

# Yes, We Can

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We hoped that our book, *Continental Crucible*, would open up a discussion of the future of the North American Left and labor movement, a discussion that is urgent in the face of the relentless capitalist offensive of the last forty years. Dan La Botz's generous, thoughtful, and critical review of our book, *Continental Crucible*, advances that discussion in important ways and we hope that others will join in the discussion. We argue that workers' struggles, while remaining grounded locally, need to simultaneously expand their geographical terrains to match those of capital, that these struggles must move beyond sectionalism and economism towards class-wide, anti-racist, feminist, inclusive, internationalist and transformational goals and that unions themselves have to be transformed into participatory, democratic, and class-political organizations. These are daunting but unavoidable challenges that face the Left and the working class. We also argue that transformed unions—and certainly not unions as they presently exist—are essential for any effective challenge to the power of Capital.

The absence of a significant revolutionary left in all three NAFTA countries creates a major obstacle to this necessary transformation of unions. But that is the unfortunate and difficult reality. The transformation of existing unions and the rebuilding of a revolutionary, non-sectarian left will have to proceed simultaneously if either is to be successful. But there is no other way to effectively challenge the rule of capital and its determination to level downward the working conditions, standards of living, and environmental conditions in all three countries, a determination consciously cultivated by the leading political organizations of the capitalist class in all three countries, as we discuss in Chapters 1-4.

The mass protest movements that have erupted world-wide have, in general, lacked a consciously organized working class core with the ability to give the movement organizational solidity and political direction. The absence of this working class core speaks to the failure of the revolutionary left as well as the cooptation, corruption and sectional economism of much of the union movement. The labor movement has responded with ineffective, rearguard actions while the capitalist class has been transforming the system.

The mass anti-neoliberal protest movements (the Quebec students, the Occupy movement in the US, the anti-media duopoly/electoral fraud youth movement in Mexico), can at best slow down the neoliberal offensive at certain points or win victories, albeit important, (tuition raise reversal in Quebec) that leave intact the power of capital to renew its offensive when these movements have ebbed in energy and organization. Only a solidly institutionalized movement based on the working class and with a left transformatory perspective can give solidity and durability to these movements of students, the middle sectors, and workers.

We think that there's basic agreement on these points. Our differences reside both in Dan's pessimism and in some of his specific reading of our views. Where Dan seems to see relative hopelessness at this moment, we see possibilities, possibilities that face great obstacles, but possibilities nevertheless. There is a murmur of discontent in important sectors of all three countries that occasionally erupts in significant struggles. There have been important episodes of resistance, impressive but fragmented- the Oaxaca uprising of 2006, the resistance of miners in Mexico against great odds, the Madison insurgency, the Quebec student movement. Indeed, these encouraging episodes float in a sea of continuing defeats. There are many good reasons for pessimism. But it's

crucial to cultivate the seeds of resistance—as Dan does in his practice—even in a historical moment of great defeats. Popular discontent, even if not expressed in actions, is being kept alive by the relentlessness of the capitalist offensive and the deliberate slamming shut of the doors of reform. There is a real potential for the emergence of radical, class-based struggles against the capitalist offensive but the path will not be easy. It will require the development of a non-sectarian radical left with a class struggle orientation.

Before summing up our arguments, we'd like to explore three areas in which Dan presents critiques of our perspective on the current situation. Dan argues that we “tend at times to exaggerate the existing level of struggle, to misunderstand the complexity of the situation of Mexican workers in the U.S., and to overestimate the likelihood of revolutionary developments in Mexico in the near future.” We'll comment on these critiques one by one.

### 1. “Exaggerate existing level of struggle”

The level of labor resistance to the capitalist offensive is at a nadir. The forty year assault by Capital and the short-sighted responses of labor have brought the union movement to an incredibly weak position. Our statement in the introduction that the clash between the capitalist offensive and the “forces of resistance” was heating up was a bit exaggerated—or premature, we hope.

But, nevertheless, we *are* more optimistic than Dan about the potential for resistance. The most important reason for optimism is the very success of the capitalist offensive. In the last forty years, both in periods of economic expansion and economic crisis, the capitalist class has been successful in creating more inequality, more human suffering, more poverty, more environmental destruction alongside a consumerist ideology of higher living standards. The capitalist offensive will continue and workers will respond individually and collectively. The heterogeneity within the working class means that there will be a variety of responses that will vary in different moments and different contexts. Despair and feelings of personal failure will mingle with anger and rebelliousness not only in the class but in the minds of individual workers. The rebelliousness for some could turn into reactionary radicalization or class-conscious left radicalization. There is danger and opportunity.

This “American (and Mexican and Canadian) Dream”—which has been a sustaining factor in capitalist domination as well as providing important underpinning for narrow, economistic unionism, is in process of destruction by the very success of the capitalist offensive. The despair that people feel will make them open to new alternatives. In the case of the U.S. and, to a lesser degree Canada, it could make sections of the working class open to right-wing, racist, anti-immigrant demagoguery. This alternative is very unlikely for the Mexican working class because of its different ethno-racial make-up and history of racial victimization in both Mexico and the U.S. as well as the very different character of Mexican popular culture. But for Canada and the U.S., the absence of both a working-class oriented Left and class struggle unionism leaves the door open for a reactionary radicalization of the working class. But the despair felt by workers in all three countries only creates a potential for left radicalization of the working class. It requires ideological-political leadership to win over workers' to the notions that their suffering is the result of capitalism and not of this or that political party or immigrants, definitions widely offered by sections of the media. The potential of left radicalization of the working class needs to be politically nurtured by the interconnected rebuilding of the Left with a working class orientation and the transformation of the labor movement in ways that we discuss and on which we all are in agreement.

We *are* also more optimistic than Dan because of the surprising—and generally unexpected—insurgencies of recent years, insurgencies that have both been inspiring and at the same time, have contained severe limitations. We are in a period both of great working class defeats and massive popular insurgencies. These insurgencies nevertheless represent a re-entry throughout

the world of the masses as political actors. They have (re)established a model of mass direct action as a model of struggle, a model that is crucial not only for the struggle against authoritarian institutions but also has pointed to a necessary alternative to the compromised politics of much of the electoral left. The Arab Spring, the Quebec student movement against tuition increases, the 2012 Mexican movement against electoral fraud and the media, the Madison occupation, the Greek and other European fightbacks against the collective punishment of austerity, the Turkish uprising, and most recently the Brazilian mass insurgency. These insurgencies show the potential for the emergence of mass and unexpected resistance to neoliberalism, though these issues have been intertwined with or submerged within broader, more diverse, and sometime ambiguous demands. These insurgencies have inspired each other. While the cases of insurgency are very heterogeneous, we can suggest that the challenge is the same as mentioned above—the development of a Left with a class struggle and revolutionary perspective within these broad and diverse movements.

The internal diversity of these movements has been both a strength in mobilizing vast and heterogeneous social sectors and a limitation in consolidating these movements or achieving social transformation. These movements, in general, have lacked leadership that could create cohesion and clear direction, a leadership with a mass of rank and file leaders within the movement. A radical working class movement could provide that leadership and the solidity of organizational structure within these diverse movements. But unions and the working class more broadly have lacked this seasoned base and transformational vision to play that role. Its absence has left many of these mobilizations subject to ideological cooptation and/or simply withering away. This argument, of course, would need qualification and greater specificity given the variety of cases.

The labor movements in Canada, Mexico and the U.S., with their lack of transformational vision, their present politics, and their existing organization are not able to play this role. The limitations of the labor movement in Mexico have important differences with the limitations of unions in the U.S. but even the best unions in all three countries have limitations that derive from bureaucratization, sectionalism, and economism as well as from the intrinsic tensions of unions within capitalism. The necessity of bargaining within the system, even when your goal is to transform the system, creates dilemmas and tensions whose progressive resolution requires an overall vision of strategy and politics. But the economistic sectionalism which was successful for some sectors of the working class in the post WWII “golden age” of capitalism has proven totally inadequate to even defend those segments of the working class in this new period, let alone the rest of the working class. In fact, this narrow form of economistic unionism has facilitated the playing off of sections of the working class against each other.

We discuss these issues at length in Chapter 8 of our book in the sections, “The Limits of Presently Existing Unionism,” “The Limits of Presently Existing Solidarity,” and “Transforming Unionism, Transforming Solidarity, Transforming Society.” We argue that the working class is the necessary central backbone to any transformational struggle in all three NAFTA countries, all of which have a vast, if very heterogeneous, working class majority. We argue that unions cannot play a leading role in transformational struggles without transforming themselves. These limits of unions and the necessity of their transformation are a key part of our discussion, as Dan notes. This is why we agree with Dan’s pessimism about presently existing unionism and specifically about US-Canadian international unions as they now exist. But we maintain a cautious optimism that the relentless assault of capital and the models and embers of resistance provide a potential that could lead to a new workers’ movement. We argue that the larger unions in the U.S. and Canada have the organizational and financial wherewithal to play a key role in the development of a new workers’ movement in all of North America—though as currently constituted, they lack the politics and the will. An upsurge of rank and file militancy is necessary to challenge these old structures and politics.

## 1. **“Misunderstand the complexity of Mexican workers in the US”**

Dan argues that our characterization of the protests of Latino immigrants lacks complexity and that we're wrong to view them as having a radical character. He qualifies this critique by saying “if what we mean by radical is a challenge to the established economic, social and political order.

Immigrants...were demanding...the right to participate in American society, not a fundamental change in American society.” We would argue that, while the demands did not have an explicitly radical character, they nevertheless had—and have—a tacitly radical character. There are different potentials in the non-revolutionary demands of the immigrant movement. Reformist demands have radical and radicalizing potential if the system cannot grant them or, if their granting has the potential, to radicalize the struggle. The radical and radicalizing potential of demands lies not simply in the demand but in the context in which it is made. Just as with trade union struggles that can only achieve limited successes within capitalism, they have the potential to radicalize the working class movement in their course of struggle.

There is great heterogeneity in the Latino community and some immigrants do achieve relative success, as Dan points out. However, the proportion of the immigrant community that is able to be successful has been sharply diminished by the structural changes to the economy brought about by the corporate offensive as compared to earlier generations of immigrants. The whole downward harmonization of the labor market has sharply decreased possibilities of mobility for immigrants as well as hopes for a better future for their children. And, yes, there is improvement in absolute poverty levels for many immigrants but that improvement comes at a very high human cost. While health and safety conditions for all workers have deteriorated, the greatest deterioration has been for those on the bottom end of the labor market where immigrants are concentrated. And the very act of migration is an act fueled by hope for a better life in the U.S. as well as desperation about possibilities at home. These raised expectations smack up against the reality of the neoliberal offensive. Raised expectations, disappointing realities, super-exploitative conditions, all create a potential for radicalization.

The immigrant rights' movement was a very broad movement and, as in all very broad movements, there is, of course, a struggle for hegemony in the movement between liberal, reformist forces, socially conservative forces, and left radical forces just as is the case with the broad insurgent movements mentioned above and the labor movement more broadly. And, as in those cases, the weakness of the Left is the Achilles heel of the struggle.

## 1. **“Overestimate the likelihood of revolutionary developments in Mexico in the near future”**

Mexico is not in a pre-revolutionary situation; it is in a deep organic crisis, a catastrophic equilibrium and an implosion and/or explosion of the regime is quite likely in the near future. In fact, it can be argued that an implosion is well underway and that an explosion may well be brewing under the surface, an explosion that may only emerge in fragmented ways and therefore be subject to containment, cooptation and defeat but also may spread. That implosion and/or explosion could lead to a variety of outcomes including a more brutal and more authoritarian regime and/or an intensified and more brutal internal war.

We are more optimistic than Dan about the potential for a workers' insurgency in Mexico in the coming period. There are numerous obstacles and problems but the continuing and now speeded-up neoliberal transformation of the economy as well as the continuing repression and denial of workers' rights have closed off reformist solutions that, along with repression, have previously worked so well in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. Contrary to the systematically promoted myth of an economic renaissance in Mexico, the economy continues in semi-stagnation with deteriorating standards of living for most of

the population (Cypher 2013). The terrible and worsening reality for most of the Mexican population does not guarantee a workers' insurgency but increases the potential for one.

The weakness of the union movement as well as of the revolutionary left in Mexico does not preclude popular uprisings but makes their success more problematic. Again, the challenge is how to simultaneously rebuild a revolutionary left with a working class orientation and a workers' movement, of which unions would be a key component. We also believe that radical traditions of popular insurgency and class struggle are still alive in important sectors of the working class in spite of their manipulation and abuse by the regime and the union officialdom. A renewed workers' movement in Mexico will unavoidably clash with the very structure of the political regime as the whole strategy of the regime is low wages and intensified worker exploitation based on repressive labor control. Workers, with rare exceptions, can only make significant and durable gains in organization, wages, and conditions by transforming the regime.

A workers' insurgency in Mexico, if at all successful, would immediately be attacked by both the Canadian and U.S. regimes. The imperial interventions as well as the insurgency itself would have popular reverberations among the vast Latino population of the U.S. An insurgent workers' movement, even if contained or defeated, could have a big and radicalizing influence on the Mexican working class in the US, especially in the context of the continuing repression of unions and wage cutting in the US.

We believe that a workers' insurgency in Mexico could be the spark for a new wave of North American class struggle. But there is no guarantee that there will be a big wave of workers' insurgency in Mexico or that it will have a wider continental impact. But there is a significant potential for a popular explosion in Mexico along the lines of ones that have recently occurred in other parts of the world. The example of Oaxaca 2006 though limited by its local character and tolerated by the national regime for tactical reasons for a period, shows how quickly the combination of militancy around trade union demands by the teachers' of Oaxaca combined with repression by the regime to produce a genuine popular uprising that controlled Oaxaca City for five months (Roman and Velasco).

## **Conclusion**

There are reasons to despair about the prospects for the workers' movement and the Left in North America at the present moment. But there are also strong reasons for a cautious optimism. Both the obstacles in the way of a revival of the labor movement and the Left as well as the pressing necessity of such a revival—and transformation—are powerful. The challenges are enormous but not impossible. The labor movements of North America and the North American Left can be and must be revived and transformed. Yes, we can.

## **References**

James M. Cypher, "Mexico: Prosperous, Competitive, Undergoing an Economic Renaissance?" in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Summer 2013.

Richard Roman and Edur Velasco, "Mexico's Oaxaca Commune," in *Socialist Register 2008* (edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys).