On Revolution and Internationalism: Socialist Strategy Today

written by Jason Schulman | January 14, 2019

With the revival of the socialist movement in the U.S., and the phrase "political revolution" having briefly entered the political mainstream as a result of Bernie Sanders' Presidential campaign, it's a good idea for contemporary socialists to look back upon the political strategies of our predecessors to examine what they thought "revolution" signified, and to draw appropriate conclusions.

Given that the current Socialist International (SI), which DSA exited from in 2017, simply doesn't act like a real International—a "world party" committed to a specific set of political principles which cooperates across borders—and that even avowed democratic socialists like the UK's Jeremy Corbyn are committed to "social-nationalist" projects like a supposedly left-wing version of "Brexit," U.S. democratic socialists (and not just us) must take seriously what Michael Harrington wrote in *Socialism Past & Future* (1989): "[A] Belgian socialist…once made the biting commentary that the only thing that the socialists had ever really nationalized was socialism itself. If that judgment stands in the twenty-first century, then socialism will be, and deserves to be, finished."

The Fate of Parliamentary Gradualist Socialism

If political revolution means, as it should, the full rewriting of the constitutions of existing states—the replacement of "bourgeois democracy" (or flat-out dictatorship) with workers' democracy, far more thorough and delegative than any existing government—then most social democratic parties haven't been interested in it since the very early 20th century. In the late 1890s, when many parties of the Second (Socialist) International—an alliance of socialist parties which, in theory, all shared the same Marxist principles—were quickly growing in Europe, the "revisionist controversy" in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) initiated a debate over whether socialism could be accomplished peacefully through routine trade union activity and election of socialists to office, or if the working class would have to overthrow the capitalist state. The main question was whether or not the capitalist class would respect its own legal order if the socialist movement became popular enough to try to legislate capitalism out of existence. The British Fabian Socialists and the German revisionists saw no political revolution as necessary; they even saw class struggle itself as outmoded or having no innate connection to "socialism" as a goal.

Decades later, left-wing social democrats who recognized the persistence of class conflict, in response to the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, put forward more radical plans for the parliamentary road to socialism. There was the "Meidner Plan" in Sweden to "transfer a proportion of annual profits to union-controlled 'wage-earner funds,' incrementally increasing this stake until they had majority control. The process would be gradual, but if implemented as designed the Swedish economy would today consist of firms primarily owned by union-dominated social wealth funds…[this] would have gradually socialized the Swedish economy." Tony Benn of the British Labour Party advocated an Alternative Economic Strategy which, while not a plan for total economic socialization, "proposed a National Enterprise Board… empowered to 'take over profitable sections of individual firms in those industries where a public holding is essential to enable Government … to plan the national economy in the national interest.'" (The use of *national* economy and *national* interest is no accident.) The Chilean Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende advocated a "peaceful road to socialism" and "launched an agrarian reform program, recognized the right of workers to take over factories and run them collectively, took control of most of the country's banks,

and expropriated multinational corporations…all within the framework of the Chilean constitution."

Neither Meidner, nor Benn, nor Allende believed a political revolution was necessary to move beyond capitalism. Allende, an avowed Marxist, did speak of "the necessity of replacing the present Constitution, with its liberal foundations, by a Constitution of a socialist nature." But he also assumed that the Chilean military would remain faithful to constitutional norms—a fatal miscalculation that led to the deaths of thousands after General Augusto Pinochet assumed power. Both the Socialist and Communist Parties had members and sympathizers in the Chilean armed forces who could have organized rank-and-file opposition to the commanding officers. Many wanted to do just that but were discouraged from doing so by the Popular Unity leadership in order to not alienate "constitutionalist" generals…like Pinochet.

By now, given the capitalist class's historical support for dictators ranging from Hitler in in the 1930s to Pinochet in the 1970s, we can be certain that if capitalists feel sufficiently threatened by a socialist movement, they'll support fascist and military dictatorships, and accept limits on their own civil and political rights, if that's what it takes to save their system. For that matter, economic sanctions by the big capitalist powers, even against a Global North country like Sweden, would be enough to undo the "gradual socialization of firms," even *without* violence. A purely peaceful and electoral transition to socialism assumes the loyalty of the military and sees no need to drastically change state structures to ensure that the working class can actually govern as the ruling class. It just isn't feasible—especially if the strategy has no international component. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone who seriously promotes such a strategy today, their rhetoric notwithstanding.

Taking Power by "Taking Away the Army" from the Ruling Class

That said, a significant part of the revolutionary left should've realized the need for strategic rethinking decades ago. It isn't simply that German workers steadfastly refused to join ill-conceived attempts at insurrection by the Spartacus League in 1919 and the German Communist Party in 1921—both efforts were deemed "ultra-left" by the leadership of the early Third (Communist) International, made up of Marxist parties that split from the Second International because of its leaders' support for the First World War. It's that as early as 1895 Frederick Engels noted how conditions in Europe "since 1848 have become far more unfavorable for civil fights, far more favorable for the military." Conditions for armed insurrection today are even worse, frustrating old visions of splitting away a percentage of the ranks of the army to the left and/or arming workers outside of the army. Certainly, due to the end of the draft in 1971, the average U.S. worker has never learned how to use Abrams tanks, armored personnel carriers, or fighter-jets or bombers. Historically, yes, growing revolutionary movements face repression, which leads to increasing conflict and a struggle over the state; this in turn leads to insurrection and to civil war. But today the U.S. capitalist state—among others—has nuclear weapons, and we should put nothing past the ruling class's political representatives doing whatever they deem necessary to prevent the victory of socialism.

The taking of political power by the working class now requires a greater critical mass than was necessary a hundred years ago. The transition to socialism requires the winning over of the *vast* majority of rank-and-file soldiers in order to ensure that they will disobey orders given by right-wing putschists against the socialist supra-majority. Hence, socialists must take seriously recruitment and education within the armed forces—and this is something we must discover how to do *now*, far in advance of a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation in the U.S. (It's been rarely mentioned on the U.S. left since the Vietnam War that some leftists concluded that the best way to resist the war, when their draft numbers were called, was to join the army and organize within. The antiwar movement in the armed forces—including the civilian-led GI coffeehouses that supported the ranks' revolt against the war—is a historical example we should study.)

We Need a Real International – and a "Strategy of a Patience"

Provided we have a powerful enough socialist (and labor) movement, achieving radical economic—and to some degree, political—reform is possible solely within the borders of the extremely wealthy U.S., a country which—of course—controls its own currency. The problems which Syriza immediately faced in governing Greece will never appear here. But "socialism in one country" is as impossible in the U.S. as it is in the rest of the world. As a global system, capitalism can only be superseded globally.

Consider the dilemma that a Jeremy Corbyn-led UK Labour Party government will find itself in. Despite inevitable capital flight, a Corbyn-led Labour government might be able to renationalize the British railways, nationalize the energy sector, and fully fund the National Health Service (NHS). It might be able to remove anti-trade union laws and it might make UK taxation rates more progressive. But that's about the full extent of what a Corbyn government could do in terms of "taking capital away from Capital." Those expecting more radical policies, such as expropriation and public ownership of the banking system, are going to be disappointed.

Even though the UK isn't in the Eurozone and is therefore able to control its own currency, Corbyn's desire to rebalance Britain away from financial services, even as the UK remains a special tax haven, involves continuing to subsidize British productive industries. The problem is that, as the head of a capitalist nation-state committed to a fundamentally *national* project of reform, Corbyn has no choice but to engage in such policies. British industry is unable to compete "fairly" with the cheap labor and favorable conditions of business that are available to capital in the Global South. The result, at best, would be to export British unemployment and poverty elsewhere. Furthermore, Corbyn is committed to "Brexit," and while there's clearly nothing innately pro-socialist about the European Union, a pro-worker Brexit is impossible. As Urte Macikene says, the reason for the UK to stay in the EU "is not support for EU institutions, or even a statement of a concrete hope to reform them from within, but a commitment to forging fighting alliances with labour movements across Europe to stand up to neoliberal institutions at all levels, beat austerity, address the refugee crisis, oppose militarism and imperialism, and take bold action on the climate."

What Macikene strongly implies is that socialists in Europe and elsewhere, including the U.S., have no choice but to do the hard work of constructing a truly anti-capitalist International—something very different from the Socialist International or even the Party of the European Left—made up of sincerely radical and internationalist parties that will live up to the example of the Second International at its best moments, but also go beyond the mostly symbolic internationalism of the International before 1914. It will have to cooperate across national borders on common projects. This may be very difficult but that doesn't negate its necessity.

The new International will have to engage in a "strategy of patience" quite different from parliamentary-socialist gradualism, even in its most radical form, but also different from the far-left belief—more common in the 1970s than today—that partial, especially trade unionist, struggles can be led into a generalized "mass strike" challenge to the capitalist state, and *in the course of that challenge* ("a non-stop series of mobilizations that make the working class aware of the necessity of taking power for real social change," as one current recently put it), the members of the would-be revolutionary party can guide the movement to the seizure of power in the form of "all power to the soviets" despite their marginality *before* the crisis breaks out (assuming soviets/workers' councils appear at all).

In socialist politics there's just no way to "get rich quick," to take power without engaging in the hard slog involved in building a mass party and associated organizations (cooperatives, workers' educational institutions, workers' media, etc.) long before anything like a revolutionary situation

emerges. Moreover, there's no way to "con" workers into taking power by making economic demands that can't be implemented under capitalism (for certain Trotskyist groups this is what "transitional demands" have become—"nationalization of the Fortune 500" and the like).

Despite the party's continuous right turn from 1906 onward, there's still much to learn from the strategy of the early SPD and the writings of Karl Kautsky through 1909. The SPD refused participation in coalition governments with "left" bourgeois parties as a way to achieve reform. Marxist SPD members knew that participation wouldn't lead to significant reform, let alone anti-capitalist revolution. It was a "get rich quick scheme" that would never pay off. This is where the Kautskyan "strategy of patience" comes in, where the socialist party-movement builds up its forces over the long term to the point when it's able to take power with majority working-class support. The party rejects cross-class coalition governments as well as "non-stop mobilization" fantasies. It instead fights for an *opposition* that will openly express the working class's independent interests. Without starting with the struggle for an opposition (something U.S socialists have been trying to do for a long time, in a sense, as we never believed that *we* would be governing the country any time soon) there's no chance of confronting, in the future, the issue of building an alternative governing authority to that of the capitalist state. The oppositional socialist party doesn't fetishize forming a government (or electing a President); it *doesn't see forming a government that would govern the capitalist state as the most important component of making the transition out of capitalism*. The class struggle *outside* of governmental structures is of a higher priority than that within them.

Day-to-day, before the working-class seizure of power, our socialist commitment to *political* revolution will consist of demanding radical *political* reforms. As Mike Macnair makes clear in his book on revolutionary strategy, *these reforms will never all be enacted by any capitalist state*, certainly not all at once. Some surely can't be enacted by a capitalist state at all, though others have existed at different times in different capitalist countries. Taken altogether, they would establish a polity where, in addition to a solidification of the political liberties partially provided by liberal constitutionalism (freedom of speech, assembly, association, movement, etc.) there is:

- universal military training and service (for those who desire it) and democratic political and trade union rights within the military (as once existed in West Germany);
- election and recallability of all public officials; public officials to be paid an average skilled workers' wage;
- abolition of official secrecy laws and of private rights of copyright and confidentiality;
- abolition of judicial review of the democratic decisions of elected legislatures;
- abolition of constitutional guarantees of the rights of private business property and freedom of trade.

This, sadly, is where the SPD's "Marxist center" eventually fell down. After 1909 Kautsky and others fostered the illusion that socialists could capture and use the liberal-democratic state for working-class political power. They ignored Marx's insight that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes," that to actually rule we need a radically democratic "social republic." The *national* limits of their strategy ultimately helped support the feeding of workers into the "human-being lawnmower" of the First World War.

This is still a relevant political issue today. The majority of existing left parties around the world use *nationalist* arguments and seek to "simply" take hold of and use the existing bureaucratic-coercive state, even if some in them want to do so for socialist purposes. But since the "stagflation" crisis of the 1970s the electoral cycle has repeatedly produced "center-left" and even "radical reformist" governments that end in disillusionment, the victory of ever more right-wing conservative parties, and now the increasing rise of the far right. The need for an alternative to capitalist society is clear—quoting Rosa Luxemburg on "socialism or barbarism" has become a cliché. But to be a

revolutionary today requires understanding that the current main task of socialists in liberal democracies is *not* to fight for an alternative *government*. It's to fight to build an alternative, internationalist *opposition*, inside and outside of legislatures, that commits itself explicitly to self-emancipation of the working class through "extreme" democracy, as *opposed to* all the state-loyalist parties and politicians, right or moderate-left.

Workers of the World…

To sum up, "national socialism" is a contradiction in terms. We need a genuine International of socialist parties which, politically, are in practice all on the same page, and which can work together on projects across borders. Capital is international—working-class organizations have to be just as international, and beyond just the symbolic level. Otherwise, no political revolution—in the U.S. or elsewhere—is possible. Relatedly, a precondition for political revolution—the taking of political power by the working class through the dissolution of the coherence of the armed forces of capitalist states—is a "strategy of patience" as outlined above. This strategy must be internationalist and radical-democratic, not one that accepts the existing order of nation-states. We must take "workers of the world unite" with the greatest seriousness. And given the current stakes, no matter the difficulty, our patience must be combined with a sense of urgency.