



# MAPPING SOCIALIST STRATEGIES

## **Reporting Back and Moving Forward**

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The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

The New York Office serves two major tasks: to work around issues concerning the United Nations and to engage in dialogue with North American progressives in universities, unions, social movements, and politics.

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# Mapping Socialist Strategies

## Reporting Back and Moving Forward

In the first days of August, 2014, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office brought together one hundred influential leftists and progressives from across the United States, Canada, and Europe for an “un-conference” on socialist strategies.

The retreat was held at the Edith Macy Center, located in Westchester County about an hour north of New York City. Shortly before we began on Friday afternoon, a powerful storm had swept across the Lower Hudson Valley region, knocking out power lines and leaving the Center reliant on generators. Off the Harlem Line train and through the post-storm drizzle, guests gradually began to trickle into semi-darkness. The reduced electricity served to emphasize the surrounding beauty—large windows opened out to rugged oak forests, a simple pond below, gathering mountains above. We’d like to think of it as the calm before the storm of socialist strategizing to come.

While socialism has a long history in Europe, Canada, and even the United States, socialists on both sides of the Atlantic have found it difficult to fight the neoliberal tide of recent decades. Whether it is shifting class formations, the capitulation of center-left politicians to neoliberal orthodoxy, or the rise of austerity, the state of capitalism looks remarkably similar throughout the North Atlantic region. Meanwhile, the term “socialist” has most often been used as an epithet to denigrate any government policy that benefits ordinary people at the expense of the wealthy.

RLS–NYC organized this meeting because we believe that it is time for those of us who oppose capitalism and wish to transform society

to proudly reclaim the socialist label. Many of the participants in this gathering are among those already engaged in struggles of survival, resistance, and progressive reform. How can we support this necessary work while at the same time linking it to broader strategies for societal transformation? Can our movements add up to something greater than the sum of their parts? In an electoral context that is structurally inhospitable to socialist challenges, how can the left constitute itself politically and with strategic effectiveness?

Unlike many conferences, this meeting was not divided into experts on stage and an attentive audience. Rather, the weekend’s work primarily took place in various breakout groups and, perhaps even more importantly, the ample time reserved for informal discussion, debate, and networking. Plenaries were kept brief and were intended to spark discussion, not to provide definitive answers. This gathering provided a space for new relationships to be formed and old ones to be renewed. Without coming together in a space of mutual respect and hospitality, it is hard to imagine the left rebuilding itself into an effective force in our societies.

This conference was focused on political activism. As RLS–NYC co-director Albert Scharenberg explained in his opening remarks, it was a space to discuss what we can do to rebuild the left, especially in the U.S. but also in Canada and Europe. We aimed to learn from each other’s struggles and to build the networks we need to move forward. This gathering brought together people from different geographical, ideological, and social backgrounds in a spirit of hospitality and friendship. It is only by coming together in this spirit that we can create

the possibility of working together. Everyone present at the meeting plays a leading role in various left struggles. This weekend, we came

together to figure out how the left can, in a political context, reconstitute itself with strategic effectiveness.

## **“Business is in Command”**

Through the afternoon, participants arrived from their various corners of the world, settled into what would be their sleeping quarters for the next three nights, then either rested, explored the beautiful retreat grounds, or began to catch up with old comrades and meet new ones. Following the first of many excellent meals to be shared in the Edith Macy dining area over the course of the weekend, the group of one hundred moved next door, to the main auditorium and beginning of “official” weekend programming.

The meeting’s first plenary, moderated by RLS–NYC co-director Stefanie Ehmsen, addressed the current state of power relations in Europe and the United States—and what we can do to change them. Hans van Heijningen, party secretary of the Socialist Party of the Netherlands, explained that in his country—and throughout Europe—governments run by social democrats and liberals claim to have “solved” the present crisis—by letting the poor pay—even as unemployment remains high. The left has advanced in some parts of Europe, but we need to be modest about our position. In a context where social democrats have sold out and people are in despair, the gains made by the left, while real, are not enough. We need to build something new while learning from history. It’s not enough to talk about beautiful things; we need to act.

Van Heijningen discussed the experience of the Dutch Socialist Party over the last several decades. They grew—and continue to grow—

from below. The party organizes ordinary people by regularly and consistently going to neighborhoods and talking about the problems in the neighborhood and what can be done about them, working together. We on the left need to remove the obstacles that stand between ourselves and the people. Sometimes, left organizations use strange language and symbols, and this can make us seem like we belong to a cult. In the Netherlands (and in many other countries as well), most people think their children’s lives will be worse than their own. When you think about the tremendous possibilities unleashed by technology, this lack of confidence is striking. So who is ruining everything? It’s the one percent who are serving their own narrow interests at the expense of everyone else. Van Heijningen is proud that this approach has helped his party to become a mirror of Dutch society. This is not the case for other political parties in the Netherlands. It takes effort. Ordinary people don’t like to sit in conferences. They like to do something and to change things. It’s critical to be respectful of trade unions and other independent organizations. We need to show what side we are on in a practical way: we need to live the life that we’re preaching.

Van Heijningen asked us to consider what motivates us to be part of a left organization. We need to seek an alternative to the current order and then go out and do something. If we argue about the Russian Revolution, there will be 100 different opinions, but we can easily form a consensus about the situation in the

Netherlands today and what's needed to get rid of the current government. It's a question of starting to work in a serious way. Nine out of ten attempts may fail, but the tenth attempt will be the start of something new.

Frances Fox Piven, the noted political activist, author and CUNY professor, summarized power relations in the United States in even simpler terms: "business is in command." Business is able to maintain control through deeply embedded biases in the U.S. electoral system. The public sector has been turned into a bazaar for private profiteering. The United States doesn't have a significant left-wing political party—a situation shared by much of Europe as well—but there is some momentum on the left, particularly in social movements. Occupy is the best known example, but there have also been uprisings of public sector workers, activism calling for a higher minimum wage, and courageous strikes by low-wage workers. This momentum won't bring us socialism, but for the middle term, at least, the positive prospects for change are with the social movements.

For Piven, the near-term possibilities for forming a left party in the United States are not good. She explained that she's not opposed to party building efforts, or patience, or being nice and making friends—whatever it takes to build solidarity—but in the U.S. calling for a left party as the solution to current problems is just kicking the can down the road. The left needs to try to figure out what we can do to help make movements of poor and working people and people of color more disruptive. How can we throw sand into the gears? What are the weak points in the system? How can we make it less governable? The Occupy Wall Street call for a debt strike was provocative and problematic. The idea is potentially extremely powerful, but it's hard to pull off because of the isolating nature of debt and the legal realities in the United States.

The "activist, articulate, educated left"—that is to say the participants in gatherings like this one—has dramatically overestimated its own importance, according to Piven. When the Second International got together, they talked about the masses and their movements and their temperament. Today we talk about this much less. We need to worry about this relationship more and to start unpacking some of the truisms we've relied on for the last few decades. People don't get politicized through "education," they get politicized by getting involved in collective action.

Bhaskar Sunkara, the founding editor and publisher of *Jacobin* magazine, referred to the much-cited Pew poll showing that young people have a better opinion of socialism than of capitalism. People's impulses are in the right place, and it is up to the left to build the kind of social movements discussed by Piven. With the partial exception of Greece, European countries don't have mass left parties either, but they have a visible horizon to build towards. This is not the case in the United States. It's hard to build socialism if you won't even use the word.

A small, militant left in the heart of empire has an important role to play, according to Sunkara. We don't really know what a left social democracy would look like in actual practice. When and if SYRIZA (the Coalition of the Radical Left) takes power in Greece, we may find out. It's true that we don't have the conditions to form a left party in the United States right now, but we still need to develop members. Reading groups are one way to do this.

This panel was followed by a lively discussion. The Highlander Center's Elandria Williams objected to Piven's distinction between activists and broader communities, insisting that she is not part of some "educated" activist cadre that is somehow separate from her community. Catarina Principe, from Portugal's Left Bloc,

observed that broad left parties don't exist because people decided to have a party; they exist because people got together to do the work. Petter Nilsson, from Sweden's Left Party, insisted that we need to make sure we talk about strategy, not just accumulation of tactics, and LeftRoots' Steve Williams reminded us of the importance of explicitly speaking from where we're coming from within the movement. We are all in favor of socialism, but this point of unity can obscure actually existing fragmentation. Beware of false unity.

After the panel the discussion continued over drinks in the Center's main lobby, as well as its large outdoor decks overlooking the sloping forests. Inside, RLS-NYC staff prepared

a "socialist speed dating" icebreaker activity, in which participants got to know each other through a series of two-minute conversations. Who is your favorite social justice super hero? Why are you here this weekend? What's your favorite type of ice cream? How better to get to know each other than at the end of a long travel day, in a steamy breakout room where body mass has overwhelmed air conditioning capacities, through a series of rapid-fire questions both serious and silly? At the end of the evening, now getting into the swing of things, people began to write what socialism meant to them on a large cardboard cut-out titled "Socialism is..." THE AMERICAN DREAM? We're not so sure about that. THE FUTURE? We sure hope so.

## **Neoliberalism vs. the Public / the Commons**

In the wake of repeated financial crises and economic collapses, neoliberalism has been thoroughly discredited on the intellectual plane, yet empirically it seems more powerful than ever. Saturday morning, in the weekend's second plenary, Leo Panitch, from York University and Toronto's "Socialist Project," sought to address this apparent bankruptcy, which contrasts with the fact that neoliberalism is very much a living vampire. He cautioned that we should avoid the idea that neoliberalism is triumphant, either intellectually or in practice. Neoliberalism is not a well-thought-out ideology that can be put into practice by the people who manage the capitalist state. These people are deeply pragmatic, in any case.

There are a few different frameworks available to us for thinking about neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be considered to be a set of policies. It can be thought of as strategic (per David Harvey and Naomi Klein). It can be con-

sidered to be a particular balance of class forces, which is to say that it is capitalism without effective working class opposition. Neoliberalism can also be defined as a particular form of the state (per Greg Albo); the neoliberal state is often thought of as being deregulatory, but this is a misunderstanding. This state-form is very active. It uses heavy regulation to further market relations in society. This misunderstanding is one way in which the left has miseducated itself. In this kind of capitalist state, there is very little room for reform, short of turning each state's financial system into a public utility.

We need to ask if our form of organization is adequate to this context, Panitch insisted. Do we have the kinds of parties and organizations that can communicate a sense of alternatives to people? When people don't have any strategic sense of possibilities for change then they try to hold on to whatever toehold they have

within the system—usually at the expense of the “other.”

What, then, are the possibilities for resisting neoliberalism, however we define the term? Rachel LaForest of the Right to the City Alliance proposed the paradigm of “the commons”/the public as a necessary foundation for any kind of anti-capitalist or anti-colonial program. The commons are shared spaces and shared resources that are not exclusive to those who are able to pay for entry, nor are they a pseudo-socialist place for those who are able to show up, as was the case with Occupy Wall Street. Those who are most affected by neoliberalism need to be central decision makers in building resistance.

LaForest explained that Right to the City focuses on campaigns that will ease people’s immediate burdens while including “transformative demands.” They are critical of a left that seems incapable of visualizing an alternative to market-based society that seems vibrant, fun, and joyful, that is an alternative that people want to be part of. The paradigm of the commons is about tapping into the imaginations of ourselves and our communities. We need to move beyond measuring success in terms of scale or breadth and to start cultivating leadership among those who want to build a commons-based alternative.

Following these presentations, the “un-conference” began in earnest as we divided into randomized breakout groups that each brought together people from different countries, regions, sectors, and social backgrounds. These discussions took Panitch’s and LaForest’s presentations as a starting point but quickly moved into broader discussions about how to understand and therefore better resist neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism does not affect everyone equally. There is a pressing need to acknowledge

and understand the central role of race and racism in the neoliberal context. We need only look at Detroit’s current struggle over access to water as a right to see how desperate things have become in some communities. We need to re-assert a connection between public provision and basic needs. Neoliberal authoritarianism has emerged as the new normal. We often think of the welfare state as the norm and neoliberalism as a deviation, but maybe it’s the other way around: neoliberalism is a return to the normal state of things in a capitalist society. In this context, who makes up the “working class?” How can class consciousness play a role in building resistance to neoliberalism? Criminalization and disenfranchisement have served as a weapon against working class capacity for action. There has been a diminution of democracy. How do we address questions of self-determination and anti-colonialism, both locally and globally?

There were rich discussions of the meaning of “the commons” and the public, as well as of whether this paradigm can serve as an effective basis for resistance. Some asked whether discussion of the commons was indicative of a retreat from politics and a move toward localism. There were worries that the idea of the commons can be too easily co-opted by capitalism. Companies like Uber and Airbnb evoke the commons in their marketing, and common goods—like free public transportation—may be desirable but can exist under capitalism. It may be better to insist on socialism and avoid the fuzzier notion of the commons. Others asked what constitutes the commons. Since capitalism does not try to seek consensus, commons-based resistance faces great challenges. Looking at fruitful examples of commoning may be a way to learn how we can open a space for popular power. Expanding the commons can be a transformative strategy. By creating niches within capitalism that are not commodified and individuated, people experience an alternate way of relating to each other and the

material world around them. They may even realize that public ownership is beneficial to them and to society as a whole. Counter-examples to the current order are sorely needed, but we must be patient in creating them. When we speak about commons, we should remember that commons begin with nature. These aren't just places to hang out; they provide necessary components of life. These are spaces that must be off limits to corporate domination.

There was much productive discussion about how to relate to the state, electoral politics, and—in particular—the Democratic Party. Consensus on this topic remains unachievable. On both sides of the North Atlantic, there has been a broad-based rejection of political elites, a situation which has created opportunities and risks. One salutary consequence has been the growth of left forces in some parts of Europe, such as Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland. In North America, Québec *solidaire* has led the formation of a fusion coalition combining socialist and non-socialist forces in fights against austerity. DIE LINKE faces both challenges and opportunities in Germany, and progressive politics can be reinvigorated in the United States through renewed focus on the labor movement and the African American struggle for rights and equality. Some participants argued that taking control of state and local governments and participating in coalitions are concrete tangible goals, which are needed. Protest is not enough; we need to enter the state. Some argued that radical politics can be practiced through the Democratic Party. There are not really two parties in the United States: there are approximately six factions, and socialists should support the Progressive Democrats of America. Others argued that even the most progressive of elected politicians rarely stick to their campaign agenda and even those who do only pass watered down bills at best, unless there is momentum from social movements to push for reforms. Some insisted that the party/movement dichotomy is a false one.

We don't need to choose. They complement each other, and we need both.

Another important area of discussion centered on questions of what an anti-neoliberal alliance looks like. Part of this discussion was a tension between hierarchical and horizontal forms of organization. In different countries, there is a felt need for a national organization: people are tired of being localized. Organizations cannot help but have some aspects of hierarchy, but problems of bureaucratization need to be faced. Left unity is needed, as is an understanding of the importance of electoral politics and institution building. There is a great need for capacity building in social movements. There are immense opportunities for the left on the local level. Local organizing provides opportunities to experiment with different models for building a better society. But there is a need to connect the local with a broader context: big reform demands and concrete experiments are needed. This tension is related to questions about how to organize different communities in order to create what Antonio Gramsci called a "historic bloc" and to achieve hegemony in society. We need to win majorities, and that's not going to happen just by focusing on the margins.

These discussions did not lead to consensus—the risk of false unity was averted—but mutual understanding was advanced in areas of how to understand the present moment, how to constitute a broad resistance to neoliberal capitalism, how to engage with electoral politics, and how to build the kind of political movement that is capable of transforming society—or at least of reversing austerity. For many on the left, the sharpest disagreements tend to occur at the most abstract of levels. There were many jokes throughout the weekend about which year the Russian Revolution went wrong. But when it comes to particular campaigns, it is oftentimes possible to achieve a great deal of left unity and to mobilize social



forces that are not always willing to accept left leadership. These campaigns have lessons for

how we can build the kinds of alliances that will be necessary to challenge neoliberalism.

## **Exposing Neoliberalism's Weak Spots**

After lunch, we returned to the auditorium for the afternoon plenary, on exposing neoliberalism's weak spots. In order to begin a discussion of how to build alliances that will challenge neoliberalism in concrete terms, we considered four case studies—drawn from the United States, Canada, and Greece—where left forces have successfully challenged neoliberal hegemony.

### **Tar Sands and Pipeline Campaigns Along the Canada-U.S. Border**

Lara Skinner of the Cornell Worker Institute provided an introduction to the struggle against the Keystone XL pipeline, one of the most diverse and broad-based social movements we've seen in a long time. This movement has dispelled the idea that the climate fight is a white, middle class struggle. It has involved more civil disobedience than we have seen in the United States since the Vietnam War. After five years, the pipeline has not been built, and it may never be built.

So what are the lessons for trying to forge an eco-socialist left pole? The Keystone XL struggle makes the failure of mainstream environmental organizations' strategy and of green capitalism clear. We have not reduced emissions. Rather, fossil fuel companies are using their wealth and power to create more infrastructure. This campaign has created a rupture in the labor movement—and that's a good thing. It has forced those of us who are on the left of the labor and environmental

movements to clarify what we want in positive terms.

Clayton Thomas-Muller, co-director of the Indigenous Tar Sands Campaign, pointed out that everyone involved in the struggle against these pipelines deserves a pat on the back, but if we don't stop this at the source then our grandchildren's children will still be campaigning against pipelines and other fossil fuel infrastructure projects. Without a strategy that stops business as usual, it's going to keep happening. We need an alliance between workers and the true owners of the natural resources: indigenous people.

### **Chicago Teacher's Union and the Strike of 2012**

Ethan Young introduced the 2012 Chicago teacher's strike by explaining that this strike wasn't just about protecting teachers; it was about the quality of public education. And the union built ties in Chicago communities—especially communities of color—to make this real.

This case study shows what class-based trade unionism can do. National Nurses United has adopted a similar approach rooted in patient advocacy, and the Amalgamated Transit Union is following this example by organizing bus riders.

Marilena Marchetti, a teacher who participated in the strike, observed that what is happening in Chicago is awful and that the 2012 strike

was about the whole community standing up against Mayor Rahm Emanuel's neoliberal agenda. The strike radicalized the entire city. It was transformative. Withholding labor was powerful. Even those who didn't want to go out on strike didn't want to go back to work. Instead, they set their eyes on the next struggle, which came quickly. After the strike, there was a horrific backlash, with a "Hunger Games" style process of closing schools that pitted one school against another just to stay open.

The Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) had to form to resist the neoliberal agenda being imposed on Chicago schools. This caucus was formed by different socialist groups with different tendencies coming together. They started as a reading group and read Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine*, a book that was not affiliated to any one particular tendency.

### **Austerity, Collapse, and the Rise of the Radical Left in Greece**

SYRIZA's Giorgos Karatsioubanis and Yiannis Bournous provided an account of Greece's recent history, from the Civil War in the 1940s until the present. The Civil War and dictatorship set the stage for democratization accompanied by the persistence of certain deficiencies in the Greek state, such as clientelism, an under-developed welfare state, tax evasion, and corruption. However, they strongly resist the narrative that Greeks are to blame for the crisis, arguing that these deficiencies are not unique to Greece but are organic and systemic characteristics of capitalism. Greece is the first guinea pig in a European project of "austeritarianism" which violently and undemocratically shifts wealth and resources from the bottom to the top of society.

The massive human suffering caused by this experiment set the stage for the rise of the radical left. The violent "proletarianization" of the low-

er and middle classes—resulting in 30% general unemployment, 60% youth unemployment, an explosion of homelessness and suicide, loss of social security and healthcare—set the stage for an unprecedented rupture in the formerly hegemonic sociopolitical block. In 2012, SYRIZA became the main opposition force for the first time. The 2014 European elections, however, were historic. SYRIZA won, establishing itself as the main political force in Greece. SYRIZA, a child of radical social movements, has created a hegemonic shift in Greek society.

### **Jackson, Mississippi: Before and After Chokwe Lumumba**

Chokwe Lumumba was able to win office in Jackson through the combination of a variety of tactics: by creating multiple ways to inform and educate the community about the connections between local, national, and international issues; picking key fights to wage against neoliberalism's impositions; coordinating a network of political allies; and creating alternative sources of power and legitimacy. Following Lumumba's untimely death and his son's, Chokwe Antar, electoral defeat, there has been a regroupment. In the face of friction and demobilization among allies and new alliances among enemies and opponents, the New Afrikan People's Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement are now centering their work on rebuilding and revitalizing the People's Assembly and doing concentrated work on the struggle for economic transformation by developing cooperatives.

Cooperation Jackson's Kali Akuno explained that the foundation for the campaigns in Jackson was laid by decades of work building a durable basis for political action. Jackson is different from many other cities in that it has never had a particularly well-developed industrial base. It has mainly been a node on transportation networks connecting Dallas-Ft. Worth

to Atlanta and New Orleans to Chicago. In this context, a sharing economy—not to say a solidarity economy—has been commonplace.

What happened in Jackson has meaning not only for Jackson but also for Mississippi and the South as a whole. The Highlander Center's Elandria Williams explained that in a context where there are fewer organizations, people can be more likely to work together and support each other's work. There are of course weaknesses, including, to put it mildly, major infrastructure challenges.

After listening to these case studies together in the main auditorium, the morning's eight breakout sessions were combined into four, and each was assigned one of the cases for discussion. These breakouts provided an opportunity to shift from the morning's relatively more abstract, theoretical conversations toward more concrete examinations of the strategies involved in one specific left-wing

campaign. As with the morning's breakouts, participants were randomly assigned their sessions in an attempt to bring them out of their comfort zone and compel them to engage people and issues that they otherwise might not have.

The rest of the afternoon was spent informally, with hikes through the labyrinthine trails surrounding the Center, a soccer game, and of course more discussion about socialist strategies. Guests then came back together to share dinner.

On Saturday evening, director Mary Dore presented her film *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*. This documentary tells the story of the origin and rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1960's and early 1970's through rare archival footage and revealing interviews with Kate Millett, Fran Beal, Heather Booth, Ellen Willis, Rita Mae Brown, Linda Burnham, Vivian Rothstein, and many others.

## Overcoming Fragmentation and Rebuilding the Left

Saturday's case studies had offered a chance to discuss particular campaigns and to consider their lessons for the fight for the commons, socialist strategies, and cross-sectorial alliances. On Sunday morning, the conversation turned toward a broader discussion of what it will take to build left alliances and current trends on the left.

Michael Brie, from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Berlin, focused on the importance of building a "middle-bottom" alliance. He opened by referring to Karl Polanyi's observations on the problem of the liberal order, where we cannot be responsible for the results of our own actions—his famous "Mandarin-killing" problem. Socialism is a society where we

are free to collectively decide our actions so we can live without causing others terrible suffering.

Movements exist that are working to strengthen the "commonist" foundations of modern society. No one can be free unless the least well-off in our societies are free.

Brie described some of the potential alliances in society. Drawing from recent political formations in Germany, he mentioned Gerhard Schroeder's "New Middle" and Angela Merkel's "Alliance of the 'Better-off.'" On the left, we're trying to build up a solidarity-based alliance—an alliance of members of the working class, the threatened wage-earning middle class, and

critical educated elites. Polanyi reminds us that anti-democratic forces have a story to tell, and we need to tell our own story—that of the common people overcoming the market.

Sarah Leonard, senior editor at *The Nation*, provided more concrete examples of promising campaigns and alliances. She focused on developments in the labor movement, which are necessarily emergent: at 11% union density, the labor movement in the United States is almost too small to fragment.

The National Domestic Workers Alliance has made great strides in a sector that seemed impossible to organize. They are changing the conversation about care work. Oftentimes, nurses, educators, and caregivers for young children are described as “part of the family,” which means they don’t need to be paid. What the National Domestic Workers Alliance is doing is feminism. There may be an opening for bringing working-class issues into the mainstream conversation about feminism.

The Alliance of Guestworkers for Dignity is a small organization based out of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice. They won an important victory and got a lot of attention by taking on the case of a group of international students who came to the U.S. on a cultural exchange and were put to work in a Hershey factory. Like other emerging parts of the labor movement, they face significant questions around the issues of funding and accountability. They are funded mostly by foundations, not members’ dues.

Another promising example is Bargaining for the Common Good, which has brought broader social issues into the collective bargaining process. The Fix L.A. Coalition has, through city workers’ unions, demanded that Los Angeles renegotiate bad deals with Wall Street banks—L.A. currently spends more on banking fees than on street services. Unions usually negotiate about wages, benefits, and working conditions, but this campaign expands the collective bargaining process to incorporate social unionism.

## **Socialism by Sector**

Michael Brie’s and Sarah Leonard’s description and analysis of emerging left alliances set the stage to consider what it means to be a socialist in the sectors in which we work. How can we move from working in various fields while happening to be socialists to acting strategically as socialists in these fields?

The challenge facing the *political education* working group is how to turn thinkers into fighters and fighters into thinkers. There is a need to rekindle the socialist imagination through political training, mapping, and bringing thought leaders together in a congress of

socialist educators; this in turn requires we commit ourselves to expanding useful educational materials.

The *alternative and independent media* working group began with a discussion of the state of the mainstream media and turned to the connection between local and national work as well as between media-making and social movement work. In recent decades, both left and mainstream media have collapsed; we are back at the stage of leafletting. There is no media on the ground left to cover local issues. How do we fill this void? A lot of media is coming out of

social movements. How can this be professionalized? How can we build shared infrastructure to overcome the challenge of scarce resources? What can we build together? But even as we build something new, we're not giving up the hope of influencing the mainstream media, and we should identify and seize the openings created by the crisis of the media sector.

The *electoral politics* working group had a fruitful conversation—one that they hope to keep going. It's a sobering point that despite the global economic crisis, only Greece has experienced a hegemonic shift. Nowhere else has there been a qualitative turn in the electoral arena. There are lessons to be learned about fostering a "fusion" process to create multi-tendency formations that are influential within social movements but also within the state. In Europe and North America, we're all dealing with similar challenges. Some of us have had the chance to be part of coalition governments or to govern regions or municipalities, but once we are there, how do we use our position to make an impact? We need to ask the right questions and not allow our struggles to be defined by our opponents.

The *labor and unions* group considered the role of socialists in the labor movement. It's really about the ABCs of going back to the way unions were organized many years ago. Unions need to take on the struggle of workers in their communities as well as in their workplaces.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

After an afternoon break that included informal conversation and continued enjoyment of our beautiful surroundings, Laura Flanders from Grit.tv opened the final plenary by citing Karl Polanyi on what capitalism does to us: it

We need to address racism and sexism head on—and we need to have more of these discussions about how to move our working-class movement forward.

The *community organizing and institution building* group transformed into a self-organized breakout addressing race and white supremacy. This group initially focused on how to organize to develop a radical consciousness and build the left. There was discussion of the "nonprofit industrial complex" in which nonprofits become bound to their funders rather than the communities in which they organize. The importance of conducting political education among community leaders and organizers was noted. Time needs to be set aside for this.

The sectorial groups were followed by four self-organized breakout groups. Topics were:

1. The fight against new "trade" agreements, i.e. the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP, or TAFTA), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).
2. What are the specific challenges of being a socialist in the United States?
3. Marxist feminism: how can we theoretically reflect and practically address the issue of gender in our struggles?
4. And how can we address white supremacy and racism within our movements and struggles?

liquidates natural human relationships. So who does the work of reconnecting us? Those who can dream of a new society that can take the shape of men and women. The media does much of the work of separating us and elimi-

nating our sense of possibility. This is an exciting moment: there is more potential here than we realize. She then created a space for some of this potential to become manifest.

Tammy Bang Luu of the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles talked about the Community Rights Campaign, the Bus Riders Union, and other movements led by Black and Latino communities in L.A. She insisted on first mobilizing as leadership those communities who are most affected by neoliberalism, not those who currently have relatively more clout.

Bill Gallegos discussed the work of Communities for a Better Environment, a Richmond, California-based campaign against a proposed expansion of Chevron's refinery there. This campaign was led by mostly Black, Latino, and Laotian working-class folk, most of them women. They had to fight the building trades unions, who saw the expansion as a source of jobs. They were backed by a progressive, Green mayor, and after three years, they managed to stop the project. They had to fight in every arena. The struggle built a sense of community power and led to a realization that they need to build alternatives if they don't want to be a plantation of Chevron forever. That's the next struggle.

Emily Kawano of the Solidarity Economy Network introduced her work pulling cooperatives together into a more coherent economic system that works for people and planet. She gave examples like the agreement between Mondragon, the federation of worker cooperatives, and United Steelworkers to develop union co-ops and the successes won by the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio. Unions and cooperatives have a long shared history. They were born out of the same struggle, but that's been forgotten. They are starting to come back together and to scale up their efforts.

Childcare can be an integral part of building a movement for social change. Marisol Ocampo Munoz described how the community organizers who came together to form LeftRoots are all part of organizations where childcare, interpretation, and food are all givens, so when they held a seven-week boot camp for those interested in joining, childcare was provided as a matter of course. Volunteers provided the care, but it wasn't just a room with toys, it was a concerted effort to create a culture where kids are wanted and engaged. This kind of childcare is part of the change that we're working for.

Maria Svart from the Democratic Socialists of America discussed their work building bridges between contingent academic labor—a group that is newly open to radicalization—and precarious workers in other fields.

Steve Williams spoke to the question of how to sustain independent left organizations. Many members of his organization, LeftRoots, work in 501(c)(3) nonprofits, so they are familiar with the necessity of constantly pandering to the wealthy for donations. To avoid this contradiction, LeftRoots decided to form as a dues-paying member organization, with members contributing between one and five percent of their income. There are leftists everywhere, but we don't have enough opportunities to come together as leftists. Our communities have become disconnected from the left.

After these inspiring reports from the field, there was an opportunity for reflection on the weekend as a whole.

Not everyone arrived at the meeting with an entirely positive view of "socialism." Clayton Thomas-Muller, from the Indigenous Tar Sands Campaign, said that he came to the conference with a lot of biases. When he hears the word "socialism," it's usually old white men talking about things that happened a long time ago and disrupting organizing efforts taking place

now, but this weekend created a valuable opportunity to connect with other social movement organizers. We need to become more sophisticated about these kinds of spaces. There is a lot of power waiting to be unleashed on both sides of the border.

Gatherings such as this one provide a starting point for changing the political conversation. Catarina Principe, from Portugal's Left Bloc, observed that part of the task of the left is to break the discourse of the inevitable. "There is no alternative"—the slogan of neoliberalism—reduces the possible to what already exists.

This meeting offers an opportunity for us to begin moving forward together. Ethan Young, from Portside.org, enthused that this meeting shows the left at its best. The high quality of the discussion is a reason for optimism. We are not on a crest. This is not the mountaintop. There can be no mistaking that we remain in a deep valley, but we can move in the right direction.

We came together in order to undertake the task of "Mapping Socialist Strategies." Map-

ping, however, can be a dangerous project. After all, Flanders observed, wars are fought over maps. Early map makers would write, "here be dragons" on the unmapped parts of the world. There is a lot to be said in favor of maps, she concluded, but there is also something to be said in favor of dragons.

The plenary closed in song, and with it our "official" programming for the 2014 Mapping Socialist Strategies un-conference. But the evening was still young. Friday's storms had by now given to a beautiful, clear-skied late summer evening, and participants gathered outdoors to share a barbeque and soak in the last of each other's company. New friends and old; socialists and social democrats; community organizers and party officials sat to break bread together as comrades in shared struggle against neoliberal capitalism, and in support of people and planet over profit. False unity? No. But a shared space to learn about each other's work and grow mutual respect where suspicion and sectarianism has too often been the norm in the past? Yes, please, an extra-large helping of that.



You've been warned.

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