Twenty Theses for Liberation

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Progressive International has provided translations on The Wire

Introduction: A Proposal

The idea of a movement of movements is not new. The concept remains popular, logical, and inspiring yet remains just that—a concept. Near universal woes such as inequality, climate change, and fascist stirrings could pressure diverse movements into a holistic progressive bloc, and in some cases, there has already been progress towards such convergence. There is a rising desire and will for coming together, but in practice, cohesion and even solidarity remain largely elusive.

What is missing is often identified as strategic organizing, while at the same time our anti-authoritarian and pluralist values rightly cause us to shy away from rigid blueprints and vertical chains of command. However, this dilemma presents a false choice. We must get organized, but we don’t need to abandon diversity and self-determination in order to come together around vision and strategy if we build our values into shared vision. Perhaps further effort towards conceiving, sharing, and utilizing a broad but unifying vision and strategy could provide much needed structure for a movement of movements to grow and thrive. And why now? Because there currently seems to be more hunger than in a long time for unity even as there is also considerable doubt about attaining it.

Below, we propose some basic insights, claims, and commitments that all seekers of new societal relations might choose to further develop and refine. The 20 theses are not ours per se, but come from many movements over years, decades, and even centuries.

Of course, none of the organizational or individual signers agree with every word of what follows. Rather, we all feel that in sum the 20 theses provide an excellent basis for debate and elaboration that can, over time, inform not just agreed opposition to existing injustices, but collective pursuit of a better world.

Here are the twenty proposed theses we together submit for consideration, debate, and refinement.

Thesis One: Foundations

To be comprehensive and liberatory, long-term aims must centrally address polity, economy, kinship, culture, ecology, and international relations because each of these aspects of life not only profoundly

influences peoples' options and well being, but also because due to extensive entanglement, each contributes to and even reinforces and reproduces the defining features of the rest, so that all have priority strategic importance.

Thesis Two: Polity

To eliminate political elitism and domination, to be liberatory, political institutions will need to establish transparent mechanisms to carry out and evaluate political decisions and to convey to all citizens self managing political say proportionate to effects on them. To accomplish that will in turn require that liberatory political institutions include grassroots assemblies, councils, or communes (and federations of those) by which people can manifest their views. It will likewise require that liberatory political institutions provide advanced public education so people's views are well formed and clearly expressed. And to ensure that deliberations and decisions are made consistent with people's interests, it will require frequent direct policy participation or, when needed, re-callable representation and delegation that utilizes appropriate voting algorithms.

Additionally, to ensure freedom to each person consistent with freedom to all people, and to benefit all people while also protecting and even advancing diversity, liberatory political institutions will need to guarantee maximum civil liberties. This will of course include freedom to speak, write, worship, assemble, and organize political parties.

To ensure diversity and continuous development, liberating political institutions will need to welcome, facilitate, and protect dissent, and to guarantee to individuals and groups means to pursue their own goals consistent with not interfering with the same rights for others.

Regarding violations, to attain justice while promoting rehabilitation, liberatory political institutions will need to foster solidarity and to provide inclusive means to fairly, peacefully, and constructively adjudicate disputes and violations of agreed norms.

Finally, in light of the entanglement of all key facets of society, liberatory political institutions will have to be compatible with new features in other dimensions of life and vice versa.

Thesis Three: Kinship, Gender, and Sexuality

To achieve an end to denials based on sex, gender, identity, or age, new kinship institutions will need to ensure that no individuals or groups — by gender, identity, sexual orientation, or age — are privileged above or dominate others in income, influence, access to education, job quality, or any other dimension of life that bears on quality of life. To attain that end, liberatory gender and kin institutions will need to respect marriage and other lasting relations among adults as religious, cultural, or social practices, but will need to reject such ties as ways for sectors of the population to gain financial benefits or social status that others lack.

Both for equity and also for the enrichment of personality and affirmation that care-giving conveys, liberatory gender and kin institutions will need to respect care-giving as a central function of society including, perhaps even making, care-giving a part of every citizen's social responsibilities, and in any event otherwise ensuring equitable burdens and benefits among people of all genders for all household and child raising practices.

Liberatory gender and kin institutions will need to not privilege certain types of family formation or role over others, but instead to actively support all types of families consistent with society's other norms and practices. And to promote children's well-being and affirm society's responsibility for all children, liberatory gender and kin institutions will need to affirm the right of diverse types of

families to have children and to provide them with love and a sense of rootedness and belonging, and will need to minimize or eliminate age- and or gender-based permissions and or restrictions, instead utilizing non-arbitrary means for determining when an individual is too old (or too young) or otherwise able or not able to receive benefits or shoulder responsibilities.

To ensure that each person honors the autonomy, humanity, and rights of others, liberatory gender and kin institutions will also need to centrally affirm diverse expressions of sexual pleasure, personal identity, sexual identity, gender identity, and mutual intimacy while they provide diverse, empowering sex education as well as legal prohibition against non-consensual sex.

And finally, in light of the entanglement of all key facets of society, liberatory kinship institutions will have to be compatible with new features in other dimensions of life and vice versa.

Thesis Four: Race, Ethnicity, Culture and Community

Liberating cultural/community relations, including race, ethnic, national and religious, requires that we rectify the negative historical and contemporary impacts of racist, colonial, and otherwise bigoted structures and neo-liberal policies and practices on countries and communities, especially in the global South.

Liberating culture and community will require implementing new participatory cultural/community institutions that ensure that no individuals or groups—by race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, or any other cultural community identification—are privileged above or dominate others. To that end, liberatory cultural and community institutions will need to ensure that people can have multiple cultural and social identities, and will need to provide space and resources for people to positively express their cultural/community identities however they choose while recognizing that which identity is most important to any particular person at any particular time depends on that person’s situation and assessments.

Liberatory cultural and community relations will also need to explicitly recognize that many rights and values exist regardless of cultural identity, so that all people deserve self management, equity, solidarity, and liberty, even while society also protects all people’s right to affiliate freely to enjoy diversity.

To end the reality and even the fear of colonization and race, caste, religious, or national suppression, liberatory cultural and community relations must also provide all cultural communities guaranteed access to means to preserve their cultural integrity and practices.

Liberatory cultural and community relations will also need to eliminate barriers to free exit from all cultural communities, including nations, and must impose no arbitrary non cultural barriers to free entry, including affirming that communities that guarantee free entry and exit can be under the complete self determination of their members so long as their policies and actions don’t conflict with society’s overall agreed norms.

And finally, in light of the entanglement of all key facets of society, liberatory cultural/community institutions will have to be compatible with new features in other dimensions of life and vice versa.

Thesis Five: Economy

Liberating economics will require implementing new economic institutions that ensure that no individuals or classes are privileged above or dominate others and that all economic actors are able to participate fully in determining their own economic lives. To attain such classlessness, liberatory

economic institutions will need to preclude owning productive assets such as natural resources and factories so that ownership plays no role in determining people's' decision-making influence or share of income.

To attain classlessness, new economic institutions will also need to ensure that all workers have a say in decisions, to the extent possible, proportionate to effects on them, sometimes best attained by majority rule, sometimes by consensus or other arrangements. This will, in turn, entail that new economic institutions have venues for deliberation including worker and consumer councils or assemblies, including that new economic institutions eliminate corporate divisions of labor that typically give about one-fifth of workers empowering tasks while they consign to four-fifths mainly rote, repetitive, and obedient tasks.

Thus, instead of producing a class division based on differential empowerment, liberatory economic institutions will need to ensure that each worker enjoys a share of empowering tasks via suitable new designs of work that convey to all workers sufficient confidence, skills, information, and access to participate effectively in self-managed decision making.

Additionally, to attain equity, liberatory economic institutions will need to ensure that workers who work longer or harder or at more onerous conditions, doing socially valued labor (including socially valued training), earn a proportionately greater share of the social product but do not earn payment according to property, bargaining power, or the value of personal output—while all who are unable to work nonetheless receive full income.

Likewise, liberatory economic relations will need to avoid both market competition and top-down planning, since each produces class rule, alienation, and ecological degradation among other violations. In their place, liberatory economic relations will need to find ways to conduct decentralized cooperative negotiation of inputs and outputs via workers and consumers councils and federations of councils, with additional participatory facilitating structures as needed.

And finally, in light of the entanglement of all key facets of society, liberatory economic institutions will have to be compatible with new features in other dimensions of life and vice versa.

Thesis Six: Internationalism

Internationalism means valuing people in other countries and being in solidarity with their just struggles for decent lives. Liberating international relations will require implementing new participatory international institutions that ensure that no nations or geographic regions are privileged above others, and that, until that is achieved, move toward that result. As a means to that end, liberatory international relations will need to end the subordination of nations in all its forms including colonialism, neo-colonialism, and neoliberalism, but also residual differences in collective wealth.

Liberatory international policy and structures will need to foster equitable internationalist globalization in place of exploitative corporate globalization, including diminishing economic disparities in countries' relative wealth, protecting cultural and social patterns internal to each country, and facilitating international entwinement as people desire, including implementing reparations and international exchange and aid as well as border redefinitions with these ends in mind.

Thesis Seven: Ecology

Not only for liberation, but literally for human survival, to liberate ecological relations will require

implementing new participatory ecological practices that first and foremost cease and reverse unsustainable resource depletion, environmental degradation, climate change, and other ecosystem disrupting trends.

To such ends, liberatory ecological relations will need to facilitate not only an end to fossil fuels, but an ecologically sound reconstruction of society that accounts for the full ecological as well as social/personal costs and benefits of both short- and long-term economic and social choices, so that future populations can sensibly decide levels of production and consumption, preferred duration of work, degrees of self and collective reliance, energy use and harvesting, stewardship, pollution norms, climate policies, conservation practices, consumption choices, and other future policy choices.

Liberatory ecological norms and practices will also need to foster a consciousness of ecological connection, responsibility, and reciprocity so that future citizens understand and respect the ecological precautionary principle and are well prepared to decide policies regarding such matters as animal rights or vegetarianism that transcend sustainability.

Where theses 1 – 7 above address attaining a degree of visionary unity regarding what we seek, theses 8-20 below seek to attain a degree of strategic unity regarding how to win what we seek.

Thesis Eight: Organize

Liberatory organizations are needed for groups to work effectively together with shared intentions while discovering new insights, retaining and sharing lessons, and collectively applying lessons from their own experiences. Such liberatory organizations will need to facilitate learning, preserve lessons to provide continuity, combine and apply energies and insights to win changes, and sustain support for members.

Thesis Nine: Be Strategic

To win liberation requires organizing that counters cynicism with hope, that incorporates seeds of the future in the present, that grows membership and commitment among the class, nationality, cultural, age, ability, and sexual/gender constituencies to be liberated, and that wins reforms without becoming reformist. Liberatory organizing requires relevant, flexible strategy, guided by shared vision, to consistently progress along a trajectory towards lasting, fundamental change.

Thesis Ten: Center Vision

Liberatory organizing will need to realize that doubt about the possibility of a better society is a primary impediment to people seeking change. To combat cynicism rooted in doubt and to engender informed hope will therefore need to be a permanent organizing priority. To that end, liberatory organizing will need to always offer and clarify the possibility and merit of vision and the efficacy of activism, even beyond indicating, detailing, and explaining the pains people currently endure and the tenacious obstacles to change people currently confront.

Thesis Eleven: Promote Participatory Decision Making

To arrive at well-considered decisions, collectively implement decisions, and monitor that such decisions have been carried out correctly, a liberatory organization will need to provide extensive opportunities for members to participate in organizational decision making, including engaging in

deliberations with others. To those ends, a liberatory organization will need to establish internal structures that facilitate everyone's participation including, when possible, offering childcare at meetings and events, finding ways to reach out to those who might be immersed in kinship duties, striving to meet diverse accessibility needs, and aiding those with busy work schedules.

A liberatory organization will need to also provide transparency regarding all actions by elected or delegated leaders, including placing a high burden of proof on keeping secret any agenda, whether to avoid repression or for any other reason, and to provide a mechanism to recall leaders or representatives who members believe are not adequately representing them, as well as to provide means to fairly, peacefully, and constructively resolve internal disputes.

Thesis Twelve: Build Empowerment, Not Hierarchy

To be liberatory, an organization's structure and policies will need to approximate, as well as circumstances and priorities allow, the self-management norm that "each member has decision making influence proportional to the degree they are affected."

To that end, a liberatory organization will need to be internally classless including being structured so that a minority who are initially disproportionately equipped with needed skills, information, and confidence do not form a formal or informal decision-making hierarchy that leaves initially less-prepared members to perpetually follow orders or perform only rote tasks.

Likewise, over time, a liberatory organization needs to apportion empowering and disempowering tasks to ensure that no individuals or sectors of members have a relative monopoly on information or position, and no subset of members has disproportionate say whether due to race, gender, class, or other attributes.

Thesis Thirteen: Celebrate & Protect Diversity

A liberatory organization must monitor and work to correct instances of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, transphobia, and homophobia, including having diverse roles suitable to people with different backgrounds, personal priorities, and personal situations.

To those ends, a liberatory organization will need to celebrate internal debate and dissent and to allow dissenting views to exist and be tested alongside preferred views. It will need to guarantee members' rights to organize "currents" or "caucuses" with full rights of democratic debate.

Likewise, a liberatory organization will need to ensure that national, regional, city, and local chapters, as well as different sectors of the organization, can respond to their own circumstances and implement their own programs as they choose, so long as their choices do not block other groups equally addressing their own situations, or deny the shared goals and principles of the whole organization.

Thesis Fourteen: Start Now! Prefigure, Practice, Experiment, & Refine

Liberatory organizing will need to plant the seeds of the future in the present to enhance hope, to test and refine ideas, and to learn experiential lessons able to inform strategy and vision. To plant seeds of the future under present class, race, gender, sexual, age, ability, and power relations, liberatory organizing will need to not only constructively address the ways it's members interrelate but to also establish internal norms that support building exemplary workplace, campus, and community institutions that represent and refine the values of the movement, which the organization then in turn offers as liberating alternatives to the status quo it combats.

Thesis Fifteen: Engage in Outreach & Build Structures of Outreach

To constantly grow membership among the class, community, nationality, and gender constituencies it aims to liberate, liberatory organizing will need to learn from and seek unity with audiences far wider than its own membership. It will need to attract and affirmatively empower young people and to organize people currently critical and even hostile to its aims, not least by participating in, supporting, building, and aiding diverse social movements and struggles beyond its own immediate agendas, and also by explicitly directly and respectfully addressing critical and even hostile constituencies in communities, on campuses, and at work.

Liberatory organizing will also need to seek, develop, debate, disseminate, and advocate truthful news, analysis, vision, and strategy among its members and especially in the wider society, including developing and sustaining needed media institutions and means of face-to-face communication as well as using diverse methods of agitation and struggle—from educational efforts to rallies, marches, demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, occupations, and diverse direct action campaigns—to win gains and build movements.

Thesis Sixteen: Build Power Blocs

To sustain deep unity, liberatory organizing will need to go beyond seeking coalitions of diverse organizations and movements who agree on a minimum focus, to develop new forms of cross-constituency and cross-issue mutuality. New blocs of activist movements, campaigns, and organizations will often need to take as their shared program not a least common component of what they all individually favor, but the totality of their individual priorities, even including their differences, so that each movement, campaign, and organization in the bloc aids the rest and all thereby become dramatically more powerful.

Thesis Seventeen: Build Trajectories of Commitment & Momentum

Liberatory organizing will need to seek changes in society for citizens to enjoy immediately, while it also establishes by the words and methods of its struggles, the means it uses in its organizing, and the ideas it broaches and broadcasts, a likelihood that all those involved will pursue and win more change in the future. Liberatory organizing will need to seek short-term changes of its own conception by its own actions, but also need to seek short term changes that others conceive by supporting other movements and projects, both internationally, by country, and also locally, including addressing such matters as climate change, arms control, war and peace, the level and composition of economic output, income, agricultural relations, education, health care, housing, income distribution, duration of work, gender roles, racial relations, immigration, policing, media, law, and legislation.

Liberatory organizing will need to seek and win gains by means that reduce oppression in the present and that prepare means, methods, and allegiances able to win more gains in the future, always leading toward liberation.

Thesis Eighteen: Choose Tactics to Serve Strategy

Liberatory organizing must embrace a diversity of tactics suited to diverse contexts that best serve flexible, resilient strategies guided by shared vision.

Liberatory organizing will need to connect efforts, resources, and lessons across continents and from country to country, region to region, community to community, workplace to workplace, and campus to campus, even as it also recognizes that strategies and tactics suitable to different places and

different times will differ.

Liberatory organizing will need to take a long and encompassing view, so as to focus not solely on immediate tactical success or failure—such as stopping a meeting, completing a march, or winning a vote—but also and even mainly on broader matters such as how many new people are reached, what commitments are enlarged or enriched, and what infrastructure is created. It will need to combine respect for the urgency of immediate injustices that need to be righted with the patience that major long-term change requires.

Liberatory organizing will, to that end, need to understand that vision orients aims, strategy informs program, and tactics implement plans. For each, it will need to pay close attention to implications of choices for advancing immediate campaigns, organization, and consciousness, but also for advancing longer run prospects, all for those immediately involved and for those viewing from a distance. For example, it will need to judge calls for participation in electoral politics case by case, including cultivating a cautious electoral attitude because of the captivating and corrupting dynamics of electoral campaigns, even while also recognizing their outreach potential and reform relevance.

Thesis Nineteen: Practice Regenerative Organizing

Liberatory organizing will need to develop mechanisms that provide financial, legal, employment, and emotional support to its members so that its members can be in better positions to participate in campaigns as fully as they wish and to navigate the various challenges and sometimes negative effects of taking part in radical actions.

Liberatory organizing will need to substantially improve the life situations of its members, including aiding their feelings of self-worth, their knowledge, skills, and confidence, their mental, physical, sexual, and spiritual health, and even their social ties and engagements and leisure enjoyments. It will need to take a positive approach in all interpersonal and organizational matters, always seeking ways forward. It will need to address disagreements not to win against others, or to elevate self, but to find ways all can progress collectively successfully. Thus minority positions will need to be protected and preserved, as possible, in case in time they prove essential.

Thesis Twenty: Foster Leadership From Below

Liberatory organizing will need to understand that we are all different and that successful insights and paths forward are found, communicated, and advocated by some people earlier than by others in acts of “leadership”. Liberatory organizing will need to celebrate such acts but also to prioritize methods that ensure acts of leadership do not yield lasting differential empowerment. The key personal contribution of any leading person or group is elevating other persons or groups into leading, while organizational relations must propel and abet that priority.

Conclusion: Three Goals

Our primary goal is to make the case that organizers and diverse movements would benefit immensely from a widely shared positive perspective. We would benefit from a framework for coalescing around shared vision and strategy, for helping to identify shared aims, and for leveraging collective power to win immediate reforms on a trajectory of societal transformation.

Would it matter if activists were to arrive at such a shared outlook that could span a country, many

countries, or even the world? Would it matter if people who mainly address and seek anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian, anti-ecocide, or anti-war gains were to all share a unifying positive vision? Would it matter if behind calls to enrich and align struggles in different places for different gains, there arose a shared perspective?

If not, there's no need to think further on sharing these or any other theses on liberation. But if such a shared stance could assist each progressive, radical, revolutionary endeavor and could especially align them into much more effective mutual support, then seriously considering the idea of arriving at a shared positive perspective and a strategy for achieving it is essential.

Our second goal is to move forward from identifying the need for a widely shared visionary and strategic framework, to proposing this particular draft framework for engagement. Are these '20 Theses for Liberation' sensible, flexible, and general, but also rich enough to sustain a productive discussion and even generate shared, effective advocacy? They come from movements, experiences, organizations and diverse individuals, but we do not propose them as the only possible formulation.

Across the broad spectrum of progressive and radical movements, there are sure to be reactions that these 20 theses are too long, too specific, lack something favorable, include something unfavorable, go beyond our means, utilize imprecise or un-preferred terminology, or are just something that no matter how worthy, will likely be ignored. Our hope is that these concerns are not a stopping point, but a starting point for undertaking further examination, discussion, debate, improvements, and refinements towards a shared basis, however different it might look from this draft, for future activism and organization building.

How might such a final shared viewpoint emerge? By people talking, writing, reading, debating in person, in periodicals, in organizations. The result, of course, wouldn't be a fixed, unchangeable stance. It would instead continually alter in accord with new experiences, contexts, and insights. The best result would be a continued, collective process of refining, adapting, and utilizing a unifying framework. We would be building and sustaining a culture of coalescing around shared vision and strategy—which is the work of building a movement of movements. We would be bringing separate agendas into powerful solidarity with one another.

Our third and final goal is to invite engagement and responses to these 20 Theses, for which we must stop writing and start listening.