

Where We Stand

The Politics of the
International Socialist
Organization



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Introduction

Marx once said that the “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”

Ideas do matter. Any organization worth its salt must have a set of guiding principles if it is to navigate without losing its way. But those principles must in turn be connected to real conditions and not be castles in the air. Without a clear set of revolutionary principles—drawing on historical experience of the struggles of the working class and the oppressed—socialists can be good activists, but not necessarily good socialists. With great ideas but no connecting thread between those ideas and the world around them, socialists may be good socialists, but not necessarily good activists.

The International Socialist Organization’s “Where We Stand” is the best place to start if you want to learn the basic political principles and positions that guide the practice of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). It was written and adopted by members of the ISO at our founding convention in 1977 and has been amended several times by delegates at successive conventions. Anyone who accepts the basic positions of our “Where We Stand” is eligible for membership in the ISO. But before you decide to join, we also recommend reading the ISO’s “Member’s Toolkit,” available on the ISO’s Web Site (internationalsocialist.org).

Paul D’Amato, author of *The Meaning of Marxism*, wrote a series of SocialistWorker.org articles elaborating on the points made in the “Where We Stand.” They have been reformatted and reworked here as a booklet.

If you want to read more about the topics and questions covered in the “Where We Stand,” you can move on to *The Meaning of Marxism*, published by Haymarket Books. Local branches of the ISO have regular discussion groups on Where We Stand and *The Meaning of Marxism*, which you are welcome to check out. Additional readings can be found at the end of this pamphlet.



Where We Stand

Socialism, not capitalism

War, poverty, exploitation, oppression and worldwide environmental destruction are products of the capitalist system, a system in which a minority ruling class profits from the labor of the majority. The alternative is socialism, a society based on workers collectively owning and controlling the wealth their labor creates.

We stand in the Marxist tradition, founded by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and continued by V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky.

Workers' power

Workers create society's wealth, but have no control over its production and distribution. A socialist society can only be built when workers collectively take control of that wealth and democratically plan its production and distribution according to present and future human needs instead of profit.

The working class is the vast majority of society and is the key to the fight for socialism. Workers' central role in production gives them a social power—by use of the strike weapon—to paralyze the system like no other social force.

Socialism is working-class self-emancipation. Only mass struggles of the workers themselves can put an end to the capitalist system of oppression and exploitation.

We support trade unions as essential to the fight for workers' economic and political rights. To make the unions fight for workers' interests, rank-and-file workers must organize themselves independent of the union officials.

Revolution

We actively support the struggle of workers and all oppressed people for economic, political and social reforms, both as a means to improve their conditions and to advance their confidence and fighting strength. But reforms within the capitalist system cannot put an end to oppression, exploitation or ecological devastation. Capitalism must be replaced.

The structures of the present government grew up under capitalism and are designed to protect capitalist rule. The working class needs an entirely different kind of state—a democratic workers' state based on councils of workers' delegates.

We do not support candidates of capitalist parties like the Democrats or the Republicans. We support genuine left-wing candidates and political action that promotes indepen-

dence from the corporate-dominated two-party system in the US.

Internationalism

Capitalism is an international system, so the struggle for socialism must be international, uniting workers of all countries. The international working class is the only force capable of solving global problems like war, hunger and environmental destruction.

Socialists oppose imperialism—the division of the globe based on the subjugation of weaker nations by stronger ones—and support the self-determination of oppressed nations. We oppose all immigration controls.

We oppose US intervention in Cuba, the Middle East and elsewhere. We are for self-determination for Puerto Rico.

China and Cuba, like the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, have nothing to do with socialism. We support the struggles of workers in these countries against the bureaucratic ruling class.

Full equality and liberation

Capitalism divides the working class, based on sexual, gender, racial, national and other distinctions. The specially oppressed groups within the working class suffer the most under capitalism.

We oppose racism in all its forms. We support the struggle for immigrant rights. We fight for real social, economic and political equality for women, and for an end to discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

We support the fight for Black liberation and all the struggles of the oppressed. The liberation of the oppressed is essential to socialist revolution and impossible without it.

The revolutionary party

To achieve socialism, the most militant workers must be organized into a revolutionary socialist party. The ISO is committed to playing a role in laying the foundations for such a party. We aim to build an independent socialist organization, rooted in workplaces, schools and neighborhoods that, in fighting today's struggles, also wins larger numbers to socialism.

Socialism, not capitalism

A few profiting from the many

“War, poverty, exploitation, oppression and worldwide environmental destruction are products of the capitalist system, a system in which a minority ruling class profits from the labor of the majority.”

We live in a world in which capitalism has spread to every corner of the globe, a market-based, profit-driven system where wealth is used to get more wealth. We are so enmeshed in this system that it appears as though it is as natural as the moon’s orbit around the earth, but capitalism came into being at a certain point in human history and will, like other social systems, pass away.

Exploited labor is at the core of capitalism

Labor is the foundation of all human societies from the foraging band—where production and distribution was relatively egalitarian—to our modern industrial system. As soon as society’s methods of production allowed for labor to produce a surplus over and above its own subsistence needs, there developed a division of society into an idle ruling class that appropriated the surplus, and a laboring class that produced it.

But previous class societies appropriated the surplus directly, in the form of corn, grain, or some other product of the land that the slave, serf or peasant produced. Under capitalism, the form of appropriation of the surplus is mediated by the exchange between capital and labor, which appears as an exchange of equal values: wages for labor.

But beneath the appearance of equal exchange of commodities lies the realm of production where exploitation goes on just as surely as under feudal oppression. The source of profit—the money form of surplus under capitalism—derives from the difference between what the capitalists pay out in wages and what labor can actually produce in a given workday.

The foundation for capitalist production is that labor itself must become a commodity. Today, it seems completely natural and normal that there should be a minority that owns the factories, the mines, the schools, the hospitals and offices on one side; and on the other the vast propertyless majority who are by and large compelled, on pain of star-

vation, to sell their ability to work—what Karl Marx called “labor power”—to those same capitalist owners.

Yet this concentration of the means of production into the hands of the few and the creation of a “free” labor force without anything but its own labor to sell is a relatively recent phenomenon. All class societies are based on squeezing wealth from peasants, slaves or workers; they are therefore in all cases societies based upon the impoverishment of the majority.

Capitalist impoverishment is particularly virulent, ironically, because capitalism is such an immensely productive system. The constant pressure on individual capitalists to outsell their competitors on the market creates a constant drive for innovation that was unheard of in previous societies; we are awash in wealth that, if used rationally, could provide everyone with adequate food, shelter, education and sanitation.

But as the immense wealth of capitalism grows, the relative portion of that wealth going to the majority of producers dwindles, whether their wages are high or low. In a society where \$20 per hour is considered a decent wage that is out of reach to millions of workers, there are billionaires whose wealth is greater than entire countries.

In addition, capitalism depends upon a growing “reserve army of labor”—pools of unemployed workers—in order to exert a downward pressure on wages and protect profits. As a result, the number of people in the world who are stuck in absolute poverty also grows.

The most obscene result of this development is that six million children per year die of hunger-related illness while enough food is produced to provide every human being with a decent diet. Worldwide, literally tens of millions of people live on next to nothing, scratching out an existence on the edge of starvation.

Crises of overproduction

The irrationality of capitalism asserts itself most profoundly in the phenomenon of economic crisis, where a rupture takes place between purchase and sale, and the system temporarily breaks down, whole businesses go under and millions are thrown out of work.

These are, perversely, crises that result not from shortages, but from abundance. They are crises of overproduction, in which goods can no longer be sold profitably, and are therefore not sold at all. Crises are sharp reminders of the way in

which production for profit creates the absurd situation in which too much means deprivation.

Whereas overabundance in a rational society based on human need would be a cause for celebration (and shortening the workday), in capitalism it is a cause for alarm and crisis—a crisis in which goods rot and factories lie idle while people who need the goods and are able to work face devastation.

These crises are a product of the unplanned, anarchic character of the capitalist market. Each crisis leads to a recovery in which the “big fish eat the small fish”—that is, the surviving capitalist units gobble up the ones that failed—and a new period of unplanned expansion begins again.

One of the most visible results of this cyclical process of booms and slumps is the centralization and concentration of capital—the growth of bigger and bigger capitalist conglomerates that control more and more wealth.

Capitalism through this economic cycle of boom and bust has gone from being a system of individual capitalists centered chiefly in England, each employing dozens of workers, to a world system of production dominated by giant multinational firms that employ hundreds of thousands.

Wal-Mart, the world’s largest retail company, for example, employs more than a million people and has sales in the hundreds of billions of dollars. What began as the relatively “free” market competition of early capitalism has given way to monopoly—the domination of industries by a handful of giant multinational corporations.

Capitalism was never a peaceful system; force, particularly the armed forces of the state, has always been used to optimize the profit-making capacities of different national capitalist groups. With the growth of monopolies, the role of the state and its armed forces also grew.

As capitalism burst the bounds of national markets, each state marshaled its forces to both protect and expand the markets of its “home” capitalists’ interests. While warfare and conquest long preceded it, capitalism has taken the destructiveness of war to a new level.

As capitalism became a world system in the late 19th century, the most powerful states used fraud, theft and violence to carve up colonies among themselves. Divide and conquer—using race, language and other designations to pit the exploited against each other—became a crucial method by which the ruling classes attempted to secure their rule.

This conflict between the growth of the world economy and its division between competing national states produced two of the world’s most devastating wars.

To summarize, while the development of tremendous labor productivity under capitalism has produced wealth enough to wipe out poverty and hunger, it has done so at the expense of the majority whose labor has made these changes possible; it has done so, moreover, in such a way as to produce more and more precarious economic crisis, destructive wars and debilitating oppressions, all of which can only be overcome when the system itself is overcome.

The case for socialism

“The alternative is socialism, a society based on workers collectively owning and controlling the wealth their labor creates.”

You’ve seen the slogans at different protests: “people over profits”; “human need not corporate greed.” They reflect a basic realization among many people that there is something deeply wrong with the market-driven priorities of capitalism.

Take, for example, our private for-profit health care system. Devising ways to provide the least amount of care for the highest possible price is incompatible with providing good health care, and yet this is the logic that drives the health care system in the United States. It is a highly profitable industry that leaves millions with inadequate care. Obama’s Affordable Care Act was meant to fix this broken system, promising to make existing private insurance more affordable while at the same time making insurance mandatory under penalty of a fine.

The result was a big increase in the number of insured people (to the great glee of the insurance industry), without altering the fundamental problems with the system. For example, the lowest quality care under the ACA, the so-called “bronze-tier plan,” the one that poor people will be the likeliest to afford, offers only 60 percent coverage of medical costs and has a large deductible that requires people with very little money to still pay prohibitive out-of-pocket costs.

The new system prohibits insurance companies from citing “preexisting” conditions to deny care, but ACA explicitly allows insurers to charge the elderly three times more than the young. Another way that insurers will keep out high-risk patients (i.e., people who need the most care) is by restricting drug formularies, dividing medicines into tiers, and requiring patients to pay as much as 50 percent of the cost per prescription. This guarantees that the chronically ill won’t enroll in their plans.

The almost 47 million people—one in seven people—who go hungry every year in the United States are not part of the food market because they cannot buy food. It is not simply that capitalism places more emphasis on profit than on meeting human needs, it’s that capitalism places no emphasis at all on meeting human needs—it simply does not factor into how capitalists make decisions about production and distribution.

Certainly, capitalists know they must make something useful, i.e., that someone else wants to consume, in order to sell it for a profit. But the aim of the operation is profit. When agribusiness worries about a “grain glut,” it is not because everyone in the world now has enough food.

In fact, millions starve every year even during food “gluts,” because the glut has nothing to do with human need, but only with whether or not the food can be sold profitably. The 800 million starving people on the planet are an irrelevant factor for the food industry.

The future socialist society

Now, imagine a society where the means of production are held in common, by free association, and where labor is expended and allocated according to a social plan. Instead of things being produced only if they can be sold profitably, they are produced because they are socially necessary, and their production and distribution is carried out according to a democratically worked-out plan.

Imagine a society where, instead of “overproduction” being a trigger for economic crisis, unemployment and bankruptcies, it merely offers an opportunity to reduce the hours that society spends making that particular thing. Imagine, moreover, that in this society, “overproduction” does not mean overproduction in terms of what can be sold profitably on the market, but in terms of what society needs.

Imagine a society in which all people take from society what they need and put in what they can; a society where no one is satisfied until everyone has adequate food, shelter, clothing, transportation, health care and so on—including those who through youth, age or infirmity cannot contribute productively or care for themselves.

Such a society would still produce a surplus, but instead of that surplus going to a tiny minority as profit, that surplus would be allocated in ways to enhance the social and personal wellbeing of the whole society. Instead of relying on the blind forces of the market, which impose upon each capitalist the drive for profit as an external law of compulsion, we would have a society in which all decisions about production and distribution are thought out and consciously agreed upon.

Such a society would have no need for a special body to coerce the population—a state—on behalf of a minority exploiting class. Such a society would have no need to divide the population against itself—to pit men against women, whites against Blacks, and so on—in order to maintain the machinery of exploitation without hindrance.

That society is socialism.

Socialistic and communistic ideas have been dreamed about for centuries. In the 1400s, for example, the Taborites, a religious sect in Bohemia, preached a communism of shared consumption.

“In these days,” went a description of their teachings, “there shall be no king, ruler or subject on the earth, and all imposts and taxes shall cease; no one shall force another to do anything, for all shall be equal brothers and sisters.... As in the town of Tabor there is no mine or thine, but all is held in common.”

A tract written in 1649 by Abiezer Coppe, a radical Ranter during the period of the English Revolution, intoned: “The ax is laid to the root of the tree.... I will hew it down. And as I live, I will plague your Honor, Pomp, Greatness, Superfluity, and confound it into parity, equality [and] community.”

Later, as industrial capitalism began to develop, there arose socialists who criticized the evils of this new system,

but could not offer a bridge from this society to one based on their socialist vision. They could criticize capitalism as being bad, but by way of an alternative could only offer blueprints for a better world.

The modern socialist movement, whose first theorists were Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, saw itself as part of this tradition, with an important difference. For Marx and Engels, “socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes—the proletariat [working class] and the bourgeoisie.”

The overthrow of capitalism, with its “crying contrasts of want and luxury, starvation and surfeit,” cannot be guaranteed simply by the “consciousness that this mode of distribution is unjust, and that justice must eventually triumph,” wrote Engels in his classic book *Anti-Dubring*.

Socialism is possible as it never was before because in addition to the knowledge that equality and freedom is just, capitalism has created the material conditions, that is, the abundance as well as the social forces necessary to effect a change in that direction. The modern call for the abolition of class antagonisms has behind it the development by capitalism itself of untold wealth, its competitive tendency which pushes it to ramp up human productivity and leads to the greater and greater socialization of production; and finally, the creation of a class of wage workers who have the concentrated power to challenge their class oppression.

Engels sums up the reason that socialist ideas began really to take hold most strongly in the period of the rise of modern capitalism:

The reason is that modern large-scale industry has called into being on the one hand a proletariat, a class which for the first time in history can demand the abolition, not of this or that particular class organization, or of this or that particular class privilege, but of classes themselves, and which is in such a position that it must carry through this demand on pain of sinking to the level of the Chinese coolie.

On the other hand, this same large-scale industry has brought into being, in the bourgeoisie, a class which has the monopoly of all the instruments of production and means of subsistence, but which in each speculative boom period and in each crash that follows it proves that it has become incapable of any longer controlling the productive forces, which have grown beyond its power, a class under whose leadership society is racing to ruin like a locomotive whose jammed safety valve the driver is too weak to open.

In other words, the reason is that both the productive forces created by the modern capitalist mode of production and the system of distribution of goods established by it have come into crying contradiction with that mode of production itself, and in fact to such a degree that, if the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution

must take place, a revolution which will put an end to all class distinctions.

On this tangible, material fact, which is impressing itself in a more or less clear form, but with insuperable necessity, on the minds of the exploited proletarians—on this fact, and not on the conceptions of justice and injustice held by any armchair philosopher, is modern socialism's confidence in victory founded.

Our tradition: Standing on the shoulders of giants

“We stand in the Marxist tradition, founded by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and continued by V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky.”

This statement is by no means meant to imply that the five socialists listed are the only important Marxists in the movement's history—or that we elevate the role of individuals over and above that of the collective struggles of ordinary workers and oppressed people.

On the contrary, every important theoretical advance in the Marxist movement has been based upon developments in the class struggle, and for every great Marxist, there are thousands of lesser-known, if not completely unknown, organizers, theorists and leaders who have made an indelible mark. However, Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky have, to date, made some of the most important theoretical and practical contributions to the socialist tradition.

Socialism from below

These names can be considered shorthand for the most important historical trends in the development of the socialist movement—from its beginnings with the First International Workingmen's Association in the second half of the 19th century; the Second International that followed it, during which mass socialist parties first developed; then, the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the creation of the Third (Communist) International in the early 1920s; and finally, the period of the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the Fourth International, through which Trotsky and his followers upheld the genuine Marxist tradition.

Marx and Engels were the first to put socialism on a scientific footing, rooting it in the material conditions and contradictions of capitalism itself, whereas previous socialists had spun socialist utopias out of their own heads. Marx was the first to systematically analyze the character of the capitalist economy, its tendency to periodic crises of overproduction, and to describe the historical conditions that made socialism a real possibility.

Together, they established that socialism was “the self-emancipation of the working class”—that is, true liberation from class society and inequality could come not

through the enlightened actions of individuals or small minorities, but only through the mass activity of the majority of the exploited. Marx and Engels showed that revolution was necessary not only to sweep aside the old order, but because only through revolution could the majority of people throw off their deference to authority and become “fit to rule” in their own name.

Lenin, in theory and in practice, was the first Marxist to develop the organizational framework—a party of the working class consisting of its most class-conscious fighters—through which the liberation of the working class could be fulfilled. He restored Marx's theory of the state—that it is a product of class antagonism and will disappear when classes are abolished—and helped formulate an understanding of the relationship between the international struggle for socialism and struggles for national liberation against imperialism.

Rosa Luxemburg upheld the necessity of revolutionary change when leaders of the Second International were turning socialist parties into vehicles of gradualist reformism. She also developed the theory of the mass strike as a central component in the revolutionary process.

In addition to being perhaps the most important leader of the Russian Revolution after Lenin, Trotsky was the founder of the theory of permanent revolution, which rejected the mechanical schematism of social democracy and placed the working class at the heart of all radical social revolutions and movements.

Perhaps more importantly, without Trotsky's fight against the Stalinist bureaucracy and his analysis of it as a product of the isolation and backwardness of Russia rather than the “original sin” of Leninism, the small but important shoots of genuine socialism upon which a new movement can be erected would not exist today. Through Trotsky, the international character of socialism (the impossibility of socialism in one country) and the centrality of the working class in the fight for socialism were upheld.

What Marxism isn't

Important to understanding Marxism is also understanding what it is not. Distortion upon lie upon distortion has been piled so high that genuine Marxism is now buried underneath a pile of rubbish. There are now so many people with diametrically opposed ideas who nevertheless claim to be Marxists that the term has become almost meaningless.

So, for example, Engels looked at the Paris Commune of 1871, where the government consisted of directly elected, instantly recallable delegates paid no more than a workers' wage, and called it a workers' government. Joseph Stalin identified the top-down, one-party bureaucratic monolith he established in Russia in the 1930s as a workers' government.

Both cannot be right. Put starkly, the question is this: Is Marxism the liberation of humanity from class and national oppression, from state tyranny and from want; or is it the gulag, rationing, slave labor camps and secret police?

Of course, in order to discredit Marxism, there are

defenders of capitalism who would say that the one led to the other—that all revolutions lead to tyranny. But there are many instances in history where ideas have been twisted and distorted to disguise entirely different realities or practices. After all, both Tom Paine—a true democrat who fought against kings and privilege—and George W. Bush profess to be advocates of democracy and freedom.

There is a yawning gulf between Marxism as a set of ideas about how to fight and win a better society (i.e., as a guide to action), and the pseudo-Marxist state ideologies of Stalin's Russia and Mao's China, which were used to paper over inequality and justify societies that were still driven by exploitation and oppression.

In the early 1920s, Lenin warned in a debate on nationalism that it was important for socialists not to paint national movements in “communist colors.” With the rise of Stalinism and the contortion of Marxism into an ideology of state-led development rather than working-class liberation, this is precisely what happened.

A whole series of national revolutions developed that challenged colonial domination in the name of socialism, but which established new states modeled on the Soviet Union—a society where workers had lost power by the end of the 1920s.

In his pamphlet *Principles of Communism*, which preceded the *Communist Manifesto*, Frederick Engels describes communism as “the doctrine of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat”—or in more modern terms, the working class. Marx and Engels therefore rejected all “socialisms” or radical politics that advocated the substitution of some other individual, group or class for the self-activity of the working class.

“For almost 40 years,” Marx and Engels wrote,

we have emphasized that the class struggle is the immediate motive force of history and, in particular, that the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is the great lever of modern social revolution; hence we cannot possibly cooperate with men who seek to eliminate that class struggle from the movement.

At the founding of the International, we expressly formulated the battle cry: The emancipation of the working class must be achieved by the working class itself. Hence we cannot cooperate with men who say openly that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves, and must first be emancipated from above by philanthropic members of the upper and lower middle classes.

Hence socialism is not a movement of social legislation; nor is it a movement in which a few hundred or even several thousand armed guerrillas liberate the masses on their behalf, while the masses play either a purely passive or merely supportive role; and it most emphatically is not the work of great leaders acting as conductors, waving their batons.

The real Marxist tradition rejects the identification of socialism with the actions of small minorities, with the estab-

lishment of one-party state bureaucracies, or with the gradualist approach that asks the working class to put its faith in elected officials and in congresses and parliaments. Ordinary people must themselves organize and fight, creating their own institutions of struggle and of governance.

As Marx and Engels wrote,

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.

Workers' Power

A power greater than their hoarded gold

“Workers create society’s wealth, but have no control over its production and distribution.

“A socialist society can only be built when workers collectively take control of that wealth and democratically plan its production and distribution according to present and future human needs instead of profit.”

AS WE mentioned in a previous section, the great class divide in capitalist society is between a relatively small number of capitalists who own the means of production—the land, the factories, the mines, warehouses, offices, transport and communication—and the working-class majority who, deprived of its own means of labor, must sell its labor piecemeal as a commodity to these same owners in order to survive.

The working class today is on a world scale larger than it has ever been; conversely, the concentration of the world’s wealth in the hands of a few thousand multibillion-dollar firms has developed to an unimaginable degree—to the point where single individuals possess more wealth than entire countries. A 2015 Oxfam report predicted that given current trends the richest 1 percent of humanity would soon possess more wealth than the rest of humanity combined.

Because capitalists own the means of production, and because they purchase labor power, they also own labor’s product. Workers also have no control over the character and conditions of their work. The realm of work is the most complete despotism, even in a capitalist democracy.

Workers under capitalism are therefore estranged, or alienated, not only from the results of their labor but also from the work process itself. Work is but a means to obtain a livelihood, not an end in itself. Labor for the capitalist is but a means to expand profits—labor and the labor process itself is subordinated to this goal of constant accumulation.

All improvements in productivity under capitalism do not ease the burden of labor or reduce work hours, but intensify them. Laborsaving technology is merely a means to increase the degree of exploitation of labor, a means to further enslave the workers to the machine, the assembly line and the clock.

The mature Marx, writing in *Capital*, put it this way:

All means for the development of production...become a means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage to the machine, they destroy the actual content of his labor by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the labor process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness.

Marx describes this as the domination of dead labor (capital) over living labor.

A socialist society can only be built when workers collectively take control of that wealth and democratically plan its production and distribution according to human needs instead of profit.

By taking control of capitalism’s wealth, we mean not simply the appropriation of the capitalists’ profits, but the seizure of the whole machinery of production and distribution by workers themselves. Only by this collective control of both production and distribution can a new society be created in which they are reorganized on a democratic plan.

Socialism must involve the active seizure of control over the workplaces by workers themselves, as well as the formation by workers themselves of democratically elected institutions of struggle and control, in order to socialize production and transform it into the property of the people as a whole. Without this component, it will not be possible to reverse the distorted priorities of capitalism and replace them with the humane priorities of socialism.

At the same time, socialism is not simply groups of workers taking over their own workplaces—takeovers of individual businesses within the capitalist market compels the workers in that enterprise to continue to operate it on a profit and loss basis. Socialization can only take place on a society-wide basis, and therefore the working class must take over the means of production as a whole and reorganize them.

Socialism can only be a product of a mass, democratic movement of the working class, not simply a better idea of what the world should be. Only the working class, because of its unique position in society, is capable of creating a new

social system.

All previous class societies rested on an oppressed, or exploited, class that was responsible for producing not only its own means of survival but also a surplus for a dominant, ruling class. But the conditions of work did not allow for the oppressed in these societies to unite as a collective and consciously reshape society.

Slaves and serfs could rebel, even overthrow a hated despot, but they could not create new social relations. As Hal Draper writes, farmworkers and peasants “live in atomized groups which stress self-sufficiency, separateness, reliance on individual effort; they are not thrown together in crowds and subjected to simultaneous stresses in the heat of social struggles as are workers.”

The working class under capitalism, by virtue of its being herded together in great cities, forced to work collectively and cooperatively in large establishments (factories, offices, hospitals, warehouses, etc.), is the first exploited class that is capable of perceiving its own conditions and uniting to transform them.

“Workers are taught organization not by superior intelligence or outside agitators, but by the capitalists themselves,” writes Draper. “They are organized on the assembly lines, in the factory gangs, in shifts, in work teams, in the division of labor of capitalism itself. Capitalism cannot live without ‘organizing’ its workers, teaching them the virtues of working together, therefore of solidarity.”

Of course, capitalism also divides workers by forcing them to compete with one another on the job market; and it is this competition that provides the ruling class with a basis to promote divisions of language, race, sex and so on. But capitalism also compels workers to unite. As Engels writes in *Principles of Communism*, modern industry, “by thus throwing great masses in one spot...gives to the proletarians a consciousness of their own strength.”

And Marx writes in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: “Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance—combination.”

The working class is the vast majority of society and is the key to the fight for socialism. Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, “All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”

At that time, this statement was not true even in Britain, where the industrial revolution began. The authors were projecting into the future, knowing that as capitalism developed, it would break down old forms of production and replace them with capitalist social relations that depended on wage labor. In industrialized societies like the United States and Germany, workers—people who work for a wage and have

minimal control over the work process—are the majority. In the majority of countries of the world, most people live in cities.

The development of capitalism has continually driven millions upon millions off the land and into cities, a process that continues to this day, for example, in China. Yet the growth of capitalist production has not been able to absorb everyone who once worked the land. The tremendous development of productivity means that as capitalism grows, it absorbs relatively fewer workers. The result is what Mike Davis has called a “planet of slums.”

Yet even in countries where the working class is not the majority of society, it remains the key class that must lead the struggle of all the oppressed and outcast to overcome capitalism, due to its central economic position; it has its hands on the jugular of capitalism, because labor is capitalism’s lifeblood.

The working class is the key to the fight for socialism because the conditions for its own emancipation are the conditions for the end of class society once and for all. Workers cannot take control of production except as a collective—they cannot divide the factories, for example, like peasants can divide the land. As Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*:

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.

Bringing the system to a halt

The working class is the vast majority of society and is the key to the fight for socialism.

“Workers’ central role in production gives them a social power—by use of the strike weapon—to paralyze the system like no other social force.

“Socialism is working-class self-emancipation. Only mass struggles of the workers themselves can put an end to the capitalist system of oppression and exploitation.”

The power of the working class derives not only from its sheer size, but from its economic weight under capitalism, a fact expressed well in the old labor song “Solidarity Forever”: “Without our brain and muscle, not a single wheel would turn.”

Individually, workers are powerless to stop production.

The conditions of production themselves promote among workers the necessity of such collective action, without which the tendency is always for employers to continually drive down wages and benefits, and speed up production. As the Russian revolutionary Lenin wrote, likening capitalism to a giant machine:

The whole of this machine is set in motion by the worker who tills the soil, extracts ores, makes commodities in the factories, builds houses, workshops and railways. When the workers refuse to work, the entire machine threatens to stop. Every strike reminds the capitalists that it is the workers and not they who are the real masters—the workers who are more and more loudly proclaiming their rights.

Moreover, if a strike reminds the capitalists who are the real masters, it also teaches workers the same lesson—it transforms their consciousness. “The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests,” writes Marx. “This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests.”

Marx’s point is that you can define class by its relationship to the process of exploitation—you can count the number of workers who are exploited in workplaces for profit; but it is also defined by its collective organization, struggle, and consciousness. Only when the working class begins to consciously act as a united class can it fulfill its potential.

A strike gives workers self-confidence, showing them that they are not alone, but share a common condition and can prepare a common response to their oppression. It also teaches workers how to measure their strength against the capitalists—it teaches them how to fight and when to retreat. It also teaches them the nature of the state, which uses its police powers against strikers and in favor of the employers. Workers learn firsthand that the laws are made for the rich and not for the poor and exploited.

Strikes teach solidarity, which is the essential condition for breaking down divisions among workers based on gender, race and other differences. The more widespread and developed the class struggle, the more workers come to see themselves as a single class with common interests—and the more open they become to using their power not only to better their own conditions, but to effect a complete transformation of society—that is, the more they become socialist workers.

Majorities and minorities

Any idea that workers can be liberated without their own active involvement—that is, by minorities acting on their behalf—forgets that it is only in and through struggle that consciousness changes, and it is only in and through mass struggle that society itself changes.

By definition, revolutions—those “midwives” of his-

tory—have always involved masses in the shaping of their own destiny. This is what Marx meant when he wrote, “The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class.” And it is why he and Frederick Engels wrote so emphatically in 1879, in response to attempts to turn the German socialist movement into a party of liberal reform, that they, as mentioned earlier, refused to “cooperate with people who say that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves.”

Even a small, well-placed strike can cripple an entire company, and even an entire industry. If a certain industry is central to a country’s economy—for example, oil workers in Saudi Arabia—a strike in that sector can cripple an entire economy, and have effects beyond the borders of a single country. During the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s, 40,000 oil workers played a key role in bringing down the autocratic regime of the Shah—by shutting down Iran’s oil industry.

Put simply, workers have their hands on the levers of production, and the more productive capitalism becomes, the greater potential power the working class has because the lever it controls moves a constantly increasing amount of productive power.

Workers’ position in society is such that when they move into action in large numbers, they tend to stir up society as a whole. Just think of the May 1968 general strike in France or the *Solidarnosc* movement in Poland.

Its social position as the class at the bottom of society which feeds all others places it in a situation in which its collective struggle—itsself compelled by the collective nature of the production process itself—has the potential to provide an alternative that can attract other social layers and oppressed sectors looking for an alternative.

As the American socialist Hal Draper wrote:

Only the proletariat, by the conditions of its existence, embodies a social program pointing to an alternative to capitalism.

However desperate a peasantry or a petty-bourgeois may become, these classes cannot give society a lead in a new direction, not simply because of social-psychological constraints, but because there is no social solution that effectively corresponds to these classes’ interests, while at the same time corresponding to the interests of society in general, including the preservation of the social fabric in time of dissolution and crisis.

In contrast, the working class, as the bottom layer of the class system, cannot stir without objectively pointing to a program, even when it consciously rejects it: namely, the assumption of social responsibility by a democratically organized people, regardless of private interests—a program which, concretized, means the abolition of capitalism.

The working class is the first oppressed class in history whose revolutionary interests do not result in the erection of

a new system of exploitation. In bourgeois revolutions, the dissolution of feudal relations gave way to capitalist relations—one form of exploitation giving way to another, and one form of minority rule to another. In seizing collective control of the means of production, the working class does not erect itself as a new exploiting class, but instead creates the conditions for the first time for the abolition of class division and the introduction of a system based on socialized production.

But strikes are not sufficient to eliminate capitalism. Mass strikes and general strikes unite and organize the working class and can bring capitalism to its knees, but they cannot by themselves lead to a new society. All great working-class revolutions begin with mass strikes, but they can only succeed if they end in a challenge for power that strikes alone cannot decide—a decisive contest over which class will run society. For that, the working class must be organized politically in its own party and be prepared to fight for power.

Uniting to resist the employers' attacks

“We support trade unions as essential to the fight for workers' economic and political rights.”

Socialists support trade unions because they are the most elementary form of organization of the working class. They are the result of the recognition by a group of workers in a single workplace, company or industry that in order to combat the concerted effort of employers to maximize profit by reducing wages and increasing the speed of work, workers must organize collectively.

Unions organize the working class to resist

The basis for working-class combination, as we have noted, is established by the character of the workplace under capitalism, which throws large numbers of workers together to engage in common work. The necessity for combination comes from the fact that capitalists force down wages and conditions by making workers compete with each other as individuals.

The point was laid out well by a 19th-century socialist, John Gray:

The quantity of wealth which a working-man receives is always the least that his labor can be purchased for; and the reason why he does not obtain twice the quantity he obtains at present is because if he, an individual, were to demand it, and refuse to work for a lesser quantity, he would be thrown out of employment altogether, by another individual offering to do the same work for the new quantity given—or in other words, by another individual competing with him.

Marx and Engels were among the first socialists to sup-

port trade unions. The utopian socialists who came before them looked with disdain on strikes and combinations, seeing workers merely as passive beneficiaries of their social panaceas. Marx wrote the following in a critique of the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who opposed strikes and trade unions:

The first attempt of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations.

Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance—combination. Thus, combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist.

If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages.

For Marx, trade unions were important not simply because they helped workers to improve—or prevent the worsening of—their conditions, but also because they helped advance the fighting strength and class consciousness of workers, allowing them to move beyond local economic issues to bigger, class-wide questions.

Trade unions, it is true, cannot alter the fact of exploitation—they merely allow workers to push back against capital's constant drive to increase the rate of exploitation. The results of union struggles in economic terms are often paltry—and when more substantial, are often rescinded or whittled away again when employers get the upper hand.

But this was not the most important question, as Marx wrote:

The alternative rise and fall of wages, and the continual conflicts between masters and men resulting therefrom, are, in the present organization of industry, the indispensable means of holding up the spirit of the laboring classes, of combining them into one great association against the encroachments of the ruling class, and of preventing them from becoming apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well-fed instruments of production.

In a state of society founded upon the antagonism of classes, if we want to prevent Slavery in fact as well as in name, we must accept war. In order to rightly appreciate the value of strikes and combinations, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by the apparent insignificance of their economical results, but hold, above all things, in view their moral and political consequences.

Living in the United States, with its historically low strike levels and extremely low unionization rates, we can see how the weakness of the unions has allowed the employers to

drive down wages, benefits and conditions for workers over the past three decades without facing a strong challenge from the labor movement.

We therefore support the growth of unions in the United States. A new wave of class struggle in the United States will both be preceded by, and give rise to, a new wave of unionization that will not only improve conditions for the class, but develop its consciousness as a class fighting for a better world.

The limits of unions

But if socialists support unions and want more workers to be in them, they do not therefore think that unions are sufficient to advance the long-term interests of the working class, let alone to advance the fight for socialism.

To begin with, trade unions by definition divide workers up according to trade and have historically failed to represent the interests of the less-skilled and unskilled workers within the same workplace or industry. Employers have often been successful in pitting the interests of skilled trades workers against those of unskilled workers in the same industry. Industrial unions, which unite workers by industry rather than by trade, are far more effective in representing the interests of workers, regardless of skill or pay scale, not to mention gender and race.

Yet even industrial unions have limits that they share with all unions. They are more or less permanent institutions designed not to overthrow capitalism, but to improve the conditions of workers within it. In that sense, they negotiate the terms of exploitation, but do not abolish them.

“Trade unions,” wrote Marx, “work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it.”

So within unions, there is both a drive to struggle on the one hand, and on the other, a drive toward conservatism to preserve the organization. To survive and negotiate with the employers, unions create an organizational apparatus of full-time officials that become separated from the rank and file, and who tend to increasingly see the survival of the institution (the source of their income) as more important than the success of the struggle.

As the Polish-born revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg wrote in *The Mass Strike*:

The specialization of professional activity as trade union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily, amongst trade union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook.

Both, however, express themselves in a whole series of tendencies which may be fateful in the highest degree for the future of the trade union movement.

There is first of all the overvaluation of the organiza-

tion, which from a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated. From this also comes that openly admitted need for peace which shrinks from great risks and presumed dangers to the stability of the trade-unions, and further, the overvaluation of the trade union method of struggle itself, its prospects and its successes.

This tendency toward bureaucracy has reached its apogee in the United States, where trade union officials make salaries closer to the employers they negotiate with than the workers they are meant to represent.

Here, “business unionism” has reached such proportions that workers no longer feel the union really represents their interests—or, perhaps more importantly, that they have any organizational input or say as to what the union does or does not do. Unionism has become so bureaucratized and separate from the needs of workers that George Meany, the head of the AFL during the 1950s until 1979, a strong proponent of labor-capital cooperation, proudly stated that he had never walked a picket line.

Mobilizing the power of the rank and file

“To make the unions fight for workers’ interests, rank-and-file workers must organize themselves independent of the union officials.”

Unions are organizations of basic self-defense for workers, and at the same time exert a moderating influence on the class struggle.

The contradictions of union officialdom

A look at the formation of the CIO unions in the 1930s—born out of mass strikes and sit-downs—makes the first side of the contradiction clear. The efforts by CIO leaders to contain the sit-down strikes and curb militants in the unions showed the other side of the contradiction.

Rank-and-file workers are driven by conditions to organize and fight back, and they learn in the course of struggle that militant tactics—strong mass pickets, solidarity action and so on—get results. The union officialdom, on the other hand, tends toward a cautious conservatism when it comes to fighting back, for fear of risking the survival of the organization, which is the basis of its own position.

The bureaucracy’s role as a mediator between workers and bosses elevates it above the rank and file, distances it from the latter’s conditions and experiences and places it in some respects closer in outlook and lifestyle to the managers it negotiates with.

This development has reached its apex in the United States, where some union officials make hefty six-figure salaries. Edward Hanley, president of the Hotel and Restau-

rant Workers' Union from 1973–1998, once had the union purchase a \$2.5 million jet for his personal use while he was president—while during his tenure union membership plummeted. Mary Kay Henry, president of SEIU, made more than \$600,000 in total compensation in 2013. The combined compensation of the union's top ten officials came to more than \$2.7 million.

Trade union officials are not workers, but they aren't employers either. Their job is to represent the interests of the rank and file. They therefore come under pressure, to varying degrees, to answer to the interests of their members. British Marxists Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein put it this way: The trade union bureaucracy "holds back and controls workers' struggle, but it has a vital interest not to push the collaboration with employers and state to a point where it makes the unions completely impotent."

That means even the most bureaucratic union leaders, if put under enough pressure from the rank and file, can be compelled to take action—though their inclination will always be to contain such action and wind it up as quickly as possible.

Cliff and Gluckstein draw the following conclusion from this, a point that relates particularly strongly to the state of today's unions in the US: "If the union fails entirely to articulate members' grievances, this will lead eventually either to effective internal changes to the leadership, or to membership apathy and organizational disintegration."

Apathy and disintegration has been like a disease eating at the US labor movement, resulting in a low level of union membership and a weak labor movement that has yet to mobilize an effective resistance to almost four decades of employer attacks on wages, benefits and conditions.

Independent rank-and-file organization

The conclusion socialists draw from this understanding of the limits of the trade union bureaucracy is that the rank and file must organize itself independently of union officialdom, supporting them insofar as they represent members' interests, and criticizing them insofar as they misrepresent those interests—always ready to act independently of the officials when necessary.

Rank-and-file organization can take a number of forms: as a campaign for union reform or new leadership; as a caucus or committee to put pressure on the leadership to act in the members' interests; or as directly elected workplace or shop delegates that organize independently of the leadership.

The union leaders' position as part of a distinct social layer means that even leaders that rise from the ranks often adapt and become alienated from the rank and file. For this reason, union reform movements, while crucial in awakening the rank and file and fighting for a union more responsive to the membership, cannot completely alter the nature of the trade union bureaucracy, which is a product of its social position as a strata caught between capital and labor.

A case in point is the Miners for Democracy (MFD), a rank-and-file reform movement in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) that ousted a vicious and corrupt leader, Tony Boyle. Boyle had succeeded John L. Lewis as union president in 1963; he later rigged his own reelection in 1969 and hired gunmen to murder his opponent, Jock Yablonski.

The Miners for Democracy demanded an overhaul of the union administration, democratic elections in all districts, moving the union headquarters back to the coalfields, a new contract increasing pensions and health benefits and a six-hour workday—all demands that a revived labor movement would certainly resurrect.

Arnold Miller, a UMWA member who had risen from the ranks to become president of the Black Lung Association, ran on the MFD ticket in 1972 and beat Boyle. After that, the MFD and other rank-and-file miners' groups disbanded. Miller became distant from the ranks, and like his predecessors, negotiated less-than-satisfactory contracts behind closed doors, without rank-and-file input.

As the magazine *Labor Notes* recounted, "Five years later, as Miller began his second term in office, the UMWA leased a new, nine-passenger Cadillac limousine. This, said Miller, would allow the officers to travel with 'proper dignity.' The story of the limousines is symbolic of what happened to the Miller administration. Swept into office on a wave of rank-and-file anger and activism, Miller resigned in 1979, scorned by many of those who had elected him."

The lesson is that reform movements cannot rest having elected better leaders—though this is important—but must maintain rank-and-file organization independently of whatever officials are in office.

The UMWA made a number of gains in 1972 that made the union more democratic. But even in the most formally democratic union (of which there are very few in the US) there are always a layer of officials whose distinct social position, as described above, engender a tendency to dampen rank-and-file initiative.

Socialists support independent rank-and-file initiative and organization for a few simple reasons. First, because it is only through the initiative of workers themselves that confidence in their own power grows and their consciousness shifts leftward. The more bureaucratically led a strike is—built top-down, setting up only token picket lines, with only passive participation from the membership—the less it promotes those qualities that prepare workers to transform society and themselves.

Conversely, the more the organization of a strike is in the hands of workers themselves, the better the potential for victory, the greater the energy and self-sacrifice exhibited, and the greater the likelihood that the strike will have a radicalizing effect on members (the same reason that union bureaucrats discourage such initiative).

The union bureaucracy is inherently conservative, and therefore as a social layer resists not only militancy, but also, ultimately, revolution. Not so the working class. The

consciousness and militancy of the working class can and does change very dramatically from period to period, but as a class, workers are capable of overcoming the “ruling ideas” of society and, through their own activity, becoming capable of fundamentally reshaping society. To do so, however, it must create more than unions—though in the first instance working-class militancy expresses itself in a growth of unions and union membership.

To move beyond the limits of unions, the working class must build organizations—preferably organizations of workplace delegates—that overcome the sectional divisions unions take for granted (between workplaces, between different skills, between different industries). And it must build rank-and-file organizations inside the unions that guide the struggle forward when the union officials act as a block to further struggle.

Revolution

The relationship between reform and revolution

“We actively support the struggle of workers and all oppressed people for economic, political and social reforms, both as a means to improve their conditions and to advance their confidence and fighting strength. But reforms within the capitalist system cannot put an end to oppression, exploitation or ecological devastation. Capitalism must be replaced.”

IN 1896, the American socialist Daniel DeLeon gave a speech in Boston titled “Reform or Revolution,” in which he compared social and economic reforms in society to grooming a poodle. No matter how you change the look of a poodle, he argued, “essentially, a poodle he was, a poodle he is, and a poodle he will remain.”

DeLeon might as well have said: “Whether a worker is compelled to work a six-hour day or a twelve-hour day, she is still exploited. Therefore, as socialists, the hours of the working day are a matter of indifference, since we seek to abolish exploitation, not change its terms.”

If we were to say this, we would rightly be looked on as fools. And yet, it must be acknowledged that, by definition, reforms change society without changing the basic social and economic relations of capitalism. The extension or retraction of a particular reform may ease or intensify the burden that capitalist exploitation and oppression puts on the mass of the population, but it does not change the fact of that exploitation.

DeLeon’s position is static and one-sided, however, because it fails to see any connection between the struggle for reforms and revolution. Hence he argued, “We socialists are not reformers; we are revolutionists. We socialists do not propose to change forms. We care nothing for forms. We want a change of the inside of the mechanism of society, let the form take care of itself.”

According to this approach, socialists have nothing to do in the here and now, but wait with folded arms until revolution comes. This counterposing of social reform and revolution leads to sectarian sterility.

Socialists cannot spread their ideas or hope to win over more and more workers to their cause without participation

in the day-to-day battles for economic, political and social reforms. The thesis on the organizational tasks of socialist parties, written in 1921 by the Communist International, put the question well:

It is the greatest error for communists to invoke the communist program and the final armed revolutionary struggle as an excuse to passively look down on or even to oppose the present struggles of the workers for small improvements in their working conditions. No matter how small and modest the demands for which the workers are ready to fight the capitalists today, this must never be a reason for communists to abstain from the struggle.

To be sure, in our agitational work, we communists should not show ourselves to be blind instigators of stupid strikes and other reckless actions; rather, the communists everywhere must earn the reputation among the struggling workers as their ablest comrades in struggle.

Why we fight for reforms

The struggle for reform is crucial in several ways.

For one, only mass, militant struggle is capable of winning reforms. Indeed, the most far-reaching reforms come precisely when the ruling class feels that its control over society and its institutions are most threatened. Second, it is in the collective fight for reforms that ordinary people are radicalized and infused with a sense of their own power. Thirdly, a mass struggle can, under the right circumstances, pass over into an insurrectionary struggle that challenges for power.

Socialists however, make a distinction between reforms, which they support, and reformism, which they oppose.

Reformism is a political stance that sees the limits of social change as the limits set by the capitalist system itself. Reforms for reformists are ends in themselves. The socialist parties of the Second International, which hoped to achieve socialism through electoral success and gradual reforms were examples of reformist parties.

Historical experience shows that whenever the fight for reforms threatens to “get out of hand,” reformists try to douse it in cold water in order that it remains properly contained within “acceptable” limits—that is, limits acceptable to capitalism. Socialists therefore always wage a struggle against reformism—and to win the working class, in the process of

fighting for reforms, to a revolutionary perspective.

Lenin explained the distinction between reforms and reformism this way:

Unlike the anarchists, the Marxists recognize struggle for reforms—i.e., for measures that improve the conditions of the working people without destroying the power of the ruling class. At the same time, however, the Marxists wage a most resolute struggle against the reformists, who, directly or indirectly, restrict the aims and activities of the working class to the winning of reforms. Reformism is bourgeois deception of the workers, who, despite individual improvements, will always remain wage slaves, as long as there is the domination of capital.

Reforms—and in particular, the struggle for reforms—while important in and of themselves for improving the conditions of the working class, are crucial in preparing the conditions for a struggle that challenges the capitalist system as a whole. Thus, socialists are never contented with stopping at achieving this or that reform, but are always pushing the movement on to greater conquest, and ultimately to the destruction of capitalism and the erection of a new society.

Some radicals oppose reforms because, they say, the ruling class uses them to induce the working class, by throwing it some crumbs, to renounce radical alternatives.

There is an important element of truth to this. Hence the appeal to the autocrat, heard more than once in world history: if you don't grant reform from above, the masses will give you revolution from below.

Less dramatically, in capitalist states like the United States, the alteration between liberal-reformist and conservative governments can act as a social safety valve, designed to keep discontent within limits acceptable to the ruling class. As Hal Draper noted, this alteration is acted out “as a division of labor by different parties of the establishment.”

Nevertheless, the fact that states grant reforms in the hope that they defuse the class struggle does not mean that the granting of such reforms will necessarily achieve that result. Quite often winning a reform through struggle gives people the confidence to fight for more.

There is, in struggle, always a tension between accommodation to what exists and pushing beyond it; but it is only through struggle (and short of revolution, any struggle is always a struggle for reforms) that it becomes possible to move beyond reforms.

Reformism and gradualism (the idea that change should come smoothly and slowly) are twins. Both accept, consciously or not, the limits imposed by capitalism, because no matter how many reforms are accumulated, they cannot by themselves transform capitalism into socialism. For socialism to be achieved, at some point, the fight for reforms must shift qualitatively into a higher form of struggle. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote:

It is contrary to history to represent work for reforms as a long drawn-out revolution, and revolution as a

condensed series of reforms. A social transformation and a legislative reform do not differ according to their duration, but according to their content. The secret of historic change through the utilization of political power resides precisely in the transformation of simple quantitative modification into a new quality—or to speak more concretely, in the passage of an historic period from one given form of society to another.

That is why people who pronounce themselves in favor of the method of legislative reform in place of and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society, they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society.

The state: A tool for preserving class rule

“The structures of the present government grew up under capitalism and are designed to protect capitalist rule.”

“THE EXECUTIVE of the modern state,” write Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, “is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

The modern state is the state of the dominant class—the big financiers and industry magnates. In fact, Engels argues, the state since its origins was always the state of the dominant class, and its main purpose was to secure the rule of that particular class:

As the state arose from the need to keep class antagonisms in check, but also arose in the thick of the fight between the classes, it is normally the state of the most powerful, economically ruling class, which by its means becomes also the politically ruling class, and so acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class. The ancient state was, above all, the state of the slave-owners for holding down the slaves, just as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is the instrument for exploiting wage labor by capital.

Myths about the state

This is certainly not what we are taught in school. There we learn that constitutional government, with its elections, “interest groups,” political parties and different branches of government are all there so that the opinions of the competing groups can be weighed and balanced. This idea of the state, peddled in sociology and political science textbooks, assume society to be nothing more than a jumble of compet-

ing interest groups, the aggregate of which constitutes “the people.”

This approach is typical of the so-called liberal “social sciences,” where analysts rarely go beyond the surface appearance of things in society to discover the more fundamental social relations underlying them.

There are also those who argue that human behavior is rooted in our biological nature, and on those grounds come to a similar conclusion: Since people are by nature nasty, violent and competitive toward each other (an assumption they make simply by skimming the surface of existing society), the state exists to regulate those tendencies, so that society does not pull apart into a war by each against all.

Material roots of the state

The state has roots in the material and historical development of human society. It arose as soon as society began to produce a surplus—usually based on the adoption of cultivation—but where the surplus was still insufficient to do more than release a tiny minority in society from hard daily toil. In other words, the state arose as a result of, and in conjunction with, the rise of class divisions.

The state arose to help sustain and develop the conditions most suitable for pumping the surplus out of the producers, be they peasants, slaves or wage workers. The state played an economic role (such as building roads), an ideological role (promoting religious ideas that justify the divine rule of kings, for example) and a coercive role (maintaining an armed force standing above or outside society that can be called on to restore “order” when necessary).

Prior, therefore, to the rise of class societies—when human beings lived in small bands and foraged for food—there was no need for a state. “The state...has not existed from all eternity,” writes Engels. “There have been societies which have managed without it, which had no notion of the state or state power. At a definite stage of economic development, which necessarily involved the cleavage of society into classes, the state became a necessity because of this cleavage.”

The formality of voting in the United States doesn’t alter the fact that the state is the state of the economically dominant class. Most people know that rich people call the shots. One needn’t be a radical to see that people with lots of money have a lot more influence in politics than those who don’t.

Engels once described the US political system as consisting of “two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends—and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality exploit and plunder it.”

It’s as though Engels wrote this passage yesterday. We should add, however, that the two great gangs of speculators are in every way tied in with the gangs of speculators known as investors, bankers and industrialists. It is they who hold the government’s purse strings, and who the government

answers to.

It isn’t simply that politicians get the bulk of their campaign funding and other forms of financial backing from wealthy capitalists; that the most powerful lobbyists are corporate lawyers; or that it requires millions of dollars even to consider running for high office; it is that the entire economic structure of society shapes the way the state functions.

Take, for example, the question of government debt. As Doug Henwood notes, “Public debt is a powerful way of assuring that the state remains safely in capital’s hands. The higher a government’s debts, the more it must please its bankers. Should bankers grow displeased, they will refuse to roll over old debts, or to extend new financing on any but the most punishing terms (if at all).”

The fact is that if I own \$1000 in government bonds—or, as is more likely, none at all—my voice in shaping government policy will be far fainter than the voice of a big billionaire banker who holds millions in government debt. You only need to look at the way crisis-torn Greece has been held hostage by European bondholders to see how this works.

How much democracy do we really have?

On top of all this, the whole structure of democracy is designed to reduce the democratic factor to a minimum.

The electoral process by which presidents are chosen is not direct: between our vote and the final decision stands the Electoral College, a holdover from the days of slavery which gives more weight to rural over urban voters. Voting laws are rigged to deprive millions of ex-felons, many of them Black men, from voting.

Moreover, most government institutions, from regulatory agencies to the IRS, the treasury, the FBI, the CIA, and the military, are not subject to any electoral control; massive bureaucracies, whose upper echelons are closely intertwined with the wealthy elite, run them, and they are not accountable to the electorate.

The evidence that the state serves capitalism and, in particular, wealthy capitalists is revealed in many ways: how the judicial system punishes “white collar” crime far less severely than crimes normally committed by poorer people and people of color; how wealthier individuals and corporations bear a lower tax burden than poor and working-class people; how social welfare is always dwarfed by corporate welfare and military spending.

Ultimately, the state asserts itself as the defender of the capitalist system in that its various armed forces are used to prevent any challenge, whether by intervening against strikers, pummeling peaceful protesters or imprisoning and murdering dissidents and left-wing organizers.

Other things being equal, socialists prefer a bourgeois republic to a monarchy or a military dictatorship, because a republic affords better conditions (freedom of the press, of speech, of organization, within certain limits, are permitted) to organize and fight the capitalist system. These democratic rights had to be fought for to begin with, and are the basis

on which we will be able to extend them. However, we understand that even the most democratic republic—with its bloated bureaucracy, police and military—is still an instrument for the maintenance of the exploitation of the many by the few.

That is why Lenin wrote that the essence of bourgeois democracy is “to decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and oppress the people through parliament—this is the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarism.”

Their democracy and ours

“The working class needs an entirely different kind of state—a democratic workers’ state based on councils of workers’ delegates.”

IN THE *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels write, “The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.”

There were two very important ideas expressed here; one, that in overthrowing the old ruling classes, the working class must set up its own class rule in order to implement its program of social transformation; and second, that working-class rule would be the democratic rule of the majority.

But beyond these compact phrases, Marx and Engels did not go. Nor could they, because they were anticipating developments that would enrich and clarify their views.

Later, socialists such as Karl Kautsky, the leading theoretician of the German social democrats, would interpret the idea of “winning the battle of democracy” to mean that the socialist movement must strive, through electoral means, to seize control of the same state machine that had served to maintain the rule of the capitalists. (At the time, those who believed in a gradualist, parliamentary road to socialism were called “revisionists.” Today, we call them reformists).

That isn’t what the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* had in mind. The rising of the Parisian workers and the brief existence of the Paris Commune in 1871 was the pivotal event that helped them put more meat on the skeletal structure they had presented in the Manifesto.

“One thing especially was proved by the Commune,” wrote Engels in 1888, quoting one of Marx’s addresses on the Commune, “that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.’”

The state, Marx argued in that address, “with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy and judiciary, was nothing but an instrument for the maintenance of capitalist rule.”

“At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labor,” he explained, “the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power

of capital over labor, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.”

All previous revolutions had merely passed control of the state machine from one exploiting class to another, who then made some changes to it to suit its own needs. The capitalists, even in the most democratic republic, had merely refined and expanded the state apparatus, whereas the task of the working class was to do away with the old state machine.

The Commune showed Marx that the working class in revolution not only did away with the old state machine, but also replaced it with the armed people (in Paris, the national guard, under the control of the Parisian workers, seized control of the city to prevent the government from surrendering it to the Prussians, whose army was near the city after defeating the French army of Napoleon III).

The Commune-state established by the workers was based on “municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms,” Marx wrote. All Commune officials were paid workers’ wages, and the Commune “got rid of the standing army and the police.”

Can we abolish the state?

But if the goal for socialists is a classless society, and consequently, a stateless society, why should workers bother with setting up a new state? That was the question that the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin asked in his book *State and Anarchy*: “If the proletariat is to be the ruling class, over whom will it rule?”

Marx answered Bakunin thus:

As long as other classes, above all, the capitalist class, still exist, and as long as the proletariat is still fighting against it (for when the proletariat obtains control of the government, its enemies and the old organization of society will not yet have disappeared), it must use forcible means, that is to say, governmental means; as long as it remains a class itself, and the economic conditions which give rise to the class struggle and the existence of classes have not vanished, they must be removed or transformed by force, and the process of transforming them must be accelerated by force.

To put it simply: if the state is the product of class division, it cannot be abolished until class divisions are eradicated. The workers need their own, democratically organized state—a state, however, that works itself out of a job by doing away with class divisions.

The capitalists had great economic power that had developed under feudalism and absolutism before they assumed political power. But the working class has no economic power unless it has political power—i.e., state power.

The Commune was based on a municipal system of voting. In later revolutions, new systems of working-class democracy were created based on the workplace. In Russia, the workers’ councils, or soviets, became the basis of the workers’ state created in October 1917. The soviets sprang up

after the Tsar was overthrown in February 1917 and consisted of revocable delegates elected directly from the workplace (and also from army regiments and peasant villages).

The American socialist John Reed, in his 1918 article “Soviets in Action,” explains that the workers’ councils “originated in 1905, when, during the first general strike of the workers, Petrograd factories and labor organizations sent delegates to a Central Committee. This Strike Committee was named Council of Workers’ Deputies.”

The 1905 Petersburg Soviet began as a tool to organize the general strike—that is, as an organ of struggle. It soon, however, became more than that. “For a short time,” Reed writes, it “was recognized by the Imperial Government as the authorized spokesman of the revolutionary Russian working class.”

In 1905, the soviet never went beyond being an embryo of a workers’ government. What changed them from institutions of struggle to institutions of power in 1917 was the intervention of radical socialists in the ranks of the working class who made a case for soviet government. In their call “All Power to the Soviets,” the Bolshevik Party was arguing that the soviet was the basis of the future workers’ state if it could strike power from the hands of the capitalists.

As Reed wrote:

No political body more sensitive and responsive to the popular will was ever invented. And this was necessary, for in time of revolution, the popular will changes with great rapidity. For example, during the first week of December 1917, there were parades and demonstrations in favor of a Constituent Assembly—that is to say, against the Soviet power. One of these parades was fired on by some irresponsible Red Guards, and several people killed.

The reaction to this stupid violence was immediate. Within 12 hours, the complexion of the Petrograd Soviet changed. More than a dozen Bolshevik deputies were withdrawn, and replaced by Mensheviks. And it was three weeks before public sentiment subsided—before the Mensheviks were retired one by one and the Bolsheviks sent back.

Workers’ councils were not specifically Russian institutions. They have sprung up, under various names and forms, in many revolutionary workers’ upheavals. They were created in Germany in 1918 after the Kaiser’s fall; in Hungary in 1919 and again in 1956; in China in 1925. In Chile in the early 1970s—before Pinochet’s coup—they were called cordones.

In virtually every case, they arose as democratic organs of working-class struggle; a way to overcome sectionalism and unite workers across all boundaries of language, nationality, sex and race.

In each case, the workers’ councils had the potential to move from facilitating struggle to becoming organs of power. However, whether workers’ councils can become institutions

embodying workers’ rule depends on whether the working class has its own political party prepared to organize and promote it.

No choice between the capitalist parties

“We do not support candidates of capitalist parties like the Democrats or the Republicans.”

“Needless is it for me to say to the thinking workingman that he has no choice between these two capitalist parties,” Eugene Debs wrote in 1900, “that they are both pledged to the same system and that whether the one or the other succeeds, he will still remain the wage-working slave he is today.”

The same can be said today, a century later. Michael Parenti, in his book *Democracy for the Few*, describes the US political system as “a veritable circus” that “performs the essential function of helping to legitimate the social order.”

This system, writes Parenti, “channels and limits political expression, and blunts class grievances. It often leaves little time for the real issues because it gives so much attention to the contest per se: Who will run? Who is ahead? And who will win the primaries? Who will win the nomination? Who will win the election?”

One of the most important ways that the political system serves the functions Parenti describes is by creating an institutional arrangement whereby two pro-business parties—the Democrats and the Republicans—are presented as the only legitimate options.

Though occasionally in history left-wing third parties tried their hands in the political field, a vote for them is considered, by design, a wasted vote. Third parties are presented as disruptive, extreme or crackpot—and institutionally beyond the pale.

Byzantine state laws make it difficult for any but candidates of the two main parties to even get on the ballot. In our political system, ordinary people are barred from participating by the prohibitive financial cost of running an election campaign. For example, during the 2012 election cycle, the average cost of a House of Representatives run cost \$1,689,580 and the cost of a senatorial campaign averaged \$10,476,451. Spending for presidential candidates in the 2012 election, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, topped \$1 billion each.

The clear purpose of this setup is to make it as difficult as possible for left-wing or working-class alternatives to develop any political traction. Both parties are backed by big business, and each takes its turn in power. Though the wealthy often prefer the Republican Party, they are not averse to backing the Democrats when they think it is appropriate or necessary.

Big business funds both parties and tilts its money from one to the other depending on the overall economic and political situation and what party the capitalist class feels is best

positioned to take the reigns of power and hold them firmly. In the 2008 election cycle, for example, of the top 50 corporate financial donors, who gave anywhere from \$850,000 to \$7.6 million in campaign contributions, only four leaned toward the GOP, according to opensecrets.org.

The two-party dance

Of course, this game cannot be played properly if it appears to the electorate that both teams are wearing the same jerseys and are serving the same owners. The system is designed so that when voters are dissatisfied with one party, there is always the other one waiting in the wings that can take over with minimal disruption to the system as a whole.

If each party is to take turns running the country, they must at least have some apparent differences if the system is going to work. The Republican Party is more socially conservative, and makes more open appeals for unfettered capitalism (read: a strong state that serves the interests of capital). The Democratic Party is more liberal, and at least in its rhetoric is more willing to make populist appeals toward working-class, women, and Black and Latino voters in order to garner public support.

Ever since FDR's New Deal—a program designed to save US capitalism during its worst crisis by averting social revolution through social reforms—the Democratic Party has presented itself as the party of social reform, the party of labor, Blacks and women. Of course, references to the party's great past neglect to mention that the Democratic Party was for most of its life also the party of Jim Crow racism in the South.

The populist paint wore ever thin after Ronald Reagan's election, when the Democrats shifted rightward and began backing the employers' neoliberal agenda and pandering to the neoconservative ideology of small government and "personal responsibility." It is only by comparison to the GOP, which moved even further rightward, that the party can still present itself as something slightly better.

In the 2008 elections (less so in 2012), Obama positioned himself as a New Deal liberal committed to genuine change. However, as in the past, there was a sharp difference between his rhetoric and the reality of his policies once he took office in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. He spent billions in taxpayer money to bail out the banks, but not ordinary people; he deported more immigrants than his predecessor, George W. Bush; he promoted the reckless development of a new oil and gas industry in the US; he militarized local police forces; and he proved himself to be every bit as much of a war president as Bush, too.

It is this marginal difference between the parties, plus the natural tendency to turn even politics into a mirror image of the capitalist marketplace, that shapes electoral contests into the political equivalent of a beauty contest. Political campaigns are run like enormous ad campaigns, where carefully crafted image triumphs over substantial issues.

As Parenti writes, "The very absence of significant dis-

agreement on fundamentals makes it all the more necessary to stress personalized features that differentiate oneself from one's opponent. As with industrial producers, the merchants of the political system have preferred to limit their competition to techniques of packaging and brand image."

Candidates sell themselves on looks, sincerity and on being family-oriented, god-fearing, patriotic, anti-corruption and committed to helping all Americans, rich, poor and in between. "Such," writes Parenti, "are the inevitable appeals that like so many autumn leaves, or barn droppings, cover the land each November."

Image and reality

Behind the image-making, both parties are bourgeois, pro-capitalist institutions—and their policies reflect it. They are both committed to promoting the best "business climate" at home and abroad, that is, to ensuring the best conditions for profit-taking.

Both parties, for example, have been strong supporters of the corporate free-trade agenda. Both parties in power offer various handouts (at working-class taxpayer expense), in the form of enormous tax breaks and subsidies to the rich, and only under pressure from below are willing to offer programs that aid the working class and the poor.

They both stand for expanding US military might abroad, and both have voted for expanding the military budget. Both parties are staunch supporters of Israel, and both parties are committed to using the ideology of the "war on terror" to justify bombings, invasions and occupations in the Middle East to protect the oil supply.

Green Party vice presidential candidate for 2004, the late Peter Camejo explained the difference between the two parties this way: "When the Republican calls for a 20 percent cut in wages, the Democrat decries this as outrageous and instead proposes a 10 percent cut. In short, the choice we are offered is that of the 'lesser of two evils.'"

This lesser-evilism has been the Achilles heel of genuine third-party alternatives, and goes a long way toward explaining why no labor party ever developed in the United States. It also explains why a nominally independent party like the Greens in 2004 abandoned its independence and urged its supporters to vote for Green candidates only in "safe states," that is, in states where there was no chance of the Democratic candidate losing the election.

Debs once said that he'd rather vote for something he wanted and not get it, than vote for something he didn't want and get it. That, sadly, is not always the guiding principle of the left. Every election year, the pressure mounts to back the realistic possibility, i.e., the Democrat. So long as we accept the limitations of this choice, we will not be able to develop a working-class political alternative to the two-party duopoly.

Independent of the status quo

“We support genuine left-wing candidates and political action that promotes independence from the corporate-dominated two-party system in the US.”

After the 1848 revolutions, Marx and Engels wrote that it was necessary for the working class to promote its own political candidates:

Even when there is no prospect whatsoever of their being elected,” they wrote, “the workers must put up their own candidates in order to preserve their independence, to count their forces, and to bring before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint. In this connection, they must not allow themselves to be seduced by such arguments of the Democrats as, for example, that by so doing they are splitting the Democratic Party, and making it possible for the reactionaries to win.

The basis of their argument was that the working class cannot emancipate itself—cannot free itself from the tyranny of capitalism—without organizing a political party of its own.

No party for workers in the United States

The ruling class has its own political parties (Democrats and Republicans); the working class has none. So long as the working class depends on electing unaccountable capitalist politicians (the one who is least offensive to workers’ interests), so long will it vote against its own interests and for those of an alien class.

Without its own political party, its own leaders and its own political representatives, the working class must always remain subordinated to the two main bourgeois parties.

The tradition known as syndicalism has always argued that the working class does not need its own political party or its own candidates; all it needs is its economic might—its power to organize into industrial unions and to strike.

In the heyday of syndicalism in the earlier part of the 20th century, this was a healthy reaction to the opportunism of the reformist, parliamentary socialists, whose electoral successes led them to an accommodation with the capitalist system—that is, to the adoption of the belief that socialism could be achieved through the peaceful, gradual accumulation of votes and seats.

The reformists had forgotten, to quote Engels, that, “Universal suffrage is thus the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the modern state, but that is enough. On the day when the thermometer of universal suffrage shows boiling-point among the workers, they as well as the capitalists will know where they stand.”

It would therefore be a mistake to conclude from the betrayals of the reformists that engagement in the electoral process is a waste of time. The syndicalists’ reaction was a healthy one, but one-sided.

Parliamentary forms of struggle—elections and election campaigns, electoral blocs, etc.—are an effective means to reach a much larger audience than would otherwise be possible with socialist propaganda. And as elected representatives of local and state institutions, socialists can use the political rostrum to expose the system, as well as amplify and give support to struggles happening outside the walls of congress or local assemblies.

Elections are the lowest form of struggle, whereas strikes, mass demonstrations and mass uprisings are the highest. But one cannot dispel mass illusions in the bourgeois election process—or, more particularly, the bankruptcy of the two-party system—without participating in the electoral arena.

How to avoid accommodating to the system

But how should socialists approach the question of elections to state institutions so as to not fall into the trap of accommodating to the existing order?

“In order to be effective, social democracy must take all the positions she can in the present state and invade everywhere,” the Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg wrote. “However, the prerequisite for this is that these positions make it possible to wage the class struggle from them, the struggle against the bourgeoisie and its state.”

For revolutionary Marxists, therefore, efforts to secure electoral success and combat capitalism through electoral means must be subordinated to other forms of struggle. The thesis on elections written for the Communist International in 1920 elaborated this point:

The activity in parliament consists primarily of revolutionary agitation from the parliamentary rostrum, unmasking opponents and ideological unification of the masses, who, particularly in areas that lag behind, are still prejudiced by democratic illusions and look to the parliamentary rostrum. This work must be completely subordinate to the goals and tasks of the mass struggle outside parliament.

Election campaigns allow the workers’ party to reach wider layers of people whom they otherwise could not reach with socialist propaganda. Socialist elected officials can use their position in Congress or parliament to disseminate anti-capitalist propaganda; expose the corruption and class allegiances of the mainstream parties; assist in the organization of struggles outside Congress or the legislature; and expose the limits of capitalist democracy.

Historically in the United States, the two-party system has had such a strong chokehold that no labor party based in the unions or mass social-democratic party has ever developed. When sentiment in the working class for a labor party was at its height—in the 1930s—the largest left-wing, working-class organization, the Communist Party, consciously steered the movement away from this.

In the United States, both the economic and political organization of the working class and oppressed today

is weak. The pull of lesser-evilmism remains strong, and we remain in a situation in which third-party alternatives, let alone working-class alternatives, are small to nonexistent. While there will from time to time be opportunities for socialists to engage in electoral work, until there is a larger, more unified left coupled with a stronger labor movement, these opportunities will be isolated.

One of the key tasks of socialists today, therefore, is to wean radicalizing elements away from misplaced hope in the Democratic Party, the party that has traditionally absorbed and muzzled radical sentiment that might lead toward an independent working-class political party.

Today, socialist organization in the United States is still far too small to take on the tremendous effort and expenditure necessary to run candidates on a widespread systematic basis.

However, there are moments when radical or working-class third-party alternatives have, if only for a time, been on offer. In those cases, socialists should call for at least a protest, class vote against the two major bourgeois parties, in the hope of cracking the two-party system and creating an opening for independent, working-class politics.

When conditions are ripe for building a genuine left alternative to the Democrats—like, for example, Ralph Nader's Green Party run in 2000 that organized around an anti-corporate, if not anti-capitalist, agenda—socialists should actively campaign and promote that alternative, if only as a means to begin the process of building a broader left that is independent of the Democratic Party.

In his advice to socialists in the United States in the early 1890s, Engels emphasized the importance of them supporting and participating in any movement of the working class that, whatever its limitations, would help it to develop its own independent political party.

In 1886, the Central Labor Union in New York formed the Independent Labor Party of New York and Vicinity in order to participate in New York City's mayoral race. The new party chose single-tax advocate Henry George as its candidate.

George himself was not from the labor movement. Indeed, he was a middle-class populist. He had recently written a popular book, *Progress and Poverty*, which attacked poverty and inequality. In it, he advocated a single tax on landed property as a panacea to solve most of society's ills. In a hotly contested race in which the local ruling class pulled out all the stops to prevent a labor-party victory, George came in second in a three-way race with 31 percent of the vote.

Engels was positive about the election in spite of its shortcomings, writing:

In a country that has newly entered the movement, the first really crucial step is the formation by the workers of an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is distinguishable as a labor party. And this step has been taken far sooner than we might have expected, and that's the main thing.

That the first program of this party should still be muddle-headed and extremely inadequate, that it should have picked Henry George for its figurehead, are unavoidable, if merely transitory, evils. The masses must have time and opportunity to evolve; and they will not get that opportunity unless they have a movement of their own—no matter what its form, providing it is their own movement—in which they are impelled onwards by their own mistakes and learn by bitter experience.

Internationalism

A world to win

“Capitalism is an international system, so the struggle for socialism must be international, uniting workers of all countries. Socialists oppose imperialism—the division of the globe based on the subjugation of weaker nations by stronger ones—and support the self-determination of oppressed nations.”

Capitalism is the first truly international system; no corner of the world can escape from the reach of the world market. “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe,” Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* when capitalism was still in its infancy. “It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.”

Workers of the world, unite

Since capitalism was an international system, the working-class struggle to overcome capitalism must also be international. “Workers of the world, unite” was therefore the *Manifesto*’s rallying cry.

The capitalists of the world were always ready to unite when it came to defending their privileges. As Marx noted in an 1847 speech:

A certain kind of brotherhood does, of course, exist among the bourgeois classes of all nations. It is the brotherhood of the oppressors against the oppressed, of the exploiters against the exploited. Just as, despite the competition and conflicts existing between the members of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class of one country is united by brotherly ties against the proletariat of that country, so the bourgeois of all countries, despite their mutual conflicts and competition on the world market, are united by brotherly ties against the proletariat of all countries.

To this bosses’ unity, the workers must counterpose their own unity. The task of a successful socialist revolution is, in the words of Engels, to “abolish competition and replace it with association.” But the abolition of competition is incomplete if it takes place within the borders of only one nation.

Capitalism is an international system. As such, it can only be abolished as a system when it is rooted out internationally. There is therefore no purely national solution to capitalism. Socialism cannot be achieved on a purely national basis because the world economy will always assert itself over a single national economy. It was for this reason that Leon Trotsky, for example, argued against Joseph Stalin’s distortion of Marxism embodied in the phrase “socialism in one country.”

Yet because the world is divided by nation-states, there are different rhythms of struggle and different traditions and histories between the working classes of different nations. There will never be a world revolution that happens at a single moment all over the world. Revolutions happen first as national phenomena.

As Marx wrote, “Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.”

Yet the international character of capitalism, and increasingly of capitalist crisis, guarantees that revolutions in one country can act as a stimulus for revolutionary movements in other countries. Thus, the Russian Revolution of 1917 heralded the beginning of a wave of revolutionary upheavals throughout the world.

National oppression

The existence of a world market has not obliterated nations or national divisions. Marx was overstating things when he wrote in the *Manifesto*, “National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.”

Capitalism actually has seen two contradictory trends. The one mentioned above by Marx was certainly real; but there was another trend toward the formation and consolidation of national states. The contradiction between these two tendencies expressed itself in the increasing competition between capitalist powers over control of the world market and the subjugation of weaker nations.

The first few decades after Marx’s death in 1883 witnessed growing concentration and centralization of capital

in the hands of powerful monopolies, and the development of tensions between the advanced capitalist states competing for control of the world market. Growing competition for markets, resources and strategic territory produced growing armed clashes, and European states (and later the United States and Japan) scrambled to seize colonies throughout the world.

Today, the size and level of integration of the world economy goes far beyond what existed in Marx's day. The level of world trade, international financial transactions and foreign investment have all risen dramatically. Moreover, the production process is so international today that a machine assembled in one country will have its parts produced in several different countries. "Auto production processes have become so transnationalized," writes economist William Robinson, "that the final product can no longer be considered 'national' in any meaningful way."

The interdependence is so deep-rooted that no nation is capable of economic life cut off from the rest of the world without suffering severe dislocation. Robinson takes these developments to mean that the nation-state is rapidly fading in importance. But the growing integration of the world into a single market takes place in a context in which the world remains divided between nation-states.

So long as there is no single "world" state that corresponds to the creation of a world market, so will capitalists depend upon a particular national state to maintain the conditions for "smooth" capitalist exploitation. The state is the "executive committee" for managing the "common affairs" of the bourgeoisie, not only its internal affairs (holding down the class struggle), but also "externally" (promoting the economic interests of its "own" capitalist class).

In the decades after World War II, the division of the world into directly-held colonial possessions of the great powers came to an end, in part due to a wave of anticolonial struggles. But though imperialism changed its form, it did not disappear. The rivalry between states over who will become (or remain) the dominant power—imperialism—continued to be an essential feature of the world system. A handful of powerful states today dominate the world economically, and one, the US, is by far the most powerful, maintaining an unprecedented level of military spending in order to keep it that way.

We earlier quoted Marx saying that the bosses, despite national differences, will unite when it comes to suppressing the working class. But the working class is also rife with divisions that are deliberately fostered by the capitalists. They foster national divisions to encourage workers to value national identity above the identity of class interests that should unite them with their fellow workers. Socialists must always challenge all forms of national chauvinism that pit workers against each other.

But we do not equate all nationalisms. A distinction must be made between the nationalism of the oppressor and the nationalism of the oppressed. Because the world is

divided between oppressed and oppressor nations, between dominant nations that use financial, diplomatic and military means to control other nations and peoples, class unity can only be built by recognizing the basic right of oppressed nations to self-determination.

No nation that oppresses another can itself be free. In the US, for example, there can be no solidarity between Puerto Rican and US workers unless US workers recognize the right of Puerto Rico to independence. There can be no solidarity between the peoples of the Middle East and workers in the United States unless we recognize the right of Iraqis, Afghans and Palestinians to self-determination.

The imperialist division of the world means that we as socialists cannot equate all wars, or condemn all wars. As Lenin wrote during the First World War,

Marxism makes that analysis and says: if the "substance" of a war is, for example, the overthrow of alien oppression...then such a war is progressive as far as the oppressed state or nation is concerned. If, however, the 'substance' of a war is redivision of colonies, division of booty, plunder of foreign lands (and such is the war of 1914-16), then all talk of defending the fatherland is "sheer deception of the people."

Some people, horrified by the devastation of modern war, become pacifists—principled opponents of all violence. But renouncing all violence in resisting a society founded on, and maintained by, systematic violence, means capitulation to that society. We do not equate the violence of the oppressor with the violence of the oppressed resisting that oppression. There is no moral equivalency between the slave who breaks their chains and the master who forges them.

Resisting US imperialism

"We oppose US intervention in Cuba, the Middle East and elsewhere. We are for self-determination for Puerto Rico."

"'Freedom' is a grand word," Lenin once wrote, "but under the banner of freedom for industry, the most predatory wars were waged."

Nowhere is this statement truer than the United States. Washington has always cloaked its predatory ambitions in the language of the American Revolution—freedom, liberty, democracy and freedom of trade. It has always been the "reluctant empire," invading other countries for their own good, and always with kind and benevolent intentions. During the Cold War, the United States presented its efforts to dominate the world as a titanic battle of democracy versus communist tyranny. Since 9-11, it has presented the same goal under the cloak of defending "civilization" against intolerant, terror-driven, fanatical Islam.

Plunder and mass murder with a human face

From its early years ideologues in the United States have accepted the idea that it was destined to dominate the world. “The history of territorial expansion,” exclaimed O. H. Platt, a Connecticut senator in the late 1890s, “is the history of our nation’s progress and glory.... We should rejoice that Providence has given us the opportunity to extend our influence, our institutions and our civilization into regions hitherto closed to us.”

The United States was from the beginning built upon violent conquest, starting with the enslavement, murder and dispossession of Native Americans. “America the benevolent,” writes historian Sidney Lens, “does not exist and never has existed.”

From its war with Mexico in 1846—which resulted in the annexing of half of that country to the United States—to the occupation of Iraq, the United States has never been shy about using its military might to conquer territory, annex colonies and intimidate rivals and weaker nations. Its interventions in the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam alone are responsible for the deaths of more than six million people.

Between 1870 and 1922, the United States emerged as the world’s biggest industrial power, and its total wealth increased tenfold, from \$30 billion to \$320 billion. By the end of this period, the United States became Europe’s and the world’s creditor; after the Second World War, it added to its economic power its military supremacy—a position it has fought to maintain by any means necessary ever since.

As a latecomer in the scramble for colonies, the United States often presented its own efforts to compete with more established colonial powers as anticolonial. It promoted what it called an “open door” policy—that is, demanding that markets closed to it by other powers be opened up for exploitation by US interests.

Woodrow Wilson made it clear in 1907 what the “open door” policy meant in practice:

Since trade ignores national boundaries, and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process.

Though the US was never a major colonial power, it did acquire a handful of colonies. The Spanish-American War in 1898, during which the US seized control of Spain’s former colonies, was its “coming out” party as a world power.

Under the guise of liberating Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico, the Washington took the latter two as formal colonies, and seized Cuba as an informal colony (it had already seized Hawaii in 1893). In order to “pacify” the Philippines, US forces killed hundreds of thousands of Filipinos who were not prepared to turn their country over to another power.

“Gunboat diplomacy” in the Caribbean and Central America

While it never again took on formal colonies after 1898, the United States turned the Caribbean into an “American lake,” through what was called “gunboat diplomacy”—using financial and military leverage to subject weaker nations to Washington’s dictates.

Washington engineered a revolution in Panama in 1903, leading to its breakaway from Colombia (a US naval armada prevented Colombia from intervening) so that a US-controlled canal to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans could be built across the Isthmus of Panama. For all intents and purposes, Panama also became a US colony.

A few years before, the Platt Amendment passed by Congress in the United States required measures inserted into the Cuban constitution that protected the right of the United States to intervene whenever its interests were threatened—something it took advantage of several times in the course of Cuba’s history before 1959. For example, Marines landed in 1912 to put down a rebellion of sugar workers. Cuba’s finance, agriculture and industry—in particular the booming sugar and tourist industries—became completely dominated by US capital, facilitated by US military power.

A typical practice was for a US bank to buy up a country’s debt, and then ask for assistance from Washington to protect its financial interests. The Marines would invade, seize the custom’s house and central bank of the country and establish control, using customs revenue to pay off the debt.

The US has sent troops to Caribbean and Central American countries more than 40 times since 1890. Marines occupied Haiti from 1915–1934, the Dominican Republic from 1916–1924 and Nicaragua from 1909–33. In each instance (and also in other countries), the US trained local armed forces and “friendly” dictators to look after their interests once they departed. Where required, the US used more covert methods, authorizing the CIA to foment coups to topple unfriendly regimes—for example, in Guatemala in 1954.

President Theodore Roosevelt explained in 1904 how the United States was to play the world’s policeman:

Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere, the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.

What of modern-day US imperialism?

Puerto Rico remains a colony to this day—the only remaining colony possessed by the US, and, indeed, one of the few remaining colonies in the world.

A bilateral pact in 1952, the Free Associated State, helps

maintain the fiction that Puerto Rico's status is agreed upon by both parties. But Washington retains veto power over local legislation. The Pentagon controls all matters related to Puerto Rico's defense and its national guard, and Puerto Ricans can be drafted into the US Army, as they were during the Vietnam War.

And though the United States imposed American citizenship on Puerto Ricans in 1917, Puerto Ricans living on the island cannot vote for the US president, senators or congressional representatives. The FBI has federal jurisdiction in Puerto Rico, and the US National Park Service runs the island's major parks. The federal courts carry out their functions strictly in the English language, despite the fact that roughly 80 percent of the population speaks only Spanish.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution overthrew a Washington-backed puppet, Fulgencio Batista, and for the first time in its history freed Cuba from foreign domination.

Since then, the US has attempted invasion (at the Bay of Pigs in 1961), assassination (many times against Fidel Castro, successfully against Che Guevara), blockade and embargo to attack the revolution. Yet Cuba remains an example of how a small oppressed nation can stand up to the northern colossus—and as such the United States has subjected Cuba to endless suffering and hardship up to this day. The 1996 Helms-Burton Act not only forbids American companies from doing business in or trading with Cuba, but also penalizes foreign companies that trade with Cuba. Only recently has Washington begun to ease some of the conditions of the blockade.

US imperialism in the Middle East

The Middle East has long been a key region for US interests because it sits on the world's largest reserves of oil, the most important strategic resource in the world.

The United States has relied on brutal, repressive regimes—Iran under the Shah, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt to this day—to do its dirty work. It has used the CIA to foment coups against “unfriendly” regimes. When necessary, it has intervened directly to punish governments that have challenged its dominance in the region—as it did to Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003.

To this day, Washington spends billions annually to maintain a large military presence in the Middle East. It provides billions in military hardware to client states, in particular to Egypt and Saudi Arabia—and above all to Israel, which the United States carefully maintains as the region's most formidable military power. In the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, when dictatorships were overthrown in Egypt and Tunisia, Washington worked closely with allies in the region to reverse the process, supporting the Saudi invasion of Bahrain to suppress the democracy movement, quietly supporting General Sisi's counterrevolutionary coup in Egypt, and backing a regime in Iraq based on sectarian repression of the Sunni minority. Its failed policies in Iraq—which deliberately fostered the Shia Sunni sectarian divide in

order to run the country—are part of the explanation for the rise of ISIS in the region.

Since the late 1960s, Israel has been the single most important US ally in the Middle East, fulfilling the role of “watchdog” in the region, as the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz put it years ago.

For this reason, Israel receives more economic and military aid from the United States than any other country in the world. Israel's unique status comes from the fact that it is a garrison state, ready to defend the dispossession of Arab land upon which its existence and survival depends.

“Once upon a time,” writes analyst Chalmers Johnson, “you could trace the spread of imperialism by counting up colonies”; today, imperialism is measured in military bases. The United States boasts nearly 800 military bases in other countries throughout the world, outposts of a war machine that accounts for almost half of the world's total military expenditures and 1.8 million military personnel.

After the collapse of the USSR and the bipolar Cold War world, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower. But this did not yield a “peace dividend,” as was talked about at the time. On the contrary, Washington scrambled to find ways to project its military power more systematically in order to deter potential rivals and secure its sole superpower status.

We live, so the expression goes, in the “belly of the beast.” As socialists living in the world's most rapacious imperialist power, it is our duty to oppose US intervention around the world, under whatever particular disguise it wears—whether it is in the name of humanitarian intervention (Kosovo and Haiti), spreading democracy (Iraq) or defending the “homeland” against “Islamic terror.”

We do this for two reasons. One, we look forward to anything that weakens US imperialism and strengthens opposition to it, because it is under such conditions that the struggle for genuine liberation from exploitation and oppression can better thrive; and two, because without unconditional support for the peoples around the world who are the victims of American imperialism—whether they are Iraqis, Haitians, Cubans, Puerto Ricans or Native Americans—we cannot create the international solidarity necessary to defeat it.

Open to capital but not to labor

“We oppose all immigration controls.”

The starting point of our approach to the question of immigration is Marx's dictum that the working class has no country.

Socialists support the right of all people to move across national borders without fear of discrimination, and oppose all attempts by governments to constrict and control that movement, or to treat immigrants as second- or third-class citizens (or non-citizens). Any other position would make

a mockery of our call for the international solidarity of the working class.

Capitalist commerce has created a world market, and by doing so, has acted to break down all barriers to the free movement of money and investment. Capital moves relatively freely throughout the world, chasing after the most profitable investments. Labor, on the other hand, does not have the same freedom as capital to move across borders.

The history of human migration under capitalism is one where people, fleeing hardship and poverty in one region or country, are forced to move to another, where they find themselves treated as social pariahs, even as their labor is freely exploited by the capitalists of the nation to which they were forced to move.

The myth of the “melting pot”

The United States has long promoted a myth about being a “melting pot” that welcomes the poor and oppressed from all over the world as they look for a better life. The reality is far different. The new nation was built upon the genocide and displacement of American Indians, the enslavement of Africans and the ruthless exploitation of immigrant workers. The question of immigration for the US ruling class has never been a humanitarian question, but a question of finding a plentiful and cheap labor supply. Slavery supplied it to the Southern plantations; indentured servitude and later the migration of “free labor” to the North.

The “free labor” provided by immigrants to this country has always been hemmed in and controlled by various legal restrictions in order to ensure its status as cheap and pliant. The only way immigrant workers can be used as cheaper labor is because immigration laws impose a second-class status on them.

Politicians and employers use anti-immigrant laws not so much to prevent the entry of all immigrant labor as to control it. The threat of imprisonment and deportation is a strong incentive not to organize for higher wages and better conditions.

The list of victims of anti-immigrant discrimination throughout this country’s history is long: Catholics, Irish, Germans and Swedes, Jews, Southern Italians, Eastern Europeans, Asians, Mexicans and Central Americans, Muslims and so on, up to the present day.

The pattern of immigration and exclusion has often followed the needs of industry—workers welcomed in times of boom, then scapegoated and deported in times of depression. Chinese immigrants worked for low wages and suffered terrible hardship building the railroads in the American West, only to find themselves the victims of racist pogroms and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which wasn’t repealed for 60 years.

As US capitalism began to take off in the late 1900s, the United States welcomed millions of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—up until 1917, when the Immigration Exclusion Act was passed. During the 1920s,

as Mexicans were encouraged to come and take railroad and agricultural jobs—a million came to this country, only to be victimized and deported once the Great Depression hit.

Divide and rule

We have already spoken about how capitalism both unites and divides workers. The system compels workers to unite in order to defend their interests, but it also forces them to compete individually for jobs. This competition forms the basis on which the ruling class creates animosity between workers of different races, regions and nations, and tries to bind the workers of one nation to the idea that they have a common bond with the exploiters of “their” nation.

Wherever the employers can get away with paying lower wages, compelling longer hours and denying basic benefits, they will do it. One way to accomplish this is by pitting lower-paid immigrant workers against higher-paid native-born workers. As historian Philip Foner writes, “All too frequently, newly arrived immigrants of every nationality made their first entrance into American industry as strikebreakers.”

Writing in the late 1880s, Frederick Engels noted how the US ruling class was masterful at pitting immigrant workers against each other, and native-born workers against immigrants. As he wrote in a letter to an American colleague:

Your bourgeoisie knows how to play off one nationality against the other: Jews, Italians, Bohemians, etc., against Germans and Irish, and each one against the other, so that differences in the living standard of the workers exist, I believe, in New York to an extent unheard-of elsewhere.

And added to this is the total indifference of a society which has grown up on a purely capitalist basis, without any genial feudal background, towards the human beings who succumb to the competitive struggle: “There will be plenty more, and more than we want, of these damned Dutchmen, Irishmen, Italians, Jews and Hungarians”; and to cap it all, John Chinamen stands in the background, who far surpasses them all in his ability to live on next to nothing.

There is also a political component to anti-immigrant hysteria. During the Second World War, German immigrants faced harassment and discrimination, as did Japanese immigrants. In the late 1910s, anti-immigrant racism was whipped up against leftists in the labor movement. Thousands of radical immigrants were arrested and deported during the famous Palmer Raids of 1919–1921. More recently, Arab and Muslim immigrants have faced harassment and deportation as a result of the xenophobia whipped up after September 11th.

These policies, though directed at sections of the working class, open up the possibility for them to be used more widely. The function of such discrimination is to neutralize the left—the promoters of solidarity and struggle against oppression—by creating a climate of hatred, mistrust and fear.

Over the past several years, millions of undocumented immigrants who have made the wheels of industry and commerce turn have faced one of the most vicious and draconian dragnets in US history, at the hands of the aptly named ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Families have been broken up, tens of thousands imprisoned and many more deported, all for the “crime” of working hard for substandard wages.

Meanwhile, employers face little more than an occasional fine. Immigrants had high hopes in the Obama administration implementing immigration reform that would make the system of border control and enforcement less draconian and would provide a means for immigrants to work in security and, if they wished, obtain US citizenship. No reform was forthcoming. Obama earned the tag “deporter in chief” from immigration rights organizations for surpassing the previous Bush administration in the number of undocumented immigrants it deported.

The only way to overcome the divisions that capital deliberately fosters among workers is to work practically for the solidarity of all workers, regardless of their nationality, race or language. The slogan “no one is illegal” is not merely a moral imperative, but one based on the idea that so long as workers allow themselves to be pitted against each other, so long will they remain weak, exploited victims of capitalism.

Native-born workers may think that exclusion and discrimination against immigrant workers will help them. But the reality is that when the bosses can hurt one portion of the working class, it becomes easier to hurt the other. Anti-immigrant laws help the employers impose low wages on all workers. The old IWW slogan was “an injury to one is an injury to all.” The only way the labor movement can improve the conditions for all is by raising the conditions of the most oppressed and exploited sections, not by scapegoating them.

“In this attitude” of support for the rights of immigrant workers, Eugene Debs once wrote,

There is nothing of maudlin sentimentality, but simply a rigid adherence to the fundamental principles of the International proletarian movement. If socialism, international, revolutionary socialism, does not stand staunchly, unflinchingly and uncompromisingly for the working class, and for the exploited and oppressed masses of all lands, then it stands for none, and its claim is a false pretense, and its profession a delusion and a snare.

Tyrannies ruling in the name of socialism

“China and Cuba, like the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, have nothing to do with socialism. We support the struggles of workers in these countries against the bureaucratic ruling class.”

It would be wrong to argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union has rendered irrelevant questions about what sort of system it was. Though the pall of “Soviet socialism”—with its bureaucratic police methods—no longer hangs over the socialist movement, we still must answer the questions: What was the nature of the Soviet Union? Was it socialist in fact or in name only? Was it an inevitable outcome of what the Russian revolutionaries set out to do in 1917?

The same questions must also apply to those countries where similar societies were set up—China and Cuba, for example. How we answer these questions today determines whether Marxism is a living system of thought that can help us change the world, or whether it is obsolete.

To defend the social relations in either of these societies as somehow socialist—where wages are low, workers have few rights and political parties other than the official state party are banned—is to make a mockery of socialism. Cuba today—much less so China, because of its lurch to the market—still stands as an apparent alternative to capitalism on the left. It is necessary to make a clear distinction, however, between the defense of Cuba’s sovereignty against the US blockade and other attacks on the island, and defense of Cuba’s economic and political system.

Russia

The most honest historical accounts of the Russian Revolution acknowledge that the October Revolution was led by a mass working-class party that enjoyed the support of the majority of the working class in Russia. The revolution established soviet power—that is, it created a workers’ state based upon the elected councils of workers, soldiers and sailors that had arisen during the February Revolution.

But only months into the revolutionary process, the new workers’ state began to falter. Bureaucracy reemerged, democracy began to wither, and a gradual process began in which the end result was a new bureaucratic regime that the revolution’s initiators had never intended. What went wrong?

Marx once wrote, “A development of the productive forces is the absolute practical premise of communism because without it, want is generalized, and that means that all the old crap must revive again.”

World capitalism had created the material conditions of abundance that made socialism a real possibility. However, in no single country, least of all Russia, did the material conditions exist such that socialism could be built in isolation. Generalized want, that is poverty, creates the conditions in

which the “old crap”—inequality, class divisions and oppression—revives, regardless of the intentions of those attempting to change society. This is the dilemma the Bolsheviks faced. That’s why they banked the ultimate success of the revolution on its spreading to other countries like Germany and becoming the signal for revolutions internationally. Looking back in 1921, Lenin remarked:

It was clear to us that without the support of the international world revolution the victory of the proletarian revolution was impossible. Before the revolution, and even after it, we thought: either revolution breaks out in the other countries, in the capitalistically more developed countries, immediately, or at least very quickly, or we must perish. In spite of this conviction, we did all we possibly could to preserve the Soviet system under all circumstances, come what may, because we knew that we were not only working for ourselves, but also for the international revolution.

The Russian Revolution produced an outpouring of sympathy and sparked a series of struggles and revolts worldwide. The European working class was restive, and in some instances revolutionary. In Italy workers occupied the factories, and in Germany the Kaiser was overthrown, ushering in an era of mass strikes, protest and insurrection. But these efforts ended in failure; no successful European revolution came to Russia’s aid. The revolutionary government in Russia faced an onslaught of counterrevolutionary “white” armies, foreign invasion, starvation and economic collapse. The civil war brought mass depopulation of Russia’s major cities and the breakdown of industry. The mobilization of the nation’s resources overwhelmed the weak shoots of workers’ power that the revolution had created. The necessity of mobilizing for total war to save the revolution, combined with the terrible economic privation, obliterated soviet democracy and replaced it with a command structure that gave the revolution success in the civil war, but at the cost of strangling the revolution’s very reason for being.

What kind of state arose in besieged Russia? It was socialist only in name. Workers did not hold power. Yet the old capitalists and landowners were gone, and their military defeat in the civil war meant they were not coming back. The state, governed by a single party, owned the means of production.

Many argued that since private property had been abolished, and since the market inside Russia was eventually abolished, Russia was no longer capitalist. Yet Russia remained in the orbit of world capitalism.

The ruling bureaucracy under Stalin consolidated its power by exiling and murdering the majority of Bolsheviks, including Trotsky. It was clearly a new ruling class—it controlled the means of production, it held state power, and it ruled by bureaucratic fiat.

But it was not free to do whatever it liked. In order to consolidate its power, it was compelled to make Russia mil-

itarily competitive with the West. That meant squeezing the workers and peasantry and using every last drop of surplus wealth to build up Russia’s military might.

The new bureaucratic ruling class embarked on a period of massive state accumulation to achieve this goal. Russia achieved industrialization at a forced pace that compressed what took centuries in Britain into a few decades. This drive to accumulate, imposed on Russia’s new rulers by its competitors, marked Russia’s turn to state capitalism.

China

If in Russia workers lost power when the revolution degenerated, in China workers never had it.

The Red Army that seized state power in 1949 after a protracted guerrilla war was drawn largely from the peasantry. It had almost no workers in it and was led by a declassed intelligentsia. This army, rather than any social class, became the source of revolutionary power.

The politics of its main leader, Mao Zedong, were not so much Marxism—though Mao used some Marxist terminology—but agrarian populism combined with radical nationalism. According to Mao, this vast army of former peasants, with almost no workers, was “the main instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

When Mao’s army marched into the main cities, it issued communiqués urging the workers to remain calm and obey orders. Essentially, the Communist Party’s aim was to utilize state power to bring about national unity, land reform and launch industrial development, using Stalin’s Russia in the 1930s as its model. Trade unions, in the words of historian Nigel Harris, became “disciplinary and propaganda agencies of management and state.”

The main difference between Stalin and Mao’s ideology is that while Stalin emphasized the inevitable march of the productive forces, Mao emphasized the role of willpower in transforming society. The population was exhorted through slogans to work as hard as possible for the glory of the Chinese state. This was a product of China’s economic backwardness. The theory of the Chinese communists was that the material limitations of China’s development could be overcome quickly through sheer acts of willpower based on the mass mobilization of China’s vast reservoir of human labor.

The most famous example of Mao’s voluntarism was the Great Leap Forward of 1958, when the state embarked on a policy designed to mobilize millions of people in rural communes to expand output. Wildly unrealistic plans for increasing steel output were devised. The attempt to burst through the objective barriers to fast growth had an opposite effect, creating a breakdown in industry and massive economic dislocation and famine.

China’s transition since the 1970s from a state capitalist economy to one allowing for greater leeway for private capital represented not a transition from socialism to capitalism, but from one to another form of capitalist development.

“Socialism with Chinese characteristics” is not socialism at all, but bureaucratically planned private capitalism.

Cuba

The Cuban Revolution of 1959, like the Chinese Revolution, involved the toppling of a dictatorial regime by a guerrilla army. The most significant difference is that while Mao's Red Army numbered in the hundreds of thousands, Fidel Castro's army numbered at most two-thousand. As in China, workers in the Cuban revolution played no significant role in the revolution, though they supported it. It was the guerrillas who marched from the Sierra Maestra to seize power, not in the name of socialism (that came later), but in the name of nationalist and populist ideals.

The revolution was wildly popular for its land, educational and economic reforms, but the Cuban masses neither carried out the revolution nor created the state that emerged from it. For Fidel, the mass organizations created after the seizure of power were sounding boards and conduits for his policies rather than organs of mass struggle and self-organization.

As Che Guevara wrote, “The mass carries out with matchless enthusiasm and discipline the tasks set by the government, whether in the field of the economy, culture, defense, sports, etc. The initiative generally comes from Fidel, or from the revolutionary leadership, and is explained to the people, who make it their own.”

Fidel only declared the revolution socialist retroactively, after his forces crushed the US-led Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and increasing US hostility and counterrevolutionary measures compelled him to wrest control of the economy from hostile Cuban capitalists and move closer into Russia's orbit.

Like Mao, Castro and Guevara's politics were voluntarist. Writes Nigel Harris, the guerrillas believed that “armed struggle creates the objective conditions for winning power, and, in Castro's words, those conditions can be created in the ‘immense majority of Latin American countries’ if between four and seven dedicated guerrillas can be found.” The Cuban model of guerrilla warfare proved successful, however, only in Cuba. Che died heroically but tragically, while trying unsuccessfully to establish a guerrilla base in Bolivia.

This was a far cry from the politics of Marx and Engels, who argued that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” meant the rule of the working class, not a dictatorship of a minority. Engels, in his criticism of August Blanqui, a French socialist who believed that revolution would be brought to the masses by a minority, wrote:

From Blanqui's assumption, that any revolution may be made by the outbreak of a small revolutionary minority, follows of itself the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the venture. This is, of course, a dictatorship, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small minority that has made the revolution, and who are themselves previously organized under the

dictatorship of one or several individuals.

Socialism is working-class self-emancipation

What is notable about the ideology of the Cuban and Chinese revolutions, as well as of Stalinism, is that they turn the basic tenets of Marxism on their head. For Marxism, socialism can only succeed as a movement of the international working class. There can be no socialism in one country.

Stalin pioneered the slogan “socialism in one country,” and the foundation of Che, Castro and Mao's politics was first and foremost nationalism and national development. For Marxists, socialism can only be achieved through the self-emancipation of the working class and the oppressed.

In the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, the working class played at best a passive role, with the center stage taken by armies acting in the name of the working class, which itself never seized nor held state power at any moment.

In the Marxism tradition, the workers' state—armed democracy—is a transitory body with the purpose of ensuring that the old ruling classes cannot regain power. Its purpose is ensure the abolition of class distinctions, after which it begins to “wither away.”

In Stalin's Russia—and in the national versions of “socialism” it inspired—the state is continually strengthened. This is a kind of inverted proof, as the existence of all state power is, that classes in those societies have not been abolished.

Full equality and liberation

Capitalism thrives on division

“Capitalism divides the working class, based on sexual, gender, racial, national and other distinctions. The specially oppressed groups within the working class suffer the most under capitalism.

“We oppose racism in all its forms. We support the struggle for immigrant rights. We fight for real social, economic and political equality for women, and for an end to discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.”

“We support the fight for Black liberation and all the struggles of the oppressed. The liberation of the oppressed is essential to socialist revolution and impossible without it.”

“I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half,” the 19th century robber baron Jay Gould once bragged.

Why would he say this? The driving force of the capitalist system is profit. As far as capitalists are concerned, nothing else matters so long as the coffers are filling. These profits are the product of the unpaid labor of the working class. Finding ways to guarantee that labor will continue to work, undisturbed, at its job of making profits, is therefore a prime concern to the capitalist.

The whip of economic compulsion accomplishes much of this goal: if you do not work, you do not eat. “Hunger,” argued a British 18th century Protestant parson, “the most natural motive to industry and labor...calls for the most powerful exertions.” Marx put it another way:

The dull compulsion of economic relations completes the subjection of the laborer to the capitalist. Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, but only exceptionally. In the ordinary run of things, the laborer can be left to the “natural laws of production,” i.e., to his dependence on capital, a dependence springing from, and guaranteed in perpetuity by, the conditions of production themselves.

But the collective experience of the working class also leads it to find ways to resist and push back against their exploitation. As Marx writes, “But with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it

becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more.”

The capitalists therefore require other means (short of the use of outright force) to attempt to divide and atomize workers other than just “the dull compulsion of economic relations.” One way they do this is by pitting workers against each other and compelling them to compete with each other for scarce jobs, as we have already discussed.

Laid over this economic competition is the exploitation of differences in race, sex, language, immigration status and so on, which are used to foster deeper divisions among workers. For example, capitalists have often used workers of one race or nationality to scab on native-born white workers in the United States in order to stir up enmity between them—something they could not do unless one group was kept in a more oppressed and, therefore, desperate and hungrier state.

Employers were often able to appeal to housewives to rein in their striking husbands, because, to quote Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the women “were expected to stay at home and worry about the empty larder, the hungry kiddies and the growling landlord, easy prey to the agents of the company.”

The IWW, however, had a different approach. “Women can be the most militant or the most conservative element in a strike,” Gurley Flynn wrote, “in proportion to their comprehension of its purposes. The IWW has been accused of putting the women in the front. The truth is, the IWW does not keep them in the back, and they go to the front.”

Understanding oppression

All workers are oppressed under capitalism, facing inferior housing, schooling and medical care, for example, compared to middle-class people (like doctors, lawyers, and managerial functionaries) and wealthy capitalists. But some groups are singled out for “special” oppression that runs even deeper: women, African Americans, Native peoples, Latinos, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex people, people who don’t speak the “official” language, people with disabilities, and so on.

These different forms of oppression had an economic function, or were closely tied to the new economic priorities of capitalism. In the early stages of capitalist development, for example, forced labor of various kinds were used to extract wealth from subject peoples, particularly in cases

where shortages of wage workers made that form of labor too expensive to be profitable.

As Marx wrote in *Capital*, “Whilst the cotton industry introduced child slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.”

Racism—the ideology that observable differences such as skin color marked some people as inferior—was fashioned to justify the forcible enslavement of Africans in the New World. “Slavery could survive,” wrote Winthrop Jordan, “only if the Negro were a man set apart; he simply had to be different if slavery were to exist at all.” In the case of slavery, racial categorization and exploitation were inseparably bound together.

After slavery’s defeat, the Southern white ruling class deliberately fostered race hatred to prevent poor whites from identifying with poor Blacks. As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote:

The race element was emphasized in order that property-holders could get the support of the majority of white laborers and make it more possible to exploit Negro labor. But the race philosophy came as a new and terrible thing to make labor unity or labor class-consciousness impossible. So long as the Southern white laborers could be induced to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro, just so long was a labor movement in the South made impossible.

Racism (as well as xenophobia) also persisted in the North. The main trade unions often refused to organize Blacks (except sometimes in segregated locals) and immigrant workers (in many cases, also women workers), disfiguring the labor movement and rendering it unable to resist the bosses’ attacks.

Divide and conquer

There is an essential point Du Bois makes here that applies to all forms of oppression. And that is that the oppression visited upon one section of society serves the function of keeping down other sections, both economically and socially, and preventing the exploited from seeing that they have common interests with those of their class who face special forms of oppression.

Oppression, and the ideologies that underpin it, objectively weakens the ability of workers to come together and unite against the ruling class. The point was well-expressed by the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who wrote, “The slaveholders...by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the Blacks, succeeded in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the Black man himself.”

Imperialism—the conquest and division of the world by Europe, the United States and Japan in the late 19th century—gave renewed lease on the racist ideas developed out of

slavery. Racist ideology was used to justify the conquest of “inferior” people who were considered to be at the stage of childhood in terms of human development and therefore needed the tutelage of the mature, “civilized” nations to guide them.

The national chauvinism fostered by the ruling classes of the big powers acted as a powerful weapon against the international solidarity of the working class. The US ruling class today systematically, and insidiously, instills American chauvinism—aided by the compliant mass media.

As a result, most Americans unconsciously accept the right of the United States to project its power around the world and to dominate international institutions, and much of the stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims that help justify it. But American chauvinism is even more insidious than others, because it comes with the ideological trappings of the American Revolution. America claims to be a great protector and promoter of world democracy, and a “reluctant” world power uniquely possessed with benign respect for human rights and dignity.

Racism and other forms of oppression persist, quite simply, because without them, capitalism could not survive; though naked exploitation is at the heart of capitalism, without the intervention of material and ideological devices to pit worker against worker, that core relationship of exploitation could not hold for long.

Thus, racism, women’s oppression and other forms of discrimination are not holdovers from previous societies, but essential features of the capitalist system.

Though many legal forms of racial discrimination have disappeared in the United States since the 1960s, African Americans remain second-class citizens, facing substantially higher unemployment, lower wages, worse housing, higher poverty rates and far higher levels of victimization at the hands of the police and judicial system than whites.

Racial profiling and stereotyping, both casual and official, is ubiquitous. To cite a couple of examples: Blacks make up 13 percent of the population, but represent 50 percent of the nation’s prison population; among first-time youth offenders, African Americans are six times more likely than whites to be sentenced to prison by juvenile courts for the same offense; and Black youth unemployment hovers at around 30 percent nationwide. Racist attitudes toward African Americans, while considerably diminished since the pre-civil rights era, continue to infect millions of people, including a significant number of working-class whites.

Other groups, such as Latinos, are systematically discriminated against on the basis of language, immigration status and skin color. Undocumented immigrant individuals and families live in constant fear of harassment, detention and deportation, not to mention facing the low wages that their precarious status imposes on them.

The form that women’s oppression takes is different from racism, but it is as rooted in the fabric of capitalism as is racism.

Capitalism depends on the unpaid labor of women in the home to guarantee the reproduction of the current and next generation of workers. This imposes a double burden on women, who most often also work outside the home, as well as do the bulk of the childcare and housework. A whole ideological apparatus exists that enshrines the privatized family as the most acceptable form of childrearing and personal relations.

Capitalism has turned sex into a commodity, a reality whose burden falls chiefly, but not exclusively, on women. Women are denied control of their own sexuality and reproductive decisions—denigrated if they are sexually promiscuous (unlike men, who are congratulated) and denied, to varying degrees, control over whether to carry a pregnancy to term. Women also face sexual harassment and violence in the home as well as outside it.

The result of women's collective burden, however, is not that a working-class man's burden is eased. Though men may benefit from having to do less childcare and housework than women, the privatized form of the family places a burden on both men and women, who are expected to use their meager paychecks to keep their families together, pay for their children's schooling, healthcare and so on, while the capitalists reap all the benefits.

Women's wages continue to be below men's, and this is justified on the archaic grounds that men are the main "breadwinners" in society. Men may think that their own sense of self-worth hinges on this, but just as the low wages of immigrant workers help the bosses drive down the wages of all workers, so the employers use the low wages of women to keep wages low for men. In addition, it should be kept in mind that working-class couples are sharing less money than if women received equal pay to men.

Sexual stereotyping also pegs women to certain jobs and men to others on the grounds that certain jobs are "women's work" and others "men's work." These attitudes have shifted but still persist.

LGBTQI oppression—society's mistreatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people—is linked to the nuclear family just described. These groups are seen as threatening to the traditional family, and are therefore considered to be "abnormal."

The pigeonholing of people into expected and stereotypical gender roles not only stultifies and crushes the lives of women and people who are not heterosexual, but it also creates a great deal of confusion and pain for boys and men, and for people who do not identify with the gender they are assigned, or who do not identify with any gender at all. Socialists reject these societal straightjackets, and believe that how people define and identify themselves should be their own decision.

Class, oppression, and liberation

Just as capitalism needs oppression, the working class needs to combat it in order to build genuine unity. The old

saying of the Industrial Workers of the World, "An injury to one is an injury to all," is perhaps the most important slogan for the labor and socialist movements in this regard—for unless the working class takes this slogan to heart, it will always be defeated. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statement in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" is in the same vein.

The working class consists of men and women, gay and straight, Black, white and brown, speaking many different languages, coming from many different nationalities, and so on. If the working class is to successfully challenge capitalism, it must overcome these divisions. On this basis alone, it is essential to recognize the sources of division and inequality inside the working class if a strategy is to be devised to overcome them; for divisions cannot be overcome by ignoring them any more than it can by stoking them.

The conditions of all workers cannot be raised or improved until the conditions of the most poorly treated and most oppressed sections are raised up.

Immigrant workers must be organized along with native-born, as equals with the same rights. Women must have equal pay and access to free childcare and reproductive services, and be treated as equals to men. Blacks must have full equality, including access to good education, training, jobs and fair housing, and be free from police brutality and the injustices of the judicial system, of which they bear the brunt.

Workers who speak languages other than English must be able to speak and learn in their own language without discrimination. Oppressed nations must have the right to self-determination. All forms of stigmatization and marginalization of people with disabilities must be abolished, and they should be provided with the means to live independent, self-affirming lives, with equal access to work, public services, schools and other facilities.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people must be free from violence, harassment, and legal constraints, and be extended the same rights as others, including the right to marry; and all people must have the freedom to choose what kind of social and sexual relations they enter into, provided no one is harmed or injured.

These struggles are not extras, but must be an integral part of the workers' movement for total liberation. The working class can never achieve emancipation unless it is able to challenge all forms of oppression, without which the class cannot unite. Conversely, because capitalism depends on oppression, the liberation of the oppressed cannot be fully achieved unless the working class is able to win socialism.

The revolutionary party

A party to organize our side

“To achieve socialism, the most militant workers must be organized into a revolutionary socialist party. The ISO is committed to playing a role in laying the foundations for such a party. We aim to build an independent socialist organization, rooted in workplaces, schools and neighborhoods that, in fighting today’s struggles, also wins larger numbers to socialism.”

“Many good socialists and radicals question the need for a party at all,” wrote the late British socialist and journalist Paul Foot in his book *Why You Should Be a Socialist*. “They say: ‘We’ve been sold out by so many parties already, Communist Parties, Labor Parties of all descriptions. Can’t we just look after ourselves without a party?’”

Do we need a political party?

When people in the United States think of political parties, they think chiefly, if not exclusively, of the Democratic and Republican Parties, and in relation to these, they see politics purely as tedious electoral campaigns and vacuous mudslinging between two organizations that represent a narrow band of interests.

So when socialists come along and say that we want to organize a party, it can be a turnoff. This negative idea of political parties was at one time also reinforced by the experience of the Stalinized Communist Parties of the world—which were top-down, command-structured organizations that blindly supported Stalin’s bureaucratic state capitalism, which bore little or no resemblance to the socialism from below of Karl Marx.

In Europe, the tepid reformism—and later, enthusiastic support for the free market—of the social-democratic parties also helped alienate young radicals from socialist organization and led them to draw anarchist conclusions that “politics” of any kind is a waste of time. “Anarchism was not infrequently a kind of penalty,” wrote Lenin, “for the opportunist sins of the working-class movement.”

Then there are the sectarian socialist grouplets, consisting of tiny numbers of arrogant and out-of-touch people who believe themselves to be the “vanguard,” claim to have all the answers and treat everyone around them (to the extent that

anyone is around them) with contempt. If that’s what anyone means when they talk about socialist organization, who needs it?

As discussed earlier, capitalism cannot be gotten rid of merely by electing the right people into office. But politics isn’t only elections. The struggle against capitalism is a political struggle, in the sense that its goal is to dismantle the capitalist state and replace it with institutions of workers’ power.

The great radical labor organization of the early 20th century, the Industrial Workers of the World, for example, believed that the socialist commonwealth could be achieved solely through workers’ economic organization and struggle. By combining into “one big union” and organizing the general strike, the working class could reorganize industry from the bottom up.

The problem with this idea is that it failed to address the question of political power. If the state exists in order to protect the interests of the capitalists, then it cannot be ignored; it must be confronted. The working class must combine economic and political struggle in order to challenge capitalism.

Moreover, if the working class limits itself to purely economic struggle, it will be incapable of becoming the leading force in a struggle against all forms of exploitation and oppression. As Lenin wrote in his famous booklet *What Is To Be Done?:*

The Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.

Anyone who has ever gotten involved in even the smallest struggle knows that without organization, little can be accomplished. An individual can’t change much, no matter how committed he or she is to changing the world. To take on an employer in a single workplace, to protest a fare hike

or to oppose a war, organization is necessary. To take on the entire edifice of capitalist power obviously requires organization of another order.

The most obvious case for organization is that the other side is very organized and has the whole machinery of the state and lots of resources at its disposal. The ruling class will literally stop at nothing to protect its wealth and privilege. To effectively challenge it, our side must be well organized and capable of mobilizing millions of people.

What kind of organization?

The question is: What kind of organization? We have emphasized in our commentary that genuine Marxism is distinguished from other forms of socialism in its emphasis on the idea that workers and oppressed people must liberate themselves—that without the active, mass involvement of millions in their own liberation, liberation is not possible.

Some anarchists stop there and think they've exhausted the question. Yet such an emphasis does not rule out—in fact it necessitates—strong leadership and organization.

The term “vanguard” has been maligned because of its association with tiny sects who proclaim themselves as such, when in fact they lead nothing and no one.

In a very general sense, however, vanguard merely means the “advanced guard” of any struggle or movement. Every movement has one, in the sense that no social struggle happens without some identifiable smaller group within the larger whole taking the lead to initiate, sustain and advance the struggle. Of course, what constitutes that vanguard is constantly shifting and developing as the movement changes.

When Marxists use the term, they don't mean a group of experts that directs the struggle from a control room. They don't mean a group of people separate from and outside the struggle. By vanguard, they mean the best-organized, most militant and politically conscious workers. An organized vanguard such as this cannot be proclaimed—it has to be created.

The necessity of leadership in struggle reflects the fact that people become radical at different paces and at different times, and because at any given moment, there are always some who are more class-conscious, radical and willing to act than others. In this sense, working-class consciousness is uneven.

Secondly, working-class consciousness is mixed, in the sense that the same worker can hold both radical and backward ideas at the same time. Mixed ideas are challenged in struggle, because the experience of solidarity tends to push against the backward ideas. Unevenness is also overcome through struggle, because in struggle workers tend to be inspired and follow the lead of the most advanced sections of the class when it is in motion, and because, once in struggle, workers are capable of making very fast strides in consciousness and confidence. The role of a revolutionary vanguard is to overcome both the mixed and uneven consciousness of the class by engaging together in struggle, and at the same time

winning workers to a more consistent, revolutionary perspective.

There are some left tendencies that believe the radicalized minority can substitute itself for the mass and act on its behalf. Such were the politics of guerrilla struggle, for example. For Marxists, the recognition of real differences in consciousness and in abilities is not done in order to sanctify those differences, but to overcome them—to raise the level of consciousness and initiative of all workers. As the British Marxist Duncan Hallas once wrote:

The essence of elitism is the assertion that the observable differences in abilities, consciousness and experience are rooted in unalterable genetic or social conditions and that the mass of the people are incapable of self-government now or in the future. Rejection of the elitist position implies that the observed differences are wholly or partly attributable to causes that can be changed. It does not mean denial of the differences themselves.

How divisions are overcome

What accounts for these differences in consciousness, and therefore, of the necessity for organized leadership?

The dull compulsion of life under capitalism inculcates in workers a sense of inertia—that little can change. This is an idea that is reinforced by the prevailing propaganda at school and in the media, which tells workers that they are not smart enough to run things and asks them to blame other workers—immigrants, women, Blacks, etc.—for their problems.

Yet, as we've seen, capitalism's tendency to grind workers down also forces them to use their collective strength to resist. In acts of resistance, workers begin to challenge the ruling ideas that have kept them atomized and weak.

A struggle can teach a worker the meaning of solidarity. But he or she may still hold negative ideas about the rights of gays and lesbians. The struggle creates the conditions in which racist, sexist or homophobic ideas that keep workers divided can be broken down.

An organization that unites the most radical elements—those whose experience has led them to reject capitalism and want to fight for an alternative—facilitates the process whereby the workers who have not yet been won to these ideas can be more easily convinced (in the course of struggle) to become champions of the rights of the oppressed, the most consistent advocates of complete solidarity and the most convinced supporters of a socialist alternative.

The point is to begin to gather together isolated and local militants and connect them with others across the country. Such an organization becomes a place to compare notes on the struggle, to learn from different struggles, and to generalize from them about what works and what doesn't. Such an organization, to be effective, must be a part of the struggle, seeking ways to make it more effective, and at the same time somewhat ahead of it—pointing toward the future. As Marx says in the *Manifesto*, “The Communists fight for the attain-

ment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.” The communists, he wrote, are “the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others.”

Such an organization can, through a national political newspaper and other publications, begin to create out of a disparate set of local struggles a national movement, capable both of learning from, and teaching, the working class. Such an organization helps to gather together and sift through the experiences of past struggles in the history of the working class and socialist movements, generalize from that experience, and use it to help guide us in our present struggles. It is in this sense that the revolutionary party has been called the “memory of the working class.”

We look to the experience of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party in Russia because it was the first and only workers’ party in history that was able to successfully challenge capitalism. Lenin’s party was not a bureaucratic structure that went around bossing Russian workers. The party was a part of the Russian working class—its best part.

N. N. Sukhanov—by no means a Bolshevik supporter in 1917, but who witnessed the party at close quarters in the days leading up to the October Revolution—observed the close interconnectedness between the party and the working class:

The Bolsheviks were working stubbornly and without letup. They were among the masses, at the factory benches, every day without a pause. Tens of speakers, big and little, were speaking in Petersburg, at the factories and in the barracks, every blessed day. For the masses, they had become their own people, because they were always there, taking the lead in details as well as in the most important affairs of the factory or barracks. They had become the sole hope..... The mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks.

What Sukhanov seemed not to understand is that the Bolsheviks themselves were workers—leaders on the ground in the day-to-day battles. They did not parachute in from somewhere else. The Bolshevik vanguard was not an isolated elite, but organized working-class militants tempered by shared experience and shared politics developed through interaction with their fellow workers.

The Leninist conception of a “vanguard” is best understood simply as a “leading body.” To really be a leading body, it cannot be proclaimed or imposed from above, and it cannot be built by standing apart from the working class and holding up revolutionary ideas to which it expects the working class, at the right moment, to suddenly flock.

Nothing remotely like the Bolshevik Party today exists. It has to be built in practice, through propaganda work, and in the course of struggles over “partial” demands.

Socialists aim to create a new society. But we cannot do

so simply by wishing it to be, or by waiting with folded arms until everybody else “gets it.” We aim to unite in solidarity with all the myriad partial struggles against the system, whether it is a battle for higher wages or better healthcare, resistance to police brutality or fighting for reproductive rights.

Struggle changes consciousness and gives workers confidence in themselves and their ability to change things. In the process of fighting together with others who have not yet decided to become socialists, we are able not only to advance the struggle and win concessions, but we are able to win wider layers of people to the socialist project—the fight for a world without exploitation or oppression.



Further Reading

There are many great books to continue your education as a Marxist, but here is a list to get you started. Most of these books are available from Haymarket Books, and some of them can be found on line at the Marxist Internet Archive (www.marxists.org).

Socialism...Seriously, by Danny Katch

The Meaning of Marxism, by Paul D'Amato

The Communist Manifesto, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Haymarket edition, edited by Phil Gasper, titled *The Communist Manifesto: A Road Map to History's Most Important Political Document*)

Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, by Frederick Engels

The two Souls of Socialism, by Hal Draper

Left Wing Communism, by V.I. Lenin

State and Revolution, by V.I. Lenin (Haymarket edition, edited by Todd Chretien)

Imperialism: Highest Stage of Capitalism and *Imperialism and World Economy* by V.I. Lenin and N. Bukharin (Haymarket edition, edited by Phil Gasper)

Party and Class, by Cliff, Hallas, Harman, and Trotsky

Reform or Revolution and *The Mass Strike*, by Rosa Luxemburg (Haymarket edition, edited by Helen Scott)

Black Liberation and Socialism, by Ahmed Shawki

Subterranean Fire: A History of Working Class Radicalism in the United States by Sharon Smith

Women and Socialism: Race, Class, and Capital, by Sharon Smith

Sexuality and Socialism, by Sherry Wolf

The Democrats: A Critical History, by Lance Selfa

Ecology and Socialism, by Chris Williams

The Forging of the American Empire, by Sidney Lens

Russia: From Workers' State to State Capitalism, by Arno, Binns, Harman, and Shawki

