

Modest Proposals for a New Left

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The Biden/Harris election to the U.S. Presidency punctuates a morbid political cycle which has seen both of the big capitalist parties move even further to the right, working-class lives violently degraded by neoliberal capitalism, and the ancient American incantations of racism and xenophobia breathed new, pandemic life by an atavistic, ruling-class autocrat.

Leftists should celebrate Trump's defeat but reject Biden's victory. He brings to the office a record of betrayal of every constituency panicked into supporting him on election day: women, people of color, immigrants, the working-class. Biden will normalize U.S. imperial hegemony globally, renew in soft-focus fashion U.S. Cold War with China, stand firm with apartheid Israel, Back the Blue, demonize dissent, and seek a neoliberal restoration over Trump's economic nationalism.

Yet of more immediate significance to this essay, the same period of Biden's ascent to White House power (2008 to 2020) coincides with two intersecting but divergent stories of American Socialism: one the ascent of the Democratic Socialists of America to becoming the largest Socialist group in the U.S. since at least the 1960s, and the other the collapse of the largest revolutionary socialist group in the U.S., the International Socialist Organization (or ISO) last year.

If a newer, more robust and invigorated independent socialist Left is to emerge in the U.S. to confront the 'Biden era,' it must begin by confronting all of the above facts. The aspirations of millions of Americans to radicalize uncannily match the objective conditions of their deracinated lives in ways Socialists can best explain. Indeed, the Left mantra that 'no one is going to save us but ourselves' has been painfully understood by hundreds of thousands who have used direct action, creative resistance, self-organizing and fearless militancy—from the Occupy movement to Black Lives Matter to the Women's March to fighting fascism in the streets.

Here I offer some modest proposals for ways a new revolutionary Left could begin to inhabit these conditions, revitalize itself and create a new history from the ashes of contemporary political life. They are intended to begin a latent but necessary discussion of how to assemble the scattered pieces of revolutionary socialism from below into a recognizable structure for confronting capitalism and beating it:

1. As soon as COVID will allow, a national assembly of revolutionary socialists organized in collaboration between leading radical political organizations and currents should take place. It should occur in a location where Black Lives Matter protests have been strong, like Oakland or Minneapolis. The assembly should include militant unions and radical queer, immigrant rights, and feminist organizations. Its charge would be how to build a unified, independent socialist organization. Independent in this context would mean independent not just of the Democratic Party but of either academic, publishing, or mutual aid institutions. Each and all of these have contributed in the past to split-thinking within revolutionary organizations about function, purpose, politics and loyalty.
2. The national assembly should foreground debate about the role of the revolutionary party and revolutionary organization in building a mass socialist movement. Prior to the collapse of the ISO, and in response in part to the rise of the DSA, this conversation was beginning. It is critical to resume. The strengths and weaknesses of both the Leninist democratic centralist model and now the dominant DSA model are well-known to the Left. There are many others relevant to our moment to consider, like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee of the early 1960s. There is no shortage of critical tradition on the question to draw from. Motivating the discussion should be a singular objective: defining a party structure that best speaks to the objective conditions of our time, and building that structure.
3. A public reckoning with the facts of the collapse of international socialism in the Anglospheric world is necessary. It is a public secret on the broad Left that both the Socialist Workers Party in the U.K. and the International Socialist Organization in the U.S. fell apart over cover-up and mishandling of rapes by members. It is less well-known that the ISO's implosion included a never-completed assessment of how a racist organizational culture intimidated, discouraged and muzzled many of its best members. To step forward, and win back hundreds or thousands of people alienated from the international socialist tradition, the equivalent of a Truth and Reconciliation process should begin. A national assembly would be a good place to start.
4. A national on-line revolutionary socialist daily newspaper is needed for a new Left. It should rival *Jacobin* for its frequency of publication but function primarily as a documentary space for the living conditions of politically conscious working-class people. The new, emergent socialist organization to come should deploy the new paper as the primary site of its practical and theoretical activity. It should be mainly an organizing tool for bringing new people to revolutionary socialism.
5. A new framework is needed for the relationship between revolutionary socialism and electoral politics. Both the International Socialist "lesser of two evils" line and the DSA's porous electoralism have revealed weaknesses in helping to build a strong socialism from below movement. The inevitable contradictions between elections and mass organizing are only likely to deepen given the recent success of groups like the DSA and Socialist Alternative in electing people to local office. A coherent and unified strategy is essential.
6. The revolutionary left needs a new perspective on fascism and how to fight it. In recent times a number of writers and organizers have begun a discussion about the differences between fascism now and in history. The global authoritarian turn has not been sufficiently diagnosed by the Left. Nor has a satisfying strategy for how to fight it. Both are needed.
7. The revolutionary left needs a rural strategy. The 'country-city' political divide in the U.S. is emblematic of degraded material conditions in vast swaths of the U.S. where neither industry nor agriculture sustains life. 82 percent of people who voted for Trump, nearly all of them in rural areas, cited the economy as their primary reason. We need assessment, perspective and understanding of this, a revisit of radical agrarianism and populism, and a sustained effort to build socialist education in the country side. We can begin by confronting the material deprivations that have made so many working-class rural people vulnerable to racism and xenophobia.
8. When successful in the past, Communist and Socialist movements have had elaborate

campaigns to build youth movements. A new such movement is needed. Young Americans are the most ready to become socialist of any demographic, according to polls. High schools in America are hotbeds of environmental, queer, and antifascist politics. The significant achievement of the DSA in building a Youth wing (YDSA) is one model for a new revitalized independent revolutionary Left focused on youth. Others are available.

9. Political education is central to rebuilding a broader revolutionary Left. History is dense with examples of radical pedagogy and models to follow, from Worker Schools of the 1930s, to the Freedom Schools of the early 1960s, to DSA Night Schools today. The pandemic has forced us to rethink political education on-line. We need a national real-time and virtual Socialist Education Program organized around some of the questions above and others not yet articulated here.
10. Finally, a new revolutionary Left must become an Abolitionist Left. In its focus on eliminating policing, Black Lives Matter has been the most important political movement in the U.S. since the anti-Vietnam War movement in raising political consciousness about the role of the state under capitalism. It has inaugurated the deepest challenge to state power in a generation. More than any political development in our time, BLM provides fertile ground and example for the gestation of a unified, multiracial working-class revolutionary socialist movement that can challenge the power of capital and win.