

What Should We Do To Help Build a New Left?

Greg Albo and Herman Rosenfeld

Marta Harnecker's, *Rebuilding the Left* (London: Zed Books, 2007) lays out an important message on the state of the Left in the struggle against neoliberalism:

“We live in a world that is nothing like the world of 50 years ago... We live in a world where capitalism in its most brutal guise, neoliberalism, uses technological advances for its own benefit and is wreaking havoc on much of the world's population and ruthlessly destroying nature... pushing social groups and whole nations into collective neglect. A growing discontent, nevertheless, has begun to make itself felt among extended social sectors... We need to rebuild the Left... our efforts should be realistically focused on changing the current balance of power so that what appears to be impossible today becomes possible tomorrow.” (pp. 1-2).

In spite of the discrediting of the ideology of neoliberalism in North America, there is no easy space for the Left to ‘fill.’ Neoliberalism in its practical form is embedded in the way most people think and the everyday

realities they live, including workers. It remains in the acceptance of private markets as the only way to organize society, in the lack of experience with collective struggles and solutions, and in that most of us confront the daily struggle to survive on an increasingly individualized basis. Neoliberalism has accomplished two of its central goals: making all of us more dependent on the market for our livelihoods and thus more subject to market disciplines; and disorganizing the Left politically and marginalizing non-market democratic alternatives from the space of politics. Actually existing liberal democracy has become the best ‘political shell’ for neoliberal capitalism.

The defeat of the Left and the workers' movement dates from the end of the post-war boom and the militant attempts through the 1970s to develop alternatives in multiple forms – a radicalized social democracy, reform communism, liberation struggles carrying the banner of socialism, workers' control and participatory democracy movements, and still others. The ascendancy of neoliberalism to revitalize capitalist power as a response to these developments still haunts us. This also

has deeper roots in the often ossified ways that Marxism was translated into the political, cultural and economic realities of developed capitalist society. These are part of our difficulty in developing a ‘21st century socialist’ vision, and in finding ways to apply socialist thinking today to the needs of segmented and unorganized working classes.

AN AGENDA FOR REBUILDING

Even as capitalism unsteadily moves into recovery from the current crisis – the deepest economic crisis in seventy years – its impacts will persist. The IMF as well as national economic authorities and financial interests are already warning that a decade of austerity is at hand. The coming fights over wage rollbacks, concessions and public sector cuts will necessarily pre-occupy many impending struggles. These need to be turned from defences against further attacks on workers into political confrontations with neoliberalism and capitalism. They cannot be limited to particular issues and single struggles. To do that, we need to push beyond the present disorganization and divisions of the Left to what Harnecker refers to as ‘the creation of an alternate social bloc’ (p. 32). We could do much worse than start with the following, which constitute a very small part of what needs to be done. But they would certainly contribute to building a socialist agenda and organizational capacity in North America, and in particular Canada, taking the Left out of the margins it now resides in.

First, there is no way to avoid sustained building of alternate communications, publications and educative capacities for socialist ideas and analysis. There is no building socialists

Neoliberalism has accomplished two of its central goals: making all of us more dependent on the market for our livelihoods and thus more subject to market disciplines; and disorganizing the Left politically and marginalizing non-market democratic alternatives from the space of politics.

without socialist media that can contest the daily interpretation of events, sustain more critical analyses of capitalism and form activist cadre. This, of course, includes using the most contemporary forms of media allowed by the internet, but also more traditional forms. A socialist press is indispensable as an organizer of the movement across different workplaces, communities and countries. Educational centres which cut across current campaigns are absolutely central for deepening understanding of issues, but also in developing the skill set of cadre as organizers and grounded community leaders.

Second, there is a need to work among the different segments of the working class, gaining a deeper understanding of how to build class unity and how to mobilize and inspire workers to fight-back. This involves work in community struggles, workplaces and in and around trade unions and other popular organizations, and the creation of new forms of struggle and resistance such as community and workers' assemblies. We have to learn how to generate and consolidate socialists from within the working class and experiment with different kinds of demands and strategies. There is, for example, in Canada and North America today no coherent network of socialists cutting across unions supporting strikes, leading workplace actions and agitating for a programme of democratic reform and political demands.

Third, socialist approaches to the environmental crisis need to be explored and movements built around them, and challenge the ecology movement's drift toward its vulgar embrace of market solutions and its utopian and nativist vision of localist enclaves. This is a long-term imperative in terms of addressing climate change, loss of habitats and species and so forth. But it is also an immediate need to address the needs of daily life and the saturation of human bodies with a diet of junk food and an endless slurry of pollutants; the necessity of reducing work-time; and the social imperative to contest the massive burden of environmental injustices borne by workers and racial and indigenous minorities.

Fourth, there is a political urgency to working together as socialists to build toward higher forms of unity: the era of small group attitudes and organizing around a singular issues is, at long last after decades of isolation and marginalization, over. Socialist regroupment, the bringing together socialists from different Left ideological currents, as well as newer and young socialists, are taking place around the world. But too often those tendencies formally committed to building a new socialist politics remain stuck in their own conceptual and organizational ghettos (unable to break from the self-identification of what Marx ridiculed long ago as the bearers of 'one true socialism').

That is one component and, in terms of the scale of the work at hand, a relatively minor one. Another is building an organized socialist current across the union movement that is not organized just as unionists connected to activists in other unions, but as part of a wider emerging socialist politics. As well, the networks, coalitions, and social forum need to push beyond these most minimal forms of linking struggles and become an integral component of deeper political organization. These kinds of initiatives have either sputtered or collapsed back into singular issue politics. They need to become part of movement building again, with much deeper organizational commitments, to actually contest the neoliberal project which has animated their politics.

In Canada we have to seriously engage in this kind of project. It means not only working together on common campaigns (that has gone in major ways through the battles against free trade and imperialist wars to current struggles for Palestinian solidarity, immigrants' rights and against the intensification of NAFTA and the security state). But also to map out plans to build new kinds of socialist political organizations. This would involve, among other things, debate and discussion of the key theoretical and practical issues we face and, in the process, clarifying them.

A NEW POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

In her exploration of the characteristics of the new political instrument that the Left needs to build, Harnecker sums up:

“in order to respond to the new challenges set by the twenty-first century we need a political organisation which, as it advances a national programme which enables broad sectors of society to rally round the same battle standard, also helps these sectors to transform themselves into the active subjects building the new society for which the battle is being waged” (p. 99).

This is, indeed, critical to rediscovering politics as making alternatives possible – the creative possibilities in all of us as an animating principle of a new revolutionary politics. In the actions taken today in the building a new correlation of political forces, in our workplaces and communities, the constricting grip of neoliberalism might at last be broken, and new kinds of political futures again be explored. **R**

Greg Albo teaches political economy at York University. Herman Rosenfeld is a union activist in Toronto.

