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How Do We Overcome Capitalism?

Tom Wetzel & Nathan J. Robinson

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Tom Wetzel explains what a planned socialist economy would look like and the strategy we need to make socialism a reality.

Tom Wetzel's book *Overcoming Capitalism: Strategy for the Working Class in the 21st Century* is both a primer on the basic left critiques of capitalism and a handbook for creating a new economic system. Wetzel explains in clear, accessible language why exploitation, waste, and environmental destruction are built into the capitalist model and then explores possible alternative economic structures and shows how we might get there. He asks important questions like "What is the role of electoral politics?" "What kinds of unions do we need?" and "What cautions does the history of Marxism-Leninism offer us?"

In the best libertarian socialist tradition, Wetzel is a critic not only of domination and hierarchy in the contemporary capitalist economy but also of attempts to bring about socialism through authoritarian institutions. He explains the importance of democracy

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and why it must guide everything we do. *Overcoming Capitalism* is the product of over a decade of research and is an important contribution to the literature of the Left. Wetzel came on the *Current Affairs* podcast to talk with editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson to explain the basics of his ideas. This interview has been edited and condensed for grammar and clarity.

Robinson

So your book is a primer on anti-capitalist politics and strategy for our time. Robin Hahnel says in a blurb: “Written in plain English, free of leftist jargon, full of common sense as well as nuance, Wetzel has produced a gem.” I’m excited because I have been following the progress of this book over the years. Congratulations. The book is quite a masterpiece.

Wetzel

Thank you.

Robinson

The book has several components to it. The first component lays out the basic critique of capitalism. Then there’s the strategy part. You get into how to be an effective leftist and how we can overcome capitalism. Your book is written for a non academic audience. Any literate person should be able to read and enjoy this book. When you encounter people who say they don’t see a problem with capitalism, how do you begin to persuade them of the left critique? What do you think is the core problem with capitalism that necessitates the strategy that you lay out in the book?

Wetzel

I usually start with the very basic structure of capitalism, which is that it’s rooted in class oppression and exploitation. The working class are people who don’t have their own means of livelihood. We’re forced to seek jobs from employers and we have to submit to these autocratic, managerialist regimes. We don’t have any say

over the work. So we're denied self-management of even how our own abilities are put to use. The relationship with management is an inherently coercive one. If you challenge anything, they can threaten to fire you or demote you. So that's the core relationship of class oppression that capitalism is based on.

Robinson

Class is the sensible place to begin. A small number of people own the capital and give the orders and a much larger number of people have to take the orders and are faced with the choice of whether to work or starve. Then there's the macroeconomic aspect of capitalism in terms of what it produces. For example, capitalism manufactures demand for consumption and produces a great deal of waste and ecological destruction without giving people what they need. So we have the relationships within the workplace and then what's being produced by a capitalist economy.

Wetzel

Right. I have a chapter called cost shifting. One of the inherent features of capitalism is that, in order to make profit, capitalists push the costs of production off onto other people—to workers and communities through air and water pollution. This has led to accumulating impact and the global warming crisis. Capitalists use nature as a free sink. Capitalists don't worry about the environment unless they're forced to. And so that is another inherent structural flaw of capitalism that we will need to overcome.

Robinson

You have a chapter on racial inequality. How should we conceptualize the relationship between racial inequality and capitalism?

Wetzel

Well, racial inequality is a feature of capitalism. American capitalism has always had a racist and patriarchal character from the very beginning. You have groups that are racialized as inferiors so that it's okay if the state or management treats them in a worse way than others. That ends up being advantageous to capitalism because it creates pools of people with fewer opportunities. Firms

can exploit them by paying them lower wages and treating them worse. This also creates racialized resentments between different subgroups of the population and that makes it harder for the working class to get together into unions to form political coalitions to fight back against the capitalist class. Racism and racial divisions reduce the overall social bargaining power of the working class and this leads to lower wages and worse benefits. For example, we don't have a universal healthcare system in the U.S. There are some white people who would argue against that because they don't want *those* people to get public benefits. Racism plays into that.

Robinson

Let's think about alternatives. If you're having coffee with someone who's new to anti-capitalism, and you're blowing their mind—you're calling into question various assumptions that they've held all their lives and suggesting that things they've taken for granted or taken as fixed features of the social world can be changed—where do you start in order to guide our alternative vision? What kind of economy do we need to make in order to have justice?

Wetzel

Well, I appeal to two principles that I call principles of natural justice. That's because I think they're rooted in human nature. One is the principle that people should have control over the decisions that affect them. This implies that workers should be able to cooperatively, collectively self-manage the labor process, their own work, and the workplace. Self-management is a general principle for the reconstruction of social institutions. People can make their own decisions and cooperate with others; it's a human ability. And the other principle is what I call equal access to resources for developing your potential, developing your skills, and maintaining your abilities. That implies free healthcare and education and so forth. Those will be the foundational principles. And then it leads us to our vision of a socialist economy.

Robinson

port that it did in an earlier era. I think it has been largely discredited by realities that occurred in the various Communist Party-run countries. Because of objective working conditions and the ongoing ecological crisis, I think that we're moving into a period that favors a process of class formation.

Robinson

Could you define the term "class formation"?

Wetzel

The working class does not automatically have the capacity or ability or power to get rid of capitalism. So there has to be a process through which working class people build better and stronger organizations and in doing so develop more of a sense of confidence. People begin to think they can change things and overcome racial and gender divisions. And that's the process of class formation. The working class needs to develop itself into a more united force, a social force, that develops the actual, potential power to confront the system. And I think it's a protracted process. It's going to take time for that to play itself out. It happens when people engage in successful organizing efforts. They develop a sense of class consciousness and the potential to change things.

to have a kind of federated social arrangement of all the various community organizations and workplaces that determines prices based on expressed demand and the plans for productions of each industry. In other words, you have to take into account what the demand and supply would be to make prices in a planned socialist economy.

It's not a market economy. Money doesn't function as capital in the economy that I'm talking about. We'd have a price system that reflects planning decisions that individual households make, that communities make, and that workplace groups make. Basically, I make use of a lot of Robin Hahnel's participatory planning ideas. He just published his magnum opus, *Democratic Economic Planning*. I use some of his ideas, and I also have some different ideas as well.

Robinson

You've been a leftist for many decades now. You've been a writer and an activist. You've witnessed the rise and fall of the New Left, Reaganism, and neoliberalism. You've seen the resurgence in left politics among young people of this generation. I take it you wouldn't have written this book if you were not still hopeful that the path you lay out in the book could be accomplished. Considering the radicalism of your proposals and the failures of leftist politics over the years, talk about why you believe that the things that you're laying out here are indeed feasible.

Wetzel

We live under an extremely nasty form of capitalism. If you look at the objective conditions of the working class in this country—in terms of the work intensification of the last 50 years, the difficulty in finding affordable housing—these conditions favor uprisings. The uprising at Amazon on Staten Island is just one example of what could happen. If you consider the difficulty employers have right now in finding employees, I think workers have potential leverage that they can develop from that. Also, a lot of the prior left-wing strategies that I critique have been undermined by the course of history. Marxism-Leninism no longer has the kind of sup-

These two principles are very, very useful. We can think about society and institutions as they exist now and imagine the changes we would need to make to make those principles a reality. When we start analyzing left institutions and groups using these principles, we can see that there are more and less democratic ways to go about seeking these kinds of changes.

Wetzel

Yes, that's true. In the book, I discuss the various radical left strategies. And one of the problems that persistently crops up is that a bureaucratic layer forms at the top. This effectively denies ordinary people the ability to control and participate in decision making. For example, one of the problems with electoral socialism has been the tendency to build up these bureaucratic party machines with professional politicians and a party apparatus. They develop interests of their own, which are not necessarily the same as the interests of rank and file working class people. And the same problem occurs with unions. Most of the AFL-CIO unions over time have become increasingly centralized and bureaucratized, with power concentrated in the hands of paid officials and staff. This effectively precludes control by the rank and file members of those unions. Those are both examples of what I call the bureaucratic layer. Historically, this has been a major problem in left-wing efforts.

Robinson

You have a chapter on Leninism. You come from the libertarian socialist tradition. You are a staunch critic of centralized or bureaucratic socialism. Over the course of the 20th century, the Marxist-Leninist variety of socialism was the dominant strain; it is criticized heavily by the right for its authoritarian tendencies. But there is a strong left critique of authoritarian socialism that you lay out in the book. Explain why it is tempting to people and why we need to resist it.

Wetzel

There are three components here. One is the emphasis upon building a political organization that's based on militants, the ac-

tivist people. That's the so-called *vanguard*. That idea in itself is not necessarily a problem. The problem arises when you ask the question of, What is the role of the Leninist organization? Their conception is that they need to gain control of the state and monopolize control over the state and then use the state to implement their conception of socialism. And this ends up being through a centralized nationalized economy, where you essentially create a managerial bureaucracy which—like under capitalism—workers are subordinate to. So it ends up being unable to achieve the fundamental thing that socialism should be about, which is the liberation of the working class from being an oppressed class or being a subordinate class. Its whole approach, which is based on the power of a party gaining control over state and then centralizing the economy in its own hands, completely tramples on that idea. The syndicalists in the 1920s critiqued Leninism and the communist movement for exactly this reason. Looking back, we can say that their criticisms were vindicated by the subsequent history of the various communist regimes.

Robinson

There are some self-described democratic socialists who would say that the problem lies not with socialists who want to seize and use state power, but with the lack of accountability through democratic elections. I think this is probably the perspective that you read in *Jacobin*. It's that there's not an opposition to a centralized state; the sense is that you need a powerful state in order to get things done if you're going to totally transform a capitalist economy into a green economy, for instance. You need the power of the state to be able to move resources around and tell people what to do. But we can hold the state accountable. The problem with Leninism and Stalinism was the elimination of popular input into what the state is doing. But I take it that you reject that perspective, or you say it's insufficiently sensitive to the problems that arise from the emergence of a really powerful centralized apparatus?

Wetzel

Robinson

If the workplace and unions are the central site of struggle, are there other kinds of organizations that leftists ought to build? If left organizing is not about elections, where is the center?

Wetzel

Workplaces are central. If the working class is going to become more confident down the road, it's going to happen through workplace organizing. This kind of organizing is rooted in the ability to stop production. But there are other sites of struggle, of course. Two years ago, before the pandemic, there was a wave of rent strikes in Los Angeles. Tenant unions played an important role there. So there are other kinds of mass organizations which are engaged in struggles that are important. Look at the movement against racist police violence. Then there's the relationship between environmental justice/climate and the labor movement. Those connections need to be built.

Robinson

Talk about how a non capitalist, non market economy could function. Give one or two highlights from your book to help us see it more clearly.

Wetzel

What I tried to lay out in the book is the idea of a planned economy that is distributed in terms of where the decision making takes place. You'd have workers managing their own workplaces and determining production in coordination across industries. The other area of self-management is in the accountability of the economy to the masses of ordinary people in the general population. You would need to have things like neighborhood assemblies and citywide congresses of delegates from neighborhoods to plan out public goods and services, housing, ecological protections, and so forth. What you need is some way to link everything together. We take for granted that in a market economy, the relationship between companies and consumers is adjusted through prices. Price wouldn't work the same way here. Rather, you need

For example, in Sweden, the Social Democrats have tried to outlaw strikes in some sectors, like in the longshore sector where there's an independent union. These are the kinds of problems you run into if electoralism is your strategy. Now, it's inevitable that some sections of the working class will look to elections as ways to make a difference. And so I'm not saying that people shouldn't vote. I understand why people do that. I'm just saying that, from the point of view of changing society, what I think socialist activists should focus on is building direct struggle such as building unions that are directly controlled by workers. You interviewed Justine Medina from the JKF8 warehouse. That's a great example. They've built an independent union. And now they're starting to do elections. This vindicates some things I say in my book. We need to build unions. That's the direction we need to take.

Robinson

Major unions in the country wished they could organize at Amazon but didn't succeed. And then you have this independent union. Justine mentioned that they made sure that the union was run by workers, that it wasn't an outside organization and wasn't being directed by a union bureaucracy from afar. That made them more likely to succeed. Amazon couldn't tell the workers, as they could in some other cases, that this was some outside organization. It was completely grassroots. And it also made people at the warehouse feel invested in the union. It was an authentic expression of their own aspirations. In that sense, it embodies those principles that you talked about.

Wetzel

Right. This is a very important example. It does vindicate the kind of strategy that I was proposing. This is the kind of thing that we need to work on. We need to work on building these kinds of directly worker-controlled workplaces and these kinds of self-managed independent unions. And if we can build this up on a larger scale in more places, maybe we could federate them together.

Yes. The problem is that the state is separate from popular control. Elections of politicians do not give the masses of ordinary people effective control over what the policies will be. For example, there was that study by two social scientists who said that the U.S. is an oligarchy. Policies that are popular don't get implemented if they run contrary to the interests of the elites. So the structure of class oppression is built into the state. Look at the subordinate position of public sector workers in relation to state management. That's the same kind of relationship of class domination that you find in capitalist corporations. I don't think that the use of the state is going to be the solution with respect to the ecological problems because there's the problem of potential regulatory capture by interest groups that have a stake in continuing to be able to pollute. And you need to have a different kind of economic system so that ecological costs are automatically taken into consideration. And I think the only way you can do that is if you have a participatory level of democratic control by the masses of people in regions and cities. People experiencing pollution need to have the power to stop others from polluting the environment. But having an election doesn't give people enough power.

Robinson

A really interesting point that is not discussed enough on the left is that if we think about what the most hierarchical, coercive institution imaginable is, it's probably the army, right? It's probably the military, a branch of the state which can order you to die, essentially. You can be conscripted. That's the extreme part of it. Of course, it's almost absurd to talk about the ability of the ordinary soldier to have a role in a participatory democracy because the military is an inherently hierarchical institution. But as you point out, if we're making a critique about lack of participation in some environment, then we can apply it to any sector, not just to for-profit corporations. What about the lack of ability of teachers to set their curricula, for example?

Wetzel

That's right. Yes. You have the same problem when you look at the state and its various components. You have public sector workers, public transit workers, and education workers who are denied self-management over their work. If we think of what self-management implies in terms of the reconstruction of social institutions, I think it has two sides to it. It's about self-management over work and self-management by the population over the impacts of the production system. This is where I bring it back to the question of addressing pollution. You have to have participatory democracy in the community as well. And this also applies to things like developing the plans and proposals for what kind of public services you want to have. The population that wants those services needs to be able to directly participate in crafting the plans for these services.

Robinson

You critique many different models of left organizing. You critique unions; you critique democratic centralism and Leninism; you critique market socialism. People may start thinking, Okay, well, what is the model we're aiming for? What are successful examples of things that eliminate this bureaucratic layer and that create genuine participation? Are there historical examples of what you see as authentic participatory democratic institutions?

Wetzel

I give some examples drawn from the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s. In Spain, people took control of industries on a very large scale. This came about through a self-managed kind of syndicalist unionism built over previous decades. Workers had debated amongst themselves the things they needed to do in a revolutionary situation. And they came to the conclusion that they needed to take over the workplaces. They didn't just have isolated workplaces competing with each other. They merged the assets of entire industries to form what they call industrial federations which would control an entire industry. For instance, in the healthcare industry, they took over drug factories and set up free clinics. In the

railway industry, they merged the railways. They merged the entire furniture industry. They did this in many different industries.

It was something like 80 percent of the economy of Catalonia and 70 percent of Valencia. These were the two most industrialized regions of Spain. Their entire economies were taken over and reorganized. It was not complete, and they made mistakes. It didn't go as far as they wanted it to go because they were not able to replace the state. Their idea was that they would link all these various industrial federations into a kind of distributed democratic planned economy that would also include things like neighborhood assemblies as well as workplace assemblies. But they went a long way in the direction of rebuilding the economy on the basis of direct worker power. They had assemblies in the workplace. So that's a very important positive example.

Robinson

In the contemporary U.S., we have a revived self-described socialist movement or a great deal of interest in socialism more so than there has been in quite some time. This has been, in part, driven by the Bernie Sanders campaigns and the growth of the DSA. Your book is about strategy. Do you think that some of the tactics of contemporary socialists—from Bernie to AOC to the DSA—are going down a blind alley? Even if we share the same values and the same aspirations for a classless society, are we going to get the results we want with the movements we have now?

Wetzel

This comes back to the problem of achieving socialism via electoralism. If you look at the socialist and communist parties in Europe, they tended to build up these bureaucratic layers of professional politicians. And those politicians had interests of their own. If you look at the European experience, over time these leaders moderated their demands because they wanted to get reelected; they didn't want to lose middle class votes. And they often opposed worker direct actions and militancy in the workplace.