

THE CRISIS OF NEOLIBERALISM AND THE IMPASSE OF THE UNION MOVEMENT

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It is impossible to separate analytically or politically the emergence of neoliberalism as a set of policy proposals of the New Right in the early 1980s from the defeat of working class politics and unions after the radicalisations of the 1960s and 1970s. From the outset, a central thrust of neoliberal policies was wage and social austerity for workers to restore the profitability of capitalist firms and the capacity of the state to assist in economic restructuring. These income policies were supplemented by labour market policies for ‘flexibility’ and labour policies, especially in North America, targeted at weakening unions in the workplace, in collective bargaining and as political actors (Albo 2008).

The consolidation of neoliberalism across the 1990s saw its policy agenda expand in ambition and scope, particularly as social democratic parties (and the American Democratic Party) – the so-called political arm of the labour movement – began to incorporate neoliberal policies into their programmes and rule as neoliberals in power. Indeed, as new production technologies, in both manufacturing and service sectors, intensified workplaces, extended management control over labour processes and increased global competition between firms and states over market shares and employment, the balance of power shifted decisively toward the capitalist classes. Unions became decidedly weaker in making gains in collective bargaining, organising and defending new members, especially in new service sector employment and for migrant workers, and advancing their traditional redistributive policy agenda for social justice.

The political climate since September 2001, particularly in North America, has been especially hostile as slower economic growth, military interventions by the NATO countries and hard right governments broke initial efforts by unions to form alliances with a fledgling anti-globalisation movement. The period of neoliberalism has depended upon – and meant – the organisational, economic and political impasse of the union movement. It exposed the limits of the union movement in the core capitalist countries: the ideological failure to grasp the nature of

neoliberal globalisation and union strategic and organisational capacities to respond to it.

It is possible to see in the political conjuncture that has opened up since the financial turbulence of 2007 began to grip the world market, however, an emerging crisis of neoliberalism. The overaccumulation of capital in key sectors in the U.S. and Europe,

particularly in commercial and residential real estate markets, auto production and financial services, has led an economic contraction that has been spreading across the world market. This crisis of global capitalism has been aggravated by unprecedented turmoil in the financial sector due to the overextension of credit, and the tax-cutting excesses and liberalisation policies of national governments and the international financial institutions. The credit expansion and crisis is not the result of problems of corporate governance or lax regulatory measures over the capital leveraging of financial institutions, whatever role these may have in fact played. They are the consequences of structural imbalances in the world market between trade surplus and deficit countries, and the undermining of working class incomes that were then compensated by resort to credit markets to maintain relative living standards. Together, these global economic trends have ended the export-led – particularly driven by high demand and prices for commodity exports in metals and fossil fuels – mini-boom over the last six years in many parts of the world, as well as the consumption-led upswing in the U.S. that supported the exports.

Over the first half of 2008, economic growth in the advanced capitalist countries has stalled to under 1 per cent on an annual basis, and further declines are expected for the second half of the year and beyond that. Growth forecasts across the world market are continuing to be lowered. These developments have meant that consumption-sensitive sectors, such as housing and retail, are suffering sharp declines in activity. As speculative financial and asset bubbles continue to burst – in mortgage, personal and commercial credit, in commodity markets, in hedge fund capitalisation, and in the Yen-carry trade – financial chaos is deepening in the core states and spreading globally. Bank credit and loan capital of all kinds are tightening and even locking up. Radically looser monetary policies in the G20 countries, and a range of desperate measures of state intervention into financial markets to restore confidence for investors and bankers, have yet to yield any signs of economic stability as 2008 comes to a close. The spectres of deflation and a bout of stagnation are now haunting the world market.

As a consequence of the economic slowdown and crisis, job losses are mounting in the labour market, and unemployment is beginning to climb upward. This is intensifying a number of negative longer-term trends in the labour market in the capitalist countries over the period of neoliberalism: downward pressures on real wages, an increase in precarious and marginal work, the undermining of public sector services and employment, increasing reliance on migrant workers with restricted rights, and mounting global inequalities. It has further encouraged employers to step up their political struggles against unions in favour of further policies of labour flexibilisation. There is developing, moreover, major employer efforts across the advanced capitalist bloc to undermine (at the state level) and redefine or even scrap (at the

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company level) workers' pension plans, and to cut healthcare provisions (private health plans in the U.S. and public healthcare provision in other countries). These calls from employers, despite the hardships they entail for working class people, have so far received a sympathetic hearing in the economic policy-making branches of states. The initial policy efforts of governments have been an attempt to reconstruct the existing policy regime and political relations, despite the severity of the recession limiting the possibility of doing so.

The economic turmoil has produced, however, an ideological crisis of neoliberalism: the free market ideology that has been virtually uncontested at the level of political power for almost two decades is now totally discredited. It has become impossible to contend that smaller states and liberalised markets will lead to prosperity for all (the trickle-down thesis); that public services could be protected and improved by increased reliance on markets (the theses of self-regulation and marketisation); that new financial instruments were spreading risk and increasing economic stability (the theses of transparency and shareholder value as central to efficient capital allocation); that flexible labour markets and de-unionised workplaces improved job security and pay (the thesis of all employment and unemployment as voluntary individual decisions); and that increased market dependence meant a parallel increase in freedom and equality (the thesis that all collective action is coercive and anti-democratic). These theoretical claims by neoliberal ideologues have now proven to be unmitigated failures as policy frameworks, and a social disaster for whole societies and workers where they have been adopted.

What remains of neoliberalism, it needs to be underlined, is its political embeddedness in state structures, policy instruments and the political field of social forces. The 'disorganisation' of working class organisation, in unions and political parties, was one of the central objectives of neoliberalism. It remains, at this point, the most formidable obstacle to both thinking about and establishing a postneoliberal political order. This is why it is necessary to make a deeper assessment of the impact of neoliberalism on the labour movement and the prospects for a new union politics in the context of the renewal of the Left.

UNION MOVEMENT CHALLENGES

Unions have been one of the most effective social movements for the advancement of democracy and social justice in capitalist societies. Unions have been the first means by which workers, who to earn their living have only their labour to sell, struggle to equalise the advantages that the owners of capital assets have in bargaining over wages and the distribution of new value-added activities in workplaces. Unions have also continually campaigned, in conjunction with socialist parties, for the extension of democracy through advocacy of universal participation in politics, civil rights such as freedoms of association, assembly and dissent, and the universalisation of social programmes to meet the basic social needs of all. These struggles for social justice were opposed historically by the capitalist classes, and the advent of neoliberalism as the policy response of em-

ployers and conservative parties renewed their anti-democratic efforts (Moody 1997).

Neoliberalism sought to roll back the gains of unions and workers in the workplace, and put an end to the push by unions and Left parties for greater worker control in enterprises and democratic determination of economic priorities at the level of the state. Their policy response was measures to weaken unions in workplace representation, deregulation of labour markets, increased corporate property rights and free trade in capital and goods. After a long period after the war in which expansionary state policies and high employment strengthened the bargaining power of union, this was the first challenge unions faced.

Beginning with the economic slowdown of the 1970s, and particularly after the 'Volcker shock' in the U.S. in 1981-82 radically drove up U.S. and thus world interest rates to force an economic restructuring to break workers' wage expectations and power, an 'employers' offensive' ensued across the advanced capitalist countries. Employers began a series of labour-saving plant shutdowns and a major shift of production to locales with lower union density, for example the southern U.S. and northern Mexico in the case of North America. Further workplace restructuring continued through the 1990s. It took the form of the so-called 'new economy': a rise in service sector employment (especially linked to ICT – information and communications technologies – and the mass growth of various kinds of low-paid servant work), lean production-intensifying work processes, flexible manufacturing systems, non-standard work arrangements and extensive resort to cheap migrant labour pools and temporary worker programmes. The 'employers' offensive' and much higher levels of labour reserves meant that inter-worker competition increased as well, particularly as migration and increased female participation changed the character of the working classes. Indeed, the entire period of neoliberalism has seen a remarkable degree of wage compression and widening gaps between the share of new value-added activity taken by capital and that taken by workers.

The pressure on wages and workplace controls has posed, in turn, a challenge for collective bargaining. This has often entailed extensive efforts to overhaul union agreements to give management increased flexibility in employment, deployment of workers and over wage structures. This has been quite diverse in the forms it has taken across the capitalist countries. In Europe, for example, this has been a form of 'competitive corporatism' where unions form social pacts with companies to increase competitiveness through wage restraint, new work arrangements and long-term contracts; while in North America flexibilisation agreements have been a more common pattern in unionised workplaces, along with sustained efforts at de-unionisation. In traditional manufacturing strongholds in North America, this has meant that unions like the United Steelworkers have often engaged in 'partnership' and co-management schemes introducing flexible work arrangements as a trade-off for some job protection and union security. And unions like the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) have been willing to forego the right to strike to gain union recognition to bargain with auto parts companies, notably Magna. The latter is a

variation of the 'voluntary recognition agreements' of unions by management occurring in the service sector, often after long unsuccessful organising campaigns but extensive losses to corporate image and time, with unions accepting certain workplace and bargaining concessions in the process. There have also been similar adjustments, again with significant national variations, to national and sectoral collective bargaining institutions. This has given variation to a common pattern of wage compression and bargaining setbacks: the 'shared austerity' of Sweden, the 'co-managed austerity' of Germany, and the 'punitive austerity' of Canada and the United States.

A third challenge has come in the form of flexible labour market policies. Neoliberal governments explicitly abandoned Keynesian economic policies geared toward full employment for monetarist policies of 'inflation-targeting.' The latter has meant targeting low inflation rates normed so that wage increases largely do not surpass the rate of inflation and thus all productivity gains are claimed by employers. It has also meant a preference for maintaining a ready pool of labour, available – because of a 'natural rate of unemployment' – to take up new work, particularly in the service sector, as it becomes available. Another component of flexible policies has been restricting access to, and reducing benefits for, programmes such as unemployment insurance or social assistance. These are seen to cause disincentives to work and labour market rigidities which hamper economic stability. Finally, flexible labour market policy has entailed a series of continual restrictions on union organising and free collective bargaining, notably the increasing invocation of back-to-work and right-to-work legislation across all North American jurisdictions.

The internationalisation of capital and the global re-organisation of labour processes has been a fourth challenge for unions. Multinational corporations have chosen expansion of international production networks, in particular distributing repetitive and ecologically damaging labour process in poorer countries where low wages can be paid. But they also shifted higher value-added activities to places where union strength is much

weaker to allow the introduction of new labour processes. This reorganisation has increased the leverage for employers through the threat of capital flight and the relative immobility of labour. The World Trade Organization (WTO) and international trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as well as the political arrangements of the European Union, all have rules restricting the ability of governments to impede capital mobility. Moreover, they often contain clauses blocking more active industrial policies. Workers in Mexico, for example, earn about one-tenth or less of the wages of workers in Canada and the U.S. for similar work; the initial period of NAFTA saw some 2 million less skilled jobs move to Mexico, particularly in the *maquilas* free trade zones in the northern border states. Parallel global pressures have hit Mexican workers, and indeed all workers, by the massive shift of so much of the world's manufacturing capacity to China and other low-wage Asian countries. The internationalisation of capitalism, aided by trade liberalisation and new trade rules, further compels employers to drive down unit labour costs and hold back wage gains.

Indeed, the weakening of unions, in turn, fuels competition between workers and further shifts the balance of power in favour of employers. In the most recent phase of neoliberalism, this has led to the embrace of 'competitive unionism.' The inequalities and divisions between workers as a consequence become not only greater, but embedded in the very logic of union organisation and strategy. With competitive unionism, union democracy, mobilisational capacity and ideological independence from employers all become strained or even atrophy.

NEW STRUGGLES, NEW MOVEMENT?

The challenges that emerged with neoliberalism put union movements in the advanced capitalist countries on the defensive and, in more than a few cases, meant a decisive defeat. Union density in the U.S., for instance, have declined to just over one in 10 workers being in a union today, and more than a dozen core capitalist economies have seen an absolute decline in union mem-

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bership. This reflects, in part, the difficulty of organising the service sector. But the inability of collective bargaining to deliver systematic real wage gains and to block welfare state reforms also tells of the broader impasse of the labour movement over the period of neoliberalism.

Still, despite the major challenges, it is necessary to note that key struggles and signs of political resistance keep surfacing, from both inside the labour movement and also associated social forces and movements (Schenk and Kumar 2006). In North America, some of this has come from 'living wage' struggles led by local labour councils in major cities, in alliance with community groups, to reach out to the low-waged and unorganised, who are predominantly women and people of colour. The mass immigrants' rights May Day protests, as well as the day-to-day campaigns for the protection of non-status workers, have taken place outside the main union movements, but also led to new linkages and alliances. Similar types of struggles are helping to rebuild local labour movements in many countries. Despite often defensive and weak leadership beaten down by neoliberal attacks, central labour organisations are also developing a new sense of urgency, at least in the sense of convention resolutions on organising, mobilising and political issues. If there is still great distance to go in translating sentiment into political action, it does suggest some significant openings for rebuilding the labour movement.

The economic recession, in the most pressing example of an opening for new union activism, is leading to a major decline in employment. The weekly announcements of workplace layoffs and closures in the manufacturing sector suggest an even further undermining of 'good jobs' in core union strongholds. The layoffs are spreading across the service sector as well, with the often female and minority workforces there moving from precarious work to no work at all. In early 2008, employer pressures on collective bargaining were already visible, and the long period of neoliberalism has encouraged employers in crisis to adopt all kinds of abuses of severance and overtime pay, pension obligations and so forth. At a time when governments are also bailing out banks and financial institutions, the building of an anti-concessions movement is not only a necessity for the union movement, but it will have broad popular appeal. This can begin with opposition to contract concessions on worktime and wages, but more militant workplace tactics such as plant occupations and community confiscation of assets will have to be explored. In reaching out to unorganised sectors with vulnerable workers facing abusive employers, 'flying squads' of union militants need to be actively built up as part of an anti-concessions movement. Indeed, 'organising the unorganised' has to be a central component of an anti-concessions campaign. It would have to include a campaign for a new legal framework favouring union organising to overturn neoliberal policies of deunionisation. In a moment of economic crisis and political transition, such a movement has to extend beyond the defence of particular plants and workers to be framed as a class and community demand.

A second opening is in the public sector where workers have confronted both limits on their rights and deteriorating working conditions as public services have declined as a result of neoliberal

policies. It is possible to envision new kinds of union campaigns linking public sector workers and communities, producers and users, in opposition to neoliberalism. It can also be insisted that responses to the economic slowdown begin with restoring the public sector, since so many years of financial sector-led growth has ended in the current debacle. A number of campaigns – notably some of the anti-privatisation struggles around healthcare, universities and municipal services – have had successes across several countries. These community-union alliances have often lacked full union support, even when major campaigns and demonstrations suggest enormous potential. This is, however, also a reflection that social democratic parties have moved to a 'post-class,' 'post-partisan,' and 'post-campaigning' managerial culture. Unions and community groups have been fighting without organising support at the political level of forces that these campaigns engage. But whatever the limits, new union and Left organisational capacities, in both connections and political consciousness, keep being built in the process.

The closing of the gap between international solidarity and social justice movements and the union movement is a third opening that needs to become central to union strategy and struggle (Waterman 2001). The formation of international production networks has partly made this a central need for collective bargaining. Works councils and campaigns are needed across companies and sectors as a basic mechanism to reduce competition between workers (rather than serve as a mechanism, as works councils have sometimes been, to increase company competitiveness) and to form a capacity to coordinate struggles. There have been interesting examples of these efforts in the steel, auto and healthcare sectors extending from North America to both Europe and Latin America, with perhaps some of the most interesting campaigns forming in the fight against the militantly anti-union Wal-Mart. But the common interest of different union movements in class struggle against international corporations has yet to form at the strategic and organisational levels. With union movements on the defensive on a national basis from neoliberalism, it has been hard to forge new international solidarities. But union and social justice struggles between one country and another are more linked now than ever as a part of global production systems.

Such an orientation also puts on the union agenda other international solidarity campaigns: notably against the intolerable conditions of Palestinian workers in the Occupied Territories and inside apartheid Israel; against the continued assaults on unionists in Columbia; for the rights of migrant workers; for the rights of workers in countries like Venezuela to nationalise industry and experiment in workers' control; and against the NATO alliance wars of intervention and occupation. These internationalist campaigns require a significant re-orientation by union centrals and affiliates, but they could play a disproportionate role in union renewal.

The very defeat of the union movement in the advanced capitalist countries at the hands of neoliberalism provides a fourth opening. It requires unions to fundamentally assess and transform their own institutions and practices in the struggle for a postneoliberal – even postcapitalist – order. This is partly about

looking at the organisational divisions of unions as they now exist. It is especially about a process that sees unions as developing workers' capacities and contributing to building a different society – social justice unionism (Fletcher and Gaspasin 2008). This entails democratising the internal practices of unions, expanding education of members, encouraging rank and file activism in leading strategic orientations and struggles, and examining union practices on gender and race and incorporating a diverse membership into an equally diverse leadership.

These are steps of internal organisational renewal. But it is also necessary to re-insert unions as a central component of wider struggles about work and production. One way is through extending union membership into workplaces even where a majority membership has not been attained as a means to break through employers' hostility or to amalgamate workers dispersed across small service-sector worksites. Another is to make local labour councils key centres of working class political activism. This has been an aspect behind 'union city' organising campaigns and also campaigns for living wages and immigrant workers' rights. It is possible to see this approach extending into other activities, from issues of local development and 'jobs and justice' campaigns to assemblies of working class organisations. Organisational renewal in both its internal and outreach dimensions is crucial to forging a new form of postneoliberal 'common sense' in the day-to-day activities of union members.

If these openings lead to new political struggles that create wider traction across the union movement, a reversal of the way neoliberalism has damaged working class organisation will have begun. In such a context, it is possible to envision an outline of an alternative union development model emerging. In collective bargaining, for example, new ways to address wage improvements and employment expansion could be adopted. Solidaristic work policies that radically redistribute work through work-time reduction, overtime caps, and sabbatical and parental leave might be vigorously pursued. Bargaining might put an annual work-time reduction factor alongside an annual wage improvement factor (set to reduce social and wage inequalities) for sharing-out of productivity gains. Work-time reduction could also be put toward education and skills that expand the capacity for self-management at work and leadership in the community. And alternative workers' plans for quality, ecologically responsible production – an imperative, given the need to make a 'green' transition to a carbon emissions-neutral energy economy – could begin to build the foundation for expanding workers' control over enterprises. An expansionary fiscal policy to respond to the economic crisis might not only rebuild the public sector, but also be linked to unionisation and a longer-term strategy to re-establish a redistributive tax system. Such a postneoliberal agenda emerging from the union movement will, of course, be equally about the renewal of the Left.

RENEWAL OF THE LEFT

The impasse of the union movement is, in this sense, also reflective of a wider decline of the Left, in North America and, indeed, globally (Panitch and Leys 2001). Working class politi-

cal organisation, in unions and parties, achieved a great deal in the course of the 20th century: leading de-colonisation and self-determination struggles; struggling for liberal freedoms and democracy; improving wages and benefits; and advancing welfare states and social citizenship. But the social forces that achieved these gains are now quite different: the communist parties have, for good and ill, all but disappeared even in places where they once held power (or they have made their peace with capitalism as in China); the social democratic parties have politically realigned to chart a 'Third Way' that no longer even poses a reform agenda to neoliberalism; unions are in retreat; and many civil society movements have evolved into professionalised NGOs navigating the grant economy. The central political coordinates for labour movements over the last century – being for or against the Russian revolution; attempting a vanguard seizure of the existing state apparatus or reforming it piecemeal; conceiving unions as primarily the industrial wing of this or that political party – vanished almost at the same pace as neoliberalism consolidated as the all-encompassing social form of rule.

From both the neoliberal assault on unions and the decline of socialist parties, there emerged the sense across the Left of 'starting over' in mapping out the organisational and strategic agendas for social justice and socialism, to the extent that the latter was still seen as a desirable objective at all. This meant initially, especially in Canada but soon spreading to the U.S. and other parts of the world, an effort to work through social coalitions apart from political parties. In this schema, unions are only one node in a network of oppositional power. This strategic outlook became incorporated into the anti-globalisation movement at the end of the 1990s as a clustering of dissident groupings, with unions cautiously making linkages to the movement through so-called 'Teamster-Turtle Alliances.'

This political 'movement of movements' has had, more or less, three predominant clusters. One has been remnants of the radical Left, and certain strands of Trotskyism in particular, that emphasise global resistance 'from below,' and that in the revolutionary juncture near at hand that a 'Leninist' organisation is still the necessary vanguard for a deepening anti-capitalist movement. A second has been an uneasy mix of anarchist, 'autonomist' and indigenous groups with the view that a combination of spontaneous rebellion and alternative direct practices could directly confront – and also bypass – existing capitalist states. And, third, a more encompassing 'anti-power' politics standpoint that has contended that neither party nor programme is necessary as the Left can 'change the world without taking power.' These views have all, in certain ways, made a contribution to a revitalised anti-capitalist politics. They have continued on in the loose organisation form of the World Social Forum, with its national and local offshoots. Most of these decentralised forums have floundered, however, and exist only as occasional regionalised social justice fairs with little or no capacity to engage in organised political struggle.

It is often claimed that the anti-globalisation movement was 'cut short' when U.S. President Bush began his 'war on terror' after September 11, 2001. This requires a sober assessment of

the organisational state of the movement and its seeming eclipse over the last years. It seems clear that its 'network' vision of power has not been adequately grounded in working class politics – a renewal of unions, day-to-day community struggles, and the contestation of the class power crystallised in state power and institutions. The movement of the Western powers toward the policy of a 'long war' across the Middle East, for instance, did not give added vitality to the anti-globalisation movement. This is especially surprising given the strengths of the global peace movements in fighting the Second Cold War of the 1980s and the first Iraq War. Similarly, the lack of grounded organisation has left unions and the Left as a whole floundering in both protest and strategic response to the financial crisis and the largest single blow to neoliberal hegemony yet struck.

It is hard not to conclude that the political thinking and organisational forms that emerged with the anti-globalisation movement have been quite limited in capacity and tentative in strategy. It has not yielded a viable means to contest political hegemony and power in a period of neoliberal globalisation, and the spread of liberal democratic political institutions. The 'national-popular' framing of the issues of the day by neoliberalism, discredited as it has become, has not yet been displaced by a socialist version of 'common sense' that would seem fundamental to charting a path out of a neoliberal social order. If the anti-globalisation movement was quite right to insist on the necessity of moving beyond political frameworks formed in quite different historical moments and contexts, it has failed to supply the political, ideological, organisational and working-class resources essential to building a postneoliberal order, let alone the capacity to contest capitalism at the political level of social forces.

The sudden setback of a movement that seemed so compelling, vibrant and globally engaged has been politically unsettling. It has necessarily given way to a period of experimentation in new Left political formations and organisational creativity. This can be seen in the important political struggles in Latin America under the banner of building 21st century socialism. Significant political realignments and breakthroughs appear also to be unfolding in Greece, Germany, France, Portugal and other places. This can hardly be said to be the case in North America: from once leading some of the most noteworthy fightbacks against neoliberalism and globalisation in the 1990s, against NAFTA and in Seattle and Quebec City, the North American Left is deeply fractured, at an organisational dead-end and only beginning to pose the question of how to build anti-neoliberal politi-

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cal alliances and a new politics of a pluralist Left (Aronowitz 2006).

There is, then, profound unevenness in Left renewal in different parts of the world. In all cases there are only fragile linkages to union movements and only the beginnings of the remaking of working class political organisation. But a new dynamic of struggle seems to be unfolding. As neoliberalism enters a phase of crisis, important struggles are being waged in workplaces, communities and states. These struggles have quickly been coming up against the obstacles put in place by neoliberalism and the limits of existing working class organisational capacities. Even the best union campaigns and most significant struggles soon reach these limits and have had to make every effort to push beyond them.

In the first instance, the fights to preserve jobs and pensions, public healthcare and community spaces for women, to improve the status of immigrant workers, or against imperialist wars in the Middle and Far East, has led to efforts to connect anti-neoliberal struggles across unions and communities. Increasingly, such struggles are pushing union activists and movements in the direction of anti-capitalist politics to oppose the barbarism that is neoliberalism in crisis. This wave of struggle is only in its earliest stages, and still needs to be set against the backdrop of neoliberal power structures and union impasse, particularly in North America, where the labour movements are just beginning the long process of renewal. Yet, glimmers of hope are breaking through the structures of neoliberalism: the possibility for remaking working class organisations, and the active rediscovering of a 21st century socialism that is the necessary condition for imagining and making actual a postneoliberal social order. **R**

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