

Labour defeat

Thoughts on democratic socialism

Angry Workers of the World

21 December 2019

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The following thoughts on the strategy of democratic socialism forms part of our upcoming book reflecting on six years of working class inquiry and intervention in west-London...

‘Democratic socialism’ is currently the main alternative vision to transforming capitalism, and as such we need to take it seriously, despite our deep disagreement with it. By democratic socialism we mean the idea that by using the two legs of the organised labour movement – the trade unions and a socialist party in government – we can walk step-by-step towards socialism. Socialism is defined as a society dominated by either nationalised or cooperative ownership of the means of production and workers’ representation when it comes to management of these economic units. The general strategy of democratic socialism can be summarised briefly.

The idea is to campaign for an electoral victory of a socialist party based on an economic program of partial re-nationalisation of a limited number of key industries and the creation of a wider sector of ‘solidarity economy’ formed by cooperative or municipal companies that can guarantee more de-centralised workers’ participation. In tandem with electoral activities, democratic socialists encourage the support of working class or ‘social movement’ organisations outside of parliament, in order to have an economic power-base to put pressure on both capital and government. Once the party is in power the strategy needs to create a dynamic between a) structural institutional changes decreed by the government which creates more space for the participation of working class organisations (so-called non-reformist reforms) and b) pressure from below to defend and extend these spaces. An example could be to enact banking sector reforms, which limits the scope of financial speculation and tax avoidance and at the same time gives ‘common ownership enterprises’ preferential treatment when it comes to commercial credits. While this happens on the governmental level, trade unions in companies that might try to undermine the reform by threatening to disinvestment will have to increase the pressure on management. The material improvements of workers’ lives and the strengthening of trade unions are supposed to create greater unification within the working class – a kind of jumping board into socialism.

There are two hearts beating in this project. We see many comrades, fed up with the social isolation of so-called ‘revolutionary politics’, becoming attracted to the practical and strategical debates of the democratic socialist project. They can be intellectually invigorating. These comrades might have come from classic anarchist or otherwise ‘revolutionary’ organisations or they might have been politicised during the horizontal, but ineffectual and often self-referential ‘social movements’ of the anti-globalisation or Occupy era. We understand the urge of these comrades to ‘make a difference’ and to think about short, medium and long-term steps towards social change. We can see many fellow working class people who feel the limitation of trade union activity and who hope that Labour in government can turn trade unions into powerful workers’ organisations again. We want to fight for the hearts and minds of these comrades. Then there exists the usual careerist swamp within these organisations, from DSA, Podemos to Corbyn’s Labour. The in-fights and power-games.

The direction of the democratic socialist project in the UK is not primarily determined by its political outlook, but by its class composition. The new Labour left is composed of three main forces: a segment of ambitious and perhaps precarious professionals who feel that according to their educated status they should have more say in society. They also want a good life for ‘the working class’, but their approach is technocratic: learned people and progressive experts are supposed to decide how things are run, not the bankers and the parasitic elite. They form an alliance with the second main force, the union bureaucracy. The union apparatus allows the new professionals to speak in the name of the workers and the union bosses can extend their power

into the political class. The third element are the most marginalised parts of the working class who've had to suffer from years of benefit cuts and sanctions. Labour under Corbyn gave them hope, but the party machine will end up instrumentalising their victim status.

We could write a long list of points of disillusionment with Corbynism, which took place even before the election disaster. The second leader of the party's 'hard-left'-wing, John McDonnell, felt obliged to publicly whitewash the war-criminal Tony Blair. People who voted with Blair to invade Iraq are presented and hosted as 'left candidates', such as the MP David Lammy. Activists at the 2017 party conference learned that Momentum could be used as a disciplining arm, enforcing that delegates wouldn't vote on contentious issues, such as a Brexit referendum. Experiences in local party branches are largely dominated by tedious petty power plays and boring formalities.

During the winter 2019/20 it turned out that the only thing that Corbynism has been able to re-nationalise is the fringe left. As we witness one of the biggest wave of working class protests – from Ecuador, Chile, Sudan to Iran – the left in the UK was completely focused on whatever Corbyn or Johnson were saying on TV. The national narrow-mindedness would have become worse if Labour had entered government: would any democratic socialist have supported unruly working class mobilisations, such as the Yellow Vests or the protests in Iran, under a new and fragile Labour government? We can try to adorn 'Corbynism' with all kind of radical looking paraphernalia and woke memes, from Acid Corbynism to 'luxury or literal communism' – but in the end it's a Party that promises us a minimal minimum wage increase, free broadband and slightly less austerity. But then our focus here is not to argue about utopian visions, but to point out the internal shortcomings of this political strategy.

1) This is not a historic phase for social democracy

Historically, social democracy developed during phases of economic upturns, based on a relatively strong national industrial production capacity. What we face now is an economic crisis and an internationalised production system. This limits both the scope for material concessions and for national economic policies. Secondly, social democracy primarily became hegemonic in post-revolutionary situations. Social democracy was based on large organisations within the working class and a ruling class that allowed workers' political representation in order to avoid revolutionary tensions. Left-communists never get tired of repeating that the establishment of the NHS was not a result of Labour party reformism, but of Tory Cold War counter-insurgency – to avoid large-scale social discontent after the war. Again, this is not a situation we find ourselves in today. The main point for us to stress is: we face harsher conditions of struggle than democratic socialism prepares us for. We can't bypass the day-to-day confrontations with bosses and their violent lackeys. Democratic socialism tends to overemphasise the autonomy of government politics. In the UK the Labour left portrays the Thatcher government and their 'wicked policies' as the source of evil neoliberalism, whereas it was the global crisis in the mid-1970s which forced all governments to attack the working class. You cannot vote your way out of this.

2) Current democratic socialism ignores the capitalist character of the state

Democratic socialist strategies are based on the assumption that the state stands above ‘capitalism’ and could intervene in it as a politically neutral form. Historically the state emerged as the violent arm to impose and secure class relations, e.g. through enclosures, vagrancy laws and the military expansion of markets. The state appears as a neutral force that is only there to look after law and order and the wider organisation of society. But law and order means primarily that the property relations which are the material basis for the exploitation of the working class are maintained. By making us citizens the state disarms us as a collective class force. State politics separate the sphere of social production from the sphere of social decision-making – we are supposed to produce the world, but apart from casting a vote every four years have no say in how the world is run. Materially the state apparatus depends on the continuous exploitation both through taxation and as an employer.

3) Current democratic socialism misreads the relationship between the market and capitalism

Democratic socialists think switching from private to public (state) ownership will be the antidote to capitalism. They see no contradiction therefore between a ‘big state’ and socialism, despite the fact that state intervention – regardless of where it is on the political spectrum – has always played the fundamental role in expanding, enforcing and defending the market. The process of industrialisation itself required state ownership and central economic planning, last but not least in order to enforce order against the emerging industrial working class. During this phase it didn’t matter if the left or the right was in government – large-scale state planning was required by the social situation and was not a political choice. Furthermore, the idea that cooperatives and national (state) ownership go hand in hand is not verified by history: the big decline of cooperatives in the UK didn’t happen under Thatcher, but during the ascent of national economic planning and concentration in the manufacturing sector during a 1960s Labour government. The competition between companies – the market form – or the formation of monopolies is just a surface appearance of the underlying class relations. So it wouldn’t be enough to just ‘smash the monopolies’. A more fundamental change is required. We can see this when class relations are in crisis – when workers organise mass strikes and hit the streets. The state, no matter if it is left or right, has no problems suspending the ‘free market’ in these situations to repress and maintain class society. For example, after the oil shock in the 1970s it was no contradiction that the Indira Gandhi government nationalised the mining and banking sector in order to prevent economic collapse, inscribed ‘socialism’ into the Indian constitution, obtained the support of the Communist Party and launched the most brutal attack against striking railway workers and other working class insurgents during the State of Emergency.

4) Democratic socialism in practice avoids the structural weakness of the working class and focuses on professionals

The current proponents of democratic socialism know that class struggle is at a low ebb – but instead of focusing on building organised cores within the class they largely focus on the recruitment of professionals and ‘activists’. While previous revolutionary upheavals like 1968 questioned the role of the ‘intellectual expert’, the current generation celebrates it. This is very obvious for parties like Podemos or Syriza, but also valid for the so-called Labour surge – most of the new party members have a higher education and are living in metropolitan areas. Materially the new left intelligentsia reproduces itself as the ‘neoliberal self’ that they pretend to criticise: hardly any of them are ‘organic intellectuals’ forged in working class existence and struggle, most of them survive by creating a social media and academic persona whose opinion is valued on the marketplace. Whether you read the “Alternative Models of Ownership” by the Labour party advisers, Bastani’s ‘luxury communism’ or Srnicek’s ‘Inventing the Future’, the prime agent is always the figure of the well-educated and networked activist. Unfortunately this forces our intellectual democratic socialist comrades to chase their own tails. There is a big blank space when it comes to the question of how their well-meaning ideas will be enforced and implemented. Who will enforce workers’ participation if workers are seen as people who are only able to engage in political discourse during election times? The absence of a strategy rooted in the working class then leads to the creation of a trite and kitsch icon of ‘the people’ – a mass of honest victims who need cultural belonging and political leadership.

5) Democratic socialism’s understanding of ‘workers’ participation’ is formal and therefore flawed

We criticise socialist thinkers for seeing state planning as essentially opposed to capitalism, though confronted with history most of them would hasten to add that nationalisation and planning have to go hand-in-hand with the ‘democratisation of the economy’. The problem is that their understanding of ‘workers’ participation’ is largely formal, e.g. proposed in the form of workers’ shares in enterprises, union delegates on company boards or voting rights when it comes to management decisions. The aforementioned class background of many of the new socialist intelligentsia also contributes to their limited understanding – or actual trajectory – of what workers’ control would require. Their understanding of class is largely economic – defined by the fact that workers all depend on wages. This understanding of class doesn’t focus on the actual form of the production process and its hierarchical division of labour (intellectual and manual workers, productive and reproductive work etc.). In their policies, their understanding of ‘ownership’ of the means of production and ‘democratic participation’ of workers is formal. Just because workers or trade unions hold 50% or 100% of shares doesn’t mean much. If workers are still forced to do the drudge work the whole day, performing only a limited amount of tasks, this won’t allow them to have an understanding of, and therefore say in, how a company or sector is actually run. You might give them a vote on a company board, but it will be those who have a greater overview and more time – due to their professional status as intellectuals (engineers, scientists etc.) – who will make the decisions. The ‘vote’ will be reduced to a fetishised process to confirm the experts’ monopoly of knowledge. As we have seen in history, workers survive

the worst defeats inflicted by the class enemy. But the deepest and longest-lasting traumas are inflicted when oppression and exploitation is enacted in their own name – didn't the 'workers' state' of the Stalinist regime formally belong to the workers, too? A mere change in government or a shift from private to state property would not touch the core of what defines 'working class', its' power and disempowerment.

6) The trade unions and the workers party are not the working class

The democratic socialist perspective relies on the idea of a transmission between the working class and the state through the interaction of the two main 'workers' organisations' – the parliamentary party and the trade unions. This perspective relies on an idealistic or pre-historic view on trade unions as the 'democratic representation' of the class. Plenty of historical examples (Labour/TUC in the UK in 1926 or the 1970s, CC.OO in Spain after Franco, Solidarnosc in Poland after 1981, PT/CUT in Brazil recently etc.) demonstrate that during the heat of struggle waves, the trade union/government connection becomes the heaviest blanket on working class initiative. During the last years that we've been shop-stewards, we've gotten quite a bit of insight into the internal mechanisms of two major trade unions – both loyal to the Labour party. Democratic socialism's idea that these organisations will be the main force in 'keeping the government and its enemies under pressure' is totally illusory. More often than not we can see how the party and the union leadership instrumentalise workers' struggles for their own ends, e.g. the recent symbolic 'strikes' at McDonald's in London were called by the union leadership at a time where it suited the Labour campaign circus, but actually undermined the organising work of the union's own organisers. Many of the proposed reforms that Labour wanted to bring in, e.g. sectoral collective bargaining and contracts, would facilitate economic planning for the bigger capitalists and strengthen the central trade union leadership's grip than actually boost workers' independent power. The regional and sectoral contracts in Germany are the best example.

7) Focus on the 'political arena' saps energy

The leadership of democratic socialism tends to try and bypass the mundane and laborious problems of power relations between workers and capital and instead focuses on the electoral leap. But these tend to be leaps forwards and backwards. The governmental politics of 21st century socialism in Latin America (Chavez, Morales, Lula etc.) and their structural weaknesses have created widespread disillusionment. The subjugation of the Syriza government in Greece to the system and its representatives has closed down, rather than opened up spaces for the class movement against austerity. The internal power-fights within Podemos or Momentum has created cynicism and burn-out. By adopting a 'lesser evil' voting strategy and calling for people to vote for Macron to avoid Le Pen, the left undermined its own position in the anti-government rebellion of the Yellow Vests. The media hype of Corbynism, the engagement with electoral tactics etc. diverts focus from daily struggles for working class self-defence. There is also a misunderstanding of parliamentarianism: just because a political party is composed by workers doesn't make party politics and the parliament a form of working class politics. Parliamentarianism is the exact opposite of working class politics, as it is based on individual citizenship, not on collective and

practical relations. This is true for national parliamentarism as much as for the ‘parliamentarianism light’ in the form of ‘radical municipalism’ (campaigning for independent candidates in local elections) that some activists propose. The best example for the limits of local electoral politics can be found in the US. The election of militants of the black liberation movement after its decline in the late-1970s meant that in towns like Chicago and Baltimore, black mayors had to enforce austerity and anti-poor policing measures in the 1980s, which further weakened and divided the movement while stabilising the system: who better to enforce cuts against black urban poor, but a black mayor? While history provides us with ample examples, cracks also appear in the present. If we look at Barcelona En Comu, the citizen platform that won the local elections in Barcelona and provided the new mayor, Colau, we can see various moments of tension between the local working class and the new ‘citizen-friendly’ local government, e.g. when the local government acted against the striking airport and metro workers in 2017. Comrades in Spain also noticed that the ‘redistribution’ of local politicians’ wages by platforms like Barcelona En Comu did not primarily benefit rank-and-file organisations, but created a larger number of so-called ‘movement jobs’, a new layer of professional activists with all the contradictions of professionalisation. One outcome of these tensions with the local working class is that Barcelona En Comu tries to channel some of the discontent into Catalan nationalist waters, as if Catalan independence had much more to offer working people than yet another dividing line within our class. We will now face the same problem in Scotland.

8) Parliamentary power and state power are two different things

Let’s assume a socialist party manages to get into government. The idea of a parliamentarian road towards socialism neglects the fact that ‘taking over government’ and ‘having state power’ are two different kettles of fish. There is little analysis of the actual material and social class structure of the state (administration, public servants, army) and its independence from parliamentary democracy, for example, despite changes to its outer form the material core and trajectory of the Russian state apparatus (i.e. social strata of people employed in carrying out state functions) has reproduced itself from the time of the Tsarist regime, through the Bolshevik revolution, Stalinist terror, Glasnost to Putin. If we want to look closer to home, even the revered Tony Benn had to understand as Secretary of State for Industries in the mid-1970s that the struggle with the right-wing of the Labour party was child’s play compared to the struggle with his ‘own’ civil servants.

9) By focusing on the national arena and the state, democratic socialism tends to misjudge the global relation of capital

Let’s assume that a socialist party not only manages to get into government, but also manages to dominate the state apparatus. Due to the fact that the nation state is the core element of the strategy for democratic socialism the project is immediately confronted with the global nature of capital. Higher levels of taxation and other impositions will result in capital flight amongst global companies. Democratic socialism accounts for this, by, for example, proposing alliances with smaller enterprises, as a kind of national productive united front against global corporations

and finance. We've seen time and again how this necessary alliance shifts the ideological viewpoint towards 'left patriotism' and other bullshit. If a Labour government would actually try to increase taxation and redistribute assets, the most likely outcome is a devaluation of the pound and an increase in inflation due to a trade deficit, which cannot be counteracted easily – given the composition of agriculture, energy sector, general manufactured goods. The new Labour left leadership – trained in political activism and speech and aided by their influence amongst the union leadership – will be the best vehicle to tell workers to 'give our Labour government some time', to explain that 'international corporations have allied against us' and that despite inflation workers should keep calm and carry on; wage struggles will be declared to be excessive or divisive or of narrow-minded economic consciousness. We have seen how, for example, the Chavez government in Venezuela organised the 'urban poor' against strikes of teachers who demanded higher wages, denouncing them as greedy and therefore responsible for other workers' poverty.

10) Class struggle doesn't develop gradually

Democratic socialism's focus on electoral campaigning and official union organising results in a misjudgement of how class struggle develops. Historically class struggles developed in leaps and bounds – in a much more complex dynamic between 'organising' and external forces and factors. The belief that class struggle is based on 'step-by-step' organising and mobilising often results in leftists putting stumbling blocks in the way of future waves of struggle. In the short-term getting 'community leaders' or your local MP involved, or relying on the trade union or party apparatus in order to mobilise or encourage fellow workers, might seem beneficial. What initially seemed a stepping stone turns out to be a stumbling block: for example middle-men who get in the way of things or illusions in symbolic forms of struggle. The challenge is to find 'step-by-step' forms of struggle which help in the moment, but don't pose problems long-term. In their need to create a transformation of workers' action (controlled strikes etc.) on the ground into 'economic pressure' to support state policies, socialist organisers tend to become scared of the often chaotic and seemingly spontaneous character of struggles. They run the danger of misunderstanding that these situations of breakdown of normality are precisely the situations where workers have to face up to their responsibility to re-organise social reproduction. These moments are the necessary learning curves and laboratories where we actually change things and ourselves. To stifle this means killing workers' participation.

11) Democratic socialism and its fear of uncontrolled class struggle becomes its own gravedigger as it weakens the working class activity necessary to defend it

The fact that the biggest socialist party in history – the German SPD – first agreed to support the German government in the 1914 war efforts and oppressed workers' revolutionary upheavals after the war was not a betrayal. It was part and parcel of a long-term strategy to gain governmental power and to re-shape the national economy – to which workers revolutionary 'adventures' posed a risk. After having weakened workers' self-activity the SPD was then confronted with a global crisis in 1929, which limited a national economic strategy. The combination of these two

factors – a working class weakened by government tactics and powerlessness vis-à-vis global capital – resulted in the SPD opening the door for the most brutal reactionary turn in 1933. Another example is the social democratic government under Allende in Chile in 1973. It shows us that the relationship between working class movements and left governments is more complicated than the often mechanistic picture of force (movement) and container/stabiliser (government). We can see that the initial social reforms were introduced by a right-wing government, which failed to contain class struggle. When Allende took over he had a hard time keeping workers' and poor peoples' struggles under control – struggles which might well have been encouraged by the incoming left government. Allende feared that the local upper-class and international imperialist forces would use the social turmoil as an excuse for intervention. Industrial unrest also created shortages which threatened to destabilise the government further. International price developments, in particular of mining products, curbed the scope for material concessions towards striking workers. Allende's policies towards the working class unrest – which ranged from concessions to military repression – undermined and literally disarmed the working class. When the local military, backed by the CIA, went in for the kill, the resistance was already weakened. This historical example seems irrelevant for the situation in the UK or the US today, but once we look beyond short-term goals of electoral tactics we still face the same fundamental dynamics.

12) Strategy starts from actual struggles and actual potentials and difficulties imposed by the social production process

We need strategies and we need organisation. We have to start by analysing the real conditions and relationships of our class: how is production organised today, how is it organised beyond company or national boundaries, how are we as workers divided from intellectual labour and knowledge and how can these divisions be overcome? How can we make use of the fact that workers cooperate along supply-chains, often using modern communication technologies in order to develop new forms of transnational organisations of struggle? How does our class lead its struggles today, where do we use the potentials of modern production and where do we fail to use them in our favour? How do the struggles in the bigger workplaces and industrial sectors relate to areas or regions where workers are more atomised? We have to create a dynamic between industrial and workplace power and the inventiveness of working class people to organise their survival, be it in the form of workers' cooperatives, hack-labs, squats or self-run community projects. Within these struggles we have to develop the organisation and strategy to imagine a coordinated take-over of the central means of production, their defence and their socialisation beyond national boundaries. This will not happen on Day X of our choosing – this will happen with the increasing disfunctionality of this system to which our own struggles for survival contribute. Democratic socialism and its strategies will not be adequate for the vastness, harshness and joy of what lies ahead for the working class.

We have seen that the strategy of democratic socialism clashes with the two main historical forces in capitalism. Firstly, by focusing on the national arena it clashes with the global character of capital. And secondly, by reducing the question of exploitation to the question of whether workers work under private or public command, their strategy clashes with the substantive discontent of the working class. A socialist government would be forced to weaken its own power base in order to deal with the continuing discontent (“Keep calm and give your workers' govern-

ment a bit more time”). In the long run this creates disillusionment and the material basis for a reactionary turn. These are the historical lessons.

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