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Struggling for Coherence on the US Left

A series (in which I am sure I will manage to piss
off everyone)

Saturn

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March 1, 2017

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tually is one of the leading forces and members of the American neo-Kautskyist movement.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t stop them, like a thousand of me arguing all at once...” — Cortana, Halo 4

Political Coherence

If I announced to the socialist Left, in a proud *Eureka* moment, full of myself, “All the Left needs is coherence!,” something would be terribly missing.

Coherence is a dual concept.

On the one hand, coherence demands greater specificity and clarity. There are many groups on the Left offering ever-greater and ever-more-specific lines of division and delineation, some of greater quality and some of greater confusion. So in this vein, coherence is about improving the quality of the Left’s accuracy and vision. It’s about sifting out what is actually socialism and what is not, in terms of battles between revisionist forms of social democracy versus radical socialism, libertarian Marxism versus Stalinism, effective strategies versus dead ends, etc. This is the more merciless part of the process where compromise is not a value, where struggle is a virtue.

On the other end, coherence requires harmony and unity. It’s not good if we achieve a small perfect nugget of perfect clarity and strategy but the group that has it is only five people, and the left is shattered into fifty groups of various sizes, many of whom are only about fifty people, some maybe a few hundred, and we can’t collaborate on anything. If the Left has the right answers but is still in a million pieces, that Left is still incoherent.

The struggle for Left coherence is therefore always a dual struggle, simultaneously for both quality and unity. These struggles are at odds with each other in an immediate sense. In an ultimate sense they are probably mutually-reinforcing.

I myself have often been very conflicted over what role I should play for example – a person who tells hard truths about

the problems with the socialist groups in the USA, or a person who tries to bring people together. The truth I've reached is that trying to specialize in either would be dishonest. It's got to be both. Both are necessary.

What does this mean in practice? It means an ability to both criticize and practice diplomacy. It means an ability to be honest and go to events and be part of a group. It means a willingness to speak truth and risk getting kicked out — but also stay and be a member if they *don't* kick you out. It means networking with everybody and connecting everyone, whether you're part of a group or not. It means acting as a force to build the Party in the *historic* sense, ie the real mass Party, which will be a new force with its own name beyond what we can predict, not this smattering of groups that exists now, perhaps emerging out of some of them and involving them, perhaps entirely out of blue involving none of them.

DSA things

Coherence, with its demand to be both teller of difficult truths and social butterfly who brings people together creating unity, has been an issue with me and Democratic Socialists of America right now, for example. I want to join, I want to stay out, I want to praise, I want to criticize, I know criticizing burns bridges, I know criticisms must be made regardless.

There are some very optimistic things going on from my perspective in Democratic Socialists of America. It's been growing like crazy for one, almost to 20,000 members. I've never been a fan of the Democratic Party, and I only just now learned that DSA's Left Caucus explicitly supports running openly socialist candidates. I don't know to what extent it actively opposes the Democratic Party entirely, though I know there was a recent petition within DSA's Left to that effect, advocating something other than the Democrats, some new kind of party.

over whether he is socialist, whether or not he is a Democrat, whether or not he is principled.

All those debates miss the point.

Instead it should be a debate over whether he is politically useful and whether he is moving huge masses of people in our direction in a way that we can capture, consolidate, and further radicalize.

When phrased this way, it should be obvious that the net effect of Bernie Sanders, while engaging some people in the Democratic Party, has overall been to crystallize a much deeper class-consciousness and reform program in the minds of the working class of the United States, which rather than obstructing revolution is a key part of the Jacob's Ladder mutually reinforcing dialectic between revolution and reform, and whenever you find yourself trying to explain to a layperson on the street what socialism actually means or what we actually need to do, Bernie's program or "the kinds of things Bernie supports" (like his recent excellent rebuttal to Trump's first address to Congress) inevitably enters the conversation as a useful and necessary reference point, indicating the expanded horizons of possibility he has created.

If you're not having these kinds of conversations, then you're disconnected. If you're disconnected, then you're not leading the revolution. The only way you can be leading the revolution is if you live the movement. Living the movement doesn't mean you have to be at the core of it. It means you have to dabble in it, it means you have to talk politics. And if you're living the movement, it means there's no way you're not feeling the Bern at *some* level, at least using him as a reference point, and if you're using him as a reference point, that means he's actually part of your struggle.

And since he has, indeed, expanded the horizons of possibility and imagination, while also playing a contradictory and co-opting role, there's no reason not to realize that Sanders ac-

TIVELY REPRESS MARXISM, LABOR MOVEMENTS, AND DEMOCRACY MOVEMENTS

IF YOU BELIEVE IN NO-PLATFORMING FASCISTS ON DEMOCRATIC GROUNDS, YOU MIGHT ASK YOURSELF WHY YOU'RE NOT DOING THE SAME THING TO THE TANKIES WHO HIJACK THE COALITIONS, SECT BUREAUCRATS WHO PURGE, SLANDER, HARASS, AND OSTRACIZE OUR COMRADES, AND BOTH WHOM ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE ONLY IN BAD FAITH TO POSITION THEMSELVES AS DOMINANT WITHIN THE MILIEU

Back to people needing to shower, though. Of course how restrictive do we get with our judgmentalism? One person's rejection of people who smell so bad we can't have a meeting (not an exaggeration, this is a thing) might in other contexts turn out to be a yuppie prejudice against the plebs. One person's rejection of sectarian psychos might turn out to be an authoritarian sect leadership rejection of rightful critics of group leaderships or Democrat sellout tendencies. One person's disdain for the impracticality of certain anarchists might be an inappropriate respectability politics prejudiced against all rioting. Or actually some people might just *really* be so awful they need to be excluded, and maybe the expellers were correct. Having both expelled or banned others and been expelled myself, I have to retain a balanced view of it — some people just can't be included, and in other cases it's a shortcut against difficulties of inclusion that should be insisted on. It's a tough call.

Denying your feelings of the Bern

Most socialist groups have assessed the Bernie Sanders phenomenon incorrectly. It's boiled down to an argument

This means that DSA is emerging as BOTH a site of *genuine* Leftism, insofar as it has a space for non-Democratic Party politics, *genuine* Leftism insofar as it allows pluralistic factions unlike the monolithic authoritarian sects of virtually all the other Left groups, ie it actually practices internal democracy, and *Left unity* insofar as the Left Caucus probably includes leftists of all sorts of persuasions and stripes and tendencies, not really caring what you believe as long as you respect democracy (which should be the minimum requirement anywhere anyway).

However I still find myself plagued by the question: is DSA really worth bothering with? It's still hampered by its old leadership and that leadership's commitment to Democratic Party politics, to the awful strategy of attempting to reform the Democrats and wasting immense amounts of resources running "progressive Democrats," and it's not just the old leadership to worry about, but how the Bernie-based popularity of the group *does* make it act as a magnet not for real socialists, but a bunch of politically uninitiated, unradicalized *liberals* whose entire concept of politics consists of elections and Democrats, whose entire concept of socialism is welfare-capitalist Europe, whose continuous flooding into the organization makes the old leadership's continued dominance and the continuation of its awful strategies a serious threat.

But there is still so much going strong in favor of DSA that I can't ignore it. Having been burned so hard in the past by not one, but two "revolutionary socialist" organizations that claim to value democracy and even have a critical perspective on Stalinism but turn out to be just as repressive to internal dissenters in practice, an organization based on democracy sounds pretty damn good to me.

It's also the case that DSA's politics are strong, aligned as they are with Bernie's strong focus on class demands, as opposed to whatever ridiculous quackery the rest of the Left is focused on. This is an emphasis I share.

As always, the dialectic answer to any question in life is both.

My other doubts about DSA? Honestly they attract a lot of yuppies and the people in it are just too fucking soft and liberal. I think that turns off a lot of the harder, lower-income, less politically correct elements in the working class, ie most of us. We wouldn't feel at home being in DSA and I'm not sure I do either. It's nice for the liberals and progressives and Democratic Party loyalists; it's not a great space for the true Silent Majority of the working class who are unaligned with either wing of the two party system and aren't really culturally dominated either by liberalism or conservatism but really by a bit of both and the general randomness of life.

That is a real problem and I'm sorry if I hurt some feelings saying that, and on the other hand I'm honestly not entirely sorry, because hard truths must be told. Of course it's not that these harder elements of the working class would be at home in any OTHER socialist group right now in any significant numbers, but I raise this as an issue with DSA as a compliment, really, because DSA is the only mass pole of attraction of any significance really worth discussing in the USA. Bernie was a good pole of attraction for this largest Third Wing of Americans; most socialist groups right now are sadly almost more welcoming to Clinton people, and that is a big problem because in truth Clinton people are a minority, and *not a good one*, but gross, disconnected, class-blind, often well-to-do identitarian-reductionist/tokenist corporate Democrats. Courting that demographic isn't just a recipe for missing out on who we *really* need; it's a recipe for *actively driving them away*.

Incoherent attempts to apply coherence

The idea that we should double down on telling the truth and that, though it may seem divisive in the present, it ulti-

are power cliques of bureaucrats and oligarchies of party insiders. It's that simple.

And does it matter? Yes, I suppose it does, I suppose the core definition of socialism being about abolishing class society, while these "socialists" in effect do nothing but reproduce a class society, not merely because their "socialism" always seems to backslide into market capitalism, but also because their "socialisms" are bureaucratic class societies unto themselves with subjugated working classes and separate bureaucratic ruling classes, completely annihilating the entire point of Marxism in the first place, and even worse using the rhetoric of Marxism to justify their rule and prejudicing generations of workers against Marxism, making them even more reactionary than usual capitalist or other ruling classes.

It takes total self-delusion to believe that the repressive apparatuses in the USSR, PRC, and other authoritarian socialist states wholesale weren't used just against capitalist dissidents, but also against the working classes and their expressions of democracy and grievances, and once you admit that, you've introduced the only necessary seed of doubt. A class does not repress its own expressions of complaint so violently and cultishly out of self-government in times of harsh necessity, as the orthodox Trotskyists would suggest with the theory of the degenerated workers' state or bureaucratic caste. No, it's a bureaucratic ruling class: this type of repression occurs if a class is being held down by another class, and nothing more. And so describes the relationship between the proletariat and the bureaucratic ruling classes of the "red" states of history thus far.

**STALINISM AND MAOISM ARE NOT SOCIALISM
THERE CAN BE NO UNITY BETWEEN SOCIALISM
AND STALINISM**

**STALINISM AND MAOISM NOT ONLY BUILD BU-
REAUCRATIC RULING CLASSES, BUT REPRESSIVE
DICTATORSHIPS THAT VIOLENTLY AND DECEP-**

down to politico-economic hierarchy surrounding the means of production. Internal to firms, capitalism actually is based on bureaucracy as well. Remember, socialism isn't about merely even distribution of resources under any range of democratic or dictatorial decision-making systems, it's about specifically democratic control of production.

Is this some petty sectarian line? No, actually; this is critical for waging the internal struggles for democracy within our organizations. The fact is, many organizations claim to be anti-Stalinist, but practice a Stalinist monolithic authoritarianism in their party line and internal organization. By taking a hard line against Stalinism and Maoism we can take an even harder line against the ruling cliques of socialist organizations who embody Stalinism and Maoism within our organizations while often preaching against them in rhetoric.

Does it matter? Yes, I suppose it does, I suppose that while Stalinists and Maoists on the surface seem to support many of the same immediate reforms as other socialists, in practice their leaderships are by far the most dishonest and power-maneuvering leaderships of the entire movement, saying one thing and doing another, and if the Trotskyists are similar, it is only because they are a less intense iteration of similar tendencies. This leads to constant sabotage and disruption of political work in practice.

Does it matter? Sure, a Stalinist or Maoist group can make temporary humanitarian material gains for people, on a bureaucratic basis, in the same way that the Democratic Party or revisionist Social Democrats can. And in the same way, because those reforms are not based on entrenched self-organized working-class power, they will eventually be eroded by self-interested bureaucracies selling out to capitalist market reform, or straight up self-interested bureaucratic corruption. Anything that is not self-organized working class power is temporary, and our enemy, and Stalinist/Maoist tendencies are not self-organized working class power. They

mately brings greater unity, is not a foreign idea to most socialist groups in the USA. It is something most of them already embrace and misapply terribly, mostly because they double down on the most ridiculous, irrelevant, and foolish things, while completely missing the point about issues we actually need to be focusing on.

By the analogy of coherence, they're trying to bring things into focus, but they're using the wrong lens and so it only makes things blurrier. You would think they would switch up their lenses, try a few different ones on, change it up...

You would think.

One major mistake the socialist groups make is thinking that the key thing to win over the working class is to have the right party line. This is disastrous. The working class isn't declining to join the various groups because they have the wrong bullet-point list of positions, but the sects will never relent in their venomous blood-letting against each other over these line-in-the-sand stance-drawings over the random political issue of the day.

If we *were* going to have a serious conversation about line struggle, about what kind of issues we should focus on to attract masses of people, then we would have to have a hard moment with ourselves of acknowledging that Bernie Sanders-type economic demands has done a far better job mobilizing people than the self-identified radical socialist Left's laundry list of overwhelming guilt-driven moralistic overemphasis on liberal activist and civil rights issues, and that class focus is more effectively intersectional than what people have been calling intersectionality. One terrible example of this was the Green campaign in 2016. Whatever the official campaign was saying, the Green supporters could talk about nothing but drone warfare, probably because they knew this was the strongest differentiation point between themselves and Sanders, but of course this wasn't exactly the strongest point of resonance with the working class. Someone osten-

sibly to our “right,” Bernie Sanders, has actually successfully outflanked us to the left on issues of class.

Meanwhile, there is a total lack of reassessment by socialist groups of their overall organizational practices and their total distance from the reality of most real-live workers in the USA. For example, most socialist organizations believe themselves to be focused on the working class. Their actual practice is completely distant from it, in reality focus on campus identity politics issues and only the narrow tiny section of the working class already organized in public sector unions. There is zero approach to organizing with the sectors of the working class in private sector unions or ununionized private sector workplaces.

The Left is trapped in “movement work,” the entire spectrum from protests to base-building, which after decades is a proven failure in organizing the working class, because workers who spend all their time working and recovering from work are not interested in doing even more work organizing. Instead we should return to the historically tried, tested and proven German Socialist Party model of politicized socializing as our the main activity into which we dump our organizing time and resources.

There is also a total lack of reassessment of how the culture of the US activist left is completely foreign and alienating to most real-live workers in the USA, and how our way of communicating is completely ridiculous, jargon-ridden, and how practical things like this, rather than our idealistic insistence on taking the right party line, are the actual obstacles to reaching the working class.

Exterminate Stalinism and Maoism

There has been a temptation to pursue Left Unity with elements that are frankly undeserving of it. It’s probably better

to pursue Left Unity on the basis of people who shower and believe in democracy. That means no Stalinists or Maoists for more than one reason. And we shouldn’t play the victim here; we should victimize *them*. This is America. People believe in democracy here. They’re not going to go for that foreign dictator shit. We libertarian communists and democratic socialists are the big kids on the playground here, we are the apex predators, we don’t have to tolerate Stalinist and Maoist bullshit, let’s kick them the fuck out, we don’t have to deal with them, there’s no reason we should. All we have to do them is call them what they are, expose them for the contradiction of how they claim to be Marxists who favor the abolition of ruling classes while in practice creating new bureaucratic ruling classes, and people will back away slowly.

In fact, why should we just kick them out? We should actually take over their groups. We shouldn’t just rest with chasing them back into their holes. Let’s treat them quite like we treat fascists; let’s deny them even having any holes to run to. Individuals should be aggressively pursued and subjected to confrontations, interventions, cult rescue and deprogramming. Let’s disrupt their every gathering place and Facebook group and no-platform them for the anti-democratic and thus anti-worker forces they genuinely represent. They do, after all, repress strikes when in power. When we’re done there should be no Stalinists or Maoists left. They did, after all, exterminate the entire original Bolshevik Party who made the revolution of 1917. Not knowing the figures off the top of my head, I have to wonder whether the USSR or Third Reich killed more actual Bolsheviks.

You may think this is a counterproductive way to treat other leftists but the mistake is to think of them as leftists in the first place, rather than just as supporters of a different form of reactionary class society based on bureaucracy instead of markets, the definition of bureaucracy being hierarchical control over people and resources, and class ultimately boiling