only the congenital Pollyanna could gloat about this as “significant improvement,” that it’s down to *merely* four when it used to be seven. Despite Occupy, the economy is still the issue, unemployment is still the major economic problem, and “Jobs for All” the only solution. It may not be “revolutionary” in raising the left to empyrean flights of activist fancy, but it is what the working masses need, want, and what I say, they will rally around—something distinctly absent from left appeal today, marking this current recession as a *historical anomaly*, a time when vast numbers of ordinary folk did not turn noticeably to the left, did not flock to specifically left organizations. Despite the enthusiasm that Occupy has generated on our fragmented and marginalized left today, it is too amorphous, inchoate and disorganized to adequately serve as a specifically left pole of attraction. Without a specifically left pole of attraction, the pole stays embedded in the center and right, and political debate stays focused on the “solutions” offered by the center and the right. And both of them are quite happy to settle for something considerably short of full employment, despite rhetoric that tries to say otherwise. Will the left continue its course of joining them by default? For that is what it is doing by not pushing a “Jobs for All” political agenda, with demands for programs that ensure precisely that.