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ing. A student union in every school. A mass assembly in every working class neighborhood. These are the building blocks for winning victories now and the foundation for a future society beyond capitalism and the state.

There will always be liberals ready to volunteer to be the officials from whom we will extract concessions. But while opportunists are a given, an organized and militant working class isn't. It's up to all of us to make it happen.

There's a certain type of socialist that reminds me of highway planners.

For years now, researchers have held up convincing evidence that adding lanes to highways does not improve traffic congestion. It's counter-intuitive: certainly adding more lanes means there's more room to drive! However, empirical studies have conclusively shown that the result is that traffic increases to fill that extra capacity in what's referred to as *induced demand*.

Press any DOT official or highway planner enough about the research and they'll gravely nod their heads and admit that it requires a serious re-evaluation within their sector. But it's almost impossible to find these insights incorporated into actual planning, a seemingly permanent blind spot kept there by a combination of politics and sheer inertia. As a city planner tells Arthur Dent in the opening pages of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, "It's a bypass. You've got to build bypasses."

Similarly, the past few centuries have provided countless empirical examples of the futility of trying to achieve socialism through electoral pursuits. But for one reason or another, the common wisdom many socialists cling to—that helping socialists take hold of part of the capitalist state gets us closer to socialism—is rarely dislodged, even when they are forced to admit the mountain of failures of the past.

The latest salvo from the electoral left comes from an expected quarter, *Jacobin*, but from a not-entirely-expected source: Nathan J. Robinson, founder of *Current Affairs* and self-avowed libertarian socialist.

In "A Socialist in Every District," Robinson encourages socialist electoral campaigns at every level of government possible, a kind of red version of former DNC chair Howard Dean's "50 State Strategy." Robinson writes:

> A democratic-socialist president needs a movement behind them. They also need a Congress

> that is as far to the left as possible. That's why, if socialists are going to make a Sanders presidency succeed, we must stake out an ambitious goal for 2020: there should be no election, at any level, without a socialist candidate running.
>
> Every one of the 435 house seats. Every one of the 33 open senate seats. However many of the 50 governors and 7,383 state legislators there are. The dog catcher in Duxbury. Wherever there is a position of power democratically contested, a socialist should be offered up as an option.

One of libertarian socialism's defining features is its rejection of both the Leninist vanguard party and the electoral incrementalism of social democracy and democratic socialism. Encouraging socialists to move en masse into electoral campaigns up and down the ballot is, to put it mildly, uncharacteristic of the political tradition Robinson pins himself to.

Robinson's key arguments are that socialist ideas are more popular and widespread than ever before, that it's impossible to know in advance which seats are winnable, and that even campaigns that lose are still valuable educational tools. The broad brushstrokes in Robinson's essay have long been refuted, recently in "The Lure of Elections," written by members of Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation.

Socialists who try to capture state power are aspiring to cut off the very branch they're sitting on. Socialist electoral campaigns are parasitic of, and ultimately destructive to, the working class movements upon which their momentum depends. Mitterand in France, Papandreou and Syriza in Greece, Ortega in Nicaragua, Allende in Chile: socialists who reach the heights of state power must either bend to the dictates of capital or they are removed. This consistently happens on the local level too, including Bernie Sanders' tenure as mayor of Burlington, Vermont, which was marked by the "pragmatic"

Even more daunting for folks like Robinson is that they're then obliged to explain why, this time, it will somehow be different. There's no reason for confidence in a social democratic strategy to even get to the "sensible government" he hopes will get us through the meantime, and every reason to believe such a strategy will both sabotage the basis for positive reforms in the here-and-now and take us further from the break with capitalism upon which humanity depends.

In the 1930s, Rudolf Rocker witnessed firsthand the profound failure of electoral socialists, including such titans as Germany's SDP:

> In Germany, however, where the moderate wing in the form of Social Democracy attained to power, Socialism, in its long years of absorption in routine parliamentary tasks, had become so bogged down that it was no longer capable of any creative act whatsoever…
>
> But that was not all: not only was political Socialism in no position to undertake any kind of constructive effort in the direction of Socialism, it did not even possess the moral strength to hold on to the achievements of bourgeois Democracy and Liberalism, and surrendered the country without resistance to Fascism, which smashed the entire labour movement to bits with one blow.

Resisting the mirage of state seizure is a deadly serious imperative. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the twentieth century that left one branch of socialists wrecked on the shoals of neoliberalism and another branch determined to remake the state as a singular authoritarian capitalist.

Instead of "a socialist in every office," a much more interesting and urgent call-to-action would be *a union in every workplace* (and prison!). A tenant union in every apartment build-

gressive Caucus, or even Bernie and Ocasio-Cortez: it was the stirrings of wildcat strikes spreading through the ranks of federal workers and related industries — perhaps most crucially, airline workers like those in the Association of Flight Attendants. On similar terrain, Trump's first travel ban was put on hold in significant part due to widespread direct action disrupting airports. And just days ago a statewide strike by West Virginia teachers scuttled a proposed bill to gut the state's public education system, with victory coming mere hours after the strike took effect. This action occurred almost exactly a year after these same educators and support workers launched a strike that both won them raises and sparked a wave of teacher strikes across the country, in both Republican- and Democrat-controlled states, that continues to this day.

Robinson is correct that his political commitments do not oblige him in the slightest to apologize for the authoritarian states ruled under the banner of socialism. But if he insists on what is functionally a social democratic strategy he *does* need to account for its past crimes and failures, including:

- the mountains of stolen resources, the millions of exploited people oceans away, and extracted fossil fuels that drove the taxable profits that made the welfare state hum;
- the historically contingent, tenuous, and compromised basis for its successes (the particular configuration of the world economy, the size and combativeness of labor and other movements, the background threat of the Soviet Union, and the willingness of capitalists to temporarily play along); and
- its slide into neoliberal austerity everywhere, including Bernie Sanders' beloved Scandinavia, teeing up the far right to gain ground.

abandonment of his signature campaign pledge to stop the privatization of the city waterfront. Meanwhile, the siphoning of social movement energies and personnel into electoral and state apparatuses means that the one counterweight to capital—the organized working class—no longer has the independence and clear battle lines needed to fight back. (It's long been understood that the most effective way to impose neoliberalism and austerity with the least pushback is to have leftist and social-democratic parties be the ones who do it.) And as we're seeing now across Europe and countries like Brazil and Venezuela, the inevitable stalling of the state-based left rolls out the red carpet for the forces of reaction.

To paraphrase anarchist Rudolf Rocker: elected socialists haven't been a toehold of socialist movement within the capitalist state, they've been a toehold of the capitalist state within the socialist movement.

All Sewers, No Socialism

What I'd like to discuss in particular is Robinson's nostalgic invocation of the socialist politicians of America's past. He writes:

> Socialists have succeeded electorally before. There were once a thousand socialist elected officials in the United States. Socialists in state legislatures introduced bills that got passed. The Socialist mayor of Milwaukee served twenty-four years. The *Wall Street Journal* has just published a fascinating discussion of the history of socialist congressional representatives in the United States, from Vito Marcantonio to Ron Dellums. It's remarkable to see the nation's business paper admit that "socialists are no strangers to Congress."

Electoral efforts at the municipal level are often referred to as "sewer socialism," a recognition that the actions of socialists in city councils and mayor's offices had much more to do with public infrastructure than, say, jailing the rich and inciting workers to seize their factories. Indeed, there was so little dangerous content in the governing agendas of elected socialists that many of their ideas were borrowed wholesale by their liberal political competitors (most famously in the case of Roosevelt's New Deal). The practical exigencies of governance within the capitalist state meant that much of the radicalism that propelled them to office was simply abandoned, and the best that elected socialists and their constituents could hope for was a friendlier and more competent management of capitalism. And that's a task you don't need to elect socialists to do.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the height of American socialists' electoral success, libertarian socialists were there too. But instead of rounding up donations and votes for socialist politicians, Robinson's political forebears were critiquing the practice as a counterproductive distraction from the essential task of organizing the working class.

One of the first sewer socialists was Emil Seidel, elected Mayor of Milwaukee in 1910 and picked as Eugene Debs' running mate in the 1912 presidential race. Coinciding with the election of the Socialist Party's Victor Berger to Congress, Milwaukee became a mecca of sorts for electoral socialists across the country. Despite his celebrity status, Seidel's decidedly un-socialist tenure in office was not missed by the most prominent libertarian socialist periodical of the day, *Mother Earth*. In its May 1910 issue, after listing the key platform planks of Milwaukee's socialist politicians—spanning from cheaper gas and trolley fares to cheaper heating fuel through the city—H. Kelly writes, "Not one of the above reforms, promised by the new Social Democratic administration at Milwaukee, is objectionable to the bourgeoisie as a class."

> the binary that pits "communism" against "capitalism." Thus, if you're a critic of capitalism, you must be an apologist for the most brutal socialist governments. But every time there has been such government, libertarian socialist critics have been the first to call it out for its hypocrisy. (Usually, such people are the first ones liquidated.)

Omitting libertarian socialism's opposition to social democracy seems intentional, as Robinson writes elsewhere, "I myself happen to be a pragmatic [socialist], who dreams of a stateless society but thinks sensible government guided by socialist principles of economic democracy will do in the meantime."

"Pragmatism" is a catchphrase used almost exclusively to punch left and artificially narrow the realm of possibility, so for our purposes let us strip it of its baggage and consider pragmatism as simply *using the most-assured methods to achieve partial progress on the way to a larger goal.* In that case, the libertarian socialist theory of change within present-day society (Robinson's "meantime") is substantially more pragmatic than one that requires socialists to run for office. Libertarian socialists generally argue that it is the balance of class forces, not the party composition of the political class, that determines legislative and policy outcomes under the capitalist state. If we want reforms in our favor, we must shift that balance through popular organization and mobilization, regardless of who is in power. (Often a wave of new, further left elected officials is a lagging indicator: a *result* of that shift, not its cause.)

In the words of anarchist Errico Malatesta, "we will take or win all possible reforms with the same spirit that one tears occupied territory from the enemy's grasp." It's a profound mistake to think we need a seat at capital's table to do so, and we need not look back a century to find evidence.

Just last month the U.S. federal government's partial shutdown was ended not by Democrats, or the Congressional Pro-

H. Kelly's 1910 *Mother Earth* article concludes by comparing the fruits of recent votes taken in Milwaukee and those in Philadelphia. Whereas the votes cast in Milwaukee were by citizens, sending a handful of socialists into city hall, the votes cast in Philly were by workers of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company. That vote committed thousands of workers to the picket line and led to a citywide general strike, the conclusion of which brought significant wage increases for transit workers across the region and reshaped the labor landscape for the next decade. Kelly puts it succinctly:

> The Socialist administration of Milwaukee has, as the first fruits of a twenty-five year agitation, raised the hours of labor, while the strike of Philadelphia raised wages.

Confronted with the perennial failure of socialists in office, the electorally-minded generally portray them as either sad accidents or cruel betrayals, but like the highway planner who thinks *I know the evidence, but maybe just one more lane will do the trick*, they refuse to understand that the problem is a systemic, structural one.

Understanding Libertarian Socialism

Where does this leave Nathan Robinson and his curious brand of election-friendly libertarian socialism? He expands on his understanding of the term in an essay on Noam Chomsky:

> Libertarian socialism seems to me a beautiful philosophy. It rejects both "misery through economic exploitation" and "misery through Stalinist totalitarianism," arguing that the problem is misery itself, whatever the source. It's a very simple concept, but it's easy to miss because of

Kelly's analysis is worth quoting at length, as it applies to much more than just Milwaukee:

> It cannot be urged too strongly that it is no part of the Anarchist or Socialist to administer bourgeois government more efficiently. It is their business to destroy capitalism, and on the ruins of that system found the Free Commune or Socialist Commonwealth… Politics will not, because it cannot, touch fundamental questions, and if the "Milwaukee Victory" were duplicated in every city in America, the capitalist question would remain unsolved, unless the exploited themselves rose in revolt against their oppressors and took possession of the land, railways, factories, etc.
>
> […]
>
> Socialists all over the world will be interested in one reform Mayor Seidel inaugurated immediately after assuming office. He increased the hours of labor for municipal employees from six to eight a day. Every capitalist paper in the country has applauded this "Socialist reform," as well they might, for this is "efficiency in government" with a vengeance, and has no doubt brought the Co-operative Commonwealth several laps nearer. True to the party platform, which calls for eight hours a day even when it means increasing the hours instead of decreasing them.

The next year Emma Goldman, reporting on her Midwestern travels in *Mother Earth*, made a similar assessment with her characteristic sarcasm:

> Seriously, has anything been changed with the ascendency of the Socialist régime? Yes, Mayor

> Seidel has declared that the only way the 25,000 unemployed in Milwaukee can be helped now, is to cut the salaries of all the city employees. Really, now? *All* city employees, including also Mayor Seidel, Congressman Berger and the rest of the official staff? Nixie. No such class-consciousness for theirs. By city employees only the two-dollar-a-day wretches are meant. Surely the Seidels and Genossen are not expected to share their hard-earned thousands with slum proletarians. The latter must starve until economic determinism will determine the entire machinery of government into the hands of Socialist politicians.

All this, of course, assumes socialists are allowed to run for office and serve if elected. The first half of the 20th century shows just how easily even sewer socialists can be kicked out of the offices they spent so many resources to win. For example:

- In January 1919, all five members of the Socialist delegation to the New York State Assembly were barred from taking the seats they had rightfully won. The vote to suspend them was bipartisan and almost unanimous, 140–6. Notably, in response the socialists hung their rhetorical hat not on opposition to the rotten system itself but on being *better* stewards of the capitalist state, with a Socialist Party leader claiming, "it will draw the issues clearer between the united Republican and Democratic parties representing arbitrary lawlessness, and the Socialist Party, which stood and stands for democratic and representative government."

- That same year, Socialist Party politician Victor Berger was barred from retaking his seat in Congress due to his conviction under the Espionage Act for anti-war speeches. After barring him, a special election was held for his seat, which Berger won again — and was again denied by Congress, keeping the seat vacant until 1921. (Only the Supreme Court overturning Berger's conviction, conveniently after World War I had concluded, allowed him to be seated in Congress after winning yet again in 1922.)

- In 1947, proportional representation in New York City was abolished, entirely due to Democrat-stoked Red Scare threats of radicals being elected.

These kinds of procedural shenanigans are still available should individual politicians or parties become a nuisance. In the 2000s, Democrats in Maine, faced with the first elected Green Party member in the state House, preferred to redistrict him instead of work with him. In Burlington, Vermont, Democrats and Republicans in city hall conspired to repeal Instant Runoff Voting because a Progressive Party member kept getting elected mayor.

We should also be wary of the notion that socialist campaigns are, as Robinson puts it, "educational tools," expanding the debate leftward. History is littered with left candidates and politicians who have, when the moment was most urgent, hardened and even narrowed the left-end of acceptable opinion. It was French Socialist Party leader François Mitterand who, in May 1968, denounced the young workers revolting in Paris and elsewhere as having a "mixture of imitation Marxism [and] hotchpotch of confused ideas". It was Jean Quan who, after having won Oakland's mayoralty with a campaign touting her union-organizing and left activist history, called in hundreds of police to violently suppress Occupy Oakland in 2011. Indeed, the sprouting of popular movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter shows just how far we can move popular opinion and political consciousness with social movements while resisting co-optation by left officeholders.