

THE SOCIALIST REGISTER

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OPENINGS AND CLOSURES
SOCIALIST STRATEGY
AT A CROSSROADS

Edited by GREG ALBO and STEPHEN MAHER

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PREFACE

The sixty-first volume of the *Socialist Register* arrives at a transitional moment. Such periods, as we know, are often marked by ‘morbid symptoms’. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that ‘now is the time of monsters’ as we await the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the American empire, and any realistic hopes of limiting planetary warming to 1.5C are dashed as states from all regions of the world retreat from previous commitments to phase out fossil fuels at COP 29. Meanwhile, the inability of neoliberalism to provide a framework for macroeconomic stability, ideological legitimacy and global political order has only become more apparent. Yet, even as this is increasingly recognized by policy elites themselves, no coherent alternative has emerged to take its place. And while the American state remains the indispensable anchor of global capitalism, mounting tensions and challenges are driving the fragmentation of power within the structure of its empire – fuelling a surge of insecurity and militarism that now includes genocidal violence and an escalating risk of nuclear conflict.

Against this background, the left is in retreat – from the capitalist core in western states, to the regional centres of power in emerging economies like China and South Africa, to the struggling peripheries of the ‘global south’ – and for the most part unable to offer leadership to defeated subaltern classes. The sense of powerlessness is amplified by the fact that this follows a period of optimism amidst the unexpected emergence of what seemed to be a major opening for socialist politics, particularly in the advanced capitalist countries but also more broadly. For a moment, it appeared that the ideas developed across decades of *Socialist Register* volumes would take on a powerful and immediate relevance. The ‘democratic socialist’ moment in the US and UK, the ‘new parties’ in Europe – Syriza, Bloco, Podemos, Die Linke – and the ‘pink tide’ wave in Latin America seemed to offer a route to develop a new politics, different from both the vanguardist approaches tied to the events of 1917 as well as the trajectory of postwar social democratic parties whose mass working class bases were steadily eroded as, one after the next, they

embraced so many ‘varieties of neoliberalism’. Despite their successes in achieving democratic reforms earlier in the century, rather than *transforming* their states these social democratic parties were *transformed by* capitalism.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the surge of popular energy surrounding the candidacy of Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party nomination in 2016 appeared to present a way out of both the crisis of social democracy and the marginality of far-left parties. The explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America that followed, as a new generation of activists flooded that organization to build grassroots support for ‘democratic socialists’ running for office across the country and develop the political power of the working class, seemed to put the possibility for *something different* on the agenda for the first time in generations. This energy was reinforced soon thereafter by the meteoric rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the UK Labour Party, overcoming intense resistance from the Labour establishment even as the influx of young people attracted to his openly – if vaguely – socialist message made that party the largest in Europe. For some, the conclusions drawn by Ralph Miliband and later Leo Panitch (often writing with his co-editor Colin Leys) across the pages of *Socialist Register* about the limits of ‘parliamentary socialism’ were cast into doubt: could the British Labour Party become a vehicle for socialism after all?

Of course, this democratic socialist conjuncture had in fact emerged from a wider and longer-term political sequence. The explosion of the Occupy Wall Street protests and the formation of the anti-austerity group UK Uncut following the 2008 financial meltdown had been essential for creating the political and ideological terrain upon which Sanders’ and Corbyn’s campaigns could blossom. And these were themselves significantly inspired by the historic events of the Arab Spring, as the world witnessed the power of mass mobilization to topple dictators, foremost among them Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, a major US ally. The ‘pink tide’ of Latin America, which saw leftist governments come to power in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, was also a significant inspiration for the possibilities of a 21st century socialism, as were the new mass ‘people’s movements’ emerging across Asia insistent on democratic and social reforms.

The more immediate context was framed, however, by the emergence across the advanced capitalist countries of new party formations and popular movements. Of particular significance was Syriza, which in 2015 became the only socialist party to come to power in the capitalist core since the 2008 crisis. Even more promisingly, it did so with the support of energetic social movements and a dynamic approach to state power that sought to break with both the communist and social democratic strategies, while offering an

alternative to the insurrectionist platforms of smaller Leninist groups.

Suddenly, after decades of defeats and the steady lowering of expectations, with no alternative in sight, there appeared to be a historic opening for a renewal of left politics, supported by the possibility of winning real, tangible victories on the terrain of the state. A new range of tactics and strategies seemed to offer a generational opportunity to rebuild fractured and weakened left forces and attract mass support for socialist politics. Debates swirled among a left that had to grapple seriously with big political questions: How, if at all, could electoral campaigns and elected officials contribute to building wider working-class forces? What political forms were called for to address the challenges of sustaining the struggles of these forces on the hostile terrain of center-left parties and capitalist states? How could they play a role in regrouping fragmented and diminished social movements, and bring them together to form a broader socialist politics? What was the proper balance between electoral politics and base-building, and through what means could this be achieved and sustained? How much could be achieved through electoral and parliamentary means, and how – if at all – could these limits be transcended? What would a socialist transition ultimately entail?

And then, just as quickly, these hopes were dashed. The opening, it seemed, was illusory. The confidence of the resurgent democratic socialist left evaporated as quickly as it had appeared, as the defeat of Sanders, and then Corbyn, facilitated the consolidation of the stranglehold over these parties by centrist coalitions under Joe Biden and Keir Starmer respectively. This followed the crumbling of the European new parties, as Syriza buckled in the face of the iron straitjacket imposed by EU institutions, and Podemos fractured under the weight of its ideological and institutional weaknesses. Bloco fared no better, and even Die Linke has fallen into a potentially existential crisis. To make matters worse, the decomposition of these forces left even fewer checks on the resurgent hard right, which took ground from the collapse of the political centrism of the liberal and social democratic parties. A weakened left offered little in the way of an alternative to supporting the coercive response to far-right forces by increasingly authoritarian neoliberal states, which it dubiously framed as constituting anti-fascist ‘popular fronts’. Some on the left, in contrast, turned to the workplace, and trade union organizing, to build the working-class base for radical politics whose absence seemed so directly responsible for yet another round of defeats.

The political terrain had shifted once again. The historic crashing of this global wave of left forces should, if we are sober, force a deep reconsideration of the strategies and ideas that animated these forces. Reckoning with the failures and limitations of past experiments is essential for uncovering

whatever possibilities may exist within the present. This is the essence of what Panitch called ‘the optimism of the intellect’: a commitment to rigorous, unflinching analysis grounded in the determination to create a better future for humanity. It was in grappling with this commitment that we conceived this volume of the *Socialist Register*, the first since 1984 in which Leo had no part in planning or executing. Not only had another cycle of left politics come to a close, but so too had the life of a towering figure of the international left, whose dedication and intellect were central to maintaining the integrity and quality of the *Register* for nearly half a century. Confronting the question of ‘what next for the left’ in this context was, for us, inseparable from considering the future of the *Register* itself. If the *Register* had played a unique intellectual role for the left since its founding in 1964 by Miliband and John Saville, what would it mean to sustain this role now, in the wake of the closure of the democratic socialist conjuncture?

In this context, we aimed to pull together a volume that confronted directly the impasses and the opportunities – the openings *and* the closures – facing the left internationally. And we have come away from the experience more convinced than ever of the vital role for the *Register* as a space for independent socialist analysis. The scale of the challenges we now face does not diminish but rather amplifies the importance of the political vision that has animated the *Register* from its inaugural volume. Miliband’s distinct contribution was to carve out a political space that was neither attached to Leninist parties nor beholden to social democratic illusions. The former had failed, for over a half-century by the time Miliband launched the *Register*, to build a substantial base in the working class that could allow it to come anywhere near taking power. Importantly, Miliband also saw that social democratic politics was not leading toward a gradual transition to socialism, but instead integrating workers more deeply into capitalist states, lowering expectations, marginalizing socialist ideas and constraining political imagination – undermining more than aiding the socialist movement.

That the new left parties, as well as socialist forces within center-left parties, have to such a significant degree succumbed to the pressures of social democratization highlights the continued power of this critique – which hinges not on seeing the limits of these projects as ‘betrayals’ of the working class, but rather as experiments to learn from. Similar conclusions could be drawn in relation to the radical projects in the global periphery. What these experiences demonstrate above all is the overwhelming gravitational pull of capitalist states and parliamentary institutions, as they absorb political forces operating on this terrain and blunt their mobilizational and radical potential. Far from succumbing to a ‘realistic’ reformism, these experiences

underscore the necessity of connecting strategies for reform to the broader project of socialist transition. No reforms are intrinsically ‘non-reformist’; they are only so, as Andre Gorz insisted in the 1968 *Register*, when they challenge capitalist needs and criteria – ‘a socialist strategy of reforms must aim at disturbing the balance of the system, and profit by this disturbance to prepare the (revolutionary) process of the transition to socialism’. Building such popular political power requires developing strategic capacities to maintain momentum toward something greater, to counteract the tendency of elected leaders to be absorbed within a narrow parliamentarism, to address and transform the constraints of the capitalist state.

This only makes sense if left politics is explicitly directed toward the goal of socialist transition. Without such an orientation, the relentless pressures of electoral timetables and parliamentary logics inevitably narrow political horizons, reducing reform to an end in itself. Broader transformative goals are perpetually deferred and ultimately abandoned or simply rendered impossible. Miliband argued that it was the height of fancy to imagine that socialists could simply inhabit parliamentary institutions and thereby wield state power in the interests of working classes. Despite the misguided accusation that he held an ‘instrumentalist’ view of the state, whereby it was directly controlled by dominant capitalists, Miliband’s entire work was dedicated to illustrating how badly such a view obscured the deeper structural interconnections between state and society which made it a *class* state. Not only parliamentary institutions, he showed, but the entirety of the state apparatus was structurally implicated in the reproduction of class rule. Even though the dominated classes were able to participate in elections, the state nevertheless remained a capitalist one, bound to facilitate the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of workers.

Of course, this wasn’t to say that reform was impossible or pointless, or that the state was merely a machine for the domination of one class by another, as more rudimentary Marxian theories of the state tended to claim. Indeed, the very existence of social democracy, an outcome of hard-fought working-class struggles, pointed to the need for a much more sophisticated understanding. The state, Miliband held, allowed definite but limited possibilities for reform: while it *must* organize reforms to legitimate the system and deflect challenges, elections alone would never be sufficient to allow a socialist transition to commence. On the other hand, it is politically remote that a call to insurrection would ever find mass appeal in a decisive moment of revolt; and even if it did, the idea of directly confronting the terrifying coercive powers of the modern state was unthinkable. If socialism was to be achieved, it could only come about through the combination of

struggles of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forces to 'transform the state'. This would require that working classes and socialists transform, in the process of struggle, their collective capacities and organizations so as to promote radical new forms of democratic participation in political and economic management inside and outside the state.

It was the failure to build organizations capable of connecting a radical struggle on the terrain of the state with the capacity for extra-parliamentary mobilization in the streets that was – and is – at the heart of what Panitch called, in the 1985/86 *Register*, the 'impasse of social democratic politics'. This was necessary both to sustain the dynamic of popular mobilization as well as to sustain the radicalization of forces operating within the state, lest they succumb to social democratization. Limiting the political horizons of the left to working 'from inside' the state inevitably reproduces the limitations of social democratic politics that have surfaced again and again over the twentieth century, as parliamentary forces become absorbed within capitalist states and thereby lose the interest, imagination and capacity to push forward a deeper transformation of society. Conversely, abandoning the state to focus solely on union politics and militant protest is bound to run up against the need for a political vehicle that can serve as the 'organizational and strategic fulcrum' linking class formation and state transformation – bringing together and transcending isolated struggles to address the root causes of inequality, imperial wars and environmental devastation.

Thus, for Miliband, as well as Panitch and Leys, it wasn't that electoral politics and the struggle for reforms were pointless. The problem, rather, was that the British Labour Party, like other social democratic parties, was by no means up to the *necessary* fight for socialism. Its hopelessly top-down and bureaucratic structure and control by risk-averse technocratic leaders, reinforced by its embeddedness within parliamentary politics, meant that it lacked both the means and desire to develop the democratic capacities of the working class or to undertake radical mass mobilization. Despite momentary glimmers of hope, the search for a new politics, oriented around and grounded in 'a party of a different kind' as Hilary Wainwright put the task in the 1996 *Register*, went unfulfilled. The historic defeat of working classes in the core countries following the 1970s crisis – to which social democratic politics offered no meaningful alternative – and the subduing of anti-colonial liberation movements on the global periphery seemed to cast doubt on the relevance of such questions for the 'skeptical age' that followed, as Miliband framed it in his final book. Though the skepticism was disrupted by the post-2008 'opening', its 'closure' today means the search continues.

Where does this search for a more creative and dynamic approach to left organizing, struggle and party building than that of the two primary alternatives thrown up in the twentieth century now stand as the democratic socialist conjuncture comes to a close? Is it possible to wage a struggle ‘within and against the state’ without succumbing to social democratization? Where does this leave strategic notions of workplace and community ‘base building’; of ‘dual power’? As an unstable moment of political equilibrium tilting toward a spontaneous moment of workers’ rebellion, or a sustained process of political ruptures with the existing complex of ruling class power? Was this ‘closure’ simply another case of the failure of social democracy to move left, repeated again and again across the twentieth century – thus replaying the cycle of Francois Mitterrand in France through the 1980s? What strategic lessons had been learned as ‘democratic socialist’ activists turned from protest to politics, and then to the workplace? Were these shifts guided by coherent strategic lessons and principles, or was this simply a matter of jumping from one form of activism to another? Was the left simply ‘starting over’ once again, or had forces been developed, and lessons learned, over the democratic socialist conjuncture in which new ‘openings’ and future struggles could still be built?

The framing above draws extensively, although not exclusively, from the organizational trials that the left confronts in the western centres of capitalism. But other zones of the world face the same questions in similar if unique ways. As important has been the search in the global South for exits from western imperialism and colonialism, as political forces in these states defined their own projects for ‘de-linking’ from the disciplines of the capitalist world market to chart paths for egalitarian development and socialism. From the inaugural issue onwards, the *Register* never wavered in its support for decolonization and anti-imperialist struggles, understanding them as absolutely vital to the global socialist movement.

The questions above are just some of those facing the global left. There are no ready-made answers to sorting through the strategic crossroads that the socialist movement is facing. It is crucial, then, to avoid falling back on old political recipes and investigate carefully, without turning away from harsh conclusions, the current period confronting socialist and progressive movements. Indeed, an initial close empirical mapping of a variety of political flashpoints, issues and struggles seems in order. And this is the challenge we put to our contributors to this volume, with the additional onus of addressing the theoretical and political implications of their contentions. Several of the initial essays help frame this political moment and the concerns that motivated our building of this volume. Panagiotis

Sotiris provides a penetrating overview of socialist debates since the 1970s on the question of the left ‘taking power’ and the dilemmas of transforming the state, not as an objective in itself, but by shifting the correlation of social forces and developing the collective capacities of the working classes and movements outside the state. Umut Özsu, and Michael Calderbank and Hiliary Wainwright, each provide quite distinct examples of the continual resonance of these debates. Özsu, through the context of the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and the Occupied Territories, outlines the failure of postwar international legal and security institutions to contain imperialist and colonial states, and illustrates the geopolitical conflicts still enclosing national politics. And Calderbank and Wainwright take a careful – at times with an edge of dismay – reading of Keir Starmer and the new Labour government in Britain as part of the crisis of social democracy as any kind of an alternative, leaving the British left in a series of political dilemmas and uncertainties that are unique in their context but far from unfamiliar elsewhere.

If these essays address long-time preoccupations of the *Register*, they also bridge to the bulk of the volume’s investigation of concrete case studies, from different parts of the world, of the political conjuncture of the crisis of social democratic and liberal centrism, traditional conservative forces holding up but increasingly accommodating a far right still gaining electoral and cultural ground, and a left still fledgling in various efforts at renewal of the labour movement and socialist parties. It may indeed be necessary to recall Gramsci’s old comment, however overused and abused, that ‘the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.’ This is indeed a caution that runs across these essays and their reflections on socialist strategy: Şebnem Oğuz on ‘late fascism’ and the Turkish state; Ingar Solty on the electoral rise of the fascist AFD running in parallel to the crisis of Die Linke; Ayyaz Mallick’s warnings on core authoritarian features in the governing bloc and state of Pakistan; and Ruth Felder and Viviana Patroni on the strangest of beasts in the emergence of an ‘anarcho-capitalist road’ in Argentina. In these cases, combating the rise of the far right has prominence in the discussion of the organization of fronts, defensive struggles in the protection of social rights and electoral tactics, and the task of rebuilding a leftwing alternative. In other cases, these struggles are less immediate. Yet the impasse of the left moving ahead remains, even when holding power, as a preoccupation in the essays focused on strategic debates in particular locations: Greig Charnock, Jose Mansilla and Ramon Ribera-Fumaz on the closures of the ‘Barcelona En Comú’ project and thus a certain passing of the ‘right to the city’ movement in Europe; Catarina

Príncipe on the cautionary tale of the left governing bloc that has held power in Portugal in the context of the complexities of the European Union; and Jeffery Webber's disentanglement of the 'left populisms' of Latin America through the lens of Bolivia.

The last third of the volume turns first to specific vectors of political struggle and organization that have been crucial terrains for checking – at times even overturning – the neoliberal policy regime. A few sectors of struggle raise the question of 'structural reforms' that provide 'permanent inroads' to the capitalist obsession with exchange value over social need, and alternative distributional logics to the market and prices. These questions and departures are taken up by David McDonald in terms of struggles over public service provisioning through a canvas of efforts at the 'remunicipalization' of utilities, including through new forms of democratic control, after the failures of their neoliberalization; by Thomas Marois and Susan Spronk in looking at the possibilities of making public banking institutions vehicles for socialization and community-building rather than private asset accumulation; and Touré F. Reed in providing a forceful assessment of the limits and possible futures of different – even antagonistic – approaches to addressing race and class inequalities in the US.

We close the volume with three essays that focus on the pivot of political agency for the question of strategy, in this case via investigatory essays, written partly in the form of participant observation and partly as activist-theorists of strategy, of leading struggles today where the left has a prominent place. Nick French reviews the past decade or so of the so-called 'rank-and-file strategy' that has held a prominent place in key sections of the American left, especially since the upsurge that came with Bernie Sanders' national leadership bid; Feyzi Ismail develops an innovative comparison of the historical suffragette movement with today's climate justice movement, and the roles of civil disobedience and mass popular action in the repertoires of activists and the building of a socialist politics; and Arun Gupta provides a sweeping account of US social movement actions from Occupy to the Palestine solidarity encampments, reflecting on their successes and where US Palestine solidarity movement organizing may yet need to evolve. Although not given as prominent a place in these accounts, the form, position and practices of socialist political parties after classical Leninism and the end of social democratic ambitions beyond governing nevertheless hovers in the background of all them. These are issues we will necessarily have to return to in future volumes of the *Register*.

The contributors to this year's volume deserve special thanks for taking up the challenge we posed to them on socialist strategy today. With the

confluence of events and geopolitical conflicts at hand, which we surveyed in last year's *Socialist Register 2024: A New Global Geometry?*, this was not an easy task. None of us, essayists and editors alike, will be in line with all the positions taken. But disagreements, and different emphases in understanding the current setting and the routes to take, is crucial to debating the responsibilities laying ahead of us. We also want to signal our special thanks to Adrian Howe for his efforts on this volume and his years of contribution to the *Register* and Merlin Press. This is our last volume working together with Adrian as he begins his well-earned retirement. We also want to thank, once again, Tony Zurbrugg for his support and coordination on our behalf with our co-publishers, Fernwood Press and Monthly Review Press. Louis Mackay again delivered a superb cover to capture the themes of the volume and the political crossings we wanted to stress. Alan Zuege and Chris Little, our supporting editorial team, provided invaluable efforts in bringing the volume together. Finally, on a sadder note, we want to acknowledge the passing of Stephen Hellman, comrade and colleague of Leo Panitch and Greg at York University, and a long-time contributor to the *Register* on the transformations in socialist politics in Italy, and notably the experiences of the Italian Communist Party since the 1960s.

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