

Challenges of imagination and daring

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Alan Sears begins his assessment of the state of socialism in Canada (NS 61, available at www.newsocialist.org) – in fact across the advanced capitalist world – with the sober statement “that we are, in practical terms, starting over.” This is a stark position. It is hard to disagree with. The revolutions against bankrupt regimes, the struggles for decolonization, and the mobilizations of the working classes and oppressed achieved a great deal over the course of the 20th century. But the social forces that achieved them are not what they once were. Meanwhile, neoliberalism, continues rolling back social and political gains. Its ideological claims may be discredited but neoliberalism remains the means by which the ruling classes rule.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Sears emphasizes that the creation of infrastructures of dissent and the spread of socialist ideas are integrally related, ebbing and flowing with the level of struggle. We fully agree. As political struggle has receded, the organizational, intellectual and cultural infrastructures of the Left have been strained, and their relationship to the demands of contemporary movements more distant. This is the impasse of the Left.

Historical structural changes provide the terrain for political struggle and influence future movements. Sears focuses on some of the new obstacles to a renewed movement for socialism. More people do live in suburbs today, but it is not so clear they are any less isolated than the numbers living on farms or in small towns in past periods of struggle. The mega-cities of today should be a fertile terrain for socialist organizing.

Similarly, the constraints on individual

activism from longer hours of work and limits in state services are not unique to this period. For much of socialism’s history there was a common, misplaced belief that if workers won a paid, eight-hour day, rank-and-filers would become much more involved in the socialist struggle. And in past periods, the Left has variously invoked the popularity of saloons, dance halls and television as barriers to political struggle. But these developments did not curb subsequent radicalization. The political challenges for the Left today are still ones of imagination, organization, strategy and political daring.

Sears’ realism is an antidote to the views that have occupied the space vacated by the old Left: the dogmatic Trotskyism that claims that resistance “from below” is ever ascendant and the revolution near at hand; the anarcho-communist views that the combination of spontaneous rebellion and alternate direct practices can directly confront the advanced capitalist state; and the anti-power politics that suggested neither party nor program are necessary as ‘we can change the world without taking power.’ These views can make a contribution to a revitalized anti-capitalist politics. They do not supply, however, the political, ideological, organizational, or working-class resources necessary to overturn neoliberalism, let alone challenge capitalism.

ANTI-CAPITALIST FORCES

These were the components of the anti-globalization movement which Sears suggests was “cut short” as Bush began his “war on terror” after September 11, 2001.

But it’s worth taking a more serious look at these social forces. Was anti-globalization politics adequately grounded in working class politics – a renewal of unions, day-to-day community institu-

tions, the capacity to contest the ‘national-popular’ framing of the issues of the days with socialist understandings? Did the movement’s political thinking and organizational form offer viable ways to contest hegemony and power in a period of neoliberal globalization? Why did the struggle against war and imperialist intervention not give additional vitality to anti-globalization struggles, considering the strengths of the global peace movements from the 1980s that fought the Second Cold War and the first Iraq war? Why did the “new infrastructure of dissent,” that Sears identifies get eclipsed so quickly? Are the ideological positions and political practices of these forces a reflection of a Left and working class movement defeated, disorganized, isolated?

As Sears points out, the Russian Revolution provided the political coordinates for socialists – for and against – throughout the past century. All but the willfully blind can see that socialists must turn now to different forms of organization to meet the challenges of 21st century capitalism. There have been some past attempts in Canada to construct broader socialist organizations, such as Rebuilding the Left or the initial NSG calls for building a new pluralist organization of the Left. But they ran into obstacles: exhaustion of the movement; disagreements over existing or past “socialisms;” new conservative offensives; massive political miscalculations about direct action and the organizational capacities of marginal communities; or vanguardist groups utilizing these processes to recruit for their own projects. The existence of realigned social democratic parties (such as the NDP) will set the rightward boundary of a renewed socialist organization in Canada. There are many hard issues that socialists will have to grapple with in order for socialist politics and visions to become a defining component of anti-capitalist struggles in Canada again. ★

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