

Regroupment & Refoundation of a U.S. Left

A Solidarity Draft Working Paper, July 2008

The opening of the 21st century finds the global working class, social movements, and revolutionary left in disarray. Yet, another world – one freed of exploitation, oppression, war and environmental catastrophe – is possible, and the need to fight for that world is as great as ever. This document attempts to summarize our experiences as members of Solidarity and to draw these lessons into suggestions for today. We lay this on the table and reach out to other anti-capitalist activists, organizers and organizations also desirous of a larger, more powerful grouping committed to revolutionary change. Collective work and analysis is necessary to generalize our experiences and gain a greater understanding of the world we live in. Changing this alienating, dehumanizing profit-driven political and economic system requires an accurate understanding of our world and location of pressure points that can create openings for radical change. Socialists need organization to be effective. Since our founding in 1986, Solidarity has seen itself as an organization devoted to the rebirth of the left in the United States. At that time the U.S. organized socialist left was approaching its low ebb.

In this 40th anniversary of the revolutionary tumult of 1968, it is important to recollect how then the worldwide upsurge spawned a proliferation of socialist organizations and parties, many attached to a particular country of “already existing socialism” (whether China, Cuba, Albania or the USSR). The overriding belief at the time was that the revolutionary process would continue to unfold. There were genuine differences on the left in this era, between radicals who identified with different historical currents (supporters of the USSR, of China, of Trotskyism, of

various social-democratic trends), which led to legitimate ideological competition between different organizations. Too often, however, this spilled over into an unfortunate competition even among those who adhered to the same historical perspectives, leading to unnecessary factional warfare and splits.

By the mid-'80s, it was apparent that this cycle of radicalization had come to an end. At the time of Solidarity's founding most of the organizations of the New Communist Movement had closed up shop. The feminist and Black liberation movements had ebbed, as had other people of color-led movements, leaving behind a rich legacy of leadership and ideas.

Social Movements over the Last Two Decades

The re-emergence of the civil rights movement following World War II inspired and propelled forward all of the oppositional and liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s. After Jim Crow was defeated, the struggle for African-American freedom and self determination moved north. Here the movement faced considerable challenges confronting the myriad ways in which institutionalized racism is embedded in the country's economic and social institutions. Some militants faced surveillance and state repression. Others were drawn into the Democratic Party, which systematically demobilized the mass movement responsible for winning significant concessions in the first place. The onslaught of neoliberalism was also particularly damaging to African-American communities in urban centers, as industry departed for the suburbs or the right-to-work states in the South. “Good” jobs declined. Poorer Blacks, unable or unwilling to leave cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Atlanta or New Orleans, were faced with deteriorating parks, libraries, schools and housing. Racism was the wedge whereby social programs won in the 1930s and '60s were cut, with the urban poor blamed for their deepening poverty. By the time Hurricane Katrina hit, lack of governmental assistance, both beforehand and afterward, perfectly symbolized the

political marginalization of urban African Americans trapped in poverty. Even in the face of these tremendous difficulties, the political legacy of the Black freedom movement lives on through ideas and organization. Formations such as the Black Radical Congress, Million Worker March, and the recent Black Left Unity indicate a desire to regroup and renew a Black liberation agenda nationally.

For draft-age youth in the 1960s opposition to the Vietnam War was a pivotal experience. The antiwar movement, like other movements, began as a minority but “infected” the general population, including U.S. soldiers at home and abroad. Many activists not only demonstrated against the war, but studied the history of U.S. intervention and saw the links between the war Washington waged in Vietnam and larger foreign policy. With the end of the Vietnam War and the collapse of the Portuguese revolution, two international struggles dominated the 1980s: southern Africa –specifically the struggle against South Africa’s apartheid regime and its military domination of the region – and Central America, with its revolutionary possibilities and the fight against Washington’s intervention. There was the promise of the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and revolutionary upsurges in El Salvador and Guatemala, with Honduras a U.S. base for launching Reagan’s “low intensity war.” Throughout the 1980s a wide range of U.S. anti-intervention and solidarity networks, projects and coalitions sustained activity, with more than 100,000 U.S. citizens visiting, studying and working in Nicaragua alone. A few, like Ben Linder, lost their lives there. Many activists, including a large proportion of women, became radicalized in this process. Most did not come out of the traditional left.

The flowering of mass-based community organizations in South Africa along with the founding in 1985 of COSATU, a federation of Black trade unions with an emphasis on shop-floor, democratic structures, produced a sustained struggle that included comprehensive sanctions against the South African government. Along with solidarity movements in other countries, the U.S. anti-apartheid movement grew and became strong enough to force universities to divest and secure passage of

Congressional sanctions over President Reagan’s opposition. By 1990 the DeKlerk government was forced to unban political organizations and free Nelson Mandela.

President Reagan’s firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981 set the stage for a quarter-century of strikes and lockouts, most of which (but not all) ended in concessions: PATCO, Phelps-Dodge, Greyhound, Hormel & P-9, Eastern Airlines, International Paper, the mineworkers at Pittston, Detroit newspaper strike, NYNEX, UPS, American Axle. These defensive struggles against corporate attack gave rise to a culture of solidarity and a diverse use of tactics including roving pickets, mass demonstrations, strike support committees, picket lines, sympathy strikes, civil disobedience, direct action, solidarity tours, boycotts, corporate campaigns and even a plant occupation at Pittston, West Virginia. While the victory at Pittston included defying a court injunction, the defeat of P-9 at Hormel signaled the gutting of militant unionism throughout the industry. In general the anti-concession battles lost because the employer had a strategy for winning and, despite high levels of solidarity, most unions didn’t. The fight begun in the 1960s to democratize the unions – among miners, teamsters, autoworkers, railroad workers and postal workers -- has been pushed back, with only the miners and teamsters partially succeeding. But without the rank and file being able to discuss and debate strategy, it’s hard to imagine how the culture of concessions can be reversed.

By the 1980s aggressive lending by the major banks led to the Third World debt crisis and IMF “structural adjustment programs” that drove millions from their land. A series of U.S. military interventions and civil wars displaced millions more. While the U.S. immigrant population had been stagnant throughout the 1960s, by 2004 it had risen fourfold (approximately 34.2 million). Although some are admitted on the basis of their professional or technical skills, most are poor people fleeing U.S. intervention or its “free trade” policies. The new, and poor, immigrants earn significantly less than the average U.S. worker. They are far more

likely to be found in manual or service occupations where the job is traditionally low paid (agriculture, food preparation, hospitality industry, and domestic work) or became low paid because of industrial restructuring (building trades and meatpacking). While California, New York, Florida and Texas are the destination for the majority, the South now employs almost a third of the immigrant work force. These workers bring social networks and, sometimes, radical political traditions from their home countries. They have developed new forms of organization in the face of union retreat, and political attacks such as "English only" legislation or refusal by various states to issue drivers' licenses to immigrants.

The explosion of one-day strikes and economic boycotts that defeated 2006 the Sensenbrenner bill demonstrated an impressive level of organization. As with the African-American movement, the immigrant rights movement has attempted to forge national networks to coordinate its struggle against discrimination at the workplace and in the community. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) mass workplace raids, detentions, deportations that tear families apart and the active participation of some local police in these practices have become a reign of terror against legal as well as "illegal" immigrant communities. Struggling to stop these obscene abuses of state power and recognize that no human being is "illegal" is essential.

Student activism has its own dynamics, and can inspire motion in other sectors, but in general it reflects the downward momentum of the social movements. At times students have organized around specifically campus-focused issues, such as during the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s. But unlike many other countries, the university system here is organized on a statewide rather than federal basis, limiting opportunities for organizing a national movement around student issues. Nonetheless throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, campus activists developed networks to coordinate labor solidarity, environmental, antiwar, global justice and anti-racist activism. Campus women's and multicultural centers, fights against political repression on campus, and activism focused on

recruitment and retention of students of color have also been important sites of struggle and places where young activists radicalize. Into the new millennium, existing student formations like United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC), Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), Student Farmworker Alliance, and the Campus Antiwar Network (CAN) have been bolstered by the emergence of the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as well as episodic mobilizations such as by those around the Jena 6.

The rise of feminism in the late '60s forced U.S. society to change some of its laws, many of its assumptions and some of its language -- but today's culture wars are still being waged over women's bodies. In 1970, on the fiftieth anniversary of women winning suffrage, women's demands were equal rights, the right to birth control and abortion and the right to low-cost, quality child care. None of them have been secured.

Although the Supreme Court established women's right to abortion at least during the first two trimesters of pregnancy, hundreds of laws have been enacted to blunt that right. Most importantly, the Hyde Amendment severely curtails poor women's right to obtain Medicaid-paid for abortions. In the late '80s and early '90s right-wing mobilization at the clinic doors gave rise to a counter movement defending women's right to abortion. Solidarity members were actively involved. Today the right organizes periodic mobilizations, including a two-week confrontation in Atlanta, and Solidarity members continue to defend women's rights at the clinic doors.

Both socialist feminists and women of color affirm the reality that women's reproductive needs include more than the right to abortion: access to scientific information about their bodies, the right to appropriate birth control, the right to choose or not choose sterilization, the right to have, and raise, children in a safe environment. Since the early 1980s a number of women of color organizations have been established including Black Women's Health

Project (now defunct), Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and SisterSong, a network. These organizations tend to center their philosophical perspective around a human rights agenda and are usually involved in a variety of community issues: housing campaigns, LGBTQ issues, Katrina solidarity work, establishing clinics.

Taking cues from the New Left's revitalization of political radicalism and the counterculture and sexual revolution, a gay liberation movement emerged. In the years following the 1969 Stonewall Riot, the movement's aims expanded beyond the individual rights focus of earlier "homophile" organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. Gay Liberation activists attacked conservative social norms, patriarchy, imperialism and the state; their political coalitions and language presented a common front with Black Power, radical feminism, anti-imperialism and other left movements. By the late 1970s, however, this initial energy had tapered; political strategy moved from a systemic critique to focus on achieving political and social equality for gays and lesbians within the existing the social framework, replacing direct action with reform-oriented lobbying and electoral tactics. While the mainstream "gay civil rights" organizations established during this period continue to dominate, the criminal negligence to the AIDS crisis breathed new radicalism into the movement. Militant organizations like ACT UP won significant victories and dramatically raised awareness of the devastation caused by the virus; as the "at-risk" population broadened, diverse coalitions for health care justice fought lack of access to AIDS treatment. Today a new generation of activists dedicated to radically re-imagining the possibilities for human sexuality and gender expression uses the language of "queer liberation," much as earlier activists distanced themselves from more cautious elders by demanding gay power.

Another movement that developed during the 1980s is the environmental justice movement. Initiated by African-American community and environmental activists, it expanded the environmental struggle to reveal how the deadly contradictions of capitalism

reinforce structural racism. For example, garbage dumps and coal-burning plants are placed in people of color communities, with resulting health disaster. This has enlarged the mission and base of the environmental movement.

Finally, the development of the global justice movement challenged the institutions through which U.S. and other capital has dominated the world since World War II. It allowed for impressive mobilizations against various IMF, World Bank and Davos meetings, but also for a thoughtful exposé of how capitalism creates tremendous poverty by redistributing wealth from the poor to the wealthy. The movement was able to attract labor and students, and was beginning to link up with people of color-led organizations only to be undercut by the "war on terror" in the aftermath of 9/11.

Regroupment, Refounding and the Arc of Resistance

In the decade of our founding, people on the left began talking to each other across ideological lines, in ways that hadn't happened for a long time – with a common realization that the "party-building" of the previous years had effectively collapsed, and had been abusive in significant ways to the human beings committed to it. In this climate of assessment and inquiry, Solidarity's founding organizations brought about a small-scale regroupment, initially including three groups with origins in Trotskyist traditions, a caucus inside the Socialist Party and one socialist-feminist collective. The project was daring for the time: to rebuild a left socialist presence, which was threatening to disappear (or alienate future generations), on the basis of a rudimentary set of shared revolutionary precepts.

The basis of Solidarity's daring was admittedly narrow. It was rooted in Trotskyism. The idea was to overcome decades of debilitating splits that stubbornly maintained separate organizations – based perhaps most centrally on different characterizations of the nature of the Soviet state, but also on other analytical, strategic or even tactical differences – and get to the positions we agreed on.

Solidarity's founders also looked to other developments, like the fusing of several survivors of the New Communist Movement into FRSO, as signs pointing to the possibility of a broader "regroupment" (as we then called it) of the revolutionary left. Later, in 1991, Solidarity closely watched as hundreds of Communist Party members, rebelling against the lack of democracy in their party – and clearly inspired by the openness of the Gorbachev era -- founded the Committees of Correspondence. For a time, some in Solidarity became dual members of the Committees of Correspondence. We thought that the demise of the Soviet Union might change the possibility of a regrouped left – with those who had looked to the Soviet Union more open to the idea that democracy is an essential component in constructing socialism. It is difficult to imagine a vibrant U.S. left that does not have the ability to learn from lessons and experiences gained by various left organizations and individuals across ideological borders. While Solidarity always prioritized having our members rooted in the struggle of aspiring social movements, it made sense in the 1980s to hold out hope for a broader regroupment of the already organized revolutionary left as the next step in a revitalized U.S. left. At our 1986 founding conference we came out explicitly in support of these kinds of regroupment efforts. We still are.

More recently, after the limited momentum for left regroupment seemed to have played out, other organizations – notably our comrades in FRSO/OSCL – raised the term "left refoundation" to highlight the role of a small but growing U.S. "social movement left" in cohering a vibrant, combative, revolutionary force.

The two words – regroupment and refoundation – mean different things, but the process we are looking at is actually a combination. The exact proportion of one in relationship to the other is impossible for us to predict. We should pursue both, and let natural processes determine how the balance works out. Today, the social movement left that actually exists suffers greatly because there is no organized revolutionary movement worthy of the name. The organized revolutionary movement suffers equally because there is no mass social movement left worthy

of the name. Each, in its future development, is dependent on the other. We favor, therefore, a "regroupment/refoundation" perspective which pays attention to both sides of the equation.

The decade of Solidarity's founding began with the emergence of Solidarnosc, an independent Polish union and nationalist response to Soviet domination, which was set back and forced underground by the imposition of martial law. In our founding statement Solidarity analyzed the Polish union as representing "the high point in the struggle for socialist freedom in the Eastern bloc." (Section 1) We saw its development could point the way to "the possibility of genuinely socialist societies without bosses or bureaucrats" (Section II). Additionally, we celebrated the founding of South Africa's trade union federation, COSATU, as "the most dramatic example of a newly arising proletarian movement with revolutionary possibilities." Along with the Polish and South African examples, we saw the growth of a vibrant and democratic labor movement in Brazil and Mexico as the best hope for repudiating debts that burdens so much of the Third World. (Section II)

Within 18 months of our founding, a new focus of resistance emerged, when the First Palestinian Intifada erupted in December 1987. A tremendous mass mobilization resting on the strength and creativity of popular organizations – many of them women-led – in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, this uprising stirred hopes that the Palestinian people take concrete steps toward their aspirations for national independence and freedom from occupation. These hopes were defeated by three factors: the overwhelming brutality of the Israeli response, with full U.S. support, to an unarmed popular movement; the decision of the external Palestinian leadership to stake the future on international diplomatic maneuvering, rather than putting all its resources into strengthening the mass struggle; and the disastrous change in the world political context with the First Gulf War in 1991. This was followed by the "Oslo peace process," which proved to be an enormous failure and step backward because it rested on two fundamentally

false premises: a) that Israel would take any meaningful steps to halt settlements, release prisoners and relieve the horrible burdens of daily life in the Occupied Territories, and b) that the Palestinian people would surrender in the face of overwhelming Israeli-U.S. domination.

The collapse of Oslo, the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, the re-ascendance of Israel's hard right, and the last-minute negotiating debacle at Camp David under Bill Clinton's watch produced the Second Palestinian Intifada. This stage of the struggle, much more militaristic and less driven by popular mobilization than the first, has taken a far higher toll in Israeli casualties but imposed an overwhelming burden of destruction and immiseration in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, especially Gaza. The imperialist mythology that the terms of surrender can be imposed on Palestine by massive U.S. and Israeli firepower has never been more destructive and bankrupt than at the present moment.

Less than a decade into Reagan / Thatcher (but also Volker / Carter) neoliberalism and restructuring, our expectations of a vibrant and stronger left turned out to be misplaced. The '90s brought forth a period in which not just Stalinism, but socialism, social-democracy and even Keynesian liberalism would seem discredited by the force of an energetic and neoliberal capitalism. The fall of Communist Party-ruled states in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe did not open the door to libratory socialism in Poland or East Germany. In fact the possibilities quickly disappeared beneath the boots of a triumphant capitalism. Reagan's "low intensity warfare" caused enough violence and disruption in Central America so that whatever the terms of the peace agreements in El Salvador and Guatemala, the status quo won. In Nicaragua a combination of U.S.-armed contras and the Sandinista government's inability to understand the issues of the rural or indigenous populations led to the 1990 electoral victory of right-wing forces. Although there was the hope that the FSLN could analyze its electoral defeat and rebuild itself, it chose instead to build a leadership clique around Daniel Ortega and consolidate itself around its business interests.

By the beginning of the '90s organized labor and progressive popular movements, instead of rebounding from the doldrums of the Reagan years, went deeper into hibernation. In these objective circumstances, prospects for left regroupment had dimmed – the forces and circumstances needed to bring us together were outweighed by forces that demoralized the left and drove many organizations to hold on to what they had. The organization-to-organization regroupment project as we conceived it stalled out, despite sporadic efforts through the years.

Among the most serious consequences of the failure to deepen the process was our inability to alter the racial composition of Solidarity, whose membership was at its founding overwhelmingly white and remains so today. A vibrant process of regroupment among surviving left formations of the period could have brought into being an organization with the basis for the participation and leadership of revolutionaries of color that is so necessary to socialist refoundation.

The founding of Solidarity was the product of the actual experiences of members of the '60s-'70s generation. Whatever innovation and departure, it occurred within the framework of a socialist left gravitating around well-defined currents on a world scale that were the product of the 20th century experience. Solidarity was a corrective "structural adjustment" of socialist organization and action to the realities of the times. More than twenty years later the challenge for Solidarity – and the other surviving socialist groups – is starkly posed: How can we contribute to the renewal of a socialist movement in today's realities?

Refounding a New Left: Next Generations & Their Experiences

The period from 1999 to 2008 has created a new situation for remnants of the U.S. revolutionary left and the new progressive and popular movements. A new generation of radicals, who hadn't been through the experiences of the traditional left, came of age around the struggles of the global justice and

antiwar movements. They are joined by a small cohort who came of age during the '90s, around the first Gulf War and in opposition to the Republican "Contract with America." Many activists from this generation cut their teeth on local struggles. They organized in communities of color with unions, around safe and affordable housing, redefined environmentalism to include the human rights of communities disproportionately affected by pollution and toxic waste, fought police brutality and the prison industrial complex, and forced queer and transgender issues onto the agenda. New forms of organizing, including workers' centers, arose to champion workers' interests both on and off the shop floor and to organize the unorganized.

Much of the most creative organizing and most of the most powerful thinking of the global justice movement took place within anarchist and anti-authoritarian circles. Various citywide Direct Action Networks (DANs) and spokescouncils struggled with issues such as balancing sporadic large mobilizations with ongoing community-ally organizing; centering the movement around those most attacked by neoliberalism; putting an anti-oppression framework into practice; calling for direct actions while ensuring safety for working-class, poor, and immigrant participants in actions; avoiding domination by a charismatic or cliquish few; and thinking one step ahead of the police and political and corporate elites. Their track record of successes in transforming themselves around these issues was quite mixed, but the fact that they wrestled with them was impressive.

Many global justice movement activists looked through a lens of anti-authoritarianism. They rejected the politics of "social democracy" in the leaderships of the AFL-CIO and traditional women's and environmental organizations as too much a part of the "system," and stylistically stale. Nonetheless, there was a pragmatic willingness to work with those forces in coalitions. Based on the sometimes commandeering and undemocratic, sometimes opportunist practices of most socialist groups they encountered, they also rejected Marxism. They constantly strived towards organizational horizontality, where leadership could be rotated. Frustrated with symbolic protest and civil

disobedience politics, they put a commitment to placing struggles against racism (and, sometimes, sexism and homophobia) at the center of organizing, both within groups and in the world. They attempted to practice forms of politics that would excite, not alienate. From the beginning a tension existed between the nonprofit-based organizations and those consisting of unpaid, grassroots activists.

After 9/11, of course, the Global Justice Movement – already getting a bit bogged down in some of the more objective quandaries – was effectively subsumed into the nascent struggle against the war. Again, particularly on the West Coast, much of the most exciting organizing at the height of the antiwar movement was in the anti-authoritarian Direct Action to Stop the War (DASW), which shared the basic premises outlined above.

Much of these politics continue to be central to movement-building projects among young people where they exist, in various Social Forums, among the Anarchist People of Color tendency, to some extent in USAS and the new SDS, and in many campus-based worker-rights and antiwar organizing projects. The insights and experiences of these activists will be an important component in the process of left refoundation.

However, the politics of the global justice movement have reached a certain blind alley, and there has been a quantitative decline in the movement. Some global justice activists are thinking about new forms of revolutionary organization, while others seem trapped into endless discussions about red and blue states. And probably a few are doing both.

Activists carry a deep-seated distrust – if not anger and rejection – of capitalism as an inhumane system that brings exploitation, war, starvation and destruction of our planet. To varying degrees, they are anti-capitalist in their thinking. With this rejection of capitalism many also feel a need to be more than just "loose activists," but rather part of a whole more effective than just the sum of its parts. They have begun to outgrow isolated, individual activism and hunger for different kinds of

organization, one that would be based around a long-term commitment to shared work and developing a common (if not completely unitary and fixed) political vision. This hunger was evident at the US Social Forum.

The longings for comradeship, accountability, a better understanding of the world brought activists, in ones and twos, into Solidarity and into other groups and collectives. Twenty years after socialism was seemingly discredited, a new generation is revisiting socialism and socialist organization – asking questions from new directions, ready to accept much and reject much.

At the same time these new generations face incredible pressure to professionalize and /or devote themselves to their individual, personal lives, their careers and dating lives, their marriages and partnerships and children. The cultural and political sources of resistance to these pressures are weaker than in '60s and '70s, when "the revolution" was perceived as being around the corner, or at least within one's lifetime. Combined with an economy that carried far less anxiety about finding a job, building personal economic survival was easier.

A socialist left is not nurtured mainly by sound theories and analyses. Unlike the generation that founded Solidarity, today's activists have not experienced anything like the same level of global social upheaval – and victories. A left is built as a reasonably-sized force in conformity with living proof that struggle is possible, that consciousness can rise and lead to sustained action for social justice against capital. The new generations of activists have not yet directly experienced a compelling and sustained political environment of this nature. Inspiring movements do arise, but have been cut short before they get wind in their sails. While the global justice movement was undercut by the war on terror, the World Social Forum evolved toward domination by reformist forces.

An organized left, if it existed, might cohere resistance, focus it, and expound a new vision and a new practice. But in terms of social weight and placement, it does

not exist. When we speak of "the left" today, this notion is a placeholder, an inexact way of speaking, an empty space needing to be filled. At best, "the left" in the United States is a project, a goal to be pursued not simply by regroupment, in the classic sense, but through refoundation: a fusing of new energies and a thoughtful examination and selection among old visions and programs. Solidarity would like to partner in such a project.

We invite the broad left to think collectively about: 1) the political state of the world, 2) the major political movements which structure our landscape of possibilities, and 3) the tasks and possibilities of some kind of left refoundation/regroupment which might have the audacity to really propose a social transformation. This analysis is necessarily incomplete and impressionistic. It is not a "line" in the classic Leninist sense, but more of an arc (a line of flight, rather than a line of march): an act of thinking together which we hope will clarify our project for ourselves as well as contribute to a dialogue with others – other groups as well as the ones and twos out there hungering for new ideas and forms of organization.

The Tasks and Possibilities of a U.S. Refounded Left

For millions, the Soviet Union and China were what socialism in the concrete looked like. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Chinese bureaucracy's embrace of capitalism in its most rapacious form, millions have concluded that socialism has been tried, and it has failed. Certainly those bureaucratic and authoritarian versions failed. However the removal of this alternative economic bloc has placed new strictures on the possibility of anti-capitalist outcomes for liberation struggles in a developing world.

Even the exciting promise of workers democracy articulated by Brazil's and South Africa's mass trade unions remain unfulfilled. Each maintained alliances with political parties which, upon taking governmental power, adopted a neoliberal model with an occasional populist gesture. Tied to these

parties, the unions and much of the social movements, including Brazil's militant Landless Workers Movement, lost a substantial measure of political autonomy and have been unable to defend themselves let alone pave the way for an alternative. U.S. revolutionaries need to understand how global capitalism is evolving, how that affects the confidence of the working class and social movements, and how those changes reveal new fault lines. We also need to support and participate in working-class and community-based struggles and social movements. With a few notable exceptions like the antiwar and immigrants' rights movement, today's battles are largely defensive and local in nature -- such as police brutality cases, attacks on abortion clinics or laws regulating them, issues involving prisoner rights, community struggles over water and pollution, and many local labor struggles.

In its present state, the left is almost never the generating force for these struggles. It is far too small and lacking in social legitimacy. However, these developments tell us that leadership has developed; militant, collective action has been taken. It is crucial for socialists to participate in such movements in order to learn from them, to support their most progressive direction, and to recruit as many of their ranks as possible to a socialist perspective in a respectful way, mindful of the parasitical stereotype that does confront us.

Experiencing solidarity is crucial to understanding that we are not condemned to live in an alienated, commodified world of growing inequality. To the greatest extent possible, our small forces should do all they can to honor and assist these fights -- from direct participation, to support work, to education on the underlying issues. Recognizing our limitations, the left should not develop delusions about taking the lead, although individuals among us are leaders or mentors to leaders. In today's relation of forces, the immediate objective is a successful struggle that can encourage further developments.

Too often socialist groups have seen the development of a movement not for what it is and can become, but only what it might offer in the way of recruits. We

reject this conception and affirm the need for an effective class movement in and for itself, which requires new forms of action, thinking and dialogue rather than repeating the known formulas.

The left must be involved in the struggle against current wars and occupations, demanding that U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan be brought home now. No occupation is benign! We think this moment provides socialists with an opportunity to educate about the nature of U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. We want to explain how complicity with the brutal Israeli occupation underpins U.S. policy, and express our solidarity with the Palestinian people. We do so without illusions that the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, let alone the ongoing Palestinian tragedy, will end in the near term. We oppose the U.S. empire and support struggles to close down U.S. military bases wherever they exist. On an international scale, our "programmatic judgments" on liberation struggles in the developing world must be held up to the light of global capitalist hegemony. That is, we can see some of their limitations, but it is more difficult to see how far these struggles can go in a world dominated by unipolar capitalism.

Despite unfair election laws that benefit the two-party system, we believe it is necessary to build a party independent of the ruling-class. Such a party needs to be both a participant in the social movements as well as run candidates that can articulate a working-class perspective. Over the course of Solidarity's existence, we have supported various initiatives toward building independent political parties including the Labor Party, the Party for the 21st century, the Green Party and exploratory efforts to build a Reconstruction Party. Some of our members work in the Green Party that, however fragile, has been able to gain ballot status in almost half the states and has elected officials at the local level. In addition to its platform of environmental justice, opposition to the Iraq war, and supports reparations, community struggles and workers' strikes. We think that a movement-rooted political formation that encourages people to break with the two capitalist parties has high priority and an

unfortunately low momentum. The capitalists have two parties, the working class has none.

In this next presidential election, we recognize that the historic possibility of electing Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States is a touchstone issue for the vast majority of the progressive community, and especially African Americans. Yet Obama is a centrist Democrat. What is unknown at this point is whether his possible victory and subsequent inability/refusal to end the U.S. occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, reverse the repression launched by the war on terror or implement such needed social measures as single-payer health care will demoralize those who vote for him – or spur them into action. While Solidarity has endorsed Cynthia McKinney's campaign in the 2008 election cycle, we realize that most of the progressive community that votes will choose Obama either as symbol of hope and change, or as the better of the two mainstream candidates.

Solidarity views Cynthia McKinney's campaign as attractive to a layer of Black activists interested in independent political action, and we want to work with them. We also note that a small group of people of color have joined the Green Party and several have run for political office. Others have decided to build the Reconstruction Party, and are also supporting the McKinney campaign. While we are not hostile to Ralph Nader's 2008 run, we want to help the Greens sink deeper roots into local struggles and feel the McKinney campaign can advance that goal. Solidarity members inside the Green Party, just as in other movements, respect the party's integrity and encourage its democratic process.

Even though no "really existing alternative" to capitalism occupies the stage at the moment, the terrifying dimensions of the global environmental crisis help convince millions of people, including the best of a new generation of activists, that capitalism is incompatible with the survival of human society. A convergence of "global justice" and environmental justice is key to the emergence of 21st century socialism.

Refounding the Left: Taking Our Past Into Our Future

A forceful renewal of the socialist left is not entirely a matter of our will alone. It ultimately depends on developments of a more massive scale both here and around the world that in one way or another pose a significant challenge to the capitalist agenda from a left direction. These developments provide the proverbial "tests" that are supposed to prove out the necessity for diverse revolutionary organization. Here, in the United States, we are no where near them. At this stage, most existing revolutionary organizations feel their fragility and place a question mark over their possibility for survival in any meaningful sense. The era of competition and triumphalism has pretty much ended.

Does this mean that we circle the wagons, soldier on and wait? Solidarity rejects this approach. Even as a body at rest, an organization will change – and inevitably not for the better. The risk runs the gambit from membership drift-out to downright cultification.

The process of socialist renewal has to begin now, and should have begun at least a decade ago. Working together at varying levels, the social movement left and the organized left together can produce a modest pole that would be more attractive to those who do not belong to any socialist organization. It would have a remoralizing effect on all our respective members and networks. What forms could this working together take?

- ***Dialogue and study.*** Each organization feels the obligation to enunciate the basic lessons of 20th century revolution, examine its past as an organization, and relocate itself in the current realities of capitalism. It is pointedly wasteful of our scant resources to be doing this separately. A far richer and educational process, as well as a healthier internal environment, could be generated by finding spaces to conduct this discussion together. The same hold true for analyzing the movements and world relations of forces of

today. The forces of the social movement left needs to figure out where and how they'd be interested in participating in this discussion.

For example, too often the left's "model" tends to drift back to a one-sided application of "Leninism" as people imagine this concept was implemented in czarist Russia nearly a century ago. Is this appropriate today -- under conditions of formal democracy and with new methods of communication, not to mention lessons from the 20th century experience on the transition to socialism and the durability of capital? What organizational forms and modes of operation can be most effective in bringing about the renewal we seek? Today's activists must be full-fledged participants in such a dialogue, bringing their questions, expectations and experiences as well as their commitment to the intersection of class, race and gender.

Starting in the 1960s, significant challenges have successfully altered the standards of internal practice and culture in revolutionary organizations. The changes that have been brought about are profoundly political, and address a concept of democracy that goes beyond the requisite and anonymous formality of one person, one vote. Solidarity's organizational practice has been influenced by people of color, women, and LGBT liberation movements. The changes include the institutional existence of caucuses within our organizations based on those oppressed because of race, gender and sexuality. These caucuses play a role not only in guiding our external relationships to movements of the oppressed, but also act as an internal corrective. They help our organizations to be inclusive and capable of acting with a collective understanding of how oppression manifests itself even among revolutionaries, who are not immune to the pressures of the broader society.

The stereotype of the '70s revolutionary organizations as being dominated by (charismatic) males, with a heavy polemical, defeat-your-opponent factionalism is -- or should be -- dead and buried. To whatever extent it was practiced, it was an exclusive, self-defeating model based on a caricature of the early 20th century movement. Today's revolutionaries are striving for

what some call "feminist functioning" -- a respectful, egalitarian and uplifting internal environment grounded in democratic functioning and pooling of the strengths from all the members.

The '70s model tended to see "the party" as a thing onto itself; floating above the members with some kind of existence of its own (often defined by these same white males). In our organizations today, this reification has to be combated. The "party" is the human beings who come together to act together. They are the locus of ownership. Solidarity has been mocked by other revolutionary groups because our members sometimes voted for different proposals at movement meetings. We have attempted to build consensus positions around our founding principles and encourage members to express judgments based on their experiences. Sometimes this has meant differences that we have not attempted to shut those down in the name of a "line," requiring members to vote against their real convictions at the loss of their integrity.

Imagine how much richer it would be to discuss -- or even build -- a 21st Century internal revolutionary culture together, instead of in small groups that are grappling with the same basic need to make deep structural-democratic changes. Together, we could make a more coherent contribution that could enter the arsenal of models of revolutionary organization and theory.

For example, developments of defiance of the imperialist world market diktat in Latin America -- highlighted by political developments in Venezuela and Bolivia, and before that Brazil and Argentina -- have to be assessed based on the current world relationship of forces, which is qualitatively different from the global reality for most of the 20th century. We should be taking inspiration from, and carefully examining, today's processes of struggle as they unfold, offering them our solidarity. Approaching this as a broader collective will give us an opportunity to expand our common experience and analysis.

The socialist left in Europe has experienced a similar stagnation, yet has managed to maintain a more vibrant existence, in good measure due to greater levels of residual class consciousness. Many organizations are engaged in building new forms of organizations that have something to teach us about the possibilities – and in some cases the limits or obstacles – for unity or united action among previously competing revolutionary organizations. These include the Red Green Alliance in Denmark, the Left Bloque in Portugal, attempts to build Respect in Britain and the evolution of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire of France has decided to dissolve and form an entirely new left socialist organization that would be more of an appropriate refoundational home for thousands of activists not currently in any socialist organization. Though we do not have the means to duplicate these efforts here – they require a level of social weight we don't presently enjoy – we should be watching and discussing these efforts at left foundation together.

- *Acting together.* We should be sharing where we think things stand and what should be done. How strange the case that we often don't even speak to one another while engaged in the same coalition, the same fight. That relic of the past has to stop. We should help mobilize our respective memberships for greater focus on a flashpoint struggle. Example: we often have members in the same trade union, even the same local, carrying on various fights for democracy, against concessions, etc. These energies should be pooled, and the tactical arguments should be had comrade-to-comrade.

For its part, Solidarity believes that agreement around a broad set of principles, and not agreement around historical questions, is the root base for organized renewal of the socialist movement. We believe that the left has yet to perfect the art of “agreeing to disagree” – while still finding ways to act together in a coherent fashion -- once basic agreement of this type has been achieved. (Solidarity is not an exception to this statement.) The notion of “homogeneity” in an organization as the 20th century left perceived it did

not serve well at all; it ended in sectarianism and irrelevance.

We believe that unity in action does not require unity of thought. Solidarity is thus, in the broad sense, a proudly multi-tendency group. However, there is an important proviso to this: unity in action may not require unity of thought, but it most certainly requires thought – not just individual thought, but collective thought.

That is, we do not believe that “democratic centralism” is an appropriate mechanism through which such a diverse group of revolutionaries can function effectively. Yes, there needs to be a set of key principles around which membership is constructed. Within that framework it will be necessary to listen to the ideas and experiences of all comrades, and to move forward with the understanding that there will be differing assessments and therefore decisions will be revisited. Diversity can be the source of an organization's strength because it allows for a pluralism from which a more nuanced assessment may be possible. Additionally, we believe that tactical decisions are just that, tactical.

Marxism should be a method and not a set of formulas we have learned from the past. We also see that the insights from other philosophies of liberation and the living movements they spring from must renew and revitalize Marxism.

Solidarity remains hopeful that today's socialist left is capable of taking some or all of the steps can lead off the process of renewal. Though recent modest initiatives, we are attempting to bring about a frank discussion with other organizations as well as local collective/study groups and national networks of the social movement left on how – or whether – they see a process of left renewal taking root.