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# Meeting the Challenge of Crisis and Opportunity

## Left Refoundation and Party Building

*About this paper: The Party-Building Commission of Freedom Road Socialist Organization takes pleasure in circulating the following paper. Like other socialist organizations, since its inception, Freedom Road has looked for opportunities to combine our own organizing with opportunities for strengthening the unity and coherence of socialist efforts overall. We endorse the themes presented here as an important part of our efforts in this general direction. Members of our organization from several cities worked on this paper over the last year and a half. We also appreciate the invaluable comments of friends and co-workers from other organizations who have seen this in draft and helped shape it. We don't see this as the final word on the way forward for the socialist left. Nor do we even see it as the first word, since others have also grappled with similar issues throughout this past decade. But we do sincerely hope it sparks interest, debate, and action toward bringing new national political organization to US socialist efforts. –January 2000*

### Introduction: The Crisis Facing the Left

The world we live and struggle in confronts us with an immense set of paradoxes. Conditions exist which should result in very favorable ground for socialist activity. Yet a real socialist movement does not exist.

There is anger stirring among the masses, particularly as their living standards implode. Yet at the same time, there is widespread despair. The media spreads the notion that history has indeed ended, and capitalism is the only alternative.

The time has come for Left activists to confront the challenge of creating a revolutionary socialist party. Neo-liberal capitalism's unrelenting expansionism threatens humanity as a whole and the physical environment itself. The earlier vibrancy of the national liberation struggles and the influence of vital Left movements in many countries has faded in the face of an invigorated post-Cold War global capitalism.

The slogan of Left Refoundation arises out of our assessment of the ideological and structural crisis among Leftists here in the U.S. and other parts of the world. Four major occurrences define this *crisis*:

- (1) **The crisis of socialism**, which predates the collapse of the Soviet Union
- (2) **The dismantling of the welfare state**,
- (3) **The crisis of national liberation movements**, and
- (4) **The rise of neoliberalism**.

All four are connected. The rise of neoliberalism and the crisis of socialism are intertwined with the destruction of the welfare state and the crisis of national liberation movements. This crisis is an ideological and structural vacuum in which words such as *revolution* become clichés and young revolutionaries seek meaning in a variety of ideological frameworks.

On the other hand, this vacuum provides Marxists a rare opportunity for reflection and reevaluation. This period affords Marxists an opportunity to shape revolutionary thought by creating a strategic vision for revolution and socialism. For success, this vision needs to include a long-range plan for the creating of a new type of political party with the capacity to stitch together revolutionary social movements behind a strategic unity that weakens and ultimately defeats and overthrows capitalism, ideologically and structurally.

The building of a party is our task because no such party presently exists, but also because we are in a historical situation in which we cannot rely on the spontaneous regeneration of Marxism and revolutionary socialist theory in order to build a new revolutionary movement. The crisis of socialism has inhibited that process. It has dampened, though certainly not stopped altogether, the emergence of Left culture and cultural opposition. It has fragmented

the opposition to imperialism and clouded the goal of achieving a socialist society.

## Socialism in the Era of Neo-Liberalism

The enduring commitment to revolutionary socialism worldwide, despite its deepening crisis, impels us all to work toward a new assessment of the present situation. Based on such an assessment, revolutionary socialists will need to propose a new way forward. We believe that conditions exist for both the refoundation of an anti-capitalist left in the next five to fifteen years, and for the creation of a new socialist party. We offer the following ideas concerning our situation and the tasks of the Socialist Left.

Almost since the end of the Vietnam War, U.S. capital has put the network of social programs known as the welfare state under attack. While a new and vicious right attacked these programs head-on, realignment among liberals occurred as well. Clinton and Gore came out of this new, neo-liberal wing of the Democratic Party, full of free-market rationalization for trampling on rights and benefits long in place.

Worldwide, the rise of neo-liberalism led to a backtracking by political parties that had supported the welfare state. In some countries, the backtracking includes even some political parties formerly associated with the Left. For many progressives and Leftists, this turnabout has thrown into question the nature and demands of the reform struggle under capitalism. Many of us have lost confidence in addressing economic development, public safety, public education, and other issues. For the mass of working people in the U.S., neo-liberalism has meant a new façade for capitalism without a new leadership to confront it.

We ignore reality if we narrow the crisis of socialism to the period following the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Instead, the crisis of socialism emerged over time in the course of political struggles. These struggles arose in the whole range of countries that threw off the rule of capital and began the transition to socialism, from the 1917 Russian Revolution, through

the post-World War II era, on into the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s through the 1970s. These countries handled a whole range of problems-- political democracy; the liberation and equality of oppressed nationalities; the emancipation and equality of women; the environment, the land question and agrarian reform--in such a manner that new ruling groups emerged. Overall, the role and leadership of the working class was not strengthened to continue the struggle against capital after the overthrow of capitalism.

Separate but equally serious problems arose in the socialist movements attempting to achieve state power mainly, though not exclusively, in the advanced capitalist countries. The groups divorced themselves from the people and were unable, and often unwilling, to carry through the struggle for socialism and emancipation.

In both cases, crisis steadily emerged despite often-significant achievements in the realm of living standards and quality of life.

The crisis of the national liberation movements is integrally connected to the rise of neo-liberalism, the collapse of many socialist countries, and the related crisis of socialism. Post World War II national liberation movements emerged in the context of the decline of the old colonial powers, the struggle between the U.S. and USSR, and the struggle between socialism and imperialism. An opening existed to fight for independence and national liberation. With the growing crisis of socialism, and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, most Third World nations could no longer politically or economically maneuver between the two superpowers. A slow but steady capitulation to neo-liberalism developed as a main trend.

Even progressive forces in the Third World found it hard to resist the neo-liberal tide. In many cases, Left movements were unable to lead an effective challenge to the threats, blackmail, and demands of imperialism for so-called structural adjustment to Third World economies. These attacks and demands often violated the national sovereignty of the oppressed nations. And behind the bankers and diplo-

mats, stand planes, warships and troops. The United States has repeatedly demonstrated this fact in Grenada, Panama, Libya, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere to enforce Margaret Thatcher's slogan for the New World Order: "There is no alternative!"

Contributing also to the crisis of the national liberation movements has been the emergence of ethnic conflicts, which have deflected the focus of the struggle away from imperialism and its local partners.

The crisis of the national liberation movements applies equally to national movements within the U.S. The decline of the left in the oppressed nationality movements has been matched by a rise to ideological and political leadership in its place of forces representing the professional and business classes. Like their counterparts in the Third World, many of these groups and individuals have accepted the framework of neo-liberalism. Their narrow, elitist, and accommodationist strategies contributed to the demoralization and de-mobilization of these movements.

### **The Challenge to the Working Class**

Left Refoundation is a process for recreating, reestablishing, and reasserting an ideological and institutional base in the U.S. for overthrowing capitalism and beginning to create a socialist society. One initial objective of Left Refoundation is to create public discourse on the subject of revolution and socialism. Another objective is to evaluate socialist theory and practice in a way that encourages collaboration and development of strategy on the Left. Building the ideological and institutional base for a new type of socialist party will require public debate, collaborative analysis and broad scale struggles that have revolutionary potential. In the past, party building preoccupied major sectors of the Socialist Left. In recent years, most independent socialists and socialist organizations have paid little attention to this element of our overall strategy for revolution.

Socialists have instead built our organizations as bulwarks of resistance, as trainers of the next generation, and as keepers of the faith. In this past pe-

riod of right-wing dominance, we should count "keeper of the faith" as a worthwhile accomplishment. But over time, it means we settled in for a whole lot less than we need. We lowered our sights to fighting the good fight instead of winning liberation of the masses of the people.

To fight our common enemy, we all take risks daily. To become more than the sum of our parts, we must take some very different kinds of risks. We can no longer dance around those risks, hiding in the safety of our own organizational confines. The time has come to put party building decisively back on the table for discussion and action. A new priority on party building does not mean that we think some new nationwide revolutionary organization made up of working class fighters of all nationalities waits just around the corner. The refoundationist perspective contrasts with the party-building efforts of the 1970s, particularly efforts of elements of the self-proclaimed new communist movement—the Communist Labor Party (CLP), the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (CPML) and the Communist Workers Party (CWP). Certain conditions in the U.S. and the world require revolutionaries to begin again the long arduous task of building a broad movement of the Left that has the objective of creating a new socialist party.

Corporate hegemony in the media and in education has created a dominant set of beliefs that stresses "no hope" and that the market economy is the only way forward. The absence of a strong Left in the U.S. contributes to this smothering ideological climate.

On the other hand, for all the damage it has done, the right wing no longer inspires the same mass respect it has these past twenty years. We all see glimmers of hope in the labor movement, as well as the African-American, Chicano, Asian movements, immigrant movements and Student movements. Left forces have begun to look for ways to gain back the initiative.

Capitalism has always been global. What is different now is the hyper-mobility of capital, trans-national

production, and the greater penetration of global markets, accelerating since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Global conditions offer new opportunities for international working class solidarity, while demanding collaborative strategies for success.

Also different today is the incredible increase in both economic and environmental injustice. 225 individuals have accumulated wealth greater than 47% (2.5 billion) of the people on this planet. The economic immiseration of the overwhelming majority of the world's people both contributes to and is made worse by spreading environmental cancers, global warming, the destruction of ecosystems and resources, and the spectre of total corporate control of the world's food supply.

Since the 1970s, U.S. capitalism has steadily found new strengths to master global stagnation, but not eliminate it. Back in the 1970s, after its defeat in Vietnam and the gains of the freedom struggles, capitalist expansion and profits stagnated. In response, capitalist attacks on the welfare state combined with the dramatic extension of global markets brought a new period of capitalist growth. This imperialist trend in the class struggle found ideological and cultural justification as neo-liberalism, a consensus among ruling circles that the state would no longer act as provider of the social safety net or as regulator of the corporate sector. Instead, the state would reduce its role to opening international markets and ensuring corporate profits.

The other trend of the weakening of U.S. economic hegemony continues, and in the longer run, remains the more powerful historical factor. But in the here and now, we cannot underestimate the resiliency of U.S. imperialism. In addition, globalization reflects growing economic and military integration of Western European and Japanese economic powers. Its military advantage makes the U.S. the international corporate cop and the most dangerous imperialist power. Furthermore, imperialist agencies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and the World Trade Organization can force neo-liberal policies onto weaker nation-states and devastate emerging working class movements. Immigrants

from developing nations still seek haven in the U.S. due to its relative position of privilege.

Capitalist economic trends include corporate restructuring, flexible production, privatization of public agencies, globalizing of the labor market, strategic use of technology and the shift to a service economy. This facet of the neo-liberal era has changed the nature of work, expanded the definition of worker, and intensified racial polarization in the U.S. working class. Some at the high end of the service industry remain privileged and benefit directly from U.S. imperialism. But as a whole, the U.S. working class suffered economic decline during this period. Both white workers and disproportionately, working class people of color and non-European immigrants have been thrown out of good paying manufacturing or public sector jobs (primary economic sector) and confined to low paying service and/or manufacturing jobs (secondary economic sector). Still others are forced into permanent temporary employment or the informal economic sector (hidden economy). And still others, primarily white women and women of color, are forced into the virtual slave labor of so-called Welfare Reform forced work.

In short, highly valued unionized skilled and semi-skilled working class occupations have dwindled in number without disappearing, and some new professional positions have emerged. Privilege in the distribution of work, benefits, housing and services within the U.S. working class remains an unmistakable and unavoidable factor. Privilege remains distinctly racialized to the advantage of white people over people of color and non-white immigrants. In turn, the ideology of white supremacy continues to have a material basis. A separate pattern of male privilege at work, in the community and at home also hinders working class unity. At the same time, a new consequence of globalization and neoliberalism is rising interracial tension among minority groups within the U.S. and between native U.S. minorities and new immigrants.

## Resisting the Offensive of Capital

The average U.S. worker has a living standard approximating that of 1979, gaining ground again only after a twenty-five year decline. Workers today typically work longer hours on the job or cannot find steady work at all, need to hold down more than one job, or have to take temporary jobs. Credit card debt has risen dramatically. Millions of people lack health insurance. Overall, economic insecurity has grown.

Unionization stands at less than 14%. More so than at any time since the 1930s, capital can start off a union contract negotiation cycle assuming no need for any significant concessions to labor. The hope that one could predict a steady rise in one's living standard (or for that of one's children) is over for most workers. Business adoption of new technology has rendered entire fields of work obsolete. For many other workers, capital's greater flexibility to pick up its operations and move--and to continually hold the threat to move--has workers living in fear of their jobs and livelihoods.

The decline in the overall standard of living of the working class disproportionately hits oppressed nationality working class men, women and youth. Nonetheless, we also see reinvigorated scapegoating of immigrants and other people of color--for example, California's Propositions 187, 209, 227 and new Juvenile Justice Initiative. The combination of these two factors intensifies racial cleavages within the U.S. working class. At the same time, the grinding down of the working class as a whole also raises the potential for greater revolutionary unity.

The neo-liberal offensive targeted the economic stagnation and profits squeeze felt by the imperialist centers in the early 1970s. Union-busting, slashing the welfare safety net, weakening health, safety and environmental regulations, providing tax breaks and government assistance to big business has been the order of the '80s and '90s. In the movements of people of color and the women's, labor, environmental, gay and lesbian movements, resistance has been the watchword. While important efforts at collaboration occurred, the Left wings of these movements have not generally seen themselves as

part of a single larger, coherent anti-capitalist Left. And we have therefore not offered leadership within our movements from that perspective.

Resistance grew from the 1980s to the 1990s, but we continue to lack a more cohesive, all-round political project for social transformation with which forces from various progressive social movements can identify. In the absence of such a project, fighters in the various movements have fallen back upon the frameworks and contexts of their respective movements.

A new generation of activists has played an important part in this new wave of struggle. The fight for affirmative action, against police brutality, for welfare rights, the civil rights of gay and lesbian people and other issues provide a catalyst for new activism. Support for the Zapatistas, the Anti-Sweatshop campaigns, support for the struggle in the Pilipines and other campaigns also reflect a new internationalism. Young activists also have made their mark on struggles against injustice to workers--garment workers, immigrant worker rights, and for the right of workers to unite into unions. But among today's activist youth as well, the various causes have not found common ground in any comprehensive strategy that significantly challenges capitalism.

Many of the best young activists, including many of working class origin, are being recruited into the partly rejuvenated union movement. The difference with past generations is that they are entering as staff, usually organizers, instead of starting as workers on the floor or in the fields. The other difference is that the Left is not concentrated in the workplace as it once was.

Some who consciously see themselves as revolutionaries have formed organizations such as Standing Together Organizing a Revolutionary Movement (STORM), Asian Revolutionary Circle, Young Comrades, Accion Borricua, Black Panther Party Collective, Zulu Nation, Asians and Pacific Islanders For Community Empowerment, Pilipino Workers Collective, ACTION, Olean and SOUL. As in past generations, these emerging revolutionaries are searching for revolutionary answers. They are

seeking out answers from different theories and ideologies and perhaps, like past generations, they will develop their own visions for revolution. The international crisis of socialism, our inadequate summary of our (New Left) history and the lack of a clear revolutionary analysis, vision or alternative has impaired our ability to adequately bridge the ideological, cultural and experiential gap that exists between the '60s and '70s revolutionaries and the emerging revolutionaries of the '90s.

## Learn From Earlier Efforts to Construct a Revolutionary Socialist Party

No one should deny the exemplary role played by the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) at key points in its history. Especially during the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party, working along with other Left organizations, helped organize the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) labor federation, mount the struggle against lynching and Jim Crow, and build new organizations to fight for self-determination for the African-American nation. The CPUSA's anti-fascist stance during most of that period made a huge difference.

During that time, the CPUSA held to what it called the popular front-- that a very broad political bloc was necessary to defeat the challenge of fascism and war. The party's approach also emphasized rooting itself in local workplace and community struggles, as they successfully accomplished in many movements and locales. In the African-American movement, by way of example, the CPUSA set out to construct their organization as a vehicle for Black liberation and socialism.

Nevertheless, the CPUSA fell victim to tendencies that dragged down virtually all the Western communist parties. During and after World War II, the CPUSA backed off its commitment to self-determination and the struggles of oppressed nationalities. The Party refused to oppose the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, did not support the wartime African American March on Washington, and eased up in its emphasis on organizing the South. Reformism became the

strategic stance of the CPUSA, putting it in line with traditional, pro-Soviet communist parties in other parts of the world. This, coupled with an uncritical identification with the USSR and its policies, contributed to a marginalization of their organization and role among emerging forces in older and newer progressive social movements.

In the advanced capitalist countries overall, Marxist-Leninist notions of the struggle for power swung back and forth between two extremes. At times, Marxist-Leninist parties emphasized direct confrontation with the state and sectarianism towards almost all other left forces. Parties saw themselves as the only important actor--the self-appointed vanguard--with all other forces serving as fronts that they sought to control or manipulate. In other times and places, Marxist-Leninists took a leap of faith to seek a historic compromise (in the Italian expression) with capitalism. Parties dissolved (at least ideologically and sometimes practically) into shapeless mass forms, becoming something of an ideological apparition.

Nowhere in the West did these parties succeed in building a strategic alliance of forces that could fully challenge capitalism and win state power. Even those communist movements that successfully led the anti-fascist struggle during World War II had trouble once in power. We certainly still have much to learn from these experiences. Some, such as the Italian party and its successor Party of Communist Refoundation, played an important role both in the student and labor revolts of the sixties as well as in reaching the present new activist generation. Yet the limitations of most of these parties provide an additional reflection of the crisis of socialism.

Engaged by the Vietnam war, the 60s freedom struggles, the women's movement and other new movements, a generation turned itself for a time to fundamental social change. Despite the problems of the traditional socialist left, many activists stuck with national organizations linked to that past--notably, the Communist Party, the Democratic Socialists of America, the Socialist party, the Socialist Workers

Party. Activists of color joined these organizations to a lesser degree, but overall this remains true.

Those organizations played an important role in furthering some crucial mass and reform struggles, but did not provide the breakthrough in thinking and organizing to move socialism forward.

A probably larger wave of activists moved out beyond the established socialist left to attempt to build new revolutionary parties. These all either failed to take root or collapsed after some initial success. At least among that sector known as the anti-revisionist or new communist movement, these efforts were plagued with left sectarianism and white chauvinism. Moreover, though they condemned the Communist Party as hopelessly lost or revisionist, they offered only incomplete or contradictory analyses of the shortcomings of the CPUSA and Soviet-style communism generally.

Many adopted an uncritical stance toward the Communist Party of China, and sometimes mechanically applied the experience of that Party to party building efforts here. One result was a proliferation of "pre-party" organizations that all tried to act like mini-parties, often seeing themselves as the center of the Left universe. They created unrealistic expectations for themselves. Seeking some kind of franchise from China, some of these pre-party organizations moved rapidly to consolidate as many loosely allied local study groups and collectives into jury-rigged national organizations.

These organizations in their different ways had master plans for party formation, but not true strategies for party building. *Party formation* assumes that the guiding organization or organizations have reached the maturity to present the key questions and the best possible answers. When this happens prematurely, movements, organizations and individuals participating find their own contributions greatly hampered. *Party Building* as we speak of it here contains fewer answers and far more questions. Debate and practical engagement together among a wide variety of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist forces takes place within a generally Marxist framework to

determine the culture, politics and structure of the new party.

The new party-builders of that earlier era included some of the finest left activists from the 1960s anti-war, oppressed nationality, and other social movements. Its activists exerted significant influence and leadership over countless mass-based struggles from the late 1960s to 1980s. Yet the movement proved to be less than the sum of its parts. It did not coalesce in such a manner that it could actually advance the struggle for a new Marxism and become a major political force in society. Those few anti-revisionist parties that did develop a significant mass base could not maintain and expand that influence past the 1980s.

Unfortunately, Left approaches that denied the need for a specific revolutionary party did not fare particularly well either. Highly decentralized or community-based attempts at building working class leadership (along the lines of Italy's Lotta Continua), tended to collapse earlier than the Marxist-Leninists, particularly as the mass upsurges of the 1960 and early '70s died down. A similar fate befell groups like Katipunan ng ma Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP) in the U.S., which advocated building an anti-imperialist (as opposed to socialist) party. KDP ultimately abandoned its effort and joined the group Line of March, which itself collapsed in the late '80s. Many local activists also found an ideological home in the Democratic Socialists of America, which has remained relatively large throughout the 1990s, but largely unable to marshal effective, coordinated political strength.

Revolutionary organizations such as the Black Panther Party expanded rapidly and influenced thousands of activists, within and outside of the Black Liberation Movement. The BPP played a critical role in educating the masses about the real nature of the capitalist state, the liberation character of the African-American struggle, and the central role of the African American people's movement in the overall struggle for social change. Due to massive state infiltration and repression and complex internal contradictions, the Panthers also did not survive

into the 1980s as a major political organization. But the Panthers and other radical oppressed nationality initiatives of the late sixties inspired a second wave of oppressed nationality Marxist organizations, which in turn fed into the wider new communist movement described above.

During the 1980s, a separate strategy was followed by some on the Left who either denied outright the need for a party or who put it so far into the future as to deny it in practice. Single-issue movements and organizations, solidarity movements like the Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), left environmentalists, and the gay/lesbian rights movements seemed to offer an alternative way of rebuilding the Left, through building up the mass movements. Without in any way dismissing the accomplishments, vigilance and valiance of these forces, their efforts failed to develop a coherent Left or to construct a party (for those who argued they were about doing so).

Other important trends, such as revolutionary nationalism, traditional democratic socialism, and radical and socialist feminism, also rallied large numbers of committed activists and contributed to the waves of resistance from the 1970s into the 1990s. But they too failed to become centers of new, nationwide unifying left mobilization.

In the wake of the collapse of most alternatives to the pro-Soviet approach to Marxism, the U.S. activist base drifted toward liberalism and left reformism, toward an embrace of social democracy or non-Left progressive politics, mostly tied to the Democratic Party. In most cases this tendency, sometimes among fine activists who continued highly effective grass roots organizing, led to their complete abandonment of an anti-capitalist alternative. Strategically, the mass of the Left accommodated itself to the continued existence of capitalism and to a large degree became nothing more than an opposition force within a capitalist context. This stance provided little or no chance of gaining real power. Notably, in the wake of the Black-led electoral upsurge of the early to mid-1980s, many took the road of maneuvering within the Democratic Party.

Some folks, lacking a clear strategy for rebuilding the Left and creating a new Party, focused more and more on just developing their own organizing and internal structures in the hopes that a revolutionary socialist party would eventually emerge out of developing objective and subjective conditions.

We offer this somewhat sweeping assessment not expecting to surprise very many people and certainly not hoping to depress anyone at this late date. We don't mean to gloss over the many positive advances that committed activists made in developing new organizing tactics and strategies and contributions to political theory during this period. Many people and groups have important stories to write and tell. In part, we think so few of us have done so because of the lack of a supportive, forward-looking political context. And we think an important common strand, even given all the external corporate, world wide imperialist, and right wing pressures has been the inattention or wrong-minded attention to party-building. We earnestly hope that the process we here call Left Refoundation will encourage that summarizing of experience in ways that will serve a new process of socialist party building.

By party building, we mean creating a party that learns from but that will be very different from the older models. Our task is not simply to take part in a new wave of socialist organizing. Nor is it solely to build resistance among the masses, though both tasks are essential. But in order to strengthen resistance at the base, as well as offer a viable challenge to capitalism, we need to lay the foundations for a socialist party. We need to help create a political force firmly grounded within the working class and oppressed nationality movements, and representing at least a trend within the radical tradition of other progressive social movements. We need a party unapologetically anti-capitalist, confidently socialist; democratic in both its view of the future society as well as in the manner in which it operates; and representing a convergence of the people's movements in composition and orientation.

Given this country's history, revolutionary strategy will only make sense if it centers on the freedom and

national liberation struggles here in the United States. A vital socialist movement will in turn depend on an uncompromising struggle against white supremacy, racism, and national oppression. Re-foundation depends on the new party reflecting the revolutionary character of the national liberation movements in the U.S., especially the working class from those movements. We need this in party membership and leadership, organizational culture, and practice.

Party building, therefore, will be a broader task than organizing existing Marxists and others on the Left. Party building has to include the task of encouraging and supporting broad-based theoretical exploration and development, left-wing culture, opposition to imperialist corruption, and the building of bridges between generations of activists. Activist work mainly helping to develop the mass movements can also help bring about a new party. The Party we want to help create must be rooted in the day-to-day struggle of the masses.

## **Learn From Socialism's Past in Order to Move Forward**

Neo-liberalism has not resolved the basic contradictions of capitalism. From our many, different vantage points in workplaces and communities throughout the country, we all can see that the system remains in crisis. But 20th Century efforts to construct a socialist alternative--what Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin describes as Socialism I--have not proven viable. From a global perspective, this seems true even where political parties that proclaim social emancipation remain in power. As others have observed with respect to the advanced capitalist countries, the masses may hate capitalism, but they fear socialism.

In order to advance a revolutionary cause, we will have to face the reality of this fear of socialism. Yes, the agents of capitalism have always smeared any efforts at independence and socialism. And yes, revolutionary victories in Russia, China and elsewhere threw out the capitalists and other reactionaries and began the process of constructing socialist

societies for the benefit of the people. In many countries, for a time living conditions improved, the economy grew, arts and culture flourished, rights gained protection.

But it is also the case that Marxism, as practiced in the USSR, and influencing other parties elsewhere, increasingly came to cast a shadow on the cause of socialism. Contradicting Marx, the Soviet Communist leadership denied class struggle under socialism in all but its most extreme and military forms. It took a narrow view of economic development that led to the poisoning of the environment. It promoted a Russia-centered view of the state, which, in practice, denied the right of national self-determination to other peoples in the territory of the USSR.

The Soviet interpretation of Marxism failed to identify steps that would increase the power of the worker in the workplace and in society. It ignored, and in many ways encouraged, the growth of a class or strata that advanced the interests of capital, while paying lip service to socialism.

It adopted an economist view of the struggle for women's emancipation. Women's liberation was centered almost totally on the role in the workplace, and failed to address issues of male supremacy in the home, the Party, and the state. It failed to provide political democracy in order to both engage in widespread debate as well as to overthrow the myriad of layers of oppression inherited from capitalist society.

We don't offer this as an all-inclusive list, but rather a delineation of some of the key contributing factors to the crisis of socialism and to the apprehension many working people have about the models from the first, but not the last, socialist wave. While acknowledging many of the positive achievements of that era, those attempting to rebuild the Left and advance Marxism must be unafraid to confront this history.

## **Building the Party of the Dispossessed**

We don't know exactly what the new party we seek will look like. Many groups and individuals, re-

flecting the full diversity of anti-capitalist struggle in the United States, will have to contribute to this. Reflecting this intended diversity, lets for the moment call this new formation we seek the Party of the Dispossessed.

And while we're just barely at the beginning of this process, we can suggest a few things based on all our experiences in the past period. The type of party suggested here needs to be mass and working class, and it will surely co-exist with other mass parties. This party of the dispossessed will need to be a party that seeks to advance the struggle for political power, both within the context of capitalism as well as in a post-capitalist environment.

To carry forward the long-term struggle, we can't make due with a social-democratic party. This new party needs to imbue our organizing with the recognition that capitalism will not disappear as a result of periodic reforms. We need to proclaim the goal not to reform capitalism, but to eliminate it. Contrary to social democrats, who, upon achieving power, again and again assumed that the ruling elite would play fair, a party of the dispossessed will assume exactly the opposite. The capitalists have never willingly given up power. That means that the working class must take state power and struggle to keep it. Only in a workers' democracy will the conditions be created for the social revolution that will be necessary in order to fully eliminate capitalism and the power of capital, and emancipate the oppressed.

The existence of our newer type of party of the dispossessed is not antagonistic to other mass formations, including the Labor Party, the New Party, or mass organizations such as ACORN. The socialist party we aim to construct will have a relationship of unity and struggle with progressive formations and not attempt to replace them or relegate them to fertile fields for recruitment. We seek a party that articulates a vision of socialism that is revolutionary and democratic. It cannot afford to be a loose network of associated individuals but needs to organize as a disciplined political force, capable of advancing a vision and moving a program. This

means the party needs to undertake coordinated regional and national campaigns, produce high quality publications, regularly summarize its practice and draw lessons from it, develop theory, systematically train its members, and have full time leadership and organizers.

Given the processes some of us lived through in the 1970s, we do not advance a new variation on the self-appointed vanguard party. Both the Communist Party USA and the 1970s oppositional Marxist-Leninist organizations postured as self-appointed vanguards. This stance stood at odds with the limited base and political influence of these organizations. We suggest instead a party that we hope will become part of the vanguard in the fight for socialism. We hope for this and will have to work for it. This role will emerge through practice in the class struggle rather than through public relations announcements. In the very essence of this newer type of party there must be the notion of building power for the dispossessed, and uniting in struggle with other forces in the progressive social movements.

Especially in the world we now live and organize in, the new party will need to be truly internationalist, in three respects. First, it needs to commit to actively combating racism, national oppression and white supremacy. Racism and national oppression have flourished again in the era of neo-liberalism and once again increased the historical tensions along racial and national lines within the U.S. working class. A new party also will need to unite with currents of revolutionary nationalism and struggle to welcome revolutionary nationalists into its ranks.

Internationalism also means a commitment to support and embrace other revolutionary and democratic struggles against imperialism. These include those struggles conducted among the nations of the South as well as those advanced by oppressed nations and nationalities within countries of the North. (The terms South and North offer another way of expressing the contradiction between the formerly colonized, under-developed countries disproportionately in the Southern Hemisphere and the indus-

trialized countries of the West and East.) Our internationalism actively advances the struggle for national self-determination as part of the struggle for socialism. Upholding the national rights of oppressed people within U.S. borders, the new party will organize for a self-determination that is part of the process of opposing imperialism and also of reconstructing relations between nations and people on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

Neo-liberal policies have resulted in great damage to the environments, economies, and social structures of the nations and peoples of the South. Neo-liberalism has, as well, rendered whole populations marginal to the future envisioned by the large corporations that dominate the planet. A true newer type party--the party of the dispossessed will surely align itself with these peoples and advance and support their struggles here in the U.S.

Our internationalism, however, does not stop there. It must also include a rejection of Eurocentrism in much of what parades itself as being Marxist theory. The crisis of socialism is certainly a global crisis, but it is especially a crisis of theoretical fashions and organizational standards emanating from Eurocentric experience. Our internationalism encourages us to reflect on social practice alongside comrades in the countries of the South. We can learn from their experience in revolutionary and democratic struggles. Internationalism requires willingness to learn from the contributions of Third World revolutionaries to Marxism, as well as an interest and willingness to undertake examinations of other revolutionary currents, and the theories so elaborated.

### **Create An Alternative to Neo-Liberalism and New Deal Nostalgia**

In the current situation, we gain little by drawing a definitive line between those who believe that this party of the dispossessed will be a Marxist-Leninist party, or a party of some other type, such as the Brazilian Worker's Party. The definition of a Marxist-Leninist party has evolved in countless different directions, including parties ranging from the

Worker's Party of Korea [North], at one extreme, to the South African Communist Party and the Italian Party of Communist Refoundation, on to the Workers (Communist) Party of Norway.

Advocates of traditional democratic centralist, cadre organizational frameworks will need to define to what extent such a party addresses or ignores the crisis of socialism. For their part, those advancing some other notion of a party of the dispossessed have the obligation to define its class character and its role in the struggle for socialism. Given the present state of the Left in this neo-liberal era, we can safely observe that the greatest danger for such a party of the dispossessed is falling into one or another variety of social democracy.

The specific nature of the party will need to be worked through in the course of an extended discussion, debate, analysis, and summing up of practice. We need to rely on those currents within Marxism that show willingness to learn from each other and from earlier socialist experience in order to assert a Marxism that is truly revolutionary, democratic and internationalist. A party of this type and emerging in this way will necessarily be multi-tendenced, the parameters of which must be defined over time. We need a broad front to address the crisis of socialism, and we need unity to tackle the collective lack of clarity among revolutionary Marxists.

This organizational task is simply beyond the resources of any one organization or grouping of individuals. We therefore must share a willingness to engage in broad debate even among forces that were, in the past, at odds with one another. Such a debate will need to take place both within the context of a party, as well as within the broader Left. Socialists, agreeing to certain basic principles and strategy, need to create terms of engagement that can exist within a party formation. This approach recognizes contributions to revolutionary theory from tendencies in addition to Marxism-Leninism, such as those coming from theorists of the women's, oppressed nationality, lesbian and gay, and environmental movements.

Political conditions today also argue for a multi-tendenced party. We need a mass political alternative to both neo-liberalism and New Deal nostalgia. The crisis facing working people, and the collapse of various reformist alternatives, demand a coherent Left opposition/alternative. Such an alternative must be capable of engaging in broad struggles and not simply serving as a propaganda sect. Engagement at the level of mass politics necessitates an organization/party that is multi-tendenced, while nevertheless being socialist. It assumes that many issues of debate will need to be postponed while at the same time ensuring that we have sufficient unity to engage in the various aspects of the class struggle.

The strategy of Left Refoundation envisions an approach to party building that contrasts, in its fundamentals, with approaches taken in earlier periods. Superficially, there may appear to be certain similarities. But at the level of theory, Left Refoundation proceeds from the notion of practice—reflection/ summation--new practice. Reflection and summation drive the process when they result in the theorizing of experiences, individual and collective. This is not novel, at least as a stated position. However, Left Refoundation wishes to translate this approach into a strategy for party building that begins with acknowledging the experience, politics and theories that already exist among anti-capitalist activists of various stripes. No one group possesses the Holy Grail. Therefore the approach we propose includes the following elements:

**Identify cores of anti-capitalist activists:** We need the support of dedicated but often isolated groupings of left-oriented activists organizing in all the contemporary social movements, but particularly those grounded and based within the working class sector of those movements, especially the oppressed nationality movements. Such activists may or may not be part of formal organizations. This main aspect of the project does not consist of uniting existing organizations, although it does not preclude that from happening.

**Seek sponsors of the Refoundation project.** This step is of critical importance. The Refoundation

project ideally needs institutional sponsors who are willing to help build it (and its various components). Such co-sponsors might be other organizations or institutions, or a set of respected individuals. In any case, ideally, there is organizational support.

**Commit to a structured, multi-year engagement among participants in this project.** This engagement needs to include political discussion, study, debate, summation and the identification of points of theoretical and practical unity. An example of this would be to have a specific several-month project of addressing the lessons to be drawn from the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the crisis of socialism. What does such a collapse mean for a vision of socialism? How do we get to socialism? How does class struggle play itself out during socialism? What is the relationship between political liberties, democracy and workers' power? (These questions are not exclusive.)

Another example might be a specific examination of the national liberation movements in the U.S. (at the general level), followed or accompanied by a specific examination of particular freedom struggles. What, for example, does the crisis of the national liberation struggles internationally affect domestic national movements? How should one view nationalism in the era of neo-liberalism and structural adjustment? Where should the work of the party of the dispossessed be concentrated? How does the party achieve the class, racial and gender composition necessary to truly represent the dispossessed?

**Launch coordinated national organizing projects:** Intersecting the process of study, reflection and debate would be engagement in collective, practical projects. Such projects should be consistent with the principles of unity that bring these various forces and individuals together. They should also not be grandiose, e.g., running our own 3rd party candidate for the U.S. presidency, but should be rooted in the actual work of the people involved. Joint action aims to have a practical impact on day-to-day struggles as well as serve as a means to learn from and implement the outcome of theoretical dis-

ussions. This work should also be summarized and factored into the discussions that are taking place.

Work to build the Black Radical Congress, the New Raza Left, and the Asian Left Forum illustrate some of the objectives of the refoundation approach, including the centrality of the national movements to the Left refoundation analysis. Also the approach taken and advocated in the construction of these initiatives flows from a view that the rebuilding of the Left generally, and the Lefts in the national movements in particular, are not the province of one ideological or political tendency alone.

As our forces gain strength, areas of joint action may expand to include issues such as municipal and county political power; the transformation of national trade unions into strengthened centers of resistance; community-centered public education, to name a few. These will have to be carefully chosen.

This multi-year project needs to be pulled together at some future date. Those who entered into the project would, of course, need to understand and agree that this project was not to be an abstract Left unity effort, but is aimed at constructing an organization/party. At the end of the period of engagement, the entire process would need to be summarized. Such a summation would aim to determine whether the basis exists to make the transition to such a party. We will need to know when unity has been reached on a real strategy; whether we have a critical mass of people; whether we have unified on an appropriate organizational form; when we have achieved bottom lines of political and operational unity.

The approach advanced here borrows from and seeks to utilize popular education as, indeed, it is intended to be used: as a "pedagogy of the oppressed," not a series of disconnected educational techniques. A Freirian approach to this project aims to create a democratic dialog among forces interested in the construction of a party of the dispossessed.

### **Begin With Broad Socialist Unity**

What sorts of forces should be approached for this refoundationist project? Specifically, around what

would people need to agree? To some extent this must be an open question and one subject to intense negotiations. Nevertheless, the following are some basic outlines:

**Recognize the need to fight for socialism.** While perhaps continuing to disagree on particulars, we need to agree that we seek a social system in which the working class is the leading class, the struggle against capital continues, political democracy is enhanced, and political debate is allowed within the bounds of a constitution. At the very least, there should be a consensual definition of socialism premised on the notion of class power as opposed to utopian views or those views that downplay class and class struggle.

**Recognize the strategic significance of the struggle against racism and white supremacy and for national self-determination.** Signatories to the refoundation project should not be held to a specific definition of particular oppressed nationalities. But all should commit to principled debate on these questions, and recognize that the struggle against white supremacy is central to building a broad, popular bloc that can achieve power.

**Recognize that the struggle against male supremacy and for the emancipation of women is not an add-on struggle, but is part of the strategic formulation for the construction of socialism.** This is not a struggle restricted to formal, democratic rights--though such a struggle is profoundly important--but is a struggle against the patriarchal roles and power which have consistently undermined progressive struggles and projects, including the struggles for national liberation and socialism. The struggle for gender equity must also be a struggle that recognizes the profound democratic issue contained in the lesbian and gay movements. We must build a movement that challenges heterosexism as well as other forms of traditional male supremacy, both within the movement itself, and in the larger society.

**Recognize the immediate and long-term importance of democracy.** The refoundation project must assume a level of unity among its constituents that the socialism for which we fight will be revolutionary and democratic. In addition, the struggle for consistent democracy within the context of capitalism also must reflect the democratic vision we hold for the future. This does not mean that we should neglect the nature of the capitalist state: at the point at which a socialist, anti-capitalist, or anti-imperialist movement takes off, it will face vicious repression. Operating in an environment of repression will, by necessity, change the forms of organization necessary in order to prosecute any struggle.

**Recognize the priority of connecting the struggle for the environment and the struggle against capitalism.** The refoundation project itself embraces the struggle to save the environment and is willing to criticize the approach to economic construction that took place in the states of Socialism I, where the environment was ignored, and often destroyed.

**Recognize that our project must be internationalist.** We recognize that the United States is an em-

pire and adhere to the concept advanced by Samora Machel: "Internationalism is strategy, not charity."

**Recognize our need to base Refoundation within the working class and sees the working class as its home.** Without denying other sectors of social movements, the refoundation project must strive to be a working class project, that is, a project of and for the working class!

Unidos y Organizados, Venceremos/United and Organized, We Will Win!

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