

## Political comment: solidarity, the labor movement, and the challenges of building a left in the United States

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Like many Leftists, I worked on a range of different political struggles during the past decade, including anti-sweatshop, Jobs with Justice, anti-war, the Workers Center movement, Colombian solidarity, food-related issues, and defending public funding for higher education—a veritable laundry list of progressive causes that has defined what we might call the “Solidarity Left” in recent times.<sup>1</sup>

That one could work on so many different issues during a relatively short period of time is telling. On the one hand, the presence of so many campaigns and causes is an indication of the breadth and energy that defines Left activism. We put a lot of time, energy, and resources into fighting sweatshops. Over one hundred Workers Centers now exist throughout the United States. Thousands mobilized against war in the Middle East. There is something going on here.

On the other hand, despite the diverse nature of progressive activism during this period, these campaigns and causes all share one important feature. They failed. We do not have a lot to show for our efforts. It takes an exceptionally creative intellect to conclude that the anti-sweatshop movement has significantly improved the lives of workers, let alone made a dent in global inequality or advanced labor organizing; or that Workers’ Centers are a successful model for organizing the US working class or revitalizing the labor movement; or that anti-war activism has stopped, or even significantly slowed, US militarism. It also seems overly optimistic to suggest that these defeats have established the building blocks for a future movement, that in

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<sup>1</sup> What I mean by the “Solidarity Left” is admittedly imprecise, and I don’t want to give the impression that “it” exists in any coherent way (quite the contrary). Painting in broad strokes, the Solidarity Left collectively (but not together) works on numerous campaigns and causes, including not only the above mentioned but also environmental, women’s issues, etc. It is dominated by white, middle-class, folks who typically have little connection to organized labor or the traditional labor movement (though some folks bridge the two).

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losing these many battles we somehow gained the alliances, knowledge, and resources to eventually win the war. Let's stop kidding ourselves.

Some people may, of course, correctly point out that many of these fights had to be fought regardless of the outcome. Had we not mobilized by the thousands, it is likely that the US military and its foreign allies would have been even more aggressive and dangerous. We saved lives. Had we not fought against attacks on public education and healthcare, the neoliberal agenda would be even further advanced. This matters.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that these battles were, in a sense, lost from the very moment we engaged in them. They were rear-guard struggles in which, as Adolph Reed Jr. has so aptly put it, the left "negotiates the best possible terms of defeat (Reed 2010)." We have not been fighting *for* something as much as we are trying to lessen the devastation.

Part of the irony, of course, is that by continuously engaging in largely defensive struggles we have contributed to the marginalization of a Left that no longer occupies a meaningful space within public life, which in turn makes it increasingly difficult to think about or engage in different kinds of struggles. Worse yet, as the Left has become absent from public debates, what we find in vaguely progressive circles is a combination of truly decent ideas mixed with conspiracy theories, political illiteracy, emotional babble, and silly, unbridled, enthusiasm that the revolution is right around the corner. Some may suggest that this has always defined the left, and to a certain extent, this is true. What is different is the overall balance between, on the one hand, clear thinking, rigorous analysis, and useful debate and, on the other, the muddled, often apolitical, often reactionary, often silly, tendencies within progressive circles. The scales are tipping in the wrong direction.

The absence of a US Left, in this sense, operates as both cause and effect. On the one hand, it is very difficult for the individual causes, campaigns, and mini-movements of the Solidarity Left to succeed, sustain themselves over time, envision how they fit into a larger progressive project, or connect with each other without the presence of a coherent Left. On the other hand, it is very difficult for a coherent Left to emerge out of a landscape defined by hundreds of relatively isolated campaigns, many of which barely exist beyond a webpage, that are struggling to survive with few resources, have little in the way of a social base, and are peopled by folks who are often exhausted, demoralized, and have little time to think about the relationship between their individual efforts and broader social change. This has resulted in three broad tendencies within the Solidarity Left:

*Disengagement.* Because many of us know nothing but defeat, and recognize that the injustices and inequalities we abhor are so entrenched and interconnected, there is a tendency to feel that unless we devote our entire life to the cause—something that fewer and fewer can financially afford to do even in the short term—that there is no point in doing anything. I see this more and more among students, which often leads them to disengage completely or look for assurances that if, as individuals acting alone, they buy the right chocolate, eat less meat, or adopt the right technology, they will then be able to continue their lives, guilt free, more or less as they had always envisioned. By this logic, if you don't have the time, resources, or commitment to tackle capitalism, anything less seems pointless (except being a

really good consumer). Many of us have been there, and it is an understandable position in a political landscape in which there is no visibly present Left to offer alternative visions or meaningful avenues for action.

*Activistism.* The second tendency is, in a sense, the polar opposite of being disengaged, what Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti have called activistism, an anti-intellectual hyper-pragmatic emphasis on acting, acting without analysis, where action is privileged regardless of its value, impact, direction, or connection to political aims (Featherstone et al. 2002). This action-will-be-taken mentality, where action is by definition righteous, circulates in many vaguely progressive circles, and leads to the any-direction-is-as-good-as-any-other orientation that is so prevalent today. It can be found in food-related activism where “local-self-sufficiency” has, despite its patent silliness as a viable solution beyond isolated locales, reached near hegemonic status among food-progressives of all ages. (One can’t help but wonder what would happen if all the progressives who started gardening in the past decade would stop and devote all that extra time to politics). Activistism is also common sense within anarchist and direct action groups, where there is often little effort to analyze the relation between a particular action and short- or long-term political aims and where the if-we-create-a-spark-the-fire-of-revolution-will-burn mode of (non)organizing often prevails. And it circulates freely within many sectors of the global justice movement, where getting together in large numbers, sharing ideas (and résumés), recounting “actions,” and becoming “energized” creates the illusion that something is being built. Although this flurry of activity could (and to an extent should) be taken as a sign of the Left’s energy, emotion, and commitment, that people care and are still willing to fight, we should also consider that this activity, and the often limited analysis that sustains it, is in fact a product of the fact that there is no Left in the United States today.

*Professionalism.* Much of the US left, particularly its middle-class core, now inhabits academia and the world of NGOs and non-profits. Progressive academics are typically as detached as ivory tower stereotypes suggest, either because they are struggling to piece together careers in the context of decaying institutions or because they often confuse doing research on social movements with actually building social movements. NGOs, which effectively hold leadership control within certain mini-movements,<sup>2</sup> are typically not funded by membership and are inherently undemocratic. In fact, they are generally run by highly educated, relatively wealthy, people, with the foundations funding them being even more so. With so much time spent on trying to keep funding, pay salaries, and build careers, there is very little space for imagination; negative sanctions are placed on those who rock the boat, and a premium is placed on immediate “action” that can show funders (short-term) results (Joseph 2008).

More than this, however, NGOs, particularly the non-profit variety that now provide the preferred career path for young progressives, suffer from what we might call the Peace Corp (or Teach for America) model, which assumes that one or two enthusiastic, young, people, with no experience, no resources, and no real connections to the people or issue at hand can be plopped into a new environment

<sup>2</sup> Anti-war is a good example. MoveOn.org points to this on an even broader level.

and bring about meaningful social change. Let's assume for a second that this widely adopted model was not inherently undemocratic, totally dependent on foundation (or union) funding, and paternalistic (yes, it's all these things); it is still not even remotely equipped for bringing about social change or organizing anyone. This is why so many progressive non-profits that are committed to organizing rarely actually get around to doing it as they find it impossible to move beyond providing services to vulnerable populations (i.e., the best the Peace Corp model allows for). Even labor initiatives, such as Jobs with Justice and ROC (Restaurant Opportunities Center), have embraced the basic logic of this model. And yet, I don't know how many meetings I've been to where someone said some version of the following: "If only we had one full-time staff person we could really do something."

So where do we go? There are no easy answers, but recent events in Wisconsin reinforce two lessons. First, if all the wonderful energy in Wisconsin is to be sustained or have any long-term meaning, it must be channeled into organizations. Otherwise, all that energy will simply dissipate, with "Wisconsin" quickly entering the nostalgic pantheon of progressive defeats. "Were you there? Can you remember the excitement?" Second, and very much related, Wisconsin highlights that there is no future for the Left without the labor movement. This was no doubt common sense for many prior to Wisconsin, but not so for many within the Solidarity Left (notwithstanding frequent declarations of affinity for the working class). In fact, the thinking in progressive circles typically leans in the other direction, with unions being equated with an outdated way of organizing and the reason why things are so messed up. This is in part because unions have in fact made a lot of mistakes; in part because fewer and fewer progressives have ever had any direct experience with unions; and in part because the *only* thing that many progressives within the Solidarity Left "know" about organized labor is that (a) unions have historically excluded women and people of color and that (b) even today they don't do a very good job of organizing marginalized workers. (I've heard this twice in the last month alone).<sup>3</sup>

The latter is no doubt true, and an important point, but it has become a truth that is unthinkingly repeated in a simplified form with amazing consistency in progressive circles, and is always accompanied by those self-satisfying nods and looks that progressives like to give each other when dismissing someone else or affirming the superiority of their own world view. It is also painfully ironic because it is almost always said within groups that are hyper-conscious about race and gender (and privilege), but are themselves virtually all white.<sup>4</sup> Compared with most progressive organizations, indeed compared with virtually any organization, the labor movement is incredibly "diverse." As a membership-based organization, organized labor also happens to be infinitely more democratic than any NGO, non-profit, or affinity group of more than about ten people. It also has the virtue of

<sup>3</sup> Adolph Reed develops this point more fully in a forthcoming book.

<sup>4</sup> The Solidarity Left, as a rule, is whiter (and less working class) than a country-music concert, especially in terms of who is in control. At meetings, someone almost always inevitably asks: How can we get some people of color involved?—as if the question itself, which is really just another way of announcing "I'm not a racist," was enough to deal with racism; or as though the addition of one or two people of color, along with a full-time paid staff member, would tip the scales in favor of revolution.

possessing a national, even international, organizational infrastructure; it is quite a bit more than a webpage.

More importantly, the “common sense” insight regarding organized labor’s racism and inability to organize the unorganized is troubling because it is never asserted in order to engage the labor movement, but as a way of dismissing it. The point here is not that the labor movement has all the answers; in different ways, “it” is every bit as confused and screwed up as the disparate causes and campaigns that constitute the Solidarity Left. The point is, for a variety of reasons that seem obvious and that Wisconsin reminds us of, there will be no viable Left in the United States without the labor movement.

For the Solidarity Left, for progressives disconnected from or on the margins of the labor movement, we might as well get our heads around this simple fact and think about what it means in terms of how we spend our political energy. Three things come immediately to mind.

First, we need to spend a lot more time thinking and educating ourselves and increasingly broader publics. This includes, of course, formulating, and articulating in a way that resonates with people, deeper understandings of how the world works and can be changed. We need to think more about the relationship between what we are doing, our actions, and a broader, anti-capitalist project. Without this, our thinking, our very ability to envision different worlds, will become increasingly muddled, which makes it all the more difficult to occupy public spaces, to become viable.

Second, the Solidarity Left needs to find more and better ways to engage organized labor<sup>5</sup> or sectors of organized labor, as a way of building a coherent Left. This will not be easy, in part because we will first have to educate many of our own; a large portion of the Solidarity Left has very little experience with the language or histories of labor.<sup>6</sup> Such education will hopefully lead more of us to the conclusion that we are not at all “outside” the labor movement or what a revamped labor movement might look like. With amazing frequency, progressives, especially those who are relatively well educated, talk about the need to “broaden the movement” by reaching out to “ordinary people.” I understand the sentiment, but can’t help but ask: Who are we? Engaging organized labor will also be difficult because organized labor is, in fact, very difficult to engage. This will require patience.

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<sup>5</sup> This of course works both ways. The third lesson from Wisconsin is that the labor movement needs the Solidarity Left, in part because it needs all the allies it can get; in part because the Left we must build cannot be neatly reduced to organized labor; in part because the Solidarity Left possesses important resources, connections, and “skill sets”; and in part because the Solidarity Left (some wacky ideas notwithstanding) provides important elements of an anti-capitalist vision that has the potential for pushing the labor movement to the left. Sectors of the labor movement recognize the importance of the Solidarity Left for building a broader movement at least in principle, a fact reflected in initiatives (however imperfect) such as Union Summer and Jobs with Justice as well as the broader recognition that community support can be crucial in organizing drives.

<sup>6</sup> This was recently brought home when I talked to a group of young progressives who, in talking about Wisconsin, had only the vaguest sense of what “collective bargaining” referred to. Terms like the “AFL-CIO” and the Employee Free Choice Act, let alone basic histories about recent splits within the labor movement, are literally foreign—a vocabulary that will not be unconsciously absorbed but must be consciously taught.

Third, if we come to the conclusion, as I increasingly have, that many of our causes, projects, and mini-movements are destined to fail in a climate devoid of a broader US Left, we must spend a great deal of time not only thinking about how to build a Left but actually working on creating an independent, national-level, organization that strives to effectively influence state power and public policy. Building what essentially amounts to a political party will not be an easy task, has been tried before, and is filled with pitfalls, but if we spend less time gardening, less time on causes and campaigns that the past tells us are destined to fail, we might actually take some steps in the right direction. Put another way, I would rather fail at building something that has the potential to get us to where we want to go than to “succeed” in building something we know will take us nowhere. On some level, it doesn’t matter how hard something is to do if that is in fact what needs to be done.

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