

A Proposal for a Discussion on Party Building

Ken Kaltornyk and Karen Naylor

In the autumn of 1998 Sam Gindin wrote an essay entitled: “Is the Party Over?” In that essay he presented the thesis that the NDP could not be considered a party of socialism and that a new party was needed to lead the struggle against neoliberalism and for the construction of socialism. However, he noted, correctly in our opinion, that conditions did not exist at that time to establish such a party. Therefore, he proposed an interim measure, the creation of an organization that was more than a movement or coalition and less than a party – a structured movement against capitalism.

That essay sparked a heated discussion in socialist circles and led to several attempts to create such an organization, including Rebuilding the Left, Structured Movement Against Capitalism and Socialist Project. These experiments have met with varying degrees of success.

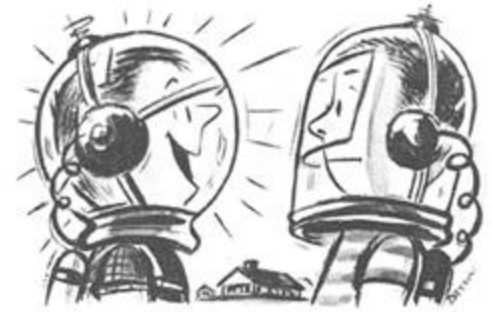
In the July-August issue of *Relay* Sam revisited this question in the article “Beyond the CAW-NDP Divorce: Towards a New Politics?” Once again he noted that a new socialist party is needed but that conditions do not yet exist for its creation. He then went on to propose the establishment of People’s Assemblies as an interim measure. We agree with Sam’s assessment regarding the lack of conditions to establish a new party. We also agree that some form of mass organization for the broader movement is required and People’s Assemblies may be the answer. However, we do not believe that the establishment of such organizations will get us any closer to establishing a new party. In fact, in some ways we think it represents a step backward from Sam’s earlier proposal.

In our view the problem stems from our collective hope that conditions for establishing a new party will emerge spontaneously in the course of carrying out joint political organizing in the broader movement. However, six years of this kind of activity has brought us no closer to our goal. We would suggest that unless the revolutionary socialists create such conditions on a systematic basis conditions to establish a party will never exist. If we do not begin discussions about what kind of party we want and what kind of party we need, the project will never get off the ground.

We fully recognize the reality that many, many people who consider themselves socialists, communists or revolutionaries have had negative experiences with political parties spanning the spectrum of “left” politics. This leads, understandably, to a certain reluctance to go down that path again. However, this could prove to be a fruitful starting point. Why not begin from our negative experiences and discuss what we do not want to see in a political party and what measures could be adopted to guard against those negatives? It’s quite possible that such a discussion could lead to a broad consensus of how a new party should be structured and how it should operate.

In our experience, the vast majority of complaints about political parties centre around the issue of internal democracy or lack thereof. These complaints take many forms. Members of social democratic parties complain that the parliamentary caucus ignores the decisions of the membership taken at conventions. Members of “far left” organizations complain about infringement on freedom of conscience once a decision has been made. In virtually

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The problems of democracy are not easy to solve, whether within a single organization or within society as a whole. On the one hand, the broadest possible democracy is crucial in releasing the initiative and creativity of the members; on the other hand, without a strong executive there is no focus and very little gets accomplished. On the one hand, democracy is undermined if the minority refuses to accept the will of the majority; on the other hand, democracy is undermined if the opinions of the minority are ignored and their rights are trampled on. On the one hand, democracy works best in small groups of 10 or less; on the other hand, effectiveness dictates large organizations. In other words, there is a constant balancing act between the rights of the individual members and the interests of the collective, between democracy and effectiveness. Having said that, if socialists cannot solve these fundamental problems of democracy within their own organizations, how are we going to solve them at the level of society as a whole?

Of course, the issue of internal democracy is not the only problem facing a political party. There are also the problems of achieving a balance between theory and practice, between electoral and movement work, between intellectuals and workers, between local and national work, and so on. Nor is all of the experience of past party-building negative. However, the main hang-up at present seems to be on the issue of internal democracy, so that would seem like the logical place to start.

We are not suggesting that individuals and groups should drop their own work or should postpone dealing with how to organize the broader movement. What we are suggesting is that those individuals who agree on the necessity to establish a new party should start discussing these issues of party-building and begin systematically working out their positions. Local and regional forums should be held to present position papers and raise the discussion and debate to a higher level. Then the same should be done nationally. We also propose that a reasonable timeline be established to carry out these discussions and that the aim of actually establishing a new party be kept in the foreground. After all, while we are trying to get our act together our enemies are organizing a broad offensive against the working class. **R**

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