

‘Fix It or Nix It?’ The anti-globalisation movement

**Review of J. Brecher, T. Costello and B. Smith, 2000, ‘Globalisation from Below:
the power of solidarity’**

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The enormous upsurge of protest against the multilateral institutions that design and implement capitalist globalisation has taken many by surprise. The new movement against neo-liberalism — and, in particular, the role of anarchist ‘black blocs’ — burst onto the public consciousness with the November 1999 protests in Seattle, United States, against the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The anti-globalization movement

The new movement, dubbed ‘anticapitalist’ or ‘anti-globalisation’, has since organised a range of high profile actions. These include ‘S26’ against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) summit in Prague, September 2000, and the mass action against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) meeting in Quebec, May 2001.

In South Africa, a range of broadly anticapitalist forces has combined as the Antiprivatisation Forums of Johannesburg and Cape Town. The union movement has been, with few exceptions, entirely absent from this new left.

Responses to the movement

Responses to the anti-globalisation movement have varied. On the far right, papers such as the *Executive Intelligence Review* have attacked the protestors as ‘proto-terrorists’. Other rightists have strongly supported the anti-globalisation movement. They see it as a way to further neo-fascist agendas of stronger national autonomy, economic protectionism, the exclusion of immigrants, and withdrawal from world affairs and so-called world government.

The left has been equally divided in response. The two main left alternatives to capitalist globalisation may be defined as the ‘fix it’ and the ‘nix it’ approaches. Divisions at the World Social Forum at Porto Allegre, Brazil, in January 2001, reflected these two approaches. This forum intended to work out a way forward for the new anti-globalisation movement.

The ‘fix it’ position advocates the reform of global capitalism and its institutions, such as the IMF, WTO and United Nations. The ‘fix it’ camp believes these institutions can be transformed to defend the interests of labour and the ‘third’ world. Once transformed, they can provide progressive global governance in such forms as the enforcement of social clauses in world trade agreements.

The more radical ‘nix it’ position, championed by anarchists and libertarians, stands for the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a humane, planned, selfmanaged, stateless, global economy. The ‘nix it’ position argues that the IMF, WTO and other multilateral structures are inherently anti-working class. Hence, it should be abolished through class struggle.

Beyond globalisation

Brecher, Costello and Smith’s book *Globalization from below* is a perfect example of the ‘fix it’ approach, and demonstrates all the flaws and confused thinking in this approach.

The authors devote a large part of the book to discussing the negative impacts of capitalist globalisation. Examples include the rapid growth of inequality between and within countries,

union bashing, casualisation of the workforce, mass retrenchments, cuts in social spending, economic imperialism and instability, and environmental destruction. A second central theme is a discussion of the tactics needed to build a powerful coalition, a 'globalisation from below', that can shape the process of capitalist globalisation.

These criticisms of capitalist globalisation, and proposed tactics for building a movement for 'globalisation from below', are not very controversial and many progressives would accept them.

Unlike Thabo Mbeki, most of the left is, at least, clear that capitalist globalisation results in increased working class poverty. They would also support the need for a self-managed coalition against capitalist globalisation that recognises diversity, unites people across borders and across the 'first' and 'third worlds', and mobilises on the streets.

A multi-class movement

When it comes to building an international movement against capitalist globalisation, and to proposing practical alternatives, however, Brecher, Costello and Smith are far less convincing.

Brecher, Costello and Smith identify a wide range of social forces that may come together in a movement for globalisation from below. These include working class movements in the first world, third world peoples and nations, and a diverse range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and identity-based movements, such as feminism and environmentalism.

The authors specifically exclude the neo-fascist movement in the west, which they describe as sharing few of the progressive and internationalist values of the other social forces. Brecher, Costello and Smith insist, however, that the antiglobalisation movement must be multiclass. The movement should not place special importance on the working class or the trade unions.

A 'common programme'

According to Brecher, Costello and Smith, these social forces should be mobilised in an international and diverse coalition fighting for 'globalisation from below'. The aim of this movement should be the implementation of a 'common programme'. The movement has to build this programme through a 'grand bargain' between the diverse forces in the movement (p 56).

The 'common programme' would not abolish global competition between countries, or replace the giant companies with workers' control, or aim at abolishing capitalism itself. Its demands are more modest. These include international trade regulations that would 'balance internal market development and production for export', set global standards for labour and the environment, set limits on capital mobility, and the establishment of a 'global investment fund' (pp 56-7, 80).

The authors claim that the effects of this programme include a general improvement in social conditions across the world, environmentally sustainable development, the redistribution of wealth, and global economic stability. An impressive list indeed!

Democratised local and national governments would implement the 'common programme' together with reformed multilateral institutions, including the IMF, World Bank and WTO, and by new institutions, such as a 'Global Economy Truth Commission'. This commission would 'publicise' and 'refer' corporate abuses to the relevant 'authorities' (pp 70-71). All of these institutions would be democratised and made accountable to the people. How? By opening up the political

process, ending ‘the domination of politics by big money’ (pp 71–2), and exerting pressure on the streets.

Third world unity?

Brecher, Costello and Smith propose an unlikely international coalition. They have a singular blindspot when it comes to third world regimes, which they describe as ‘poor-country governments’. The authors regard these regimes as victims of globalisation. As an example of ‘globalisation from below’, the authors point to complaints by these regimes against the WTO (pp 11–12).

But Brecher, Costello and Smith fail to mention that most of the third world states on which their hopes reside are busy inflicting brutal neoliberal programmes on their own working classes. South Africa’s government, for instance, is hardly an innocent.

Further, the authors are strangely silent about the content of the third world regimes’ complaints with regard to the WTO and international trade agreements.

These regimes’ complaints have centred on the introduction of social clauses that would require minimum labour and environmental standards on goods produced for export markets. The complaints have also been on the failure of certain first world countries to fully implement neoliberal policies by including economic protection deals in trade agreements!

In other words, these third world regimes are supporting the *full* implementation of capitalist globalisation, not an anti-capitalist struggle.

Because Brecher, Costello and Smith fail to develop a class analysis of capitalist globalisation, they ignore class conflicts within the third world where capitalist ruling classes are neoliberal in character and using some of the lowest wages and worst working conditions on the planet to gain entry into the global market.

Third world elites have no material interest in the ‘common programme’. The competitive advantage of the third world is the ability of its regimes to suppress working class movements, and to bid for foreign investments based on a large supply of cheap, flexible labour. In the context of a long-term global economic slowdown, and subsequent economic restructuring, such competition between capitalists is unavoidable.

South Africa’s comparative economic advantage, for example, has been, and , remains, cheap labour. It is certainly not technological innovation, nor was it ever gold. Only the existence of a large, cheap labour force provided by the state made the extraction of the country’s low-grade gold ore economically viable.

Today, South African capital is simply reintroducing the cheap labour system · under the new name of casualisation.

Such are the allies to which Brecher and company direct the anti-globalisation movement! This sentimental ‘third worldism’ provides a highly naïve and politically dangerous approach to fighting capitalist globalisation. This approach has led other radical analysts such as Noam . Chomsky to the absurd conclusion that union-bashing dictators such as Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Mahathir in Malaysia are potential allies in the fight against capitalist globalisation.

It is pure hypocrisy to exclude first world neo-fascists from the antiglobalisation movement but to ally with dictators in the third world.

The role of the state

Brecher, Costello and Smith's proposal to use the nation state and reformed multilateral organisations such as the IMF and WTO to tame global capitalism is equally problematic.

The authors refer to a period when states supposedly provided a vehicle for popular democracy, and a defence against capitalism. Their complaint is that 'big money' has corrupted the political process (pp 71–2) and that multinational corporations have grown large enough to 'outflank' or 'undermine' the state (pp 3, 8–9, 10, 24, 36, 37 etc.) Hence, these authors see the key task as restoring power to 'the people' and 'their representatives' in government (p 40).

This is a remarkably naïve view of the role and functions of the modern state. Brecher, Costello and Smith fail to understand that the states of this world designed, and implemented the neoliberal policies of capitalist globalisation. They also fail to provide a good reason why the multilateral organisations such as the IMF and WTO can be reformed to regulate the world economy in a labour-friendly way.

The multinational corporations do not implement globalisation. The states make it possible for the multinationals to globalise their operations in the first place. Organisations such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO, and summits such as the FTAA are, after all, coalitions of governments, both first and third world, and not of corporations.

Similarly, it is simply wrong to portray 'third world' states as no more than victims of globalisation (pp 56, 71). The IMF did not impose South Africa's neoliberal Gear programme on the country. Local capital chose it and our 'poor-country government' implemented it with vigour.

In August 1994, the Department of Trade and Industry announced new tariff reduction targets for clothing, textiles and automobile components. These targets exceeded those to which South Africa had agreed in the 1994 Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (now the WTO). In 1997, government announced that it would reduce tariff protection on telecommunications to zero. GATT only required a reduction to 20%.

Within Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), originally set up to break the region's dependence on South Africa, has played a similar role. The free trade commitments of SADC, as reflected in the 1997 Windhoek and the 2000 Mbabane agreements, has facilitated the growth in South African trade in the region by nearly 600% in the post-1992 period.

Hence, it is nonsensical to talk about corporations 'outflanking' the state, as if states are not party to the process of globalisation. It is equally ridiculous to direct people to defend the state from globalisation, or to treat the state as an ally in the struggle against capitalist globalisation, or to speak about 'reforming' the IMF and similar bodies. This is done as if the state were, like the working class, a victim of the process, rather than a perpetrator.

Conclusion

Brecher and company's analysis is a good example of the pitfalls facing the antiglobalisation movement, and the flaws inherent in the 'fix it' approach.

The authors' statist and reformist approach can lead, at best, to the cooptation of the anti-globalisation movement into the structures of capitalist globalisation. It will demobilise popular activities, struggles and movements in favour of using the formal channels of the parliamentary

system. This happens at precisely the moment that the role of states in imposing unpopular capitalist policies is more evident than ever.

At worst, it will open the door for the suppression and fragmentation of that movement.

A consistent struggle against globalisation must be *outside and against the state*, rejecting the false alternatives of national protectionism ('Buy South Africa' campaign) and world government ('fight capitalism through the IMF').

Furthermore, it must be anti-capitalist. Capitalist globalisation is nothing more than an attempt to reverse the global economic crisis by attacking the social and economic rights and conditions of the working class.

The class character of capitalist globalisation creates the basis for, and sets the limits on, the emerging movement for globalisation from below. The international working class must play the leading role in fighting globalisation, without allies from local or foreign elites, and without delusions of the role of the nation-state or the multilateral institutions.

The state or social clauses should not regulate capitalist companies in the short to medium-term. It should rather be the power of the democratically organised working class to directly enforce decent living, working and environmental standards on an international level.

This radical internationalism, this anarchism, contains within itself the possibility of taking the struggle to a higher level, and the constitution of a post-capitalist social order on a world scale, centred on workers' control of production. In other words, the best answer to globalisation is 'nix it'.

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