

THE QUESTION OF STRATEGY

Edited by Leo Panitch,
Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber



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PREFACE

The previous two volumes of the Register were focused on analyzing the roots of the ongoing economic crisis. It was clear by 2010 that if there was going to be a recovery, it would occur on the backs of the poor and working people. Even more, ruling parties pushed through programmes of privatization and anti-labour legislation that, until recently, would have been considered too draconian to be feasible. The question asked in the Preface to the 2012 *Socialist Register* was whether the left could fashion any sort of effective response to state-imposed austerity and attacks on public services and workers. This, the 49th volume of the Socialist Register examines the choices faced by the left today, the models of strategy available to it, and the innovations that are being made by groups as they organize in diverse settings.

The regions at the epicentre of the crisis have indeed witnessed the emergence of quite significant social mobilization. The most dramatic of these was probably the Occupy movement, which began on Wall Street in the autumn of 2011, and then spread at its peak to over 200 cities across the world. But this movement was preceded by the dramatic mobilization and occupation of the Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin the year before; by the extraordinary winds of change that swept across the Middle East in 2010-11, whose radical potential was highlighted by the epochal demonstrations in Tahrir Square; and in Europe, by the determined resistance of the Indignados in Spain, which has continued now for several years, extending to neighbourhood assemblies and general strikes; and in Greece, by the two years of street protests and strikes which eventually led the stunning near-victory of Syriza at the polls in the spring of 2012.

These movements had much in common, not the least of which was that their organizers *saw* themselves as being part of the same global upsurge. Placards in Madison paid homage to Tahrir Square and the activists in Occupy Wall Street took inspiration from Madison. What stood out the most was that, for the first time since the 1980s, social movements put the question of *capitalism* back on the political agenda. The Occupy movement even

introduced a new concept into the political lexicon, with their chant: ‘We are the ninety-nine per cent’. Their slogan captured the public imagination as no other has in recent years, with its indictment of the obscene inequality – of wealth, income and above all, power -- separating the ruling classes from the mass of working people. It is hard to overestimate just how profound was this achievement, when we compare it to the actual size and duration of the mobilizations. Two years ago, we could still only hope that socialists might be able to insert the language of class into public debate. Then, as if by decree, these very issues, which had disappeared for so long from political discourse, suddenly returned to centre stage. The movements have created a climate where it is possible, once again, to place class power at the centre of the left’s political strategy.

But what political strategy? If movements are emerging once again, what is the strategic vision that is employed by, and available to, the anti-capitalist left today? As several of the essays in this volume attest, the anarchist milieu has been more concerned with process and tactics than with strategy. There is an intense preoccupation with the micro-politics of meetings, making sure that they abide by certain principles that are held to be sacrosanct -- but less with issues of organization building, or of state power. There is also a tremendous appreciation of spectacular events to capture popular imagination, but a strong resistance to thinking about their long-term consequences. While activists in this milieu have played a very important role in energizing this explosion of mobilizations, one can only be dismayed at the denigration of strategy, *per se*.

We have to acknowledge the fact that the two strategic conceptions that dominated the left during the twentieth century – social democratic parliamentarism and Leninist vanguardism --have both failed as vehicles for anti-capitalist politics. The mass social democratic parties that oversaw the post-war welfare states have long ceased to have any connection with mass mobilization, much less with anti-capitalism. This is but the culmination of a very long trajectory through which social democratic parties have changed their orientation from one of transforming capitalism, to better managing it. Where once they at least gave lip-service to socialism, they now tout their credentials as guardians of competitiveness and social discipline. Across Europe, the traditional labour parties, and the unions attached to them, have no vision except a return to some kind of guided capitalism. In Greece and Spain, it is Socialist parties that have been the overseers of cut-backs and retrenchment since 2007; and in France, the new Socialist administration of Francois Hollande, while imposing new taxes on the wealthy, is itself embarking on its own path to fiscal consolidation.

To their credit, the political organizations coming out of the Leninist tradition have been sharp and sometimes insightful critics of the social democratic parties. But it is hard to deny that these groups have been handicapped by their own strategic vision, one which stridently promises that the dangers of reformism can be avoided by engineering a break from capitalism. While an insurrectionary rupture might someday be possible, it hardly seems in the realm of possibility anytime in the near future. For now, in this world, the hard reality is that capitalism is in economic crisis, but politically secure – even if some regimes are experiencing instability. Whatever political and organizational innovations emerge, for the present we have to assume that capitalism will continue to structure the environment in which we function. What, then, should an anti-capitalist strategy look like, when capitalism is likely to shape the landscape of social and political struggle, at least for the middle run? Is it possible to find a way toward socialism through a combination of reforms, building mass organizations, confronting capital and its power centres, i.e., a strategy that is inevitably aggregative but which avoids the fate of the social democratic parties?

We certainly do not pretend to have all the answers to the question of strategy. Yet it is important to at least pose the question. A good many of the essays in this volume address the broader theoretical and normative vision that continues to undergird the socialist project today – the conception of the state, of social transformation, and of politics itself. A number of the essays take up the strengths and weaknesses of the Occupy movement's strategic vision, or lack thereof, while others direct their attention to some of the theories that have been influential in the promoting the new zeitgeist of horizontalism. One of the major tasks in this context is clearly to assess the emergence of new socialist parties in light of the legacy of Leninist and social democratic traditions. Several essays confront this issue generally, while others do so through the examination of individual cases, not least Syriza in Greece. A number of essays also address the strategic lessons to be drawn from various disappointments of revolutionary hopes in the South, from the Zapatistas in Latin America to the ANC in South Africa, the latter appallingly highlighted by the slaughter at the Rustenburg mines as we go to press. Another prominent theme in this volume is the importance of feminism as an integral part of anti-capitalist movements, both within the advanced capitalist world and in the Global South. What the experience of feminist organizing has been, and the challenges that confront it, are at the heart of several of the essays.

We want to thank all the contributors for their essays, while pointing out that neither we nor they necessarily agree with all the arguments presented.

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