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Retrieved on 11th August 2021 from utopianmag.com and utopianmag.com
Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 16.9.

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# Contents

pose it is now time for me to "come out" explicitly as an "ultra-left sectarian" (otherwise known as an anarchist).

In the interests of solidarity with those in our milieu who do not see themselves as anarchists and do not support my opposition to participating in any way in the capitalist electoral process, I am willing to take a united-front approach. Specifically, I will not insist that my position be adopted as the official stance of our group and will not attempt to block efforts of others to launch or support a high-level propagandistic campaign, that is, one organized around an explicitly revolutionary and libertarian (that is, anti-state capitalist) program, which, among other things, emphasizes that we can only win our freedom outside of — and in fact, against — the capitalist political process. Anything short of that, I will adamantly oppose.

I will not participate in or support anything like a Labor or Workers Party running as a "third party" in the capitalist electoral process.

I will not participate in or support anything like a mass socialist party that runs on an explicit or implicit reformist (and statist) program, such as the Socialist Party under the leadership of Eugene Debs, Norman Thomas, or whoever has represented the party since.

I will not participate in or support electoral campaigns of Leninist-type organizations.

With all these formations, my belief is: one is what one does. To the degree that members of a political organization devote their time, energy, and other resources to organizing such parties or movements, they become what they are doing. Thus, if people who consider themselves to be "revolutionary socialists" devote themselves to building a reformist organization and promoting reformist politics, they become reformists themselves. In the same vein, if those who consider themselves to be revolutionary socialists take positions within the trade union bureaucracy, they become reformist (or even liberal) trade union bureaucrats. The history of the ISC/IS/Solidarity — starting with the Peace and Freedom Party, including their recruitment of orthodox Trotskyists who believe that the state capitalist societies are "degenerated or deformed workers states", and ending with the organization, or at least a significant chunk of it, supporting Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential primaries — is instructive in this regard.

I will not be a member of any organization or milieu that supports and decides to participate in the above-mentioned types of activity. I refused to join the ISC/IS until it had abandoned the Peace and Freedom Party and indicated that it would pursue a more radical and working-class approach. I have not changed my position on this issue. If anything, my position has become more extreme. If some might call me or my approach "ultra-left sectarian," I sup-



## Trump and the Left

Resisting the Trump presidency has led many on the broad Left to focus on electing Democrats. However, is Trump the central problem confronting us, or is he just a crude manifestation of the fundamental problem, a global capitalist system that is spiraling downward and veering out of control?

Implicit in the efforts to defeat Trump is the conviction that the election of a Democrat to the White House, along with the election of a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress, will reverse the impetus of the Trump presidency, while providing the basis for a substantial step forward toward a just and humane society.

Liberal Democrats believe that capitalism can be reformed by a benign intervention of the state acting to bring about an acceptable version of the capitalist system. Trump's election and the furor this has triggered raise acutely two distinct but linked issues: The nature of the Democratic Party and the limits of reform in a globally integrated economy.

### *The Democratic Party as a Mainstay of Capitalism*

How one views the Democratic Party has always been a critical dividing line within the U.S. Left. For decades, progressives, even some who claim to be socialists, have joined the Democratic Party in the futile hope that it could be changed into a genuine working class party. Instead, they have been the ones who have been transformed, absorbed into the mainstream, jettisoning even the remnants of a radical politics.

The Democratic Party has always been a capitalist party, committed to defending an economic system in which a few of the rich and powerful maintain ownership and control over the means of production. Yet in the past the Republican Party has been the preferred of the two mainstream parties. Most wealthy donors contributed large sums to Republican coffers and Republican admin-

istrations featured corporate executives in key positions. All this has changed in recent years with the rise of the Tea Party and the ongoing economic crisis that began in 2008. Although a minority of capitalist interests applauds the call for a wholesale dismantling of social services, most corporate bosses are now aligned with the Democrat Party, which has welcomed them with open arms.

Trump's presidential campaign accelerated this process. The mass media savagely attacked Trump, while praising Hillary Clinton, despite her obvious inability to generate any popular enthusiasm. This pattern has continued with Trump in office. The *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* despise Trump and devote most of their energies to battering him. They speak for the bulk of the ruling class, which views Trump as a dangerous demagogue who cannot be trusted. Of course, there is a small segment of the ruling class that is prepared to back Trump in his efforts to pursue a policy of economic nationalism. Yet it is indicative that most of those who own and control the growth industries, information technology and entertainment, are vociferous in their denunciations of Trump. The last thing these globally integrated corporations want is an economic policy that appeals to nationalism and that voices the fears of those being squeezed hardest by the integration of the world's economy.

A century ago, the Republican Party was tightly controlled by the business community. The Tea Party and talk radio has changed this. Even before Trump, the Republicans were no longer seen as the reliable framework to defend corporate interests. In the past, the Republican advantage in funding was counterbalanced by the Democrats ties to the mainstream unions. The global integration of the world economy has led to the demise of unions in the private sector. This loss for the Democratic Party has been offset by an influx of corporate funding. The Republicans now have to rely on money coming from a few corporate mavericks and the grass-roots efforts of a conservative minority based in the South and small town America.



> good things" for the people. They then become involved in managing the very system they claim to oppose. Under the reformist Socialist Party of the early 1900s, such people were described as "sewer socialists." Serious revolutionaries have always opposed this. Moreover, those sections of political movements that engage in electoral action often, even usually, become the chief forces fighting for explicitly reformist politics within those movements.

While there is more to be said under this topic, I wish now to indicate my views on specific types of electoral activity. I write this because I realize that not everyone in our milieu sees him/herself as an anarchist and shares my view about participation in the capitalist electoral process. As a result, I am concerned to indicate what type of electoral activity I might be willing to tolerate as part of a united-front effort to win people over to my perspective.

I will not participate in or support anything like the Peace and Freedom Party. This was an explicitly middle-class and reformist political party. It did not even purport to be a labor or a working-class party or one moving in that direction. (In fact, for the Independent Socialist Club, the chief organization that launched and organized the party, the Peace and Freedom Party was seen as a "step" toward the formation of a Labor Party, although they kept this view to themselves. The founders of the ISC had, for the most part, been members of the Labor Party Tendency of the Young People's Socialist League [YPSL].) Moreover, the program of the Peace and Freedom Party was so tepid that a good chunk of the radical movement of the time (including the very organization the ISC wished to build an alliance with, namely, the Black Panther Party) was far to its left. Finally, the ISC explicitly counter-posed launching and building the Peace and Freedom Party to a perspective of working inside SDS, which it dismissed as being made up of a bunch of "ultra-left crazies."

3. In electoral campaigns, the relationship between those organizing the campaigns and those targeted by the campaign (the potential voters) is inherently didactic and elitist. It necessarily entails the idea that "we" (the organizers) are trying to "educate" or "raise the consciousness" of those we are addressing. As I have written elsewhere, I do not see what I am doing as "educating" or "raising the consciousness" of anybody. Such notions are appropriate for Marxists and others who believe that they are the possessors of the scientific or religious truth. In contrast, I believe that I am merely presenting an alternative way of looking at the world, a possible way of trying to change it, an alternative way of relating to our fellow human beings, and an alternative way of living.

4. The logic of electoral campaigns is to inculcate and reinforce the passivity of the voters, that is, to convey the notion that "you" (the voters) should rely on "us" (the candidates running for office) to promote social change. This is one of the key functions of the political process under capitalism. In contrast, anarchists seek to encourage people to take matters into their own hands, to reject their elected "leaders", and engage in direct action (as Wayne described) to win their rights, needs, and freedom.

5. Electoral campaigns tend to attract people who are politically ambitious and often opportunists, who, while claiming to want to carry out propaganda to further the "cause," are or become primarily interested in furthering their own political careers. Bernie Sanders is a perfect example of this. The tension between this type of person and those who really believe that they are participating in a campaign to carry out socialist propaganda usually comes to the fore when the candidate running for office wins an election. Such candidates are often, even usually, tempted to take office in order to "do



The Democratic Party has become the safe, centrist party, the party that starts with an enormous advantage in media support and money. The unlikely result of the 2016 election, when Trump was elected despite receiving significantly fewer votes than Hillary Clinton, is not likely to be repeated. Furthermore, it would be surprising if Putin were willing to use the resources of the Russian government to assist Trump's re-election. Putin has made his point. A country that has fallen far behind in military and economic power can still mess up the government of the dominant superpower through clandestine operations and cyber warfare.

Those who are lining up with the Democrats to defeat Trump and his right-wing supporters are bound to become a subordinate element in a political alliance controlled by the corporate ruling class. This cannot be a successful path forward for the Left in the United States.

### *Bernie Sanders*

This leads us to the question of Bernie Sanders and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Sanders began his political career as a socialist, committed to working outside of the Democratic Party. Even once in Congress, he remained an independent. In spite of working closely with the Democratic caucus in the Senate, Sanders still argued that the working class needed to form its own, independent party. The current version of Sanders as a Democratic Party hack is a recent one, the opportunistic outcome of his decision to seek the presidential nomination.

It is too easy to say that the upsurge in support given to Sanders by young people during the presidential campaign was a positive development. Sanders has opted to funnel this energy into involvement in a series of local elections where his supporters campaign for a progressive seeking the Democratic nomination. This strategic decision steers those new to politics in exactly the wrong direction.

Radicals need to remain committed to basic principles. The Democratic Party cannot be reformed. Working within it is not only futile, it is counter-productive, providing the party of the corporate centrists with a veneer of credibility. Those who seek to justify support for Sanders and his ilk as a tactical maneuver are in reality jettisoning a fundamental cornerstone of radical politics. The result can only be a wholesale retreat into liberal reformism.

Sanders has focused on the call for a single-payer scheme of health insurance. Providing everyone with a minimum of health care would represent a significant step forward in a country where tens of millions are still without coverage and cannot receive medical care except in emergencies. Yet this is an issue that fails to challenge the crucial inequalities in wealth and power that are the core of a capitalist society. Indeed, Sanders has justified his support for single-payer health care by pointing out that most of the other industrialized capitalist countries have implemented universal health care.

Furthermore, merely introducing single-payer insurance would not ensure a system that provides everyone with adequate health care. Many European countries grossly underfund their health care systems, resulting in long waits to see doctors who are stressed out and unable to devote the time needed to properly care for their patients. Quality health care requires money and this returns us to the central issue, the gross inequality in income and wealth.

Sanders is not willing to confront the corporate ruling class because he knows that this will place him outside of the Democratic Party consensus. He would also become the target of a full-scale media assault. Instead, Sanders plays it safe and limits his positions to those of a liberal reformer.

### *The Radical Alternative*

All of this takes place in a historical context in which capitalism continues its downward spiral, as the world veers toward environ-



tures and processes of contemporary society. Thus, I oppose forming, helping to form, or organizing for anything like the Peace and Freedom Party, the Green Party, a Labor Party, a mass (reformist) socialist party, a Leninist-style party, or even third party candidacies, such as that of Ralph Nader. Beyond the general argument I have just laid out and which I think is paramount, I would add the following:

1. I don't see how one can honestly and consistently argue that fundamental change cannot be won through the capitalist electoral process while simultaneously running or supporting candidates or otherwise participating in that process. Such participation, by its very nature, suggests that one believes that such change can occur through that process. In other words, it seems obvious to me that by participating in the process one spreads illusions in the viability of that process. Moreover, to the degree that we run, support, or urge people to vote for candidates in capitalist elections, we are drawing people *into* the political process, rather than encouraging them to reject it. Today, more than 40% of potential voters do not vote, even in elections involving a high turnout. I strongly support this (de facto) boycott. Why would I want to try to convince them to turn out and vote, that is, get involved in what I believe to be an inherently hierarchical and authoritarian process? It would be the height of hypocrisy of I did.

2. I do not see how one can run candidates in bourgeois elections without in fact building a political party or some other hierarchical structure, in other words, an electoral apparatus, to organize, raise funds for, and manage those campaigns. As an anarchist, I am opposed to such parties, structures, and apparatuses, and will not support or participate in them.

resents "raising the proletariat to the position of the ruling class" and the "establishment of democracy," and they believe that once it is established, it will immediately begin to "wither away." While I once subscribed to this view, it has become crystal clear to me that it is absurd, a complete contradiction in terms. For to the degree that society is collectively and democratically-controlled by the majority of its people, to that degree there is no state; while conversely, to the degree that there is a state, society is not managed by the majority of people but, instead, by the minority that controls the state. Moreover, once such a highly centralized state, one that owns all of society's economic resources, is established, it will certainly not wither away. Aside from some mythological law of history or "laws of motion" of capitalism, whose existence Marx never proved, why would it? And the history of all Marxist-led revolutions demonstrates this: rather than the "withering away" of the state and the establishment of state-less and class-less societies, these revolutions all led to the creation of tyrannical, bureaucratic monstrosities that attempted to control every aspect of their citizens' lives, including their very thought processes.

Thus, while Marxists believe that hierarchical/authoritarian means, namely, the state and political parties (either Leninist "vanguard" organizations or Social Democratic bureaucracies), are essential to establishing free societies, anarchists emphatically deny this. In fact, they argue the exact opposite: specifically, that it is impossible to establish truly free — that is, non-hierarchical/non-authoritarian — societies through the use of the state or any other hierarchical or authoritarian institution. As a result, they do not support, participate in, or organize hierarchical structures as a means to promote social change, including and especially political parties. And this means that they do not participate in, advocate that anyone else participate in, or organize anyone else to participate in, the bourgeois political process.

To me, this precludes supporting, organizing, or otherwise engaging in any kind of electoral activity within the political struc-



mental disaster and nuclear war. One response is to cling to what currently exists, to play for time and hope that somehow a simple way forward will present itself. This is an easy solution to a complex problem, but it is one that is bound to fail. Building a genuinely radical movement will be difficult, but there is no other alternative to the catastrophic collapse of a disintegrating system. To start, we need to build a grass-roots movement that can advance a program of specific measures that challenge the capitalist power structure. As we do this, we need to be sure that the demands we put forward, and the organizational structures we build, are consistent with our vision of a future society.

An essential starting point for a newly revived radical movement is the understanding that Sanders and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party are not our allies. Our disagreements with their political perspective are fundamental and irreconcilable.

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The November issue of the Bulletin carried an article by Eric C. titled, 'Trump and the Left.' This led to much lively discussion, which appears below. Further discussion will be carried in the next issue of the Bulletin. –Editor

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## A Response to Eric Chester's "Trump and the Left"

By Wayne Price

Eric's essay is excellent. Everything it said is true, as well as well written. However, there is a fundamental weakness in its perspective. Knowing that the basic political and social problem is capitalism, rather than Trump as an individual, Eric focuses on the dangers of Left support to the Democratic Party. **But the problem is**

**not the Democratic Party; the problem is electoralism**—that is, Left entanglement in the machinery of bourgeois representative democracy.

Concentrating on the Democratic Party as the main obstacle to progressive change leads to a Left strategy of trying to build a new party, to oppose and replace the Democrats. This is a widespread perspective on the radical Left, among those who reject the Democrats.

I have written a detailed argument against this program (Price 2016). As a practical matter, I pointed out, U.S. laws make it exceptionally hard to build a new party. A serious attempt would cost the Left a great deal of activist effort and money, which could be used elsewhere. People know this; it makes more sense to most people to propose general strikes and militant demonstrations than to propose replacing the Democrats with a new party. Also, the distinction made by Marxists between a (good) new working class party (which would certainly begin with a reformist program) and a (bad) new liberal pro-capitalist party did not make sense. In program, leadership personnel, and mass base, the two types of party would actually be the same. The U.S. does not need a third capitalist party.

Further, even limiting ourselves to reforms, **in the U.S. almost every major victory has been won by non-electoral means**. The rights of unions (and the benefits of the New Deal) were won through mass strike waves. The destruction of legal Jim Crow and other gains for African-Americans were won through mass civil disobedience as well as urban rebellions ("riots"). The war in Vietnam was opposed through demonstrations, draft resistance, campus strikes, and a virtual mutiny in the armed forces. LGBT rights were fought for through the Stonewall rebellion and ACT-UP's civil disobedience. The women's movement was an integral part of these non-electoral struggles. And so on.

Let me make a different point: **Electoral politics play an ideological role in attaching the working class to the capitalist**



as I have tried to explain elsewhere, I believe human beings have (at least) two tendencies hard-wired into them through the course of our evolution: a tendency to cooperate with each other and a tendency to compete with and strive to dominate one another, both as individuals and as groups. In fact, these two tendencies are thoroughly intermeshed. Throughout much of our recent history (say, the last 5,000 years), people have cooperated through the means of hierarchies, most notably, the state and economic classes. (In what has been called "primitive communism," the human tendencies toward competition, hierarchy, and inequality tended to be suppressed in the interests of the survival of the tribes and groups in which people were organized. Yet the tendencies were always there, waiting, as it were, for the opportunity to express themselves more forthrightly. This opportunity emerged, full blast, with the development of "civilization", that is, the state and class society.) As I result, I am not convinced that human beings really are capable of living in a truly non-hierarchical manner. However, it seems to me worthwhile to hold up this goal as an ideal to aim for, and to organize and fight for it to the degree I am able. At this point in time, I see my goal as helping to keep the libertarian/anti-authoritarian ideal alive.

One of the things that flows from this, at least as I see it, is that to create such a non-hierarchical society, it is necessary to utilize means that are consistent with the goal. This is a major area of difference between most anarchists and Marxists. Marxists believe that a free — that is, a class-less and state-less — society can, and even must, be created through the use of hierarchical and authoritarian structures, specifically, the state and political parties. Most crucially, Marxists have insisted that the immediate goal of a socialist revolution has to be the establishment of a state, what they call the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Equally important, in their view, this state must be based on the centralization of all of society's productive resources, what they call the "means of production," in its hands. In the Marxist view, such a state rep-

My basic position is simple: I oppose organizing, participating in, or supporting any kind of electoral activity within the capitalist political process as a means of promoting revolutionary social change. And yes (horrors of horrors!), this is a principled question for me. Although it is not among the top tier of my political principles, it is, in fact, closely linked to them.

Aside from wanting to be more revolutionary than everybody else, I have additional reasons for my stance. The most important ones flow from my basic views as an anarchist. Although anarchists are commonly understood as being primarily against the state, the more fundamental category for most anarchists is the notion of hierarchy. Hierarchies are structures of domination (authority) through which one individual or group of people rules over or dominates others. Examples of hierarchies are socio-economic classes; oppressive social and cultural relations involving gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, nationality, and physical and mental ability; bureaucracies; states; and top-down organizations of all kinds, including capitalist corporations and political parties of all suasions. I see contemporary society as being made up of a web of these hierarchies, with a small (wealthy and powerful) elite at the top and the rest of us descending from this apex, roughly in the shape of a cone (with its base on the bottom), that evolves over time. Against this, the goal of most anarchists is the creation of a truly egalitarian, cooperative, and democratic society, in other words, a completely non-hierarchical society, a highly decentralized form of socialism in which no individual, group, party, social layer, or class rules over or dominates anybody else. Although many anarchists (most notably, the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin in his book, *Mutual Aid*) have attempted to establish a scientific basis for anarchism, I do not find their arguments convincing. They usually come down to the claim that human beings are, by nature, cooperative and non-hierarchical, and that hierarchies have been imposed through violence, particularly the violence of the state, on the majority of human beings. In contrast,



**system**. This is like the role that the Catholic religion played in keeping people attached to medieval feudalism. That is in spite of the fact, known to everyone, that the capitalist economy does not pretend to be the least bit democratic, but is completely top-down authoritarian. (Its ideological claim is to be "free enterprise.")

The bourgeois representative democracy, in its various forms, has two main functions. One is to let factions of the capitalist class and its hangers-on settle their differences and make overall policy—without (much) bloodshed, and without the dangers of a dictator. The bourgeoisie is, after all, a very divided and conflicted (competitive) class. By and large it prefers to concentrate on running its businesses, and to hire professionals to manage its government and other institutions (with exceptions, such as Trump, a businessman but also an entertainer). This is organized through the electoral system.

The other main function is to bamboozle the working people into believing that the system works for them, that they rule the state, that they are a free people. Even when they are cynical about the system, they think this is the best that can be done. And there is some reality to all this, in that they have a fairly high degree of personal and political freedom and at least some (indirect) influence on the workings of the state (within the limits of capitalism).

Perry Anderson writes: "The general form of the representative State––bourgeois democracy––is itself the principal ideological lynchpin of Western capitalism, whose very existence deprives the working class of the idea of socialism as a different type of State [I would say "a different type of society"—WP], and the means of communication and other mechanisms of cultural control thereafter clinch this central ideological 'effect'. Capitalist relations of production allocate all men and women into different social classes, defined by their differential access to the means of production. These class divisions are the underlying reality of the wage-contract between juridically free and equal persons that is the hallmark of this mode of production. The political and economic orders are

thereby formally separated under capitalism. The bourgeois State thus by definition 'represents' the totality of the population, abstracted from its distribution into social classes, as individual and equal citizens. In other words, it presents to men and women their unequal positions in civil society as if they were equal in the State. Parliament [or congress and president—WP], elected every four or five years as the sovereign expression of popular will, reflects the fictive unity of the nation back to the masses as if it were their own self-government. The economic divisions within the 'citizenry' are masked by the juridical parity between exploiters and exploited, and with them the complete separation and non-participation of the masses in the work of parliament. This separation is then constantly presented and represented to the masses as the ultimate incarnation of liberty: 'democracy' as the terminal point of history. The existence of the parliamentary State thus constitutes the formal framework of all other ideological mechanisms of the ruling class. It provides the general code in which every specific message elsewhere is transmitted. The code is all the more powerful because the juridical rights of citizenship are not a mere mirage: on the contrary, the civic freedoms and suffrages of bourgeois democracy are a tangible reality, whose completion was historically in part the work of the labour movement itself, and whose loss would be a momentous defeat for the working class." (Anderson 1977; 28)

Which is why radicals must defend the rights of African-Americans and others to vote, which are now under attack. While voting is essentially a fraud, it is part of the complex of bourgeois-democratic rights such as free speech, free association, the right to bear arms, the right to strike, free press, etc., which are useful for the self-organization of the working class and the oppressed. But in themselves, none of these change the capital/labor relationship, the oppressor/oppressed relationship, which dominates all of us—and certainly voting does not.

When the First International split between the Marxists and the anarchists, there was a lot of personal and organizational conflict.



bourgeois elections but to inspire people to see an alternative to electoral activity, namely mass working class direct action (aimed ultimately to get rid of the state). Most people do not see this now. In fact, the whole of U.S. politics can be understood as a method of keeping the working class from realizing its potential power in mass action.

Finally, I agree with Eric that, for now, "*the priority would seem to be the creation of a network of anarchists and radical socialists that can present an alternative vision of politics while participating as a radical presence within direct action campaigns.*" That is, to build a revolutionary libertarian socialist left wing within the growing movements of opposition.

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## Thoughts on Electoral Activity

by Ron Tabor

At the risk of alternately (or even simultaneously) boring and enraging some people, I would like to indicate my views on electoral action.

I would first like to make clear two points:

1. I agree very much with the position that Wayne lays out. If anything, my position is more extreme.

2. I see no need for our milieu to take a definitive position on this question until or unless either it becomes actionable (that is, somebody makes a specific proposal for organizing, participating in, or otherwise supporting a specific electoral campaign) or a very broad consensus comes to be formed in our group around a specific viewpoint.

*perspective… Progressive parties usually wind up by sliding back into the Democratic Party*."

For Eric the basic issue is not electoralism. Instead, "*the fundamental issue is reform versus revolution*." Well yes it is. I never said that electoralism is the "fundamental" problem, as opposed to industrial capitalism. But I believe that it is a more basic and general problem than is the Democratic Party.

If, as Eric writes, "reform" is the "fundamental issue," then what is the reform position on the state and elections? It is that the state is class-neutral and can be taken over by the people through democratic elections. What is the revolution perspective? It is that the state serves the capitalist class and its system that it needs to be overturned and to be replaced by a federation of councils and assemblies. To write "the fundamental issue is reform vs. revolution" does not contradict my strategic position.

Eric says he is only for electoral activity if there is a grassroots party, one that is explicitly socialist, with a program that challenges capitalism, with ties to mass direct action that it prioritizes over elections. This does not sound like much of a pro-election perspective. He agrees that conditions for this are not likely to exist in the near future.

In my opinion, I do not see any principled reason why such a hypothetical revolutionary socialist grass-roots movement might not sometimes run candidates to use elections as platforms—if they make it absolutely clear that they do not expect to win power in the state and/or to use the state to change society. What I object to is the strategy (by this hypothetical revolutionary grass-roots formation) of running in elections to build an electoral machine, which implies a belief in the reform of this state and the possibility of using the state to free the working class and the oppressed.

I am not responding to Eric's argument that many nonvoters do not have illusions in elections, and that many liberals also do not really have illusions in elections but they are involved anyway. I am not sure what his point is. My strategy is not only to discredit



But there was one main political issue, which reverberates to this day. Both sides were for workers forming labor unions. But Marx insisted that every local of the International should form a workers' political party to run in elections and try to take over the state. Bakunin and his comrades opposed this. In 1910 Kropotkin summarized their position: "The anarchists refuse to be party to the present State organization and to support it by infusing free blood into it. They do not seek to constitute, and invite the workingmen not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments… They have endeavored to promote their ideas directly amongst the labor organizations and to induce these unions to a direct struggle against capital…" (Kropotkin 1975; 110)

In over a century and a half of experience of various socialist parties, social democratic parties, labor parties, Communist parties, Green parties, and so on, it should be clear enough whose perspective was correct.

Eric is completely correct when he concludes with a call for a "genuinely radical movement" as "an alternative to the catastrophic collapse of a disintegrating system." He advocates, "build[ing] a grass-roots movement that can advance a program of specific measures that challenge the capitalist power structure…consistent with our vision of a future society." (32) In my opinion this requires rejection not only of the Democratic Party but of the whole electoralist perspective.

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## A Response to Wayne Price

by Eric Chester

Wayne has raised several important issues in his thoughtful response to my article on Trump. Both of us agree on Trump and the need for radicals to remain outside of the Democratic Party. Yet we disagree on the fundamental issue underlying this critique. For Wayne, "the problem is not the Democratic Party; the problem is 'electoralism'". In my view, the fundamental issue is reform versus revolution.

Wayne's response focuses on positions that divide anarchists and libertarian socialists. My feeling is that we should be emphasizing the basic agreements in political perspective uniting all anti-authoritarian radicals, whether anarchists or socialists, rather than highlighting our differences. Still, the questions that have been raised are important and cannot be left unexplored.

Let me start by clarifying where I stand before I go on to respond to the specific points made by Wayne. Capitalism cannot be reformed. The working class cannot move from the existing system of exploitation to a new society based on cooperation and equality through a series of small, incremental steps. This holds for both electoral and non-electoral actions. Only a revolutionary transformation of capitalist society can provide the basis for socialism.

Wayne points out that the reforms that have been won were gained through direct action, not electoral gains. I agree entirely, but I would go further. Capitalism is spiraling downward. The working class in the advanced capitalist countries is on the defensive, moving backwards not forwards. Even small reforms are difficult to win and usually result in only a temporary victory.

Unfortunately, much of the Left remains within the Democratic Party. I continue to believe that the Democratic Party is the graveyard of radical politics and that a complete and total break with it in all its forms, including Bernie Sanders, is an essential prerequisite to building a radical movement in the United States. Yet this



groupings that they might do: the unions, the African-American community, Latino community, LGBT people, organized feminism, the climate justice movement, the 40 % of the population which identifies as "socialist," etc. What strategy should they carry out?

The Left focus on the Democrats as the problem leads in general to the wrong strategy, namely advocating a new party. (Which Eric is not for, but his essay also focused on the Democrats rather than on electoralism.) **The strategy I advocate is (1) non-electoral ("extra-parliamentary") direct mass action:** militant demonstrations, civil disobedience, boycotts, mutinies, and especially labor actions such as union organizing, strikes, workplace occupations, and eventually general strikes. **(2) An opposition to the electoral strategies** of the liberals, reformists, and "communists", who advocate either a pro-Democratic or a new-party program. Whatever these radicals think in their hearts (or in their position papers), they act to reinforce the belief that the democratic representative state is "neutral" and can be used by either the capitalists or the working class.

To quote Perry Anderson again: "*The general form of the representative State–bourgeois democracy–is itself the principal ideological lynchpin of Western capitalism… The existence of the parliamentary State thus constitutes the formal framework of all other ideological mechanisms of the ruling class.*" This has to be exposed and rejected. So long as people see the state as neutral, they think they can use it. Therefore they do not see the need for a revolution to overturn it and replace it with other institutions.

Eric says he agrees with me in rejecting "*support for a broadly based progressive party.*" He writes that attempts to build broad progressive parties (based in unions and community organizations) invariably tend to be little different from liberal Democrats, at best. Based on his research, "*The historical record demonstrates that the program advanced by progressive parties closely resembles the positions advanced by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. These parties remain trapped within the limitations of a liberal reformist*

*Eugene V. Debs Speaks* (New York: 1970).

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## Further Responses on Participation in Elections

by Wayne Price

As is clear from his response, Eric and I are in agreement on most issues. He even agrees that in the split in the First International between Marx and the anarchists, the anarchists "*were correct*" in opposing Marx's insistence that every branch form an electoral party (the anarchists wanted each branch to be free to decide for itself whether to run in elections). He chastises me, however, for "*highlighting our differences*." But I did not criticize his opinion on electoral party building (among other reasons, because I did not know what it was). What I criticized was his focus on the Democratic Party as a barrier to progress, rather than on the inherent problems of participation in the electoral process in general.

This is not a trivial question. Most of the Left is for participating in the Democratic Party. Most of the rest of the Left (as Eric acknowledges) is for building a new electoral party: a Labor Party, a Workers' Party, a Green Party, a Progressive Party, etc. So the question of how radicals relate to electoral politics is pretty important.

It has been stated by Eric and others that my opposition to electoral activity is "*a matter of principle*." Apparently I was not clear. As a believer in pragmatic morality, I do not much care for abstract "principles." My opposition to electoral activity is primarily **strategic**. I am not discussing what individuals, isolated from broad movements, should do every two years when there is an election. I don't care. I am concerned what we radicals advocate to major



is only part of the problem. Underlying the commitment to the Democratic Party is the hold of liberal reformism. As radicals, we need to directly challenge this perspective. My article sought to do both, that is it attacked the Democratic Party for being not just a capitalist party, but for becoming *the* capitalist party, as the Republicans become increasingly erratic and demagogic. At the same time, the article also criticized the program advanced by Sanders and the liberal politicos, pointing out that these politicians deliberately avoid any direct challenge to the underlying concentration of wealth and power that characterize a capitalist society.

Wayne believes that my position critical of the Democratic Party leads inherently to support for a broadly based progressive party. As he correctly observes, this is a position widely held by those on the Left. In fact, I not only disagree with this proposition, but I have written a book examining the pitfalls that beset socialists who opt to work within more broadly based progressives parties (*True Mission*).

The argument for a broad party was originally presented as support for the creation of a labor party modeled on the British Labour Party. As unions have declined in strength, the argument has been modified to a call for a progressive party that would link activists in community organizations as well as unions. Yet the historical record demonstrates that the program advanced by progressive parties closely resembles the positions advanced by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. These parties remain trapped within the limitations of a liberal reformist perspective. Furthermore, they frequently maintain ties to liberal Democratic Party politicians, even supporting them in 'non-partisan' elections. Ultimately, without a firm commitment to an anti-capitalist perspective, progressive parties usually wind up by sliding back into the Democratic Party.

The only electoral formation that I could support would be a grass-roots party that is explicitly socialist and that puts forward a program of immediate demands that challenge the existing sys-

tem while pointing directly to a future society. Such a party would have close ties to a militant, direct action movement with its roots in both the workplace and the community. Indeed, such a party would see its electoral efforts as secondary to the actions taken by the mass movement.

For Wayne, opposition to any form of electoral activity is a matter of principle. He raises several objections to the electoral arena, but I want to focus on the one that represents the essence of his argument. Anarchists have frequently contended that participation in elections by itself validates the existing system and, furthermore, that it reinforces the illusion that social change can be achieved through the electoral process.

I do not find this argument to be compelling for several reasons. For one, voting rates are very low in the United States and, indeed, in many other countries. Most people are very cynical about politicians and about the utility of elections. Unfortunately, this cynicism is usually linked to apathy and despair, as well as the conviction that efforts to change the system are bound to fail.

Furthermore, while committed liberals do believe in the electoral route to social change, it is far from true that they are under the illusion that everyone enters the electoral arena on an equal footing. On the contrary, there are frequent complaints from progressives concerning the efforts of rich conservatives to buy elections. Yet liberals believe that the system can be fixed, perhaps by capping the amount that anyone can contribute to a candidate or by public funding of elections. Also, they suggest, anti-trust laws could be used to break up media monopolies. This set of measures is consistent with the pattern followed by liberal reformists. They are convinced that the existing system can be fixed from within. One has to be pragmatic and come up with a patchwork of reforms that can modify the system to make it fairer. Radicals need to contest this analysis, pointing out that the way elections are rigged is embedded in the essential logic of the capitalist system.



Finally, I don't believe that a candidate presenting an explicitly anti-capitalist program validates the existing system. Instead, radical candidates can use the electoral arena as a platform to reach the working class with the message that fundamental change is both necessary and possible, and that it cannot be won through the ballot box. Debs stood on exactly this perspective. Indeed, he was so effective that the powers that be went out of their way to silence him by confining him to jail.

Wayne correctly places the debates within the First International in the context of political differences rather than tactical maneuvers and personality disputes. Marx insisted that the formation of a working class party should be a priority objective in every country, no matter what its traditions and circumstances were. Bakunin and the anarchists opposed this dictum and, in my view, they were correct. Yet Bakunin's position, as supported by Wayne, is just as rigid, that is the total rejection of any form of electoral activity.

From my perspective, participation in the electoral arena is a strategic option that has to be determined in the specific circumstances as they arise in a specific country. There are times when standing candidates may be a useful means of articulating an anti-capitalist perspective and be helpful in building a mass movement that can challenge the existing system. Yet there are also many situations when electoral activity is not a viable option and will only drain scarce energy and resources.

Given the de-politicization of much of the working class and the weakness of the radical Left in the United States, the formation of a viable radical party seems unlikely at this moment. Instead, the priority would seem to be the creation of a network of anarchists and radical socialists that can present an alternative vision of politics while participating as a radical presence within direct action campaigns.

References

Eric Thomas Chester, *True Mission: Socialists and the Labor Party Question in the U.S.* (London, 2004)