



MAGAZINE

JANUARY 2023

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Thinking about strategy

State of the world

Interviewing Russian
draft resisters



*“Another World Is
Possible.
Let’s Bring It to
Reality.”*

-Noam Chomsky



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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Thinking about strategy:

Left Culture and Movement Prospects 3
by Bridget Meehan, Michael Albert

New Year at The New School 9
by Cooper Sperling, Fintan Bradshaw

Thinking About Thinking About Strategy 12
by Michael Albert

Make Economic Democracy Popular Again! 22
by Rasmus Hästbacka

State of the world:

Another World Is Possible. Lets Bring It to Reality. 25
C. J. Polychroniou interviews Noam Chomsky

Decry The Merchants of Death 29
Kathy Kelly

Israel Was Never a Democracy 31
by Ramzy Baroud

Disgracing The Dream
by Wim Laven

Interviews with Russian draft resisters:

Voices of Resistance 34
by Alexandria Shaner

Left Culture and Movement Prospects

Bridget Meehan, Michael Albert

Have you ever heard a fellow progressive, leftist, radical, or revolutionary say, “I remain on the left despite the left, not because of it”? The left, writ large, is a kind of community. It has an array of traditions, rituals, and norms which diversely appear in leftwing organizations, projects, campaigns, and movements. Of course, there are many variations. But it turns out, even those on the left who practice a fair share of the expected language, traditions, rituals, and norms often dislike parts of the whole. In fact, isn’t it the case that many who leave progressive leftist, radical, and revolutionary projects, organizations, parties, and movements—which over time is a whole lot of people with many never returning—leave largely because of interactions they have encountered on the left?

In that light, we might reasonably ask, what is it about some left behavior, or at a minimum about people’s impressions of some left behavior, that repels those who would otherwise identify with left aims?

Most people who become involved with progressive, left, radical, or revolutionary (hereafter just called left) political projects and movements do so because they have a genuine desire to change the world for the better. Left ideas resonate with them. But if most people get involved with the movement to improve the world, why do so many of them not stick around for the long haul?

First, you might reasonably wonder, is that really true? Do that many people really leave the left? Well, mentally tally all the folks who have been in anti-war, feminist, gay and lesbian, anti-racist, no nukes, climate, labor, community, and other movements over, say, the past five decades. Millions. Even tens of

millions. How many of those people remain to this day actively engaged in left projects and movements? Incontestably, the answer is a seriously small percentage. This is a major issue. Indeed, it may be the most serious issue activists face. We continually refill our movements yet they don’t grow much. After any sudden intense growth, which periodically happens, movements shrink back because people leave the left at roughly the same overall pace as people join the left. It is like the water level in a bathtub with the drain open and the faucet on. The water level stays static.

Without a doubt, fighting against the most powerful institutions in the world isn’t easy and can wear on anyone. This, of course, explains why some who join the left, later leave. Political work can be difficult, stressful, and taxing. It wears people out. Burn-out is a fact. But why can’t we do a better job of supporting people who are enduring such pressures?

Being a progressive, leftist, radical, or revolutionary ought to mean wanting to attain a better world. It ought to mean revealing obstacles to attaining a better world. It ought to mean understanding the roots and mechanisms of the obstacles, communicating the ensuing insights, and developing campaigns to overcome or transcend the obstacles.

So, do we do that regarding the reasons our size seems to be capped by the fact that people join, excited and eager, but all too often leave, worn out and depressed? Do we sufficiently identify the problems at work in that phenomenon, communicate those problems, and initiate campaigns to overcome or transcend them? If not, why not? Is it because self-assessment, especially to find correctable flaws,

is uncomfortable? Is it because we know it will offend some? Where the left is super ready to identify problems in the mainstream world that obstruct our success, why do we hesitate to find problems within our own collective practice? Is it due to not wanting to pile on, to not wanting to undermine, to not wanting to be called to task as not a team player?

Perhaps we can here identify some consequential issues. Recognizing that what is important is not whether the issues mentioned here are true of everyone on the left, or even of most on the left, or ultimately, in some sense, even of anyone on the left. What is important is do the issues mentioned here identify reasons people leave or don't join the left in the first place.

Sometimes it seems that activists think new people should just hear the truth, hop off the couch, get involved with, become immersed in, and rise to lead political movements. Of course, for the majority of Americans who live in poverty or can barely make ends meet, that's not reality. For them, reality looks like multiple jobs, risky or no housing, health problems, and mounting bills and debt. Their daily life pressures tend to be all-consuming. If we're serious about actual working-class people joining much less becoming immersed in and leading campaigns for change, we must first understand how different their day-to-day lives are than those of most established left writers, activists, organizers, and commentators, and beyond understanding that difference, we must act in light of that understanding.

To programmatically reach and involve working-class people, the left should in considerable part focus on the sort of reforms and legislation that would create more conducive circumstances for working-class people to participate in political activities. Immediately, this could include seeking student loan abolishment, at least a living minimum wage, ample affordable or free housing, Medicare For All, free or affordable childcare services, expanded Social Security payments, free and universal daycare and health care, and especially and most obviously, a shorter workweek with increased pay, plus better conditions for union and general labor organizing and reform.

Quite often, these issues are indeed part of the overall commitment on the left and thus the rhetoric of activists, but nonetheless, they are not so successfully emphasized in many organizing efforts. Is it in part because many of those who occupy important roles within left movements do not come from working-class communities? Hence, they don't immediately feel as urgently the needs of working-class people?

In recent times, some modest advances have been made on these issues, for instance, shorter working weeks in countries such as Spain and Iceland; at least \$15 per hour minimum wage in US states such as California and Washington. Most notable and perhaps most impactful have been the mass strikes by the labor movement over the last couple of years. These have been across continents and across industry sectors and have involved millions of workers. What does it say about the left though, that these strikes have been largely organized by (not necessarily left-identifying) workers themselves who, no longer able to endure endless workplace violations and abuses, have fought for unionization, better pay and better conditions? And how many of these striking workers, who did not originally self-identify as leftists, now see themselves as part of the left?

Unfortunately, history shows us that when left movements do attract overworked, time-stressed working people, most eventually leave. Perhaps a major reason is that many left institutions, organizations, and movements don't internally share among participants existing resources, however limited they may be, to aid and empower those most in need. Not only is it rare that we practice serious mutual aid for members to advance within organizations and movements, but each of our organized efforts often competes with others for a limited pool of resources. Perhaps the left would be better served to come up with ways to share resources equitably between various groups, movements, parties, projects, and so forth and also within them among members who have very different material circumstances. Perhaps that could reduce the pressures causing people to leave.

Another factor curtailing growth is that much of the time we preach to the choir. Yes, the choir needs practice and reinforcement. It needs to refine and sustain its song. But the left spends far too much time speaking to itself. And not just speaking to itself, but repeatedly telling itself what it already knows. We call for a protest. We issue social media blasts. We call for another protest. All the while we wonder why our numbers aren't growing. We write, give speeches, talk face-to-face, but very often we don't find a way to reach beyond our own circles, mailing lists, and online contacts with what we have to say—and, when talking to our own circles, we say only what we already all agree on.

Part of the reason is certainly that we don't have tools that reach further. But isn't part of the reason also that not reaching further is comfortable? And isn't another part of the reason that we confuse mobilizing with organizing? The left doesn't spend enough time organizing, which is reaching out to people who don't self-identify as leftists. Even left writing is mostly directed at ourselves. Sometimes that is sensible. But not always. This problem is both about methods and awareness. Might it help to spend more time seriously and sincerely hearing and addressing those who don't yet agree with us, indeed, even those who currently disagree with us, so as to cross divides and develop new relationships and personal bonds?

In the end, organizing should be about engaging massive numbers of “ordinary” people and bringing them into the left and then sustaining and empowering everyone inside the left. That requires speaking and working with people who don't already agree with us or who don't already identify with us. Sometimes our numbers don't grow because we aren't, in fact, doing what it takes to grow our numbers.

But further, what about people leaving? If we had a greater rate of member retention and development from the 1960s through all the intervening years to now there would be tens of millions of organized, committed, and trained activists with shared vision and strategy all working together. That is incontestable. And that we don't have that is also incontestable.

The sad truth that follows from this incontestable observation is that many people leave the left and even the most cursory survey of such folks tends to suggest it is very often because they grow tired of left behavior patterns that mirror those we abhor in society at large. How many leftists do you know who've never sincerely and meaningfully asked how your day is going (not perfunctorily saying “have a nice day”)? Many people on the left jump on meetings, phone calls, or attend events, and the only thing they want to discuss is the business at hand. It's off-putting, and to some degree, antisocial. Is it you? Maybe not. Probably not. But don't circle the wagons and ward off the observation just because it isn't you. Is it people you know? Maybe not. Probably not. But don't circle the wagons for that reason, either. The fact is, people do leave. The point is not to ward off wondering why that might be. The point is to find and repair reasons why that might be.

Winning change requires sacrifice and especially trust and to have trust we must develop personal bonds with those we're working with. That can only happen through one-on-one conversations, breaking bread, sharing personal stories, dreams, desires, and fears. It happens through dancing, talking, and playing games. If we're serious about building a radical much less a revolutionary movement, we must be serious about building intentional relationships, especially with those we're trying to bring into the movement.

Okay, but is the relative absence of actively, explicitly caring relations the only reason people leave? No. It is an important aspect, but it is far from the only reason. Everyone has of late heard of the term ‘Cancel Culture’ or earlier, “political correctness.” While of course the terms have been cynically used by elites to justify a wide-range of their undesirable behavior, that doesn't mean there is nothing to the observation that ‘Cancel Culture’ deters many working-class people from joining or staying in left movements. It even prevents people from thinking about why other people leave, from identifying reasons, and from calling for efforts to address the reasons, overcome the reasons, and transcend the reasons.

Consider the debate, as but one example, about trans women participating in female sports leagues. Many liberal and progressive women have brought up the issue, yet they have often been shamed, denounced, and even attacked for doing so. Does that mean everyone has reacted thusly? Of course not. But do those watching on get the impression that to differ with the left calls forth shaming, denunciation, and even cancellation? Can anyone, regardless of your views on the specific issue, really deny that?

Another example might be that in left circles, it's a foregone conclusion that existing left orthodoxy is correct, hence all reason for discussion is over. Anyone who disagrees risks being shunned or shamed. This kind of interaction turns people off rather than communicating substance about important issues. It puts off people within left movements, as well as those watching from the outside. That is, it puts off the people we should be most concerned to reach.

Consider a further example, that of views of gun culture in the U.S. which is inherently tied to a conversation about violence vs. nonviolence. As everyone knows, many people in the U.S. love and own guns. In fact, millions more since the pandemic started. Gun culture is an undeniable component of U.S. culture. Regardless of any analysis, it's not going away anytime soon. So should the left simply denounce gun owners? Of course not. Blanket denunciation of guns and gun culture isn't the best political route if we're hoping to bring people over to our side.

The same is true of discussion about violence vs. nonviolence. Both sides caricature the other. It's unhelpful. Pacifists often see violence as a terrible means that will never lead to our intended end. On the other hand, those advocating for violent revolution often see pacifists as sell-outs who, if given the opportunity, will get us all killed. Of course, neither caricature is true. While, in our view, nonviolence is almost always superior to violence, we also understand that many people understandably conclude that violence is not only warranted but wise. Right now, that's the case more than any other time in recent memory. The left should be willing and able to engage in such debates and conversations without



demonizing those we disagree with. The demonizing or even just abrupt dismissal of others not only doesn't make any headway regarding the issues, it creates an atmosphere that stifles all debate, stifles all listening to those who differ, and propels folks away or out.

Elections, as another example, tend to bring out the worst in leftists. Those who advocate for strategic voting, which usually means voting for one or another Democratic Party candidate, are painted as “apologists for imperialism and capitalism,” while those who refuse to vote, for example, for Biden last time around are portrayed as “unthoughtful buffoons and fringe radicals who aren't to be taken seriously.”

When leftists battle each other in ways that avoid substance and instead rail at presumed motives, they often degrade and insult one another with little or no room for serious discussion of substance, and such behavior is part of what causes folks to leave.

And in one more example, over the years, perhaps you have seen leftists castigate newcomers for eating

meat, drinking CocaCola, driving pickup trucks, listening to country music, and a whole host of personal behaviors that people make within a limited framework of choices in a totally corrupt and terrible system. Does every leftist demonize others like this? Of course not. But it can often be the case that what people choose to eat or drink, where they shop or what music they listen to, who they choose to sleep with or not sleep with often even becomes fodder for high school-like vendettas. Surely, that a person has some habit or practice that others have rejected shouldn't preclude that person from being heard and treated with empathy and understanding.

All of us come from very different geographical, cultural, economic, political, and social backgrounds. What we know, what we've experienced, varies greatly. That the variation becomes a pretext for attacking and being attacked, instead of for understanding and mutually benefitting, drives people away. People's backgrounds should be respected, as long as they are not directly threatening anyone with violence or intimidation, racism, sexism, or homophobia, not to mention classism, which is arguably even more prevalent.

And that brings us to another albeit closely related point: the policing of language. Let's look at this from a practical and constructive angle. Many of us have been involved in campaigns that require coalitions. Consider, for instance, an environmental campaign. At its outset, the campaign may well include rural whites, urban blacks, and college-educated whites and blacks who self-identify as leftists. Perhaps none of the groups have interacted much or even at all with each other prior to the campaign, yet in order for the campaign to work, they need to build relationships.

Often urban blacks and rural whites in such campaigns interact much easier with each other than the self-identified leftists interact with either group. This group may often be appalled by much of the language used by both other groups and their cultural habits. Designer beers, hipster clothing, hostility to pop culture and sports, plus coffee house music don't jive with poor whites from the countryside or urban blacks from the ghetto.

At times things get heated. For example, the rural whites may use racial slurs and other words that people find troubling. But this is also true of the black group. The college radicals flounder over how to respond. Their preconceived notions about how those groups should have responded to their well-wrought arguments and their preferred issues prove irrelevant. What the experienced activists realize, at least when they take time off from judging, is that they are the ones living in a cultural and social bubble. That, in fact, many working-class blacks and whites often have little problem interacting, but it can be that their interactions, language, and behaviors don't fit into existing left culture.

These issues are best dealt with by having more thoughtful and down-to-earth, calm conversations about issues and people's habits and beliefs, the sort of discussions people can have at BBQs and family parties, but not the sort that radicals typically experience in college seminars and leftwing conferences much less when tweeting and posting on social media. Is mutual learning and respectful exchange the norm for leftists? Is it the vibe our writing, speaking, gathering, and campaigning gives off?

Moreover, simply being on the 'right side of history' isn't enough to continually enlarge and maintain membership. The left should want to bend and change history. The left should want to win. Left practices should reflect that desire. This is certainly necessary for attracting and retaining working-class people. Indeed, for them, there is no other reason to be on the left, at least as it typically operates. Experience tells us that campaigns, movements, and organizations that are growing in vibrant, creative, and interesting ways, while also winning, are the sort of projects that can keep most people who connect with them engaged over the long haul.

Telling people they're bad for not being involved with the movement isn't a winning outreach strategy. Humiliating people for their habits, mannerisms, or tastes is not conducive to any kind of change. Hammering people with how terrible things are in the hope that they'll somehow just snap out of their survival patterns and start a revolutionary insurrection

(as if that's ideal) or even join a sensible and sober movement (which would be damned good), is not an effective strategy. Constant appeals to the pains we share and the moral virtues we advocate have limited success in bringing people into movements and even less success in keeping people in those movements.

If we operate under the assumption that most people are good people, then we probably don't need to badger them with calls to be good people. The issue is, "What can actually achieve social good?" not "What is deemed behaviorally good?" People will join and stay in the movement if they believe the movement is serious, committed, disciplined, accessible, and has good winning prospects. People will stay in if they would be proud and eager to bring their friends and families in.

So why doubt that a movement is serious, committed, disciplined, accessible, and has good winning prospects? We believe there are two more big reasons people doubt that.

If a movement has good demands but the movement seems internally as racist as your town, workplace, or school, you have reason to doubt its commitment. If it seems as sexist as your town, workplace, or school, again you have reason to doubt its commitment. With very few exceptions, movements understand these two observations. It therefore becomes important to identify the problem of racism and sexism in the left, to communicate that problem, address it and transcend it, not to cast blame or score ineffective points about it.

But if a movement is as classist as your town, workplace, or school, again you have reason to doubt. Yet with very few, if any exceptions, movements don't identify the problem of classism in the left, don't communicate it, and don't address it to overcome or transcend it. Movements that don't elevate people from working-class families into full participation and leadership are structurally classist. Movements whose internal culture—tastes and preferences—revile working-class life practices, are structurally classist. Movements that are tone-deaf

to working-class needs are structurally classist. And arguably most of all, movements whose internal role structures divide their members into those who make decisions for others and those who abide by decisions that others make are structurally classist. Does this mean every member is classist? Of course not. But does it mean there is a problem that will impact the likelihood of working class men and women joining, staying, and leading, even if the movements have a good understanding and program regarding class relations in society? Of course it does. Seeing any of these classist features provides powerful reasons for people to not join, or to join and before too long, to move on. Having any and often all of these classist features means a movement will also not really understand working-class life and demands, and not really have a profoundly pro-working-class program.

Seriously joining movements requires our commitment, time, and focus. It may involve tensions with family or friends. It may even risk our jobs or repression. Suppose someone manages to overcome all the above mentioned obstacles, there remains another factor that causes diminution of morale and finally disassociation: lack of vision, which leads to lack of hope. What works against staying on the left is being in a movement that has so little belief that a long term vision—another world—is attainable that it spends nearly no time clarifying what it would be and what seeking it would entail. Why bother, if you can't get there?

Movements tend to do a very compelling job of explaining how existing institutions and relations are powerful, but despite recent improvements they still do barely any job at all of making a case that another world is possible. Committed activists believe another world is possible. And they believe history shows that people are willing to fight to attain another world, if they feel welcomed and deeply connected to the movements, projects, campaigns, and issues they're fighting for. In order to make that true, all of us on the left will need to overcome the barriers discussed in this essay, as well as many more.

New Year at The New School

Cooper Sperling, Fintan Bradshaw

The New School's Old News

The New School was founded in 1919 in New York, by a group of scholars who were dissatisfied with the state of critical thought in American academia, and wanted to establish a progressive, free school unshackled intellectually by financial interests. They envisioned most school funding going toward research and education instead of administration, intending that it “would become the center of the best thought in America, would lead in emancipating learning, and would be a spiritual adventure of the utmost significance”. In 1937 Thomas Mann spoke at The New School and tasked them with preserving the spirit of free inquiry amidst the rule of oppressive governments during World War II. To that end he recommended the adoption of the motto “To the Living Spirit”. Current political and economic hegemonies suggest that we may be in increasingly oppressive times.

Facilitating a participatory educational environment was a central part of the New School from the beginning. In this spirit, working people were offered classes in the evenings so they could attend, students and faculty would together decide on curriculum and course design and academic staff took an active role in the administration of the School. A formal administrative structure only developed after Alvin Johnson became director in the 1920s.

However, behaviour of recent administrators of the New School led it increasingly towards a neoliberal model and into conflict with staff and students. Changes made from 2001 onwards, while Bob Kerrey (an ex-politician accused of war crimes in Vietnam) was president, caused occupations and a vote of no confidence between 2008 and 2009. David van Zandt's efforts to further the neoliberal changes in the university was marked by occupations in 2011 and 2018, leading up to the current

administration's president, Dwight McBride, and the current situation at the New School. Under McBride's leadership departments have been earmarked for closure, and or merger, and a continuation of the poor working conditions particularly facing part-time staff. Tensions came to a head when the administration began dragging its heels on the long overdue renewal of contracts.

Negotiations began in earnest with the administration and staff represented by union branch ACT-UAW local 7902. They negotiated for five months without success. During negotiations the administrators handed responsibility for negotiating the new contracts to an external law firm, a sign that ultimately The New School had no intent to offer the improved conditions that the staff sought. This ultimately led to the union calling for a strike on the 16th of November 2022. The strike did not immediately result in success for the strikers, however, subsequent widening of the strike included support from students, whose occupation of university buildings eventually resulted in a climb down by the university and improved contracts and health-care for part-time staff. Arising from that conflict is a greater solidarity between students and staff that is developing into a movement to push to fundamentally alter the structure and operations of the university.

New Year at The New School

Before the next semester gets underway at the New School, students, parents, alumni, faculty and staff will meet to begin to develop strategy and procedure to bring about a ‘participatory New School’. Under the banner of the One New School Coalition, formed on December 12th 2022, a set of objectives and demands were outlined to change the operating structures of the New School to those of a self-governed university. The solidarity

actions that brought about the improved contracts for part-time academic staff are intended to be employed again in order to advance the aims of the Coalition. They have invoked the New School motto in the spirit it was intended, this time, to protect free inquiry from the oppression of the market.

The Living Spirit of Occupations and Declarations

The Coalition expects that faculty members in Parsons School of design, Mannes, SPE and CoPA will schedule votes of no confidence in the current administration. They intend to seek the removal of President McBride, Provost White and Shobowale, the Vice President of Business and Operations. In support of the no confidence votes the students are committing to occupy the University centre to achieve the removal of all administrative staff that were responsible for the intimidatory, anti-union tactics that were employed to break the strike. While cognizant of the aim towards self-governance, the Coalition intend to initially maintain the current administrative structure while allowing

for newly appointed administrators to be recalled by vote of no-confidence from the One New School Coalition. A stipulation for the appointment of new administrators will be that they work to realize the self-governing intentions of Coalition for the New School.

The Coalition intends vetting the board of trustees one by one and creating full financial transparency for the funding of the New School. They initially intend to control 10% of the discretionary budget of the school to implement Participatory Budgeting at the New School. Over time the Coalition hopes to control the entirety of the New School's discretionary budget. It also intends to convert the president's townhouse to communal property of the School and redefine its future use.

The Coalition is seeking a number of changes to benefit current and future students by freezing academic tuition fees for the next five years, as well as increasing protections for students suffering from ill health who have difficulty meeting course requirements. As well as increasing affordability



Student Occupation at The New School Photo: Graham MacIndoe



and accessibility of resources and course material they also intend to improve facilities and supports for minorities.

The Living Spirit

The New School has a long tradition of liberal associations and it currently boasts the Platform Cooperativism Consortium among its affiliates. It is striking then that this significant movement for change has not occurred sooner in the development of the New School. However, the pressures of operating in an educational environment increasingly influenced by a neoliberal market driven model is at odds with really educating students and supporting research beyond the influence of market whimsy. It is also at the expense of the kind academic freedoms the New School was founded upon. Only now is the original vision for the New School potentially becoming a reality.

The One New School Coalition seek to distance themselves from allegiance to market forces, in line with the vision of those who founded the New School, who sought to distance themselves from the University of Columbia's requirement to pledge allegiance to America. These forces have caused students to amass unsustainable debts in pursuit

of an education delivered by adjunct professors struggling to make ends meet and often taking extra employment just so they can afford to teach, who suffer intolerably onerous conditions of work to teach subjects for which they have a genuine passion. It is these unsustainable outcomes of a neoliberal market model of education that those seeking change in the New School seek to avoid. Instead they seek an alternative model for a university.

Hopefully, the example and lessons from the movement at the New School can become a model for university staff going through similar struggles other universities. The travesties of an education system beholden to neoliberal markets are a global phenomenon and the conditions experienced in the New School are increasingly a reality for educators internationally.

A participatory university is within reach. Paying close attention to the progress of the solidarity developed between students and staff in the coming months will hopefully show how this can come about.

Thinking About Thinking About Strategy

Michael Albert

A famous economist Lionel Robbins, who was no radical, wrote "...the validity of a particular theory is a matter of its logical derivation from the general assumptions which it makes. But its applicability to a given situation depends upon the extent to which its concepts actually reflect the forces operating in that situation." An actual radical GDH Cole wrote: "Woe betide those who seek to save themselves the pain of mental building by inhabiting dead men's minds." Both had a good and not always attended point.

This is an essay that thinks about thinking about strategy which uses thinking about whether some tactics are worthy to use or not. Consider: What is criticism and self-criticism?

You might answer—"it's a way to assess and hopefully improve ourselves. I think it was popular among Maoists." And you might think, in times like these, who cares?

Yes, right on both counts, and implicitly about it being an obscure question too, but still what does it mean?

You might answer, "Self-criticism was a technique used by Maoists. An activist would criticize something the group was doing, or criticize themselves for their feelings or choices and the group would respond, and people would criticize them and so it was this mutual criticism process that was supposed to elevate peoples' effectiveness and politics."

Yes, criticism self criticism was indeed meant to uncover false ideas and harmful behaviors and also correct them. It seems like a nice idea. It would be wise to have a tactical tool to use to improve effectiveness.

A strategy is a scenario that involves a sequence of tactics such as strikes, demonstrations, civil disobedience, criticism/self-criticism, boycotts, letter writing, marches. These are all tactical things that you can do in various situations to piece together into a campaign. And then you can piece a lot of campaigns into a scenario, a strategic program. So should we put this tactic or that tactic in our tactical toolbox or not? Criticism self-criticism, yes or no? It's a serious question.

Well, it seemed like an okay idea to use this approach to lots of people in the U.S. left, for example, 50 years ago, so they accepted it. They didn't consider that whatever its merit or lack of merit in China, it might be that Americans, because of who we are and our culture and everything else about us and our situations, might take criticism/self-criticism and in just a few minutes of enacting it, turn it into something more like, tear my head off, tear his head off. So it might not be a good idea because worthy desires aside, given who our society has made us it might not work properly in our milieu. But because the Chinese did it, and after all, their movement won big changes, some in the U.S. chose to do it—unwisely, reflexively, 50 years ago—because they wanted to wear the same suspenders that Trotsky wore, or in this case, the same hat that Mao wore, more or less. Is there a more general point? The point is to consider what people in various sects and far larger efforts than sects often do. They emulate one another mindlessly, sometimes even down to clothing. Then they sing, "hooray for our side."

I think I could go around the U.S. right now and if I were to run into somebody who was a Weatherman 50 years ago, even who hasn't been very political in decades, there's a pretty good chance that I would recognize some of the tonal intonations in



their voice patterns—and I just knew many Weather members but wasn't a member myself.

The point is, in such groups, the dominant personality's attributes tend to spread through the whole group. So after a time members all talk pretty alike. They all walk pretty alike. They look pretty alike in their mannerisms and choice of clothing. They wear the same stuff, sometimes unbelievable stuff—outfits that made them look like Lenin or whoever it was they wanted to look like—and this happens on the right too, of course. But mainly it is about ideas or procedures that spread us examined.

You might reasonably think these are seemingly strange points to raise, and in any event exaggerated, but in fact pressures to conform are a real problem that people can be sensitized to and do a lot better regarding. This is not just trivia. How often nowadays do people strenuously, aggressively, hold some views and attack other views solely for

disagreeing even though they are doing so largely or even entirely with little reason other than habit or unity with others who behave similarly? How often are choices closer to reflex than to thought through?

So assessing criticism/self-criticism, to return to that in particular, is consequential. Back in the late sixties some kept trying to do it, trying to do it, trying to do it, because true revolutionaries did it, or maybe because their group did it, or their friend did it. To not do it, well, a kind of peer pressure precluded that. And at least in our context, the U.S., as I saw it unfold, it was self-defeating because as it was formulated and practiced, it didn't work here. It didn't lead to good results here. So if we were in fact being self critical about criticism self criticism we would have had to come up with some other method to accomplish the sought end—which was finding and correcting weaknesses—which is certainly an important thing to achieve.

Folks should have asked, what's the goal of a technique that didn't work, and if that goal was worthwhile, fine, folks should have realized the need for a technique to accomplish it—and should have asked how can we accomplish the goal given who we are and where we are? Seek the goal but don't use a method that doesn't work. My point, however, is not about the case itself—you can agree or disagree about criticism self criticism, or about specific habits and positions prevalent nowadays, and no matter for this essay. My point is about the issue of adopting or rejecting possible tactics/methods/views.

Here's another example of a kind of operational dynamic or symptom the left often had and often still has. Tom Hayden was a leftist who remained progressive but changed quite a lot as he aged, and now he is gone for some time. At any rate, he was a very smart guy and he had some considerable insights. And one of his insights was that leftists have a tendency to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. What did he mean by that? And why does it happen? When we win something, who's going to be the one who delivers it? Will we deliver it? Will we get up on TV and say, yesterday we won the end to the war or climate sanity. Hooray for us? No.

So, who will do it? The State. And what does the state get up and say? Could you imagine a president coming on and saying, "due to the courageous activities of the anti-war movement, or the climate movement or Black Lives Matter it has been revealed that I am a slimy bastard war monger, carbon defender, racist who's trying to enrich the rich and impoverish the poor and annihilate whatever country we have attacked, or the world, and, therefore... I enact the following changes?" Nope. But you can imagine some president saying that "despite the stupid lunatics in the street who have tied our hands for so long in our efforts to reach a just conclusion of our war, or to deal with our energy policies, or the police, or whatever, I have finally reached a just conclusion...blah, blah..."

And the leftist who watches this then often snatch-

es defeat from the jaws of victory. The Leftist gets upset, that is, when it turns out that the person who signs the decree for the thing the activists fought for doesn't give them credit for the accomplishment.

Tactic? Part of strategy? Well, more accurately in this example, mindset or approach. But generalized, yes, it becomes part of practice. Often unevaluated. But what the hell did we expect? If we understand what's going on, such shenanigans shouldn't depress us. But these are real processes that happen—this one happens due to ignorance on our part. These are not little things. These are the kinds of things that slowly but surely rip movements to shreds. Slowly but surely they lead to disillusion or depression. Regrettably, there're many things that do that. I am choosing examples that I hope won't cause readers to lose sight that the issue here is how to think about such things most broadly, not what do we think about the particular examples discussed. Point is, we have to get a grip on how to address recurring aspects of what we do, whether tactics, attitudes, practices, or ideas.

What about the personal is political? An idea summarized in a slogan generated by feminists from way back that resurfaces periodically. What does it mean? You might say, "It's like... would you be able to apply some sort of macro-political vision if you don't live it yourself on the personal level." That's one thing that it meant—back when it was popular—for some people. It's a kind of a hypocrisy argument. But it also meant, and this was far more its original meaning, that personal acts are political by their logic and implications sure, but most particularly, in their causes. So it meant all those things, I think. And it was a correct insight. And what sharing the insight was supposed to actually do was to sensitize people to paying attention to the stuff that is called personal but from a political angle. Seeing the social causes. As a kind of instruction, "the personal is political" was supposed to attune us to the fact that personal depression, personal poverty, personal ignorance, personal passivity, personal denigration, personal

inadequacies usually aren't personal failings at all, but are, instead, the product of social forces.

The view emerged when women in the very early days of feminism got together and talked about their lives, their families, their marriages, all of it—and discovered that what they were enduring separately and blaming themselves for, or their partners for, as if it was an aberration, instead recurred for them all. It wasn't personal. It was political.

But what about the hypocrisy interpretation? The extreme version of it is that each person's every act is political and more, what it means to be political is to oversee your personal choices and make them perfectly wonderful—or you are a hypocrite. To comply, you sit around and figure out what the absolute perfect human being is. And you claim any deviation from being that perfect human being is a failure. And you call out the failures. To deviate from perfect makes a person a slimeball. They are not practicing worthy politics. So, in such form, the instruction becomes a method, a tactic.

We go from “the personal is political” means that large-scale political phenomena impact our lives and are at the root of many things that seem entirely personal to us, to nearly the opposite mentality. That is, we slip slide to thinking everything is entirely personal and it is our narrow, individual personal choices that constitute all that is politics. This then leads to this kind of attitude where correct insights (the insight that what we do has political implications) are pushed down a slippery slope until they become impossibly extreme (the only thing that matters politically is our private personal daily life choices, our lifestyles). In fact, the idea that one is going to be perfect overnight is horribly self defeating, even if we knew what perfect personal choices were, indeed even if such a thing actually existed in the abstract. So our words in some exchange, our take on some event, even just one utterance can provoke harsh attacks and even spiral into very nearly berserk hostility that becomes so hyperbolic that explanation and understanding entirely exit. Communication exits.

People who think their political focus should be attaining some kind of perfect lifestyle or more generally unassailable stances and choices—often far less examined than one might guess—become timid, defensive, almost the opposite of creative and initiating for fear of making a misstep that brings on hostility. Movement activism becomes an unfolding contest in which many participants generally last about two years of political life, maybe four years of political life. Or they don't get going in the first place.

We set standards for ourselves that we're not going to meet. We set standards for others that others won't meet. So someone missteps and good, caring people hurl epithets and hate. There's no sense of patience. There's no sense of humanity, mutual respect, and modesty. There is no careful exploration of new and different ideas. Ironically, once there is a general position in some group, the user of it is often profoundly conservative, to ward off different views. This was the birth process, I think, of what we now call cancel culture and of the too often intense attacks of leftists on other leftists.

What I am saying doesn't mean that we shouldn't pay attention to our behavior. We should. But to really pay attention to our behavior would include being sensitive to the fact that people take some time to develop good traits and habits and that what is good for one person may not be for another. That would be sensitive. It would understand that challenging existing beliefs is okay, indeed good practice to welcome, even when it is mistaken, though not when it is dismissive and derogatory. But again, my point here is not really about the examples themselves, it is about dealing with choices.

Here's are two more examples regarding thinking about tactics and strategy. These are probably more controversial for many readers. What about violence? And what about Leninist organization, democratic centralism?

These too are tactical options. They are more widely seen as strategic options but violence and

democratic centralism are both like criticism/self-criticism in the sense that they're tactics. We could use them. We could not use them. Should they be in our toolbox or should we throw them out because they are dysfunctional or even counterproductive? That is the question. How to address it is my point.

Should we have Leninist organization and violence in our toolbox? Are they tactics that we can constructively use in the course of the campaigns, struggles, and scenarios we seek to create? Or is there something about them that's just so horrible that we can't even conceivably use them?

You might say, "Well, violence in terms of hurting people, that's a tactic I wouldn't put in my toolbox." Okay, in that case you would be saying: "violence against people, I don't think that's a tool that I want to put in a toolbox." But why? As soon as we're strategic, we're not asking what people want anymore. We aren't even talking about a goal for society—of course we want a non-violent society—no, we are talking about what means we are going to utilize to get to a desired society.

If I'm asking you what you're like as a person, then I want to know that you want or you don't want violence against people in a new society. And I would prefer to associate with people who don't want it in a better future. But, as soon as I'm asking you about strategy, I'm not asking about your personal wants, tastes, desires for the future. I'm asking about what you think will work well and won't work well in different situations, times, and places. The issue becomes what are the drawbacks and the virtues of, in this case, violence.

You might say, "violence alienates everybody." So one set of drawbacks would be the likely effect on others. It might be that violence somehow alienates everybody. Does that make any sense in the United States? It's a fuzzy, hard question. But one side of what I am trying to convey is, what are the issues we need to consider when we're trying to figure out to use or to reject tactics?

Will the tactic (or idea or whatever) help us build our constituency? Will it help us strengthen our constituency? Will it help us overcome obstacles we face, weaken our opponents, even divide them? Will it help us build organizational structures that lead to what we're trying to accomplish. What effects does violence, in this case, have on those we are trying to reach, on policy makers we are trying to win gains from, but also what effects does violence, in this case, have on us as organizers and as activists? What does it do to us? We should analyze a tactic and ask whether or not it has negative or positive effects, on reaching our constituency, on building our strength, and on us as people and as organizers.

But to make such judgements, we also might have to look at the setting that we find ourselves in and ask whether we have any choice. If we simply have to use the tactic and we have no choice, then we may know we need to ameliorate the bad aspects because if we don't, we lose.

What about the second example, Leninist organization? What's the issue with that? Well, first of all, what is it? You might say, "It's a vanguard group that does the decision making."

So it's an organizational structure in which you have mind and body... or you have officers and troops, is I suppose the right analogy in some sense. You have some folks who are responsible to do the theory, do the vision, do the strategy, figure out the campaigns, issue the instructions, hopefully in glorious rhetoric and with great emotional appeal and insight. And then you have everybody else who do what needs to be done. Now, there are some arguments in favor of and against variants of this.

It could promote coherence, unity. It could engender discipline. And then there are some arguments against it. It might drive off members. It might not lead where you want to go. Can Democratic Centralism ever allow or generate victory? Well, yes, we know it can because it has in fact won at times. So this is not an open question. Some of this

stuff we're guessing about and have to be guessing about, because we have no experience of it. We use what experience we have, the concepts we have, and we come to the best conclusion we can. But in other cases we actually know. Advocates of Leninist organization, that's the first thing they say. We have won. So Leninist organizations can win. So what's the problem with winning, they then ask? And we might say, for starters, well, it can win what? Bad guys have won, too. Winning is not enough. Winning is not a sole criterion of value. Just like those people who might go somewhere to organize and might say, we have created motion and energy. We are wonderful—and they might be wrong because creating motion and energy isn't the sole criteria of value. Motion to where? Motion to what?

"But it isn't the case that every Leninist is a little Hitler or a little Stalin or even a little Lenin or Trotsky," you may reply. Indeed, a Leninist might say, "don't be so arrogant with me. I understand the ills of Leninist organizations. I understand the ills of hierarchy. I don't like the bad aspects of it any more than you do. We want the same democratic, participatory, end. But the other side is waving an M-16 at me. And I know this way of organizing can work and I want to use it not because I enjoy hierarchy and authority, but because I want to change the world and the other side has created a setting where nothing that is more in tune with my ultimate values will succeed. I have to do this for coherence, for discipline, for unity, and I know I have to guard against the bad side effects."

All right, so that's a sincere argument. It's an educated and sensitive argument. Do we have to use this tool? If we use this tool, will it subvert our true desires and steadily substitute new aims for what we thought we were pursuing? And then we have to discuss the issues and figure out what the implications of the role structure of this thing called Democratic Centralism and Vanguard Party are.

And if we look at it and decide not just that it is ideally morally inferior to something we'd personally rather be doing, which is largely beside the

point, but that there is something else we can employ that is more likely to attain our desired ends, then we rule it out from our box of tactical options. That's where I am at — I don't think Leninist organization is a worthy left option. But I don't feel quite the same way about violence, though the logic of the discussion is the same, and my feelings are almost the same. But my point here is not what I think about these tactics, or even about what you may feel about these tactics, but about how to assess tactics.

There is another problem with Leninist organization, at least as I evaluate it, which bears on how we think about evaluating choices that I should at least mention. If you're in the United States and ultimately trying to contribute to a revolution, one of the things we have to deal with is authoritarianism, including the parts of our own mindset that are associated with reproducing current oppressions as compared to battling against them.

We have to address authoritarianism to overcome submission to elite instruction, or we're not going to get far. But that has strategic implications. We can't counter authoritarianism, eliminate its impact within our projects and oppose it in society, while we are literally reproducing and even celebrating its virtues in our own practice and rhetoric.

You might ask, "but do you differentiate between a rejection of Leninism and a rejection of things like leadership and education in relatively small groups that have different levels of experience and commitment?" Now I could get sarcastic and say, "Oh, I'm all in against education, clearly." But better to say, "you're right. I'm not against leadership and excellence and working hard and emulating people who set a fine standard. There is nothing wrong with any of that unless it is done in a way that subverts your values and aims. It's a specific structure that I'm against, a set of institutional roles, a set of allocations of power."

So the point is I'm against Leninism in the U.S. not just because I think if successful it would win the

wrong thing—authoritarian political forms and, I also believe, coordinator class dominated economic forms—which is a reason to be against Leninism anywhere. In the U.S., however, I don't think it would win the wrong thing because I doubt it could ever win anything leftist in the U.S. I don't think it could attract sufficient support from the needed constituencies in the U.S. to fight its way out of a paper bag. And the reason is because average people in the U.S. are so anti-authoritarian in spirit, but simultaneously so habituated to obedience, that in practice, on both counts it is essential for a left movement to be anti-authoritarian. If that right or wrong? Important question, but not my point in this essay. Rather, does it reveal something useful about how to think about thinking about strategy.

To go left in your morals and sense of right and wrong and to adopt a dissident position that allies with those worst off in society, in the U.S., I believe you have to be highly anti-authoritarian. An approach to organization which emphasizes becoming obedient to exactly the kind of person you are tired of being obedient to, won't attract wide support and certainly won't counter the dynamics that reproduce the broader oppressions of society. So, yes, in some places, you can do a Leninist approach and garner support and build a powerful movement, so you might then gain sufficient power to win gains, but the other problem that then enters is that such gains will tend to lead to the wrong end.

What about violence and the left? We didn't finish with that example. With violence one issue is that if you turn the other cheek, they'll hit that one too. And if you sit down on the railroad tracks, they'll run you over. The U.S. is one of the most violent countries in the world, in its culture and its behavior patterns. And this makes a problem for non-violence, obviously. In many settings violence trumps non-violence. Not always, but sometimes. So it isn't obvious that committing yourself to a principled non-violence in all contexts is actually the way to minimize violence.

Sometimes the fact that you won't defend yourself literally invites attack. Indeed, in the U.S. I think that an absolute a priori commitment to non-violence most likely guarantees that all violence will be directed at you and there may well be enough to squash you. But being willing to defend one's self, in certain situations, is not a prescription for going out and buying M-16s and trying to attack the state in which case you're squashed in seven seconds. The effective way to handle violence, I think, is in most situations to create a context in which the social costs of suppressing you with violence are higher than not doing so. So that's what you do, you create such costs for the state. And if you don't, you get attacked. You have to set up a situation, in other words, in which elites will lose more than they will gain if they use their violent apparatus against you. If you can do that, you're dealing with violence well. Sometimes—rarely—this may include being willing to defend yourself. Consider a picket line outside a facility you are on strike against. Scabs come. They want to enter to violate your strike. They try to break through your picket. Do you defend yourself and ward them off? Or do you non-violently let them pass? Or perhaps sit down and make them struggle to get past? Well, you assess what will strengthen our efforts? What will lead to more strikers on the line the next day? More community support, and so on?

The point here in this article isn't to exhaustively decide such issues in some apriori way for all cases. If you're interested in reading people on the side of non-violence as a principled stance you might want to read Dave Dellinger who is certainly one of the most admirable movement participants in the United States in the last fifty or a hundred years. He was an incredible person. Anyway, his autobiography is a good thing to read about this and about many topics.

At the other extreme, how many people have heard of Frantz Fanon? He was an African revolutionary, from Martinique, a psychiatrist, who wrote brilliantly about colonialism but who also had a thesis, or at least many people read him this way, that violence was therapeutic. Violence for the repressed

and the oppressed served the purpose of liberating their sentiments and freeing them from psychological subservience, and, therefore, it was a positive factor, not a negative one, in the movement. For Fanon, or his readers, anyhow, violence wasn't so much a last resort, forced upon us by circumstances, as it was actually something to pursue as part of our way to eliminate the vestiges of repressive beliefs and habits in ourselves.

I happen to think that at least in the U.S. where I reside, this is, well, seriously false, and that violence instead has horrible effects on its perpetrators, more often than not causing them to devalue human life and elevate themselves to a higher status than others—else why do they have the right to exercise this violence? My enemy is a pig not a person.

But the point here is to see how such issues can be tackled and thought about, rather than folks merely screaming at each other this or that position often based on inexpressible intuitions or worse, my team says that, so I say that. Violence and Leninist organizational choices are different things, clearly. But the way we think about whether we should have them and other options in our menu of available tactics should be similar.

We have an understanding of what's wrong now, and of what we want in the future. In our case, let's say, we understand key spheres of social life with their defining core institutions that create role offerings that circumscribe options and outcomes in horribly oppressive ways. And we understand the emergence of people with beliefs and habits in considerable part created by these impositions, as well as by our fighting against them. And let's say we see these different aspects of life, polity, economy, culture, kinship as so entwined and mutually enforcing, intersecting, that to change any one of them the most sensible orientation is to build movements addressing all four. And let's say we have an understanding of our goals for these four sides of life and their interrelations that emphasizes institutional aims that foster and facilitate necessary social functions but that also further val-

ues we care about—for example, equity, solidarity, diversity, sustainability, reciprocity, internationalism, and self management.

And let's say we also understand something about people and their current conditions, and we see certain constituencies as critical to building movements, and we see certain patterns of struggle for change and for new infrastructure as leading toward our goals. Okay, so do we use Leninist organization, do we use violence, within the choices we make?

If you think there is something about perpetrating violence that structurally, emotionally, or interpersonally contributes to building needed movements, then you likely want to use it. If you think it has some very negative attributes but is required by virtue of the choices of those maintaining oppressive structures, then you will want to use it, but only the minimum possible amount. If you think it not only has bad effects but actually reduces your prospects of being able to ward off the violence of the state or its other means of destroying your efforts, then you will be very nearly unequivocally against the use of violence.

A perfectly consistent position, for example, would be to think violent attacks against oppressive institutions and agencies are wholly justified but that they are very often also utterly insane, at least in industrialized societies. That is the way I feel, by and large, so I certainly hope it is a consistent position.

I know that nowadays many very wonderful, caring, serious people are going out and buying guns thinking that doing so, and that trying to learn to use them, is part of trying to build a better world—and it is painful to see and sad to contemplate... because my own perceptions and thoughts suggest that however well motivated it has no utility for winning a better world and, instead, if it persists it is far more likely to undermine such positive efforts and fuel reaction. It isn't that it is immoral. It is, well, honestly, that it is so ill conceived as to be politically and socially suicidal.

The same kind of calculations apply to evaluating Leninism, or for that matter national strikes, different types of rhetoric, different choices about focus, different means of structuring our organizations, and so on. Undertaking calculations concerning the effects of different tactics in different situations—or sometimes even for all situations—generally results in liking something a lot, not liking it but feeling like sometimes we must use it and guard against associated problems, or thinking something is just downright subversive of our intentions.

Here is a little story about violence. Consider one of Che Guevara's tactics. It's an example of thinking about violence in a very ugly context that has nothing whatever in common with living in a good society—war. So Che said, look, in any confrontation you're going to have in the jungle fighting against Batista's Cuban army, you want to make sure that the person who was in the front of the enemy's line of march is dead when the battle is over. He said, get that person, whatever you do. Why? So nobody would ever want to be in front. If everybody knows that there's a 100% likelihood that the person who's in front is going to be dead, who's going in front?

I don't know whether this story is totally accurate, or to what extent it worked or not, although we know the Cuban army did crumble even though it confronted a force that was initially relatively minuscule. But what kind of thinking was that? It was vile in some sense. A calculus of killing. And that is a problem, because when you start thinking like that it is very hard to stop. And yet, if you are at war... I should say, I suppose everybody has their heroes and Che is one of my heroes. Because I think, in the horrible context, the kinds of things he did were—I don't know this for sure, how can we know such things for sure, lacking enough real evidence—warranted.

But to employ a process that leads people to think about killing like that—you could argue, forget it. The price is too high. We won't be able to create a good society because if we think like that for

long enough, our humanity exits. Or you might say something slightly different which is that all the people that had to think like that, after you win, instead of putting them in positions they can abuse, the first thing that you ought to do with those people is ship them off for a long vacation. I happen to think that's a pretty sensible viewpoint. In other words, if there are things you have to do, as a movement, about which you could predict in advance the likelihood is that the net result of doing it is going to be that the people involved are corrupted by it, well then whatever your goals are, you probably shouldn't want to leave the person who did those things any room for subverting desirable outcomes later. Of course, the irony with Che is that later at many points he seems to have been the most libertarian voice in the revolution, though perhaps not always and not regarding violence. Evaluating tactics and ideas in light of their consequences—is not easy.

Another example, How did the Bolsheviks raise money before the war? They robbed banks. And who was the guy who organized the bank robbers? You might guess "Lenin."

But, no, Lenin was too busy. It was Stalin. So Stalin organized the bank robbers. And that's pretty interesting. There were others involved, of course, but in any case, Stalin did that and maybe it was his personality that led to his being involved. Or maybe it was just a crappy dangerous job and he did it out of sincere commitment, despite it being out of character. Who knows? The thing is, you do stuff like that and your character tends to change. So am I against robbing banks to get money in principle? Not in principle, no, I'm not against it. If there was a way, tomorrow, that leftists could rip off from Chase Manhattan millions of dollars and then have that money available for activist purposes, or even just for redistribution, without the costs being higher than the gains, I'd be for it.

Choosing what to do and how to do it in social contexts, with human stakes, is not simple. It is partly guided by one's view of what exists and what is being sought, partly guided by values and

intuitions, and sometimes an assessment is hard to pin down.

When I was a student at MIT others used to ask me questions like would you burn down a library? This is during the Vietnam War. And the particular situation I was in was that I would often be talking to a whole lot of students in a big hall because of the role that I was playing and what I was doing and the particular prominence I had. And among more sensible and serious queries, students would often ask questions like, would you burn down a library to stop the war in Vietnam? And I would just look at them and say, well, you wouldn't? You wouldn't burn down that library right there, right now, to stop the war in Vietnam? Are you telling me that you would not burn 17 books or 17,000 books and some walls in order to stop a war that's killing tens and hundreds of thousands and indeed millions of innocent people? Be serious.

So in certain contexts there are things that you do that you wouldn't do in a good world, or even dream of doing in a good world, but you would do in a war. But the people who are doing it, if it screws them up, they need to be treated not as leaders, but as casualties.

And of course about those books, I would then point out that far from ending the war burning down the library would alienate potential anti-war support and therefore have the reverse effect, so I don't spend even milliseconds thinking about things like that except to answer your ridiculous question.

Suppose you have spies. So you have some people who are professional liars. What do you do with them after you win? Make them part of your new news bureau? Well, that's the kind of thing that happens in history to date. Idiot choices like that. I mean, it doesn't make any sense at all, unless, of course, you intend your news bureau to be an evasive and manipulative and lying institution.

What I am trying to do is to just bring up examples, issues, and experiences that call forth the kinds of thinking that goes into being strategic, being tactical, in a sensible way.

Here is another example to contemplate. In the sixties, there were people who were just wonderful who got on a trajectory of personal interaction and it wasn't even six months before they were sectarian crazies. They're running around at night and they're coming to your house and they're sneaking in the door and they're saying, we are the Vietcong. And they really do think they are the Vietcong. I mean, in other words, they've lost track of reality. They think the next demonstration will end the war if we are violent enough. They hold a view and if you don't agree, you are an enemy of humanity. Your motives are vile. Understanding the dynamics by which this kind of devolution happens not only on the right, in fascist trends, but also at times on the left, isn't some weird diversion from trying to change the world. It is, instead, very much a part of trying to change the world.

A movement isn't just understanding how the Bank of America or inflation work, or what patriarchy is, in order to staunchly stand against such ills. It's also partly understanding how choices that one makes about tactics impact us or impact those we are trying to reach, like the impact of violence on us or of our ways of organizing ourselves on us, or of our ways of judging ourselves (like criticism self-criticism) on us, or of our forms of arguing or our modes of reasoning or our choices of concepts, on us—and in each case also on those we need to reach.

And then comes an annoying complication—you can't go to the opposite extreme of asking everybody to be perfect people overnight. We have to have a sense of proportion, of taking insights steadily forward, but not so far as to turn them into destructive norms used to bludgeon people, or cancel them.

Make Economic Democracy Popular Again!

Rasmus Hästbacka

Can syndicalism and the vision of economic democracy rally popular movements again? In this article, Rasmus Hästbacka of the SAC makes a historical retrospective in order to find ways forward.

Is there a way out of this anti-human machine? I am referring to what is called “market economy” and “democracy” but actually is an economic dictatorship in the workplaces. It is, after all, the case that wage earners enrich a class of managers and business owners. It is a class that the workers have not voted for, nor have the right to direct or revoke. The economic dictatorship also sets strict boundaries for political democracy. Or as the classic liberal and educator John Dewey wrote: “politics is the shadow cast on society by big business”.

As far as I know, it is syndicalism that has pointed out the most credible path to a vision beyond class society. If one captures syndicalism in a single phrase, then syndicalism can be defined as independent workers’ struggle to achieve economic democracy. Economic democracy means staff-run workplaces and self-management. Employees then rise from subjects to equal citizens. Economic democracy is the alternative to what in the old days was called “wage slavery” and “employer’s tyranny”, but which in contemporary terms can be called economic dictatorship.

If syndicalism is defined broadly, as I just suggested, something interesting is revealed in the historical rearview mirror. The syndicalist currents have been significantly bigger than

the trade unions which have called themselves syndicalist. Unfortunately, syndicalism in many countries has shrunk from a broad class movement to a marginal phenomenon. In Sweden, the independent workers’ struggles have declined both within and outside SAC. It can be difficult to distinguish SAC from a left-wing opinion bubble. Economic democracy has disappeared from public debate in Sweden as in many other countries.

I hope that syndicalism will grow both inside and outside SAC and that we will succeed in making the vision of economic democracy popular again. We can do that in at least three different ways.

First, we can invest more in workplace organizing. Thus, SAC’s center of gravity will shift from client service to solidarity between co-workers. Client service means that union representatives handle individual grievances. Client service is one-sided, while solidarity is mutual and the basis for collective struggle. It is through union struggles that the broad masses of the people can move towards economic democracy. Already in the present, syndicalist sections and cross-union groups in the workplace give a clue as how to manage the economy in the future. Organizing means democracy as a practice and not just rhetoric.

Second, syndicalists can actively reach outside the left-wing bubble that SAC seems to be stuck in. It is about presenting syndicalism and economic democracy in a fresh language spoken in contemporary workplaces. It is also about repeat-

ing that SAC is a union open to all wage earners (except the managers), not a club only for leftists.

Syndicalist phrases from the 19th century about “smashing the state” and “introducing socialism through revolution” are about as cryptic as the word Scientology. But democracy at work is straightforward. Then we are talking to our colleagues and not only to ourselves. Once you have started discussions about staff-run workplaces, it becomes natural to also argue for a transfer of power from state and supranational bodies down to the population. Thus, democracy in full.

Third and finally, syndicalists can highlight historical facts about the strength of syndicalism in earlier periods. It gives an indication of how big a movement can be built again. We can probably build a bigger union movement than our predecessors. Because the old labor parties no longer attract with their stray tracks (state socialism).

The most important thing is, of course, to invest more in workplace organizing. But the vision of economic democracy is probably important in spurring more wage earners to organizing. Facts about the historical achievements of syndicalism can strengthen the credibility of the vision anew. In our ancestors’ treasure chest, we also find practical tools for organizing.

It’s easy to believe that the vision of abolishing class society is just an odd leftist opinion and always has been, because that’s what contemporary propaganda says. This falsification of history should be swept away. I therefore want to continue this text with examples of the power that syndicalism has exercised in the past. The text ends with two book recommendations concerning economic democracy where the authors look ahead.

The standard proof of the capacity of syndicalism is Spain in 1936 when several million workers introduced economic democracy (before fascism crushed it all). Instead, I choose USA as an illus-

trative example. During the 19th and early 20th century, syndicalist tendencies were as American as apple pie. Independent workers’ struggle for economic democracy was in the mainstream.

In the United States, economic democracy has been advocated by liberals, conservatives and outspoken socialists, by deeply religious workers and ardent atheists. In the 19th century, slogans against wage slavery were raised by both liberals in the New York Times and conservatives in the Republican Party.

A seminal group of pioneers in the American labor movement were the female workers in the textile industry around Boston in the 1840s. They became known as The Mill Girls of Lowell. They saw economic democracy as a continuation of the American Revolution. “Those who work in the mills ought to own them”, the pioneers wrote.

The first broad class organization in the United States was the Knights of Labor. It was founded in 1869 and declined in the late 1880s. Economic democracy was at the center of its vision.

Into the 1900s, economic democracy was advocated by union leaders of the AFL and CIO (the American equivalent of the Swedish LO), without the leaders seeing themselves as leftists. Economic democracy was the common sense of the time. Everything else was odd deviations.

Howard Zinn’s book *A People’s History Of The United States*, tells the story about how the struggle for economic democracy was crushed by extreme violence and massive propaganda from the state and big business. In the Blair Mountain strike in 1921, even bombs were dropped from airplanes on workers. A nice dive into labor history is the book *The Fall Of The House Of Labor* by David Montgomery. Such studies bury the childish myth that Americans have always loved capitalism. A cocky yet thought-provoking quote by the Roman Cicero reads: “To not study history is to remain a child.”

In Sweden today, many people outside SAC find it difficult to distinguish our trade union from a left-wing party or an anarchist club. Sometimes I wonder if active syndicalists have become so used to a left-wing bubble that they have forgotten that Swedish syndicalism was once much broader.

SAC was formed in 1910. Before World War II, SAC had more than 30 thousand members. Into the 1970s, SAC had a strong foothold in mainly three industries (mining, construction and forestry), where syndicalists voted on different parties and belonged to different churches (or were atheists). Then we have all the tendencies that have been clearly syndicalist without calling themselves so. An example is the 20-year wave of “wildcat” strikes that broke out in 1969.

When I became a member of SAC in the 1990s, SAC had about 9,000 members. In the counties Västerbotten and Norrbotten, I met syndicalists who, in addition to their union membership, considered themselves socialists, moderates, anarchists, liberals, communists etc. Such is the breadth of the working class. For my own part, I vote for the Center Party in the Municipality of Umeå. Breadth is a strength if we gather around workplace organizing through SAC.

Today, SAC has around 3,000 members. Structural changes have swept away SAC’s old strongholds. The important shift from a service union to organizing has been slow and the union has shrunk. When I talk to active syndicalists around the country, the left-wing bubble is palpable. Some approve of the bubble and wonder why one should organize with colleagues who vote for bourgeois parties. Some syndicalists want to break out of the margins but are unsure how to do it. For others, it is self-evident that SAC is a union for all wage earners and not a left-wing club.

Syndicalists with a strong left-wing identity sometimes claim that economic democracy is left-wing and therefore SAC is a left-wing organization. By the same logic, SAC is actually a



liberal and Christian organization. In Spain, for example, there are many Catholics who are active in unions and advocate economic democracy with reference to their Christian faith.

America’s most famous liberal thinker, John Dewey, rejected capitalism as “industrial feudalism” and advocated “industrial democracy”. In Europe, the liberal John Stuart Mill took the same view. So, of course you can call SAC both liberal and Christian.

The question then is this: does it benefit SAC and workplace organizing to promote SAC as a liberal or Christian organization? Is it wise to present SAC as a left-wing organization? I believe it is time to popularize the idea of the class organization. A union that is open to all employees except the bosses. That is the primary guiding star of syndicalism.

If we invest more in workplace organizing, keep the vision of economic democracy alive and welcome all our co-workers to SAC, I think the union has a future.

Another World Is Possible. Let's Bring It to Reality.

C. J. Polychoniou interviews Noam Chomsky

It's a truism that the world is in a dismal state; indeed, there are too many great challenges facing our world and the planet is in fact at a breaking point, as Noam Chomsky elaborates on an exclusive interview below for Truthout. What's less widely recognized is that another world is possible because the present one is simply not sustainable, says one of the world's greatest public intellectuals.

Chomsky is institute professor emeritus in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. One of the world's most-cited scholars and a public intellectual regarded by millions of people as a national and international treasure, Chomsky has published more than 150 books in linguistics, political and social thought, political economy, media studies, U.S. foreign policy and world affairs. His latest books are *Illegitimate Authority: Facing the Challenges of Our Time* (forthcoming; with C.J. Polychoniou); *The Secrets of Words* (with Andrea Moro; MIT Press, 2022); *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power* (with Vijay Prashad; The New Press, 2022); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychoniou; Haymarket Books, 2021).

Noam, as we enter a new year, I want to start this interview by asking you to highlight the biggest challenges facing our world today and whether you would agree with the claim that human progress, while real and substantial in some regards, is neither even nor inevitable?

The easiest way to respond is with the Doomsday Clock, now set at 100 seconds to midnight, likely to advance closer to termination when it is reset in a few weeks. As it should, considering what's been happening in the past year. The challenges it highlighted last January remain at the top of the list: nuclear war, global heating, and other environmental destruction, and the collapse of the arena of rational discourse that offers the only hope for addressing the existential challenges. There are others, but let's look at these.

Washington has just agreed to provide Ukraine with Patriot missiles. Whether they work or not is an open question, but Russia will assume a worst-case analysis and consider them a target. We have few details, but it's likely that U.S. trainers come with the missiles, hence are targets for Russian attack, which might move us a few steps up the escalation ladder.

That's not the only possible ominous scenario in Ukraine, but the threats of escalation to unthinkable war are not just there. It's dangerous enough off the coast of China, particularly as Biden has declared virtual war on China and Congress is seething at the bit to break the "strategic ambiguity" that has maintained peace regarding Taiwan for 50 years, all matters we've discussed before.

Without proceeding, the threat of terminal war has increased, along with foolish and ignorant assurances that it need not concern us.

Let's turn to the environment. On global warming, the news ranges from awful to horrendous, but there are some bright spots. The Biodiversity Convention is a major step toward limiting the lethal destruction

of the environment. Support is almost universal, though not total. One state refused to sign, the usual outlier, the most powerful state in world history. The GOP, true to its principles, refuses to support anything that might interfere with private power and profit. For similar reasons, the U.S. refused to sign the Kyoto Protocols on global warming (joined in this case by Andorra), setting in motion a disastrous failure to act that has sharply reduced the prospects for escape from catastrophe.

I don't mean to suggest that the world is saintly. Far from it. But the global hegemon stands out.

Let's turn to the third factor driving the Doomsday Clock toward midnight: the collapse of the arena of rational discourse. Most discussion of this deeply troubling phenomenon focuses on outbursts in social media, wild conspiracy theories, QAnon and stolen elections, and other dangerous developments that can be traced in large part to the breakdown of the social order under the hammer blows of the class war of the past 40 years. But at least we have the sober and reasoned domain of liberal intellectual opinion that offers some hope of rational discourse.

Or do we?

What we see in this domain often defies belief — and evokes ridicule outside of disciplined Western circles. For example, the leading establishment journal of international affairs soberly informs us that a Russian defeat “would reinforce the principle that an attack on another country cannot go unpunished.”

The journal is referring to the principle that has been upheld so conscientiously when we are the agents of aggression — a thought that surfaces only among those who commit the unpardonable crime of applying to ourselves the principles that we valiantly uphold for others. It's hard to imagine that the thought has never surfaced in the mainstream. But it's not easy to find.

Sometimes what appears is so outlandish that one is entitled to wonder what may lie behind it, since

the authors can't believe what they are saying. How, for example, can someone react to a story headlined “No conclusive evidence Russia is behind Nord Stream attack,” going on to explain that, “World leaders were quick to blame Moscow for explosions along the undersea natural gas pipelines. But some Western officials now doubt the Kremlin was responsible,” even though the Russians probably did it in order to “strangle the flow of energy to millions across the continent”?

It's true enough that much of the West was quick to blame Russia, but that's as informative as the fact that when something goes wrong, Russian apparatchiks are quick to blame the U.S. In fact, as most of the world recognized at once, Russia is about the least likely culprit. They gain nothing from destroying a valuable asset of theirs; Russian state-owned Gazprom is the major owner and developer of the pipelines, and Russia is counting on them for revenue and influence. If they wanted to “strangle the flow of energy,” all they would have to do is to close some valves.

As the sane parts of the world also recognized at once, the most likely culprit is the only one that had both motive and capability. U.S. motive is not in question. It has been publicly proclaimed for years. President Biden explicitly informed his German counterparts, quite publicly, that if Russia invaded Ukraine the pipeline would be destroyed. U.S. capability is of course not in question, even apart from the huge U.S. naval maneuvers in the area of the sabotage just before it took place.

But to draw the obvious conclusion is as ludicrous as holding that the noble “principle that an attack on another country cannot go unpunished” might apply when the U.S. attacks Iraq or anyone else. Unspeakable.

What then lies beyond the comical headline “No conclusive evidence Russia is behind Nord Stream attack” — the Orwellian translation of the statement that we have overwhelming evidence that Russia was not behind the attack and that the U.S. was.



Photo: Andrew Rusk

The most plausible answer is the “thief, thief” technique, a familiar propaganda device: When you’re caught with your hands in someone’s pocket, don’t deny it and be easily refuted. Rather, point somewhere else and shout “thief, thief,” acknowledging that there is a robbery while shifting attention to some imagined perpetrator. It works very well. The fossil fuel industry has been practicing it effectively for years, as we’ve discussed. It works even better when embellished by the standard techniques that make U.S. propaganda so much more effective than the heavy-handed totalitarian variety: foster debate to show our openness, but within narrow constraints that instill the propaganda message by presupposition, which is much more effective than assertion. So, highlight the fact that there is skepticism about Russian depravity, showing what a free and open society we are while establishing more deeply the ludicrous claim that the propaganda system is seeking to instill.

There is, to be sure, another possibility: Perhaps segments of the intellectual classes are so deeply immersed in the propaganda system that they actually can’t perceive the absurdity of what they are saying. Either way, it’s a stark reminder of the collapse of the

arena of rational discourse, right where we might hope that it could be defended.

Unfortunately, it’s all too easy to continue.

In short, all three of the reasons why the Clock had been moved to 100 seconds to midnight have been strongly reinforced in the past year. Not a comforting conclusion, but inescapable.

Scientists are warning us that global warming is such an existential threat to the point that civilization is headed toward a major catastrophe. Are apocalyptic claims or views about global warming helpful? Indeed, what will it take to achieve successful climate action, considering that the most powerful nation in history is actually “a rogue state leading the world toward ecological collapse,” as George Monbiot aptly put it in a recent op-ed in The Guardian?

The Yale University Climate program on climate and communication has been conducting studies on how best to bring people to understand the reality of the crisis facing humanity. There are others, from various perspectives.

It is a task of particular importance in the “rogue state leading the world toward ecological collapse.” It is also a task of difficulty, given that denialism not only exists in some circles but has been close to official policy in the Republican Party ever since this extremist organization succumbed to the offensive of the Koch energy conglomerate, launched when the party seemed to be veering toward sanity during the 2008 McCain campaign. When party loyalists hear their leaders, and their media echo chamber, assuring them “not to worry,” it’s not easy to reach them. And though extreme, the GOP is not alone.

It seems to be generally agreed that apocalyptic pronouncements are not helpful. People either tune off or listen and give up: “It’s too big for me.” What seems to be more successful is focusing on direct experience and on steps that can be taken, even if small. All of this is familiar to organizers generally. It’s a hard path to follow for those who are aware of the enormity of the crisis. But efforts to reach people have to be tailored to their understanding and concerns. Otherwise, they can descend to self-serving preaching to a void.

Recently, we discussed in another interview the aims and effects of neoliberal capitalism. Now, neoliberalism is often enough conflated with globalization, but it is rather obvious that the latter is a multidimensional process that has existed long before the rise of neoliberalism. Of course, the dominant form of globalization today is neoliberal globalization, but this is not to say that globalization must be structured around neoliberal policies and values, or to think that “there is no alternative.” There are indeed continuous struggles across the world for democratic control over states, markets and corporations. My question thus is this: Is it utopian thinking to believe that the status quo can be challenged and that another world is possible?

Globalization simply means international integration. It can take many forms. The neoliberal globalization crafted mostly during the Clinton years was designed in the interest of private capital, with an array of highly protectionist investor-rights agree-

ments masked as “free trade.” That was by no means inevitable. Both the labor movement, and Congress’s own research bureau (the Office of Technology Assessment, or OTA) proposed alternatives geared to the interests of working people in the U.S. and abroad. They were summarily dismissed. The OTA was disbanded, according to reports, because Newt Gingrich’s GOP regarded it as biased against them, though it may be that Clintonite New Democrats shared the sentiment about fact and reason. Capital flourished, including the mostly predatory financial system. Labor was severely weakened, with consequences that reverberate to the present.

Globalization could take a very different form, just as economic arrangements can quite generally. There is a long history of efforts to separate the political from the economic domain, the latter conceived as purely objective, like astronomy, guided by specialists in the economics profession and immune to the agency of ordinary citizens, labor in particular. One very impressive recent study, by Clara Mattei, argues persuasively that this dichotomy, typically taking the form of austerity programs, has been a major instrument of class war for a century, paving the way to fascism, which was indeed welcomed by Western elite opinion, with enthusiasm by “libertarians.”

There is, however, no reason to accept the mythology. The political domain in a broad sense, including labor and other popular activism, can shape the economic system in ways that will benefit people, not profit and private power. The rise of social democracy illustrates that well, but there is also no reason to accept its tacit assumption that capitalist autocracy is a law of nature. To quote Mattei, “either the organizations of people can move beyond capitalist relations [to economic democracy], or the ruling class will reimpose its rule.”

The status quo can certainly be challenged. A far better world is surely within reach. There is every reason to honor the slogan of the World Social Forum that “Another world is possible,” a far better one, and to devote our efforts to bring it to reality.

Decry the Merchants of Death

Kathy Kelly

Days after a U.S. warplane bombed a Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing forty-two people, twenty-four of them patients, the international president of MSF, Dr. Joanne Liu walked through the wreckage and prepared to deliver condolences to family members of those who had been killed. A brief video, taped in October, 2015, captures her nearly unutterable sadness as she speaks about a family who, the day before the bombing, had been prepared to bring their daughter home. Doctors had helped the young girl recover, but because war was raging outside the hospital, administrators recommended that the family come the next day. “She’s safer here,” they said.

The child was among those killed by the U.S. attacks, which recurred at fifteen minute intervals, for an hour and a half, even though MSF had already issued desperate pleas begging the United States and NATO forces to stop bombing the hospital.

Dr. Liu’s sad observations seemed to echo in the words of Pope Francis lamenting war’s afflictions. “We live with this diabolic pattern of killing one another out of the desire for power, the desire for security, the desire for many things. But I think of the hidden wars, those no one sees, that are far away from us,” he said. “People speak about peace. The United Nations has done everything possible, but they have not succeeded.” The tireless struggles of numerous world leaders, like Pope Francis and Dr. Joanne Liu, to stop the patterns of war were embraced vigorously by Phil Berrigan, a prophet of our time.

“Oppose any and all wars,” he urged. “There has never been a just war.” “Don’t get tired!” he begged people, adding, “I love the Buddhist proverb, ‘I will not kill, but I will prevent others from killing.’ ”

People who’ve embraced his message continue meeting at the Pentagon, as happened December 28 when activists commemorated the “Feast of the Holy Innocents.” Christians traditionally dedicate this day to the remembrance of a time when King Herod ordered the massacre of children under two years of age because of a paranoid belief that one of the recently born children in the region would grow up to oust Herod from power and kill him. Activists gathered at the Pentagon held signs decrying the slaughter of innocents in our time. They’ll protest the obscenely bloated military budget which the U.S. Congress just passed as a part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023.

As Norman Stockwell of The Progressive recently noted, “The bill contains nearly \$1.7 trillion of funding for FY2023, but of that money, \$858 billion is earmarked for the military (‘defense spending’) and an additional \$45 billion in ‘emergency assistance to Ukraine and our NATO allies.’ This means that more than half (\$900 billion out of \$1.7 trillion) is not being used for ‘non-defense discretionary programs’—and even that lesser portion includes \$118.7 billion for funding of the Veterans Administration, another military-related expense.”

By depleting funds desperately needed to meet human needs, the U.S. “defense” budget doesn’t defend people from pandemics, ecological collapse, and infrastructure decay. Instead it continues a deranged investment in militarism. Phil Berrigan’s prophetic intransigency, resisting all wars and weapons manufacturing, is needed now more than ever.

Outraged by the reckless slaughter of innocent people in wars ranging from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Phil Berrigan insisted that weapons manufacturers profiting from endless wars should be held accountable for criminal activity. The weapons corporations rob people, worldwide, of the capacity to meet basic human needs..

The appallingly greedy Pentagon budget represents a corporate takeover of the U.S. Congress. As the coffers of weapons manufacturers swell, these military contractors hire legions of highly paid lobbyists tasked with persuading elected officials to earmark even more funds for companies like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon United, and General Atomics. According to militarists, stockpiles of weapons must be used up, in order to justify more weapons manufacturing. Media complicity is necessary, and can be purchased, in order to frighten U.S. taxpayers into the continued bankrolling of what could become worldwide annihilation.

Phil Berrigan, who in his lifetime evolved from soldier to scholar to prophetic anti-nuclear activist, astutely linked the racial oppression he opposed as a civil rights activist to the rising oppression caused by militarism. He likened racial injustice to a terrible hydra that contrives a new face for every area of the world. Throughout his life, Phil Berrigan identified with people menaced by the hydra's new faces of war. Elaborating on this theme in a book called *No More Strangers*, published in 1965, he wrote that the dispassionate decision of people in the United States to practice racial discrimination made it "not only easy but logical to enlarge our oppressions in the form of international nuclear threats."

How can we in the United States prevent the killing that goes on, in our name, in multiple wars, exacerbated by weapons made in the U.S.A? How can we resist the growing potential, acute scourge of a nuclear exchange as warring parties continue issuing nuclear threats in Ukraine and Russia?

One step we can take involves both political and humanitarian efforts to hold accountable the cor-

porations profiting from the U.S. military budget. Drawing on Phil Berrigan's steadfastness, activists worldwide are planning the Merchants of Death War Crimes Tribunal scheduled to be held November 10 to 13, 2023. The Tribunal intends to collect evidence about crimes against humanity committed by those who develop, store, sell, and use weapons to commit crimes against humanity. Testimony is being sought from people who've borne the brunt of modern wars, the survivors of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, and Somalia, to name but a few of the places where U.S. weapons have terrified people who've meant us no harm.

"We render you, corporations obsessed with war profiteering, accountable; answerable!," declares the Reverend Dr. Cornel West on the Tribunal's website.

On November 10, 2022, organizers of the Merchants of Death War Crimes Tribunal and their supporters served a "subpoena" to the directors and corporate offices of weapons manufacturers Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon United, and General Atomics. The subpoena, which will expire on February 10, 2023, compels them to provide to the Tribunal all documents revealing their complicity in aiding and abetting the United States government in committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, bribery, and theft.

People menaced by the hydra's new faces of war often have nowhere to flee, nowhere to hide. Thousands upon thousands of the victims are children.

Mindful of the children who are maimed, traumatized, displaced, orphaned, and killed by all of the wars raging today, we must hold ourselves accountable as well. Phil Berrigan's challenge must become ours: "Meet me at the Pentagon!" Or at its corporate outposts.

Humanity literally cannot live in complicity with the patterns that lead to bombing hospitals and slaughtering children.

Israel Was Never a Democracy: So why is the West Lamenting End of ‘Liberal’ Israel?

Ramzy Baroud

Even before the new Israeli government was officially sworn in on December 29, angry reactions began emerging, not only among Palestinians and other Middle Eastern governments, but also among Israel's historic allies in the West.

As early as November 2, top US officials conveyed to Axios that the Joe Biden Administration is “unlikely to engage with Jewish supremacist politician, Itamar Ben-Gvir”.

In fact, the US government's apprehensions surpassed Ben-Gvir, who was convicted by Israel's own court in 2007 for supporting a terrorist organization and inciting racism.

US Secretary of State Tony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan reportedly “hinted” that the US government would also boycott “other right-wing extremists” in Netanyahu's government.

However, these strong concerns seemed absent from the congratulatory statement by the US Ambassador to Israel, Tom Nides, on the following day. Nides relayed that he had “congratulated (Netanyahu) on his victory and told him that I look forward to working together to maintain the unbreakable bond” between the two countries.

In other words, this ‘unbreakable bond’ is stronger than any public US concern regarding terrorism, extremism, fascism, and criminal activities.

Ben-Gvir is not the only convicted criminal in

Netanyahu's government. Aryeh Deri, the leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, was convicted of tax fraud in early 2022 and, in 2000, he served a prison sentence for accepting bribes when he held the position of interior minister.

Bezalel Smotrich is another controversial character, whose anti-Palestinian racism has dominated his political persona for many years.

While Ben-Gvir has been assigned the post of national security minister, Deri has been entrusted with the ministry of interior and Smotrich with the ministry of finance.

Palestinians and Arab countries are rightly angry, because they understand that the new government is likely to sow more violence and chaos.

With many of Israel's sinister politicians in one place, Arabs know that Israel's illegal annexation of parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories is back on the agenda; and that incitement against Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem, coupled with raids of Al-Aqsa Mosque will exponentially increase in the coming weeks and months. And, expectedly, the push for the construction and expansion of illegal settlements is likely to grow, as well.

These are not unfounded fears. Aside from the very racist and violent statements and actions by Netanyahu and his allies in recent years, the new government has already declared that the Jewish people have “exclusive and inalienable rights to all parts of

the Land of Israel”, promising to expand settlements, while distancing itself from any commitments to establishing a Palestinian State, or even engaging in any ‘peace process’.

But while Palestinians and their Arab allies have been largely consistent in recognizing extremism in the various Israeli governments, what excuse do the US and the West have in failing to recognize that the latest Netanyahu-led government is the most rational outcome of blindly supporting Israel throughout the years?

In March 2019, Politico branded Netanyahu as the creator of “the most right-wing government in Israeli history,” a sentiment that was repeated countless times in other western media outlets.

This ideological shift was, in fact, recognized by Israel’s own media, years earlier. In May 2016, the popular Israeli newspaper Maariv described the Israeli government at the time as the “most right-wing and extremist” in the country’s history. This was, in part, due to the fact that far-right politician Avigdor Lieberman was assigned the role of the defense minister.

The West, then, too, showed concern, warned against the demise of Israel’s supposed liberal democracy, and demanded that Israel must remain committed to the peace process and the two-state solution. None of that actualized. Instead, the terrifying figures of that government were rebranded as merely conservatives, centrists or even liberals in the following years.

The same is likely to happen now. In fact, signs of the US’s willingness to accommodate whatever extremist politics Israel produces are already on display. In his statement, on December 30, welcoming the new Israeli government, Biden said nothing about the threat of Tel Aviv’s far-right politics to the Middle East region but, rather, the “challenges and threats” posed by the region to Israel. In other words, Ben-Gvir or no Ben-Gvir, unconditional support for Israel by the US will remain intact.

If history is a lesson, future violence and incitement in Palestine will also be blamed mostly, if not

squarely, on Palestinians. This knee-jerk, pro-Israeli attitude has defined Israel’s relationship with the US, regardless of whether Israeli governments are led by extremists or supposed liberals. No matter, Israel somehow maintained its false status as “the only democracy in the Middle East”.

But if we are to believe that Israel’s exclusivist and racially based ‘democracy’ is a democracy at all, then we are justified to also believe that Israel’s new government is neither less nor more democratic than the previous governments.

Yet, western officials, commentators and even pro-Israel Jewish leaders and organizations in the US are now warning against the supposed danger facing Israel’s liberal democracy in the run-up to the formation of Netanyahu’s new government.

This is an indirect, if not clever form of whitewashing, as these views accept that what Israel has practiced since its founding in 1948, until today, was a form of real democracy; and that Israel remained a democracy even after the passing of the controversial Nation-State Law, which defines Israel as a Jewish state, completely disregarding the rights of the country’s non-Jewish citizens.

It is only a matter of time before Israel’s new extremist government is also whitewashed as another working proof that Israel can strike a balance between being Jewish and also democratic at the same time.

The same story was repeated in 2016, when warnings over the rise of far-right extremism in Israel – following the Netanyahu-Lieberman pact – quickly disappeared, and eventually vanished. Instead of boycotting the new unity government, the US government finalized, in September 2016, its largest military aid package to Israel, amounting to \$38 billion.

In truth, Israel has not changed much, either in its own self-definition or in its treatment of Palestinians. Failing to understand this is tantamount to tacit approval of Israel’s racist, violent and colonial policies in Occupied Palestine over the course of 75 years.



Disgracing The Dream

Wim Laven

The third Monday of January is celebrated as a national holiday to honor the memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a man whose legacy is larger than life and whose work benefitted all of humanity.

Yes, he led the successful struggles that achieved landmark civil rights and voting rights legislation.

But his deeper legacy is to show humankind a more evolved way to manage conflict. He led a minority of oppressed, disenfranchised, impoverished Americans living in former slave states to freedom, not with the sword, but with militant love, an advanced form of conflict transformation that taught the world lessons even beyond the great Gandhi.

King's life was cut short and there is great sadness that the racist forces he worked so hard to oppose live on. Most insidiously the normalization of dishonesty and the abundant gaslighting in Republican politics have allowed his work to be white-washed with little resistance. He is now routinely quoted by the people promoting legislation and policy he would condemn.

The racism of 2023 is both the continuation of a long legacy of American white supremacy but also the denial that racism even exists. It is mind boggling to place remembrance and renewal of King's vision into the political drama of our times.

In the unprecedented 15 ballots required to elect Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of House we saw the worst of what conservatives represent and the ahistorical denial of inequality and threat posed by prejudice.

McCarthy, a fierce advocate for sanitizing history and critic of teaching actual history, has said,

"Critical race theory goes against everything Martin Luther King has ever told us, don't judge us by the color of our skin."

Critical race theory is the idea that race relations have been a profoundly oppressive part of US history. This includes teaching that the Three Fifths Compromise, made in the 1787 Constitutional Convention, which said that three out of every five slaves would be counted in the population so that more representation and federal funding would go to slave states—despite slaves have zero rights, despite their status as mere property. Without this ungodly compromise it is certain the Constitution would not have been ratified.

John James, African American newly elected Republican Congressman from Michigan, said during the Speaker nomination debacle, "Our nation has made a lot of progress. That includes families like mine. My family has gone from slave to right here since 1856." With staggering hypocrisy, James nominates a person who does not believe the history of slavery or Jim Crow segregation should be taught in schools.

Black Americans, in general, are quite aware that Republicans will suppress their votes, will oppose funding social uplift programs in black communities, and will look the other way when polluters make their children sick. Republicans woo some with enticing promises to include some of them in an American material success elite, but black Americans, in very high percentages, continue to vote for what they know to be a better bet.

Martin Luther King Jr. met with John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, two Democrats who got the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act promoted



and passed. Republicans since Richard Nixon have increasingly become the party of rolling back those rights.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew of threats against his life and nonetheless traveled to Memphis to support sanitation workers in their quest for workers' rights. In his last speech he said, "I may not get there with you." But it is important to remember what nonviolent direct action he promoted, strategic economic withdrawal:

"We are asking you tonight, to go out and tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in Memphis. Go by and tell them not to buy Sealtest milk [...] up to now, only the garbage men have been feeling pain; now we must kind of redistribute the pain. We are choosing these companies because they haven't been fair in their hiring policies; and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying, they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike."

King's words were specifically tactical mixed with soaring inspiration. King critiqued capitalism, war, and poverty in the midst of wealth; he called for

the redistribution of financial excess, a guaranteed income, and came out against the Vietnam War.

Republicans love to cherry-pick from King's 1963 speech: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

But these Republicans keep insisting that we cannot teach the rest of the speech; King knew struggle "we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition" ... "Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice" and "We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one."

It would be nice if the misleading lip service could be replaced with work towards the visions. Legislation for affordable housing, living wages, access to entitlements, and real economic integration could be the work of Speaker Kevin McCarthy; King's Dream could be honored, but instead we move closer to banning his real message and reversing the justice he and his movement achieved.

Voices of Resistance

Alexandria Shaner

Introduction

Russians have long suffered under Putin's authoritarian, neoliberal regime with heavy surveillance and harsh penalties for dissent. On September 21st 2022, Putin announced a draft that could sweep 300,000 civilians into military service, bringing the war in Ukraine home to all Russians who are eligible, or know someone who is eligible, for military conscription. That is almost everyone.

And like all other ills under capitalism, the draft falls hardest on the poor, the working class, and on marginalized communities who have little money or power to evade it.

Commentators have expressed a wide spectrum of thought on what this will mean for Russians, Putin, and the Russian Left. Some herald the draft as the straw that will soon break the camel's back, igniting revolution and the overthrow of Putin. Others see it as a move to further entrench and escalate both Putin's power and Russia's lurch towards right-wing nationalism. While no one can predict outcomes with total certainty, not even Russian activists still inside Russia, it is important that the global Left not germinate yet more useless silos of opinion. Instead, with both ears and both eyes open, we need to prioritize solidarity with the Russian left, seeking out their experiences, understanding their struggle, and supporting their self-determination.

The international Left claims that we celebrate and support Russian people's refusal to fight in wars and that we support the Russian people's political struggle against authoritarianism, oligarchy, and neoliberalism. We should therefore make it a priority to elevate the voices of these people in a direct way, and to let them help guide us in our solidarity.

Voices of resistance

Voices of Resistance is a collection of interviews conducted between October-December 2022 with young activists inside Russia who give their impressions and observations about resistance to authoritarianism & conscription, about the state of Left movements in Russia, and about what has changed over the course of this year.

Seven questions were proposed to each respondent, and their answers have been translated and lightly edited for clarity. All names have been changed and political affiliations have been kept vague to preserve anonymity. Each respondent is politically engaged and navigating tumultuous circumstances as they struggle to both survive and to build a better world.

All of the respondents are eligible for conscription.



Skulls displaying Ukrainian and Russian national symbols asking "Heroes or cannon fodder?" Image of anti-war graffiti by Сберос

Ivan, recently fled to Kazakhstan

*How would you describe your political involvement?
Why did you agree to this interview?*

I agreed to this interview because I cannot stay away from all the horror that is happening in my country, and what an atrocity my country is doing in a neighboring state. When dissent is punished with prison terms and persecution, and people in the neighboring country are dying and suffering from the hardships associated with the war, there is a terrible lack of justice in relation to ordinary people who can just live, all while a group of super-rich people easily sign decrees that plunge our world into chaos, death and famine.

And I also want to show that not all Russian citizens support this lawlessness, that we are not animals and not orcs, but the same people as in any other country.

I am speaking up for my political and personal values.

On the ground in Russia:

What would you like people across the globe to understand about what is going on in Russia today? What are the conditions that you and others experience?

To answer this question, we need to start with the events that occurred 30 years ago, when the Soviet Union collapsed. At that time there were elections to preserve the USSR or its collapse, the overwhelming majority of citizens voted for preservation, but the voice of the people was not heard, the country was destroyed, people were deceived.

Then came the events of the collapse, and the looting of everything that was built, factories were closed, people were left with nothing. Vouchers were distributed to people, but since people lived in a socialist system, no one knew what it was and why

it was needed, so they sold incomprehensible pieces of paper for a bottle of vodka or a loaf of bread. People had to learn how to survive in the new capitalist system, knowing nothing about it except Soviet exaggerated propaganda about the horrors of capitalism. As a result, the deepest depression of the entire people, who were robbed and humiliated, while instilling in everyone, on the one hand, the former greatness of Russia, and on the other hand, the stupidity and criminality of the past rulers.

The establishment has also been telling us for 30 years about the greatness of the Russian army and Russian weapons, since our people heroically defeated Nazi Germany, yet leaving out what price had to be paid for this victory. And the past slogans “never again” changed to “we can repeat”.

After that, the strengthening of the totalitarian regime, oppositionists were imprisoned or killed, dissent was persecuted, and ordinary people came to the conclusion that it was necessary to remain silent and stay away from politics for their own safety. Because for a clear position, they could be fired from work, and children in schools could be bullied. At the same time, many were sick and disgusted by this, but fearing that it would also happen to them, they themselves poisoned others so as not to stand out. Plus, every election in the country was rigged, and the people learned that no matter how they acted, the elites would do it their own way.

As a result, now the situation in the country is like this: the working class thinks that if you don't stick out and just sit quietly, then you can somehow live. It's bad, but not as bad as it could be, our ancestors lived even worse. Businessmen live by the principle that it is better to support the war in order to somehow earn money, or at least not to speak out and lose everything.

Many people now live with a contradiction in their heads: war is bad, but ‘they are smart’ (the rulers and bosses) and must know what they are doing.

The Russian Left today:

Describe the state of the Left movement in Russia. What has changed over the course of this year? Has conscription had significant impact and if so, how?

The left movement in Russia is very weak and fragmented. It is mired in disputes between Trotsky or Lenin, and not solutions to social problems. This is partly due to the repression in the country, while they are arguing among themselves, they are not touched. Plus, the problem of demonizing the USSR is very much a hinderance. Ordinary people think that if you are a leftist, then you want to return to the Soviet Union. And often the supporters of the left movement are educated and well-read and do not understand how to convey their ideas to people in simple words without jargon so that they are understood. Many people are left-wing in their views, and they want social benefits for the people, but they are ready to be called liberals or anyone other than the 'Left'.

Conscription greatly influenced the opinion of people. While everything was happening far away and it did not concern people, they did not care so much, since all thoughts were of how to live until the next salary and get the child to school. But then the situation became such that it began to affect almost everyone, and discontent has grown greatly, the percentage of people who are against the war has grown.

The situation is similar to the Vietnam war and the United States, while everything was going well, people were calm, and when more and more corpses and cripples returned, discontent grew.

Resistance to authoritarianism and to war:

What are your current thoughts about resistance to authoritarianism & to conscription? What has resistance meant for you and for others around you?

The authorities are fighting the resistance by all means. Repressive laws are being passed every day against criticism of their actions. Now a different way of protest is growing – sabotaging processes. People are not doing something, or they are doing it, but very slowly and not effectively, or even deliberately badly. As a result, many people do not appear on the official agendas and lists, they hide, they dissuade their friends and relatives from appearing at military enlistment offices, change houses and apartments, go to dachas, villages or hide in forests, or for those who have the opportunity, they go abroad.

For me, resistance is to dissuade as many people as possible from going to the military enlistment office, to persuade them to leave the country, and to explain to people who support the war that they are wrong, that it will not end well for them, that there is no personal benefit from the conflict, but only loss.

What Russian Leftists are trying to build and to do:

Are leftist and/or mutual aid organizations growing in ranks and commitment? If so, what are some notable examples?

The Russian left is trying to unite now, the process is going on, but very slowly. They are very used to arguing with each other, plus they do not have strong support from the people, since they have little understanding of how to interact with them. There are organizations that try to help people and create trade unions, but they try not to be called leftists.

National consciousness:

Has there been any shift in national popular sentiment towards the war, towards Putin, and towards the hegemonic establishment over the course of this year? And even in these last weeks since the draft was announced? What sort of, if any, conversations are happening among people that question official narratives and institutions?

After the announcement of the partial mobilization (conscription), the number of dissatisfied people in relation to Putin and the war increased, as it began to affect almost everyone. But all the same, Putin's support is high, since he created the impression that no one but him can govern the country, since his rivals looked weak in the elections, and sometimes like clowns. There is talk in our country that people don't like Putin, but who, if not him, and then suddenly even worse people will come. They say that Putin is his own thief and bastard, but he is understandable and known.

A lot of people began to be disappointed in the Russian army, because there were failures on the fronts, there were no successes. Officials said that Ukraine would be captured in a couple of weeks, and they promised that there would be no mobilization. But there is still a very strong opinion that if we had not attacked Ukraine, NATO would have attacked us, and we have been told about the fact that NATO would attack Russia for the last 30 years.

Those people who watch little TV and have a critical analysis, understand perfectly well that all this is not so. They talk about the horrors that are happening, and they are very ashamed of what our country is doing. Other people are in a state of terrible contradictions, on the one hand, war is bad, on the other, it was necessary to somehow defend against NATO, and they are doing everything right.

The view from Russia:

How are the actions of the West perceived by you and by other Russians?

The actions of some of the Baltic countries cause indignation when people who did not want to fight were not allowed to go abroad, and sometimes even handed over to the Russian authorities. Many sanctions imposed by the West eventually hit the people who do not have a golden cushion, medicines have gone up in price, or

completely disappeared, many vital products have left the market. Meanwhile, people from the authorities have not suffered much, as they have stolen a lot of money, and they can afford to get sanctioned goods through their channels, yes, it is more expensive, but everything is still open to them. Even while in Kazakhstan, the consequences of sanctions are visible, since many goods went through Russia, and now the trade turnover has been preserved only with China. And other problem with sanctions is that they fall on the shoulders of ordinary citizens, prices are rising, wages are falling.

Internationalism and solidarity:

What would solidarity mean to you from both within Russia and from the global Left? How can fellow activists support your efforts and become advocates within their own countries?

For me, solidarity would mean rallying the people and recreating civil society in my country. There is very little mutual assistance between people in Russia, everyone in Russia is alone. In the best case, there are family and friends you can rely on. In other problems you are alone, down to the simplest things, such as help on the road if the car breaks down, or help a woman lift a stroller with a child up the stairs if there is no ramp.

It seems to me that in Russia it is necessary to develop easily accessible psychological help, since so many are in a state of depression. As an example, many people who went to war are deeply unhappy, and went there to run away from their problems or to find their death.

Direct confrontation with the authorities has not been washed away now, it is necessary to develop educational circles and employment centers.

Dima, residing in Moscow

*How would you describe your political involvement?
Why did you agree to this interview?*

I was most active in politics before the Lockdown and changes in personal circumstances, but I have been close to the Left political movement since 2012. We have some good people, but the movement itself is a little chaotic these days.

On the ground in Russia:

What would you like people across the globe to understand about what is going on in Russia today? What are the conditions that you and others experience?

I would like to say: in Russia we have to work hard now. Harder than ever.

We feel a lot of new limitations. Since February 24th, we can not travel freely all around the world as cheap and easy as it was before. We have to choose: to leave our homes, our neighborhood, our families – or stay in Russia and try to make something better from the inside.

I think that it would be great if people around the globe understand that we are not part of our government.

The Russian Left today:

Describe the state of the Left movement in Russia. What has changed over the course of this year? Has conscription had significant impact and if so, how?

It is really difficult to understand what is actually the Left movement in Russia.

We have liberal-minded people, soviet-minded and some radicals – and all of them are Left towards the current establishment.

This year was full of complicated problems. In the first days of war, a lot of people made terrible decisions to flee in a panic: crashed their business, left their families, lost their friends.

The impact from the conscription was not as bad as the war itself – we were already terrified by the situation, so this new problem, to me, was not really newly terrifying.

The conscription had more impact on Russian families and couples and I think you can see here the power of women. I know a lot of men who left Russia because their partner or family was fearful for them and stopped everything and made every effort to get them out. A lot of people in Russia are just living their own lives without any politics, trying to survive. But if someone tells them “your husband or son will serve and he can die for his country” that changes quickly. I know several women who sent their husband to another country, with great expense and sacrifice, because of the conscription.

Resistance to authoritarianism and to war:

What are your current thoughts about resistance to authoritarianism & to conscription? What has resistance meant for you and for others around you?

The resistance from inside an authoritarian country is to be a good human. Me and my friends are trying to do our best, even if we stay here with no dedicated purpose, or just because of low funds. Our goal is to make our country better by staying here, though for many they also stay because they don't have the opportunity to leave.

I have such trivial plans: to build a home, raise my child, etc. – and I could do it in any country, but I really love my friends and my parents. I don't want to lose my roots because of one insane man in our government.

What Russian Leftists are trying to build and to do:

Are leftist and/or mutual aid organizations growing in ranks and commitment? If so, what are some notable examples?

I'm not really often communicating with Russian leftists outside my friends anymore, for now. I know that

many people suffer for their human rights and spend a lot of time on this, but en masse, we don't really feel any impact in our everyday life. And since the conscription started, I feel that we have no law, and surely it is not really safe to protect any position if it goes across the line of the government position.

We have "nice" government and establishment in Moscow and some other cities in Russia. But the Federal power is not as friendly and cute as the local authority.

National consciousness:

Has there been any shift in national popular sentiment towards the war, towards Putin, and towards the hegemonic establishment over the course of this year? And even in these last weeks since the draft was announced? What sort of, if any, conversations are happening among people that question official narratives and institutions?

Over this year I met a lot of people and I heard a lot of discussion about the situation.

Of course, it was a great shift, and it still is not over. We will continue to feel strong repercussions over the years and it will likely remain as painful as the situation now.

Some of my friends became enemies. OK, maybe not enemies, but it created more and more divisions. Friends and family are becoming estranged or even enemies due to differences in politics and understandings of power relations. Some friends with different points of view (especially those, who mostly agree with Putin) raised the distance between us (people who are anti-war) and them. You know, no more birthday parties etc with these people. I know about a couple divorces because of different positions within families.

Others abandoned their lives and took great risks by fleeing. Some of them ran away and lost their work. Some people left their hometowns to run away from the conscription.

We are living in a historic time, just like people in The Black Obelisk felt in Germany before the Nazi's got their full power.

The view from Russia:

How are the actions of the West perceived by you and by other Russians?

As for me – everything is right: if your neighbor tries to use force instead of resolving problems by speaking about it – surely, let him know that he is not right.

It looks like human rights doesn't mean anything for the Russian military – so OK, it's time to let them know! The invasion is wrong. I think that any armed conflict is wrong.

Someone became richer because of this conflict, but I don't know who exactly.

Many Russians are very upset about the response of the West, and I do understand them. We now have increased problems with lack of access to medicines, with a lot of technologies – it is dangerous to stop our global development and we feel this danger here. The people feel punished for their government's actions.

Internationalism and solidarity:

What would solidarity mean to you from both within Russia and from the global Left? How can fellow activists support your efforts and become advocates within their own countries?

From the outside, I don't really know. I'm not competent enough to tell someone from the outside what to do. I will say that some other countries are helping by providing opportunities for Russian draft refusers and political dissidents to leave. This helps a lot. Some of my friends already left Russia to Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Israel, Georgia – all these places help people to leave Russia.

It will help us if people all around the globe understand that Russian people and our government are not the same.

From the inside, I'd like to say to Russians: work hard, don't listen to official politics, don't watch TV and try to figure out what's really going on.

Shamil, residing in Dagestan

*How would you describe your political involvement?
Why did you agree to this interview?*

I come from an area and a community that suffers under the authoritarianism of Putin's regime, and that has also long suffered under imperial style rule as far back as the Persian Empire, to Imperial Russia, to the USSR, and now to the Russian Federation. When I was younger, I had a different more reactionary view of politics, use of violence, and what it means to struggle for self-determination, equity, dignity, and peace – but now I am committed to non-violent action and I try to focus on building what I want, instead of only tearing down what I don't want. I'm not so old that I became less of a radical, but I discovered this was the way to gather people and help people, and I don't betray my values in the process. Either way, it is dangerous to be considered an activist, so we can't avoid confrontation sometimes. I oppose this war and all wars. In my community, we are not so much part of the hegemonic culture of Russia, so perhaps it's easier for us to reject the lies that have been fed to everyone. We are used to being 'marginals' and we are used to living in a very heterogeneous mix.

On the ground in Russia:

What would you like people across the globe to understand about what is going on in Russia today? What are the conditions that you and others experience?

I can say that life is hard both economically and politically, harder since the start of the war in Ukraine – but that is true in most of the world. In terms of political struggle, in Dagestan we have some benefits of our traditional structures and communities here that have not yet been totally wiped out, like culture, family and social groups. In general, we are less atomized than people in most other regions. We have our culture to sustain us, in a way, but even culture is not without problems. For example, our long developed culture of defiance is a support in opposing the war and authoritarian rule, we have this much more than many other areas inside

Russia. But we have serious problems with old patriarchal and newer capitalist forces that both erode our community solidarity and derail emancipatory movements. A lot of people have an obsession with the US or a western macho bling bling lifestyle, which to me is just the same like what Putin represents anyways. I'm not saying we should become completely traditional, but we are losing the value of community to a capitalist fantasy world that isn't actually liberating people and makes everyone only concerned with themselves and their survival. Again, this is also probably true of most places in the world. So maybe we are like everyone else, struggling to survive and if we are political, trying to identify our opportunities and strengths.

The Russian Left today:

Describe the state of the Left movement in Russia. What has changed over the course of this year? Has conscription had significant impact and if so, how?

The Left in Russia is very scattered and divided both because of state and oligarchic repression from above and because of a lack of meaningful social fabric from below. In my region, yes we have stood up more to the Federal State, to Putin – but I wouldn't call it a Left movement. A lot of people have Leftist values and goals, like basic needs and social services that should be accessible for all and not for profit, or also against war and imperialism, but they would not call themselves leftists for the most part. The story of what is a leftist is not effectively told in a way that people understand it or relate to it. Most people are sick of bullshit from authorities and want to have more say in their lives, but there isn't a broad understanding that this could be achieved under a leftist vision.

Here, conscription has had a big impact and created mass outrage – though again, the resistance is not tied to a leftist vision. It is a reactionary anti-authoritarian (or even just anti-Putin) movement, also anti-racist since minorities are sent to the front more than ethnic Russians. This resistance is good,

but the mass consciousness needs to be more developed toward what we really want. For example, we want more self-determination, but most people tie this to national or cultural identity rather than to self-determination and internationalism as goals in and of themselves.

Resistance to authoritarianism and to war:

What are your current thoughts about resistance to authoritarianism & to conscription? What has resistance meant for you and for others around you?

If you are anti-war and anti-imperialist, you must resist conscription however you can. If you are still human enough to not want to kill or be killed, you must resist conscription. This can mean participating in protests (as I have done), acts of sabotage (no comment), to evade, or even to flee, if you can. Some people falsely say that to flee is a coward's move, but it is not true. To refuse to fight or participate in injustice is never cowardice, it is bravery, especially if it is against the social current. Here, we had a wide social consensus to refuse conscription, so I have had support and did not have to lose friends and family connections by protesting and dodging lists.

I would like to find ways to support those who refuse fighting in other places where the social pressure is against them. Maybe the fact that we are standing up and saying no to conscription can be a support. If Russians or military objectors in other countries read this, know you have my respect.

I have heard about mutinies, but not directly. While I know they have happened, I don't want to spread false hope or put people in danger by relaying second-hand information, so I won't discuss that.

The same for authoritarianism – here, I feel supported in opposing authoritarian rule from Russia, but it is harder to look at our own local politics and say we want true self-determination for all. I can generally speak against a far away leader that no one here likes and feel safer than if I speak against the local bosses.

What Russian Leftists are trying to build and to do:

Are leftist and/or mutual aid organizations growing in ranks and commitment? If so, what are some notable examples?

I can speak to what happens where I live, but I don't have much contact with wider Russian movements. Here, as I already said, we don't have a big movement that one could call Leftist. But we do have a culture of defiance and mutual aid, especially among women. In my group, we try to connect issues and talk to people to build a wider understanding of power and politics. I guess it is called organizing but it's also learning. No one has all the answers but we try to ask the right questions to help others ask questions.

It seems to me that in Dagestan, we don't have so much of a contradiction to overcome as do many other regions in Russia. We have always been marginalized and so mobilizing people against the oppressor is not new and doesn't make people conflicted. It is part of who we are. But, now we need to go beyond opposing the oppressor and to develop an understanding for how we really want to organize our society. Otherwise, we continue to have local oppressors who look and speak more like us but act more like Putin and like the NATO and business bosses.

National consciousness:

Has there been any shift in national popular sentiment towards the war, towards Putin, and towards the hegemonic establishment over the course of this year? And even in these last weeks since the draft was announced? What sort of, if any, conversations are happening among people that question official narratives and institutions?

Yes, the war and conscription were catalysts here to make people speak out and protest against Putin and generally against racist and authoritarian policies. It was both the fact that he took it too far and also that he has shown weakness by not gaining a swift victory, as he boasted he would from the beginning. We were angry and took courage from perceiving such a weakness.

This is the factor that has a bigger effect even than the mobilization (conscription). People see that Putin and his backers were wrong about their strength. People are also suffering more from a lack of goods and medicines. And a partial mobilization leads one to consider, what if next there could be full mobilization? The fear and the effects keep getting closer and people feel cornered. So, if one was already thinking that we need a new system or at least that we should get rid of the oppressors in power, this dynamic creates both a desire and an opening to become more bold and open in dissent. Most people are not talking openly about system change or even regime change, but there is more possibility to start these conversations than before.

The view from Russia:

How are the actions of the West perceived by you and by other Russians?

We have to be wary of the false choice between Putin and the US, which is a trap of swapping one oppressor for another. Both are imperialist powers waging war on other people's bodies and homes on behalf of capital and power. This is not a perspective that is widely shared in Russia or even within Dagestan unfortunately, though most people do understand that rich bosses under any flag are still rich bosses. Though again, this perspective seems mirrored in the West by most westerners.

I feel solidarity with the Ukrainian people, especially since my home was also invaded and ruled by Russia with many bloody wars and a long history of rule and oppression. There are more developed leftist movements in Ukraine (I have friends in an anarchist collective there) than there are here. I hope they remain strong against both war and the neoliberal forces that will continue to subjugate the people of Ukraine once the bombs stop.

It is impossible to know if it is true that Putin really felt so threatened by NATO that Russia was pushed into the invasion, or if this claim was an instrument to facilitate Putin's imperial aims and his hold on domestic power. If we disagree about which fac-

tor is most important or even most true, should we then forget to oppose the war in solidarity and continue to divide further? What use is that? To be more correct in your analysis about facts you can't yet or possibly ever be sure of? This is a waste of time for people who lost sight of the real goal, to build peace.

I am able to read in 5 languages and over this past year have read much analysis from around the world and locally. I fear that both the Westerners and Russians are largely just shouting claims to further their own narratives. This makes people follow who they are conditioned to follow, which is what has happened. I have been ashamed but not surprised that the global left has also been guilty of splitting into warring camps. In fact, one of the reasons I began speaking with you and agreed to this interview was because I read and greatly respected an article you co-authored with Michael Albert in March 2022, shortly after the invasion, which addressed this issue, *War & Warring Thoughts: Reasons to Rebel*.

This is not a widely articulated message in Russia, but it is my message for both Russians and the West: War will continue forever unless we (those who say we oppose war) all care more about actually ending war and building better societies than we do about being right or pure in our analyses.

Internationalism and solidarity:

What would solidarity mean to you from both within Russia and from the global Left? How can fellow activists support your efforts and become advocates within their own countries?

Inside Russia it is difficult to organize widely because of surveillance combined with lack of trust and connections within communities, people are more and more atomized. There are some efforts online that help, but it's also not always easy to trust. I would say to others in Russia to build local networks of mutual aid, not just now and in terms of resistance to war, but everyday for as much as possible. We need to build back our connections with each other and help each other survive and

then we can discuss the future and our resistance in solidarity.

Outside of Russia, it is important not to give in to the divisiveness that tears the global Left apart. This is also why I want to publicly answer these questions – to show that Russia is a diverse place of people, not a monolith or a government. For Russian people refusing conscription or becoming politically active, it will often mean extreme dan-

ger and sometimes will mean needing to escape. I would like to see comrades internationally organizing for rights of asylum seekers and refugees (from all countries) and developing their own mutual aid networks that could help support those displaced by political persecution and war. It's up to each person to take whatever actions and risks they determine is right for themselves, but then it's up to all of us to stand with them and be part of a community that practices solidarity.



Protest against the invasion of Ukraine (Yekaterinburg, February 24, 2022)