Electoral Road to Socialism?

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Contents

Could a shift from capitalism to socialism be brought about through electoral politics? Ever since the origins of the modern socialist left in the late 1800s, many socialists have viewed the politics of parties and elections as a way they can insert themselves into history — forming a core component of their strategy.

In the World War I era the American Socialist Party (SPA) had gained a hundred thousand members and elected more than a thousand government officials — mayors, members of city councils and state legislators. By the mid-20th century "democratic socialism" had been coined as a kind of political brand to refer to the tradition of the socialists oriented to electoral politics as a strategy for social change.

The "democratic socialist" label was partly meant to show their defense of the systems of "representative democracy" and liberal values in western Europe, North America and elsewhere. This was combined with critiques of the repressive and undemocratic nature of the "communist camp" countries of the mid-20th century — the Soviet Union, Castro's Cuba, Communist China. This defense of "representative democracy" is tied in with their basic strategy of working to gain political power through elections.

The "democratic socialist" brand gained a huge boost in visibility in the USA in 2016 when Bernie Sanders called himself a "democratic socialist" during his presidential campaign. His attacks on economic inequality echoed the Occupy movement of a few years before and his reform proposals spoke to the conditions of life faced by the younger generation. This led many young people to search out the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). This was the beginning of the vast growth in the membership of DSA — from about five thousand to over 60,000. The new members were overwhelmingly in their twenties and thirties.

DSA derives from the 1980s merger of Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee with the New American Movement. DSOC was one of the fragments of the old SPA when it blew apart in the early 1970s. Harrington advocated the rather delusional idea that the labor movement could be the basis for converting the Democratic Party into an American labor party. The New American Movement, on the other hand, was mainly a product of the student-based New Left of the Sixties. NAM's founders wanted it to be a non-Leninist "revolutionary socialist" organization. Like the present DSA, NAM was a multi-tendencied organization based on activist chapters. After the libertarian socialist and hard Maoist factions quit NAM in the mid-'70s, NAM drifted more towards left-liberal reform via electoral politics. Hence the merger with DSOC.

The charter of the merged organization allowed for caucuses and a certain democratic flexibility. And this has helped DSA to accommodate its huge growth. The multi-tendencied character of DSA is reflected in the proliferation of many different caucuses and working groups — from the North Star caucus (the old guard from the Harrington-influenced DSA) to the Libertarian Socialist caucus (a coalition of people with views from syndicalism to building "alternative institutions" like cooperatives). There are also groups defined by interest, such as labor, socialist-feminism, eco-socialism. Many of the local chapters include people who focus on organizing tenants or fighting ICE roundups of immigrants.

A particularly influential tendency in DSA is the Bread and Roses caucus. This goes back to the Momentum slate which elected about a third of the members on the National Political Council of DSA. This effort also included people who created *The Call* (now the official blog of the Bread and Roses caucus). Various members of Bread and Roses are on the editorial masthead or staff of *Jacobin*. Bread and Roses proposes a strategy which they call "the democratic road

to socialism." Their strategy is based on combining the building of unions in workplaces and "the politics of mobilization" with an electoral strategy based on the eventual creation of a mass socialist party. Bread and Roses counter-pose their strategy to "ultra-left tactics that substitute adventures organized by a small cadre of activists for a mass, organized working-class movement. And we oppose politics defined by radical posturing that appeals only to the already convinced." Building "a mass, organized working class movement" is central to the syndicalist strategy, so we can agree on that point.

In Our Road to Power Vivek Chibber points to the lack of a real presence in the workplaces of people with socialist or radical politics. And this is indeed a long-standing weakness of radical politics in the USA. But for Chibber the main focus is building a social base for socialism — a base for a socialist party. For the transition to socialism, the Bread and Roses strategy relies on the role of the electoral socialist party pushing through structural change after winning state power through elections.

The aim of combining electoral politics with a socialist goal has led also to a revival of interest in non-Leninist forms of Marxist theory. A number of the writers and activists around *Jacobin* magazine and the Bread and Roses caucus have thus revived an interest in the ideas of Karl Kautsky. Kautsky was the pre-eminent Marxist theorist of the pre-World War 1 electoral socialist parties. Kautsky's strategy was for the "gradual accumulation of forces" through the growing votes of the German Social-democratic party and the growing membership of the centralized German trade union federation. "Class struggle," for Kautsky, was conducted primarily through electoral politics. He tended to see actual strikes and mass struggle as secondary to "the main battle."

Kautsky was a major influence on the leadership of the American Socialist Party before World War 1. But the left wing of the party saw things differently. The main publication of the party's left was International Socialist Review. A perusal of the pages of that magazine shows the strong influence of syndicalism and libertarian socialist ideas. IWW organizer Bill Haywood was part of the party's left wing. In Industrial Socialism Haywood did see a tactical role for socialist electoral politics. He suggests that electing socialists to head a local government could create a more favorable environment for organizing — helping to keep the police in check for example. But Haywood did not see socialism coming about through an electoral path. For that he looked to the development of a labor movement capable of large-scale mass action — and an eventual "expropriating general strike."

In explaining "why Kautsky was right", Eric Blanc points to writings of Kautsky in the 1890s to early 1900s where Kautsky believed that a fundamental "ruptural break" with the capitalist regime would be necessary but differs from the Leninists in "how to get there." Thus Kautsky believed that the bureaucratic state of the pre-World War 1 German monarchy was far too undemocratic to be used as a vehicle for building socialism. For Kautsky, the power of the autocratic executive authority and the military officer corps were the basic roadblock. He believed that a "revolution" could be brought about by achieving a parliamentary majority. This majority would "occupy government power" and use this as a platform for transforming the state, eliminating the old military corps and the autocratic executive power. Kautsky's ideal was the supremacy of the House of Commons in the British state. Although Kautsky kept Marx's language of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" to refer to the rule of the working class, he believed that this could be achieved through the statist "representative democracy" of a British-style parliament.

This makes the statism of Kautsky's approach clear enough. But the liberal state is not "neutral ground" for the working class. Class oppression is inherent to the structure of the state. This is shown by the subordination of public sector workers to the managerialist bureaucracies of the state — a power base for elements of the bureaucratic control class, such as state managers, prosecutors, judges, military brass.

In its more radical form "democratic socialists" propose that a party committed to socialism could use the state to enact reforms that would break the old capitalist scheme. This would mean, according to Neal Meyer "nationalizing the financial sector so that major investment decisions are made by democratically elected governments and removing hostile elements from the military and police. It will mean introducing democratic planning and social ownership over corporations (though the correct mix of state-led planning and "market socialism," a mix of publily-owned firms, small privately-owned businesses, and worker cooperatives is a matter of some debate in our movement)."

Here we see one of the traditional problems with electoral socialism: A tendency to think of socialism in terms of nationalization — state takeover and management of banks and other industries and "state-led planning." This problem seems to fall directly out of the electoralist strategy. After all, politicians are seeking government office. For that reason their program focuses on what they propose to do through the state once elected.

Reformist versus Non-Reformist Methods

For libertarian socialists with a syndicalist orientation, our strategy is fundamentally different than the electoral socialists. The syndicalist strategy is based on the development of movements built on non-reformist forms of action and organization. But what is the difference between "reformist" and "non-reformist" methods?

A "reform" is any partial change in society that is within the power of movements to fight for. There are different ways to fight for "reforms," different ways to organize and different forms of action. And this will have effects on the development of working class power to make change.

A *reformist* approach relies upon paid "professionals of representation" to win gains "for us" — the layer of paid officers and staff in bureaucratic "service agency" unions, the paid staff and executives of non-profits that "advocate" for us, the politicians who we vote into office. The method of action is indirect because it doesn't rely on the direct participation and action of working class people themselves. The activists may do door-to-door canvassing to get working class people to vote for candidates, but this does not bring these people into organizations they can control and use as vehicles of direct activity of struggle by working people themselves.

The electoral socialist parties tend to be controlled by the paid layers at top, such as the politicians who are focused on retaining government office and not losing votes. This means they have a lifestyle that will lead them to oppose the development of direct action such as strikes and occupations when these reach a level of social conflict that may threaten their institutional position.

When the focus is on electoral campaigns, this will tend to lead electoral socialists to look to the paid apparatus who control unions, and have financing and staff to support candidates. This has often led electoral socialists to support the positions of the paid officials of unions even when

these conflict with the rank and file. In other words, they will tend to accept bureaucratic trade union methods and structures.

But the existing trade unions tend to be controlled by a layer of full time officials and staff. As with the professional politicians, their way of life is based on their institutional role. They tend to favor negotiations staying in their own hands so that they can negotiate deals that the employers can be persuaded to sign onto without risky levels of mass struggle. Like the professional politicians, they will tend to oppose direct action getting to the point of threatening severe risks to the union that is the basis of their prestige and way of life. The present trade unions in the USA tend to be obsessive about not breaking the law. They accept no-strike contracts and stepped grievance systems that take struggles and disputes off the shopfloor and place them in the hands of lawyers and paid officials — thus discouraging direct action by workers themselves. But it's very unlikely for unionism to be revived in the private sector in the USA without a revival of militant methods of direct action that are likely to violate the restrictive labor law regime in the USA.

When people propose a strategy of seeking changes or improvements to our situation by voting for politicians to enact a reform, or through "mobilizations" crafted and controlled by staff-driven non-profits, or relying on the paid officials of trade unions to negotiate with employers, or building alliances by schmoozing up politicians and other bureaucrats in unions and non-profits, this approach does not encourage participation in decision-making or control of organizations by working people. These methods do not build self-reliance and confidence in our own capacity. The rank and file are not learning about democratic organizing or public speaking or other skills learned through direct participation in building a membership organization and direct collective struggle.

The upshot is this: A reformist strategy tends to build up these layers of political and union bureaucracy apart from the working class. And these layers tend to become a roadblock to the development of wider mass action and direct solidarity that can lead to major class confrontations — conflicts that challenge the power of the dominating classes and threaten the capitalist regime. Thus a reformist strategy will tend to keep the working class captive to the capitalist regime. In Germany Kautsky's reformist approach necessarily built up layers of trade union careerists, professional politicians and the party apparatus. Already by World War 1 this layer had become a roadblock to a mass struggle for socialism.

We can say that an approach to action and organization for change is *non-reformist* to the extent that it encourages a reliance on direct struggle (such as strikes and occupations), and builds rank-and-file controlled mass organizations, and builds self-confidence, self-reliance, organizing skills, more active participation, and wider solidarity within the working class.

Non-reformist forms of organization are self-managed by the members — rooted in direct participation (as in the direct democracy of a union meeting) and forms of accountable representation (such as elected shop delegates who still work the job or an elected rank-and-file negotiating committee). Non-reformist forms of action are disruptive forms of collective action based on direct participation — such as strikes, occupations, militant mass marches.

Syndicalism can be defined as a strategy that is based on non-reformist forms of action and organization. The idea is to work to build self-managed forms of mass organization, such as unions controlled by workers themselves and other grassroots mass organizations. By "organizing the unorganized," we help to build a movement that working people can use to fight the employers, landlords and powers-that-be. By building up the capacity of working people to organize and run

their own movement, and build a form of social power they control themselves, we encourage the self-reliance, confidence and links of solidarity needed for advancing the struggle against the system.

To the degree that working class people do not see themselves as having the power to directly change the society, they are likely to see the ambitious agenda for radical change offered by socialists as "pie in the key" or "nice ideas but unrealistic." On the other hand, growing levels of direct struggle and a stronger development of solidarity in practice builds more of a sense of potential power. When working people participate directly in building unions, or in carrying out a rent strike with other people in their building, or in reaching out to others in the community to build solidarity, this directly engages people in the action — and helps people to learn how to organize, builds more of a sense that "We can make change." To the extent that the working class builds power through its mass participation and disruptive challenge to the system, this encourages people to develop aspirations for deeper changes in society. In this situation mass organizations of struggle form a setting that allows those active workers who have a radical agenda for social change to connect with the grievances and concerns of other working people.

As this process develops in the course of a growing crisis in the system, the possibility for a fundamental break to the system becomes possible as the working class develops the organizational strength, confidence, participation and aspirations needed for a fundamental challenge to the dominating classes. This consciousness can develop rapidly in periods when large numbers are brought into mass struggle and solidarity is built through widening connections that working people create among the various groups in resistance to the system. The working class needs to develop its own class-wide agenda and "gather its forces" from the various areas and sectors of struggle to form a united bloc with both the power and agenda for change.

What I'm describing here is the process of *class formation*. This is the more or less protracted process through which the working class overcomes fatalism and internal divisions (as on lines of race or gender) and builds the confidence, organizational capacity and the aspiration for social change. This is the process through which the working class "forms" itself into a force that can effectively challenge the dominating classes for control of society.

The potential for this process of mass struggle to develop into a fundamental challenge to the system depends on the way this dynamic of mass struggle interacts with the political and economic crises of the capitalist regime. We can't predict exactly how a basic "rupture" with the capitalist regime will develop.

For syndicalists, a key part of a revolutionary process is the takeover of the collective control of the industries by workers, and a process of breaking down the old top-down bureaucratic state and building new self-managed institutions, such as neighborhood and workplace assemblies, and councils or congresses of delegates. From a syndicalist point of view, the democratic promise of the revolution is rooted in the self-managed character of the mass organizations that are driving the process.

Even when this kind of fundamental challenge to the system is "off the agenda," we need to encourage forms of organization and struggle that leave open the potential for mass extension that can break the framework of the capitalist regime. To do this we need to avoid building up institutional barriers to this movement from below.

Of course many activists are likely to continue to look to electoral politics as part of their strategy. Although much of the working class doesn't vote, many people do think about candidates for office. Not only because of the media frenzy around elecctions but also because it

can make a difference who is elected in some cases. Even if "democratic socialists," Marxists and other radicals continue to look to electoral politics as part of their strategy for change, many of them also favor a focus on building grassroots organizations and direct struggle — building more democratic unions, pushing strikes to gain working class power, and building other forms of grassroots social movement protest. For many activists in DSA, this may be their main personal focus. To the extent the focus is on building democratic mass organizations, building participation and support for militant struggles, syndicalists and other socialists may be able to work together in a kind of "united front from below" in the organizing situation.

A Revolutionary Path?

In "Our Road to Power," Chibber concedes there was an era when mass movements did pose a revolutionary challenge to the system:

> "Now there's no doubt that the decades from the early twentieth century all the way to the Spanish Civil War could be described as a revolutionary period. It was an era in which the possibility of rupture could be seriously contemplated and a strategy built around it. There were…socialists who advocated for a more gradualist approach, but the revolutionaries who criticized them weren't living in a dream world."

But, as Chibber sees it, a revolutionary strategy is permanently off the agenda:

> "Today, the state has infinitely greater legitimacy with the population than European states did a century ago. Further, its coercive power, its power of surveillance and the ruling class's internal cohesiveness give the social order a stability that is orders of magnitude greater than it had in 1917. What that means is, while we can allow for and perhaps hope for the emergence of revolutionary conditions where state breakdow is really on the cards, we can't build a political strategy around it…Today, the political stability of the state is a reality that the left has to acknowledge. What is in crisis right now is the neoliberal model of capitalism, not capitalism itself."

For Chibber, this means that "left strategy has to revolve around building a movement to pressure the state, gain power within [the state]…and erode the structural power of capital." To do this "democratic socialists" propose to use the labor movement (and "mobilizational politics") as a social base for participation in electoral politics.

The history of the electoral socialist parties in the 20th century does not provide much reason to hope this strategy will work. By the mid-1980s the various electoral socialist parties in Europe had abandoned any idea of a transition to socialism. They had become parties focused on "managing" capitalism — and quite willing to adapt to the elite demands for a politics of austerity, privatizations and cuts.

In its radical form "democratic socialism" proposes a series of gradual structural reforms to achieve socialism through electoral politics. In fact the capitalist elites will wage a fierce fight against radical reforms that attack capitalist control over the work process, or attack the basis of capitalist profits or capitalist ownership of the industries.

In the 1970s the Swedish social-democrats proposed a fund for the unions to buy out shares of Swedish companies (the 1970s-era Meidner Plan). This plan was opposed at the time by the

syndicalist SAC union in Sweden because it would leave the corporate managerialist bureaucracy intact. It was not actually a proposal for worker control of industry. Nonetheless, it was enough of a threat to the owning class in Sweden that the major capitalists mobilized effectively against it. The social-democrats were forced to retreat. They soon moved towards neo-liberal politics — including extensive privatizations of the public sector. The French Socialist Party under Mitterand in the early 1980s had to retreat from an ambitious plan of nationalizations when it was faced with vast capital flight (a "capital strike"). For Chibber, "mass mobilizations" and actions, especially in the workplaces, will be necessary to force the state to grant concessions. But he wants to combine this with "democratic socialists" gaining power within the existing state — pursuing reforms for a series of "breaks" with the inherited capitalist regime.

In fact, this strategy is highly unrealistic because (as I've argued above) there is an inherent contradiction between an electoralist strategy and a strategy of mass working class struggle from below. The reformist approach of relying on elections and conventional bureaucratic trade unions builds bureaucratic layers that form a roadblock to the emergence of a mass working class movement with the organizational capacity and aspiration to make a fundamental challenge for power from below. The reformist strategy discourages the development of an independent working class movement with the capacity for an effective challenge to the system.

Success for a working class movement from below works to a different logic than electoral politics and bureaucratic trade unionism. Here the movement builds power by building disruption collective action, such as strikes, and building wider solidarity, overcoming internal divisions (for example, along lines of race or gender). Self-managed, democratic organizations are essential if people are to control the struggle — crafting demands and working out the tactics. The working class develops the capacity and aspiration for challenging the system from below by relying on non-reformist methods of action and organization.

Moreover, the course of world events since the Sixties does not suggest the capitalist regime has either the popular legitimacy or stability that Vivek Chibber seems to think. From the 1960s to 1980s there were a whole series of crises where mass-scale working class movements posed a nearly revolutionary challenge to the system: the general strike in France in 1968, the revolutionary collapse of the state in Portugal in the 1970s, the mass strikes of Solidarity in Poland in 1980. In these cases the movements weren't defeated by the stability and power of existing states. Rather, they were defeated by the role of Socialist and Communist parties which saw the mass movement from below as a threat to their bureaucratic ambition of sharing in state power.

Given the vast ecological crisis that capitalism faces, the steep financial crash in 2008, the overthrow of various rulers in the Arab Spring or the emergence of radical right-wing populist movements, it's not clear that the state has the kind of stability or popular legitimacy that Chibber claims. In the USA, elections rarely attract much more than half the eligible population to vote — 55 percent in the 2016 presidential election. And studies show that the non-voters are poorer than the voting population. Much of the working class doesn't vote. This makes elections a poor venue for working class struggle because our numbers cannot be marshaled there. Left candidates will depend on votes of middle class elements who may not favor a radical working class agenda.

A plausible path to self-managed socialism is going to lead through a revolutionary crisis. If the working class does develop high levels of direct struggle and solidarity through the growth of non-reformist methods of action and organization, this builds organizational strength, wider solidarity among sectors of the oppressed, and greater aspiration for change as people develop a growing sense of their own power. In such a period, the working class needs to develop its own

class-wide agenda and "gather its forces" from the various areas and sectors of struggle to form a united bloc or front with both the power and agenda for change. In this way the working class becomes a revolutionary factor in its own right.

The working class front or alliance (made up of grassroots unions and other social movement organizations) that acts as a force of social transformation may have ideologically specific organizations (such as various socialist groups) participating in it. As syndicalists, however, we are opposed to the idea of a party "taking state power" and then implementing its program through the managerialist bureaucracies of a state. The history of the mid-20th century "communist camp" countries suggests where that will lead.

As syndicalists, we believe that a process of social transformation should aim at worker self-management of all the industries but also democratic accountability of social production to the people in the ways they are affected by it — through effects on ecology, through quality of services and products, and by producing for social benefit. This means rooting the governance of society and industry in the democracy of neighborhood and workplace assemblies and councils or congresses of elected delegates.

A revolutionary working class strategy is not about building a small armed group to assault the heavily armed state from outside. In the syndicalist concept of an "expropriating general strike," the idea is that workers throughout the economy "defect" from management control, taking over control of the places where they work. This includes the public sector. In the Russian, Portuguese and Spanish revolutions there was also very substantial "defection" of the personnel of the military forces to the side of the working class. There was very little initial violence in the October, 1917 transfer of power to the Soviet Congress in Russia because the rank and file of the army and navy were already loyal to the soviets.

An argument against a revolutionary strategy is often based on the kind of dismal, authoritarian regimes that discredited the Communist movement in the 20th century. The problem here is the idea of party hegemony and seizure of state power by a "centralized cadre party." When a revolution is propelled and controlled by a guerrilla force in the hands of a top-down political group (as in China and Cuba) or a single political party works to gain a top-down party monopoly of state power (as the Bolsheviks did in the Russian revolution), this prefigures the power of a bureaucratic class that rules over the working class.

But guerrillaism or the seizure of state power by a "centralized cadre party" are not the only forms of ruptural strategy. The syndicalist strategy is designed to avoid the bureaucratic class power that emerged in the Communist states. This is accomplished by a strategy centered on democratic mass organizations.

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