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“Acting Locally” in the Age of Globalization: The Case of Salem

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In his recent work, Socialism or Barbarism, István Mészáros issues a clarion call for the transformation of the capitalist system into a socialist one.1 Mészáros is aware of the daunting nature of this challenge, for the American left, especially its socialist component, is among the weakest in the industrialized world. Unfortunately, he has few suggestions for activists. After describing the fundamental contradiction between the increasingly global reach of transnational corporations and the continued importance of the national state for the system’s maintenance, he warns readers to be wary of the ideological discourse on “democracy and development,” as well as its corollary to “think global and act local” (24). This discourse, he asserts, promotes the global imperial designs of the hegemonic national power, the United States. It effectively weakens the authority of other national governments, while promoting the illusion that local participation in decision-making gives people control over their lives (34f).

Mészáros’s arguments are compelling and represent an important step in identifying some of the dangers facing a socialist mass movement that aims to “counter and defeat the forces that are now pushing humankind toward the abyss of self-destruction.” However, his approach also raises many immediate and very concrete questions. For example, what steps should American activists take to promote the reunification of the “productive and political components” of the movement? What organizational forms or structures should they establish that would avoid the hierarchical pitfalls of the past? What should the relationship be between extra-parliamentary elements within the movement and others more focused on electoral work? If one assumes, as I do, that the Democratic Party is not going to be a vehicle for the radical alternative we seek, then should it be the Green Party or some other political formation? What should be the immediate goals of the movement and how should they relate to more long-term ones?

This list could be extended, but I think the point is clear. If the socialist left accepts Mészáros’s fundamental theoretical conclusions, and especially his point that time is short, then it is forced immediately to grapple with the problem of taking practical action. This essay, which is based largely on my experience in Oregon’s state and local politics, focuses on that issue.2 It is my contention that the local political arena contains a great deal of potential for substantial progressive change using tools that we now have available to us. At the same time, local politics is fraught with ideological and institutional obstacles to fundamental changes that reveal the limitations of “acting locally.” Over the long haul activists will have to develop new means to overcome these barriers and to link local struggles, where most day-to-day political work actually takes place, with those being waged on state, national, and international levels. This linkage will be necessary to achieve the social transformation that must occur if we are to master the crisis described by Mészáros.

Background

I moved to Oregon from New York in 1991. When I arrived I discovered a place where politics are, in many ways, very different from those in my home state. Like New York, Oregon is largely divided politically between its cosmopolitan and, loosely speaking, politically liberal metropolitan hub, Portland (where about one-third of the state’s 3.5 million people live), and its vast rural hinterland, which is generally quite conservative. But unlike New York, Oregon’s governmental system is strongly influenced, if not dominated, by the use of the referendum. Political groups of virtually all persuasions make frequent use of this instrument to legislate on a wide range of issues including the extent and type of taxation, the environment, the role of gays in public life, minimum wages, and health care. State and local legislators often refer measures to the voters when they wish to avoid taking controversial positions or when, to put it another way, “as a matter of principle,” they think that certain issues should only be decided by the voters (here we are talking primarily about new taxes).

Salem, the capital city where I live and work, lies about an hour south of Portland in the lush Willamette Valley. With 137,000 residents, the city’s population has almost doubled since 1980 with growth being particularly strong in the 1990s when about 3,000 new people per year settled here. State government is the largest employer, but there is also a wide range of large industrial and service companies such as SUMCO of Oregon (a major microchip manufacturer) and Voice Stream. The lumber and agriculture sectors also remain very important but have been under stress for many years.

The city is governed using a city manager type of system. The manager and his staff carry out policies set by an elected, volunteer, and “non-partisan” council of nine members including a mayor elected citywide (for a two-year term) and eight councilors (with four-year terms), who each represent a ward with about 17,000 constituents. Most of the individuals elected to these time- consuming and demanding offices are either retired people, independent entrepreneurs (especially lawyers and people from the development industry), or have odd jobs with substantial time flexibility (academic types like me). Since few working people can sit in such a body, it is no surprise that their interests are often poorly reflected there.

I first became active in Oregon’s electoral politics at the state level. Oregon is one of the few states where the barriers are not virtually insurmountable for alternative parties to get on the statewide ballot. By the mid-1990s, the Pacific Party (The Greens), the Socialist Party (SPO), and the long established Libertarian Party, among others, were competing with the Democrats and Republicans for votes. I initially chose to participate in the SPO because, for the first time in my life, I could actually vote for candidates with whom I strongly identified. In 1996 we ran 17 candidates for offices on various levels and in 1998 we had 13 on the ballot.

Competition between the Socialists and the Greens within the framework of our first-past-the-post electoral system was self- defeating. A large majority of SPO members then supported a merger with the newly renamed “Pacific Green Party” (PGP), which was carried out in the spring of 1999 with the election of a new leadership and passage of a new party platform. In the four years since the merger, the PGP has done well. It won 75,000 votes (5%) in the 2000 presidential election, which represented a 50% increase over its 1996 showing, but, even more importantly, Ralph Nader’s candidacy stimulated the growth of the party membership from about 1,000 registrants and perhaps 100 dues-payers to over 14,000 registrants and 600 dues-payers. Although still small and financially weak, the PGP has established new chapters in many parts of the state and may soon overtake the Libertarians as Oregon’s third largest party.

The PGP marks an important step for those interested in building an alternative electoral movement, but it is an extremely limited success. It remains difficult for the party to compete effectively in partisan races for state and federal office, and remains crucial for the Greens to first build a base of support on the local level. There, where most races are “non-partisan,” party members can gain much experience dealing with issues that include providing basic services, protecting the environment, and managing the local economy. Over the past few years several Greens, including myself, were elected to local offices in Oregon cities and have learned a lot about politics on the ground.

The Road to Power

For most socialist activists, especially those like me who are based in the academic world, political power is largely an abstraction. We analyze its sources, talk about its importance, and perhaps participate in movements that strongly influence the making of policy from the outside, but in the United States we rarely have the chance to wield it directly. In January of 1999 I actually got that opportunity when I took my seat in the Salem City Council.

My election was largely a function of being in the right place at the right time. In March 1998, leaders of my local neighborhood association asked me if I would consider running for the council. The incumbent councilor was clearly on his way out after his support for a major road-widening project had infuriated a good part of the ward, and people were casting about for someone to replace him. When I agreed to run no one else stepped forward to oppose me. I was duly elected in May and assumed office the following January.

What were my goals as a new “socialist/green” councilor? Simply put, I aimed to pursue policies that put “people before profits.” Barring the outbreak of revolution, city governments cannot expropriate the means of production (although they can set up entities such as municipal power companies), eliminate wage labor, or even do much to ward off the impact of broader economic crises. They can, however, promote polices that stress greater equality (e.g., progressive taxation, the provision of high quality services for all, and housing and transportation policies), community involvement in policy making (especially planning), and regional cooperation in the management of growth. In opposition to the right-wing demand to run government “like a business,” we can assert that the provision of public goods must adhere to a different standard and that the public sphere has one great advantage over the private one: democratic accountability. To challenge the current system, our movement must make gains on this ideological terrain.

It is on the local level that people’s lives and the actions of their government most often intersect, and residents expect “full service” cities like Salem to provide security, good roads, water and sewer services, libraries, parks, and emergency services (social and environmental). The level of service provided is often the key to a community’s quality of life; hence it is ironic that many Oregon cities, and those in other parts of the country, are now in the midst of serious, long-term fiscal crises. These crises have resulted in the gradual erosion of service delivery, a decline in the quality of life, and a concomitant fall in people’s support for the public sector. Salem provides an excellent example of this nexus of crisis and decline, which is one of the legacies of the “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s.

Salem’s annual budget totals about $450 million, of which $85 million is in the general fund. The latter provides the resources for almost all of the key day-to-day services provided by the City to residents (with the major exception of water and sewer service delivery, which is in a separate and massive “dedicated” fund). The bulk of Salem’s general fund revenue comes from local property taxes, franchise fees, and a hotel/motel tax. There is no sales tax and no municipal income tax; the City’s revenue base is very narrow. In 1979, when the City had much higher levels of service than today, about 20% of the general fund came from the federal revenue sharing program. As part of its attack on the social service sector, the Reagan administration abolished revenue sharing in early 1980s, forcing Salem and other cities to raise property tax rates to make up for the lost income. The result was a statewide tax revolt in the early 1990s that used ballot measures to roll back property tax rates and put limits on how much they could be raised. These actions set the stage for Oregon cities’ ongoing fiscal crisis, as the costs of financing urban growth outstripped local governments’ ability to maintain services or expand them as required. A clear result is a long-term decline in virtually all service areas.3

In concrete terms this means that, over the course of the last 20 years, the city has had to defer tens of millions of dollars in road and infrastructure maintenance, while drastically curtailing its provision of emergency social services, reducing its library services, and cutting park operations to the bone.4 Even the police and fire departments, initially protected from major cuts, have suffered substantial declines, and the lengthening police and fire emergency-response times illustrate the dangerous nature of the continued cuts. Past councils have been frugal. The number of workers serving the public today (about 1,100) is the same as in 1979, but they are dealing with twice as many people. Fearing voter backlash, the city government has made no serious effort to reform a system based on an inadequate and regressive property tax. As Reagan’s anti-government supporters had hoped, the fiscal crisis makes the provision of services increasingly difficult and opens the door to their elimination or privatization.

I joined the Council at a time when a major shift was occurring in Salem politics. For many years the Chamber of Commerce, especially its representation from the building industry, had dominated the Council and shifted scarce resources to promote the city’s extensive growth. Over the course of three decades, the Council approved virtually all annexations and did little to reduce subsidies for the expansion of infrastructure that were paid out of the increasingly strained general fund. In 1996, however, the people of Salem elected a progressive lawyer, Mike Swaim, as Mayor. Swaim represented an agenda that included opposition to sprawl and promoted “smart growth,” a method of growth management that is hotly contested around the country, but especially in Oregon, which has some of the most innovative and restrictive land use laws in the United States.

Over the past quarter century, Oregon has implemented a set of complex land use regulations designed to preserve farm and forest lands by reducing urban sprawl. In a nutshell, every city is surrounded by an “urban growth boundary” (UGB) outside of which urban development is prohibited. Theoretically, urbanization should only occur between the actual city limits and the UGB, and the expansion of the latter can take place only when a city no longer has a twenty-year supply of land available for building. Despite certain flaws, there is no doubt that this system of regulation has slowed suburban sprawl and done much to protect farm and forest lands. The system also raises a whole set of political issues for public debate. For example: How fast should a city “build out” to the UGB? What level of housing density is appropriate? How does one balance residential, industrial, and commercial development with the need for open space and parks? In what geographic area should public investment be focused? To what extent should the public subsidize private development? These are just a few of the issues that lie at the heart of local politics as various interest groups (e.g., developers, environmentalists, etc.), and ordinary citizens debate the impact of growth on their quality of life.

Although he did not have majority support in the council during his first term, Swaim and his supporters brought these issues to center stage. Very importantly his efforts were matched by those of City Watch, a local watchdog group, which aimed to democratize the expansion process by having all annexations placed before the public for a vote. City Watch supporters insisted that a vote of the people should follow a public debate in the Council over the value of annexations, a position that was fiercely resisted by the development industry and its local, Gannett-owned mouthpiece, the Statesman Journal, Salem’s sole daily.

The issue came to a head in May of 2000 when City Watch succeeded in having its measure seeking voter approval of annexations placed on the ballot, and both sides mobilized for the mayoral and Council elections. As is often the case with local political issues, the growth issue in Salem and elsewhere makes for strange political bedfellows, and Swaim and City Watch were able to construct a loose electoral coalition that included Democrats, Greens, Republicans, and independents to win a resounding victory. To hold onto his unpaid job, Swaim raised $27,000 to defeat an opponent who raised four times as much. The story was much the same in the council races, in which massive developer contributions could not overcome grassroots organizing and solid door-to-door work. In the end, the annexation measure passed comfortably and Swaim emerged with a 6-3 majority (consisting of 2 Democrats, 2 Republicans, and 2 Greens). This coalition, despite its political diversity, was prepared to implement sweeping reforms not just dealing with growth, but on a wide range of issues.

In the fall of 2000 many of the people who had worked for the electoral victory came together to construct an “Agenda for a Livable Salem.”5 The purpose of this document was to guide the formation of Council priorities by making a series of specific proposals in a variety of areas. In summary form the most important of these called on the city to:

– Pay a living wage and require its service contractors to do so.

– Require businesses with which it contracts to disclose their policies and histories regarding employment, human rights, and environmental records as a part of the bidding process.

– Recognize the right to collective bargaining for all its workers (e.g., unorganized seasonal employees) and require its private sector partners to do the same.

– Strengthen the authority of the Salem Human Rights Commission.

– Support the right of farm workers and immigrant workers to unionize, and protect the rights of undocumented workers.

– Create a Citizen Review Board to ensure the fair treatment of all residents by the police.

– Promote alternative means of transportation to the automobile, and link transportation and land-use planning more effectively.

– Protect, preserve, and restore Salem’s natural places by working more closely with grassroots organizations such as Watershed Councils and Neighborhood Associations.

– Protect and restore the urban forest.

– Pass legislation that would eliminate corruption and conflict of interest from local elections and encourage public participation.

– Explore and implement progressive forms of taxation.

– Encourage more public input in the land-use planning process.

By themselves, none of these proposals is particularly radical, but taken together, they represent a powerful push toward creating a city government that conducts itself responsibly, effectively combats discrimination, protects the environment, and promotes economic equality and democratic participation. Despite some very substantial ideological differences, the council majority recognized that these reforms would significantly enhance Salem’s quality of life for all citizens. Encouraged and sometimes prodded forward by various groups of “agenda” supporters, who also organized public rallies and mobilized to testify at public hearings, the Council majority generally stuck together in moving the agenda forward. Over the next two years it implemented almost all of it.6

In addition to passing living wage and corporate disclosure ordinances, the Council welcomed the city’s seasonal workers’ effort to unionize, it created Oregon’s first environmental commission, and it strengthened protection of the city’s waterways. The Council broke new ground by requiring all annexation applicants to tell voters exactly what they plan to do with land that comes into the city and to provide them with a cost/benefit analysis of their development proposals. It significantly raised developers’ fees for new infrastructure and, thus, reduced public subsidies for growth. In the area of civil rights, the council created a Citizens’ Police Review Board and passed a series of ordinances strengthening protection of minorities. And, finally, it followed through in the sphere of electoral reform by sponsoring a successful ballot measure restricting any councilor from voting on an issue if he or she received of total of $501 or more in campaign contributions over the previous 4 years from any party involved.7

With the important exception of progressive tax reform (more on that below), by any stretch of the imagination the Council lived up to the promises it had made to the community. At a time when national and state politics provided little to inspire or encourage progressive activists to press on, those in Salem could take heart with their local success. Although Mike Swaim decided to leave the Mayor’s job and run for the legislature, many hoped that in the upcoming 2002 elections our majority would be returned to office.

The “Counterrevolution” Rears its Head

They were to be sadly disappointed. The “progressive” slate was trounced in the May elections. Along with our mayoral candidate, two of our Council candidates, including myself, went down to defeat and a third lost in a runoff in the fall. Only one member of the slate won a victory. In the aftermath of our debacle there has been much soul searching about its causes and I don’t profess to have “the” definitive answer. I think, however, that the analysis below, which focuses in particular on my own race, incorporates the views of many involved.

There are many reasons why we lost. Some of these, such as tactical mistakes, the quality of our candidates, or the failure to mobilize “our” voters, were at least within our partial control, but others, such as the economic downturn that had hit Oregon especially hard, were not. This time around we certainly did not have a mayoral candidate with the energy of the one put forward by our opponents. Janet Taylor, Salem’s “Margaret Thatcher,” is an ambitious, well-connected, and well-financed local industrialist who campaigned hard for a full year not against her immediate opponent, but against Mike Swaim and the agenda he represented. She was backed in her effort by the Chamber of Commerce leadership, the developer community, and the Statesman Journal. These institutions, long used to having their way in the City government, were incensed at having lost power and had challenged virtually every economic and environmental element of the agenda.8 During the campaign, they worked together effectively to construct and broadcast a message to undermine the credibility of the council and its policies. They themselves had little of substance to offer, but negative campaigning and outright lies did the trick!

In many ways I was well positioned to win my race. As Council President I was closely allied with a popular mayor, and all the major unions supported me. I had an experienced manager, enough money and volunteers, and was willing to campaign hard. I also had an excellent record to run on and decided to keep the campaign positive. Despite the vociferous criticism of the Chamber of Commerce and its allies, most people expected me to beat my opponent, Jim Randall, a marketing consultant with good connections to the Chamber and to the local arts community, whom the press described as a “moderate Republican.”

Unfortunately, my campaign underestimated and failed to deal effectively with our opponents’ strategy, which aimed to avoid most substantive issues and to criticize the Council along personal and ideological lines. Backed by the Statesman Journal, the Chamber (especially its development interests), and the Republican Party, Taylor and Randall attacked the Council for “not listening” to citizens and for “incivility.” Without producing any substantive evidence, they claimed that the Council’s policies had had a dire effect on the business climate and had driven away high quality city staff. It had promoted an “ideology,” rather than providing jobs and fixing potholes.9

After testing the waters with polling, my opponent recognized that my background as a Socialist made me vulnerable to “red-baiting.” In public meetings I was asked “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Socialist Party,” and in mailings, in public debates, and on local TV, Randall’s campaign constantly repeated that I was a “passionate socialist,” while he was a believer in “free enterprise.” The Statesman Journal assisted by writing “news” articles describing his family, his career, and his moderate Republicanism as opposed to my being a socialist. Of course, I had no family and no professional career! It was no wonder that Randall’s campaign delivered this article to every household in the ward twice.10

When he did deal with substantive issues, Randall used outright lies or distortions of my views to gain advantage. He focused particularly on my longstanding proposal to reform the city’s tax structure by rolling back the regressive residential property tax rate and replacing it with a progressive income tax levied on everyone who lives or works in the city.11 If structured properly, it is my contention that we could raise enough additional revenue (about $12 million) to restore basic services to 1979 levels without increasing the tax burden on the majority of Salem’s residents. I initially proposed this reform four years ago to a city task force charged with finding new revenue and was basically laughed out of the room. The extent of the crisis, however, and the failure to find a better alternative have now caused many colleagues to reconsider their views and we are currently looking at potential schedules for public consideration.

Randall misled the voters by simply stating that I wanted to introduce an income tax on top of the property tax. In a state where anti-tax sentiments are very widespread, this lie was a powerful weapon. He claimed that my position illustrated the Council’s anti-business agenda, which was responsible for the city’s unemployment rate of 9%. Ignoring the fact that almost a decade of rapid growth in the nineties had produced no fiscal surpluses, he proposed as an alternative the annexation and development of a 1,000-acre block of land now outside the City.12 This kind of growth, he claimed, would “put Salem back to work” and fill the city’s treasury.

At a moment when many Oregonians are distrustful of government on all levels, hate to even talk about taxes, and feel threatened by unemployment, such arguments, no matter how unrealistic, score well. In my case, when combined with his use of red-baiting tactics and personal attacks, they were decisive. In the end, I was able to win only about 44% of the votes from among the 51% of the eligible voters who turned out.

Thinking About the Long Term

Certainly our slate’s loss was demoralizing, but I also believe that our overall experience, both in office and during the campaign, provides us with important lessons for future work. In terms of the big picture I think that it shows clearly that electoral politics, even on the local level where the scope of action is quite constrained, is a key arena of struggle in which we must be engaged. When we win, we can improve people’s day-to-day lives in significant ways. When we lose, we can at least shape the terms of the debate. For example, despite our defeat, the community debate on the income tax continues (even in the Council!) and this discussion is a result of our having made it an electoral issue. Win or lose, we can use elections to educate the public and build up our forces.13 Mészáros is certainly right to warn against losing sight of the importance of the national state as an instrument of power. In my view, however, our success in the struggle for control of that state ultimately will depend on those “acting locally” to build a broad movement.

The left’s recent experience in Salem forces us to think not only about the tactical errors that were made in the campaign, but, much more fundamentally, about the ways in which we failed to mobilize and coordinate our forces to get our message out and broaden our base. In recent months many local activists have concluded that one of the best ways to move forward is to re-establish our coalition within the structure of an organization.14

The Agenda for a Livable Salem was a set of ideas that helped guide the Council’s policy-making, and the groups and individuals that supported it played an important role in placing their respective issues before the public. The coalition did not function well as an electoral force, however, because its constituent elements were not effectively linked. As the respective issues of each group were “resolved” by Council action, the groups tended to disappear from the scene. The goal of building a more structured coalition is not to transform non-electoral movement organizations into an electoral political machine. It is, rather, to connect the former with the electoral campaigns to create a more powerful engine for change. The movement organizations are essential because of their grassroots organizing energy and reach. To wield power, however, they have to provide support to allied forces in the electoral arena. They are then also in a key position to hold those who are elected accountable.

In addition to its weak organization, our coalition also suffered from a lack of an effective alternative to the Statesman Journal newspaper. This dearth is a problem faced by progressives in many communities around the country. The Statesman‘s monopoly gives it enormous influence in the community, despite the widespread recognition of the paper’s low quality. Its editors determine what and how “news” gets reported, and the editorial board plays an important role in setting the local political agenda. Its voice is supplemented by the Chamber of Commerce’s newsletter, which appears as an insert every month and was a significant factor in turning local businesses against the Council in the recent elections. There is no question that our movement must also establish different means of its own to reach the general population. Though even a weekly paper would be a tremendous undertaking for us, it would also be an enormous asset in the ideological and political struggle. The right clearly knows this, and we must use every opportunity, print, radio, or television, to challenge its domination of local media.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to win and hold power over the long haul we have to do much more to build our links with Salem’s massive population of poor people, and especially with the “new working class” of Latino immigrants who are flocking to this area in huge numbers. Many of Salem’s poor are citizens who simply don’t participate in the system because they are alienated from it. Many of the Latinos, however, are disenfranchised due to lack of citizenship and a host of other obstacles (economic, cultural, etc.) that leave them isolated from the mainstream. In some of Salem’s poorest and most densely populated areas there is hardly a voter to be found, to say nothing of people interested in radical activism. While it is possible that newly arrived Latino populations are less well indoctrinated in the American religion of anti-socialism than their Anglo counterparts, no matter how you square it, our largely white and middle class movement will have to work very hard to overcome its isolation from these people.

Conclusion

Local politics is certainly in many ways just “small potatoes.” Socialists and their progressive allies working on that level must overcome very substantial material and ideological obstacles to win and hold power and, even if they succeed, they are limited in what they can do. At this historic moment of capitalism’s global hegemony it is certainly transnational corporations, supported by capitalist powers such as the United States and its allies, who call the tune. Through institutions like the World Trade Organization and treaties like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, they are able to undermine the sovereignty of national states in the interests of capital and to weaken the ability of regional and local governments to control their own future.

Mészáros is absolutely right to point out that when the international institutions of corporate capital, such as the World Bank, attempt to provide “aid” on the local level, it functions as a means of undermining the national state. He is also right to note, though, that we should “not deny the potential importance of appropriate local action”(34). In my view, this is where the U.S. left should now concentrate its work. Organizing on the state, national, and international levels is, of course, of crucial importance. Electoral activity in those arenas and extra-parliamentary struggles that draw the world’s attention (e.g., the Seattle demonstrations against the WTO) are indispensable. But, in the long run, the local work will be decisive in the ideological and practical struggle for hearts and minds. Socialists must strive to give the slogan “think globally, act locally” the content that we want.

Our experience in Salem illustrates the limitations of local efforts to bring about change. Local government’s powers are limited by all kinds of controls from the top: state, federal, and now, international. Yet there are ways to take advantage of these limitations. For example, it may be illegal, according to WTO rules, for a local government to deny the right of a foreign firm to invest in a local “enterprise zone” on the basis of that company’s or its government’s past human rights record. But one can use local government to publicly challenge those rules (by resolution or by going to court) and thus educate the public. In Salem we passed and publicized a variety of such resolutions dealing with state and federal controls over minimum wages, trade issues, and even the School of the Americas. We have used our “bully pulpit” (which is televised on cable) to our advantage.

One can use local politics not only to put new ideas on the table for people to consider, but also to deliver real services that can change people’s lives. If bus service is affordable and really functions well, one can convince people of the advantages of mass transit (both socially and environmentally). When the city government provides quality library or park services, it is providing access for everyone to information and public space. When it opens the planning and annexation process to the public, it is democratizing a major component of community life previously largely limited to the back rooms of the elite. When we redistribute the local tax burden, we can show working people, once again, that progressive taxation benefits, rather than harms, them, as many believe.15 When people realize that government can work for them, and when they see government’s actions as the result of pressure from our movement (as they did earlier with the eight-hour day and social security), this is a major step forward for the left.

Of course, it doesn’t always work this way. People often have short memories and delivering services to those who need them brings no assurance of their political support. Many of our poorest citizens benefited a great deal from the Council’s policies, but relatively few of the poor voted. Old ideologies die hard, and Jim Randall and his allies knew that anti-socialist rhetoric still resonated with a large part of the populace. Using that theme, they succeeded in mobilizing their supporters more effectively than we did ours.

Despite our defeat, we try to not lose sight of the fact that many people, who, in the past, never would have viewed themselves as “socialist” or “green,” supported us. Little of this support had much to do with “theory” or political labels. Sometimes it was oriented around a single issue, but often it was due to the whole “package” that we brought forward. By making concrete and compelling arguments that these were issues that affected the quality of life for all, we were able to build a broadly based coalition.

In an age in which the logic of capitalism has permeated every nook and cranny of social life, the only way to combat it is to challenge that logic. We have done that in Salem by putting forward an agenda that simply put people, rather than profits, first. We need to do more to strengthen our movement and to link it with those on the larger political horizon, but I think that we are on a course that is the right one, and one that I am sure is being duplicated in many localities around the country. It is in that sense that “acting locally” in the U.S. can have an implicitly socialist content and serve as a firm base for action on the larger political horizon.

Notes

1. István Mészáros, Socialism or Barbarism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

2. I am aware that much of my analysis is based on my personal experience. I think, however, that my experience serves as a useful point of departure. Of course, the conclusions drawn from it will have to be confirmed as new evidence comes to light.

3. Salem’s dilemma is exacerbated by the presence of state government. The state owns 11,000 of the city’s 37,000 total acres. It pays no property tax on this land but expects services from the city. If the state paid its share of the property tax, it would bring $6 million into the city’s treasury or about half of what we need to return to levels of service provided in 1979.

4. The Parks Department provides a clear illustration of the City’s dilemma. Cuts in that department have been so deep (from roughly 60 to 30 workers over 20 years), that no new neighborhood parks have been opened in 18 years. The only way to keep the existing parks open has been through the use of about 80,000 hours per year of volunteer and prison labor. With five prisons in town, the city has been able to draw substantially on the latter.

5. Altogether about 100 people attended the initial gathering that began the drafting process. Organizations that were represented officially included the local chapter of the Green Party, the Audubon Society, AFSCME, two Willamette University student organizations, Oregon PeaceWorks, and the Humanist Society. Many individual activists from several other groups also were involved.

6. For the achievements of the council majority’s first year and a variety of perspectives on them see Dan Meisler, “Swaim, Council tout gains for 2001,” Statesman Journal, January 1, 2002.

7. This list does not by any means include all the Council’s goals or accomplishments. We also worked hard on issues such as the protection and enhancement of emergency social services, downtown housing (there is virtually none in Salem), preferential treatment of local businesses over big box stores, promoting sustainable, mixed-use development within the city, and after-school programs for children, among other things. Space considerations preclude discussion of these and other issues faced by the Council.

8. They could no longer dominate the Council, but they were well positioned to challenge it. Although the Chamber leaders constantly shouted that the Council was shutting them out of policy discussions, it was strongly represented on virtually every city advisory body and continued to exert significant influence. For a typical example of the Chamber’s outlook and a partial list of the Council policies it opposed, see their Business News insert in the Statesman Journal, December 27, 2002.

9. For example, see the Statesman Journal editorial, “Salem Voters have chance to build committed council,” May 4, 2002 and Lawrence M. Cruz, “Candidates don’t see eye to eye,” Statesman Journal, May 4, 2002.

10. See the “news” article by Stephanie Knowlton, “Randall Files for Ward 2 council seat,” Statesman Journal, March 3, 2002.

11. Another issue he used against me concerned water and sewer rate increases. At a minimum, Salem must invest $560 million in its water and wastewater system to deal with growth and new environmental standards, and to make up for decades of neglect. In order to soften the blow to rate-payers, I supported consecutive rate increases over 8 years of 8-9 percent. The alternative to this mode of ramping up the rates was to pay for the investments with huge rate spikes later on that would be much harder for people to bear. In his mailings to voters, Randall simply lied and said I supported a 20% rate hike. It was very difficult to answer this charge in the time and venues available.

12. Lawrence M. Cruz, “Candidates don’t see eye to eye,” Statesman Journal, April 20, 2002.

13. It has brought together progressive individuals and groups not previously linked. For example, people joined together to form a “Fair Taxes and Full Services” committee that aims to keep the income tax on the public agenda. By working with our reconstituted coalition (discussed below), it succeeded in at least getting the City Council to schedule a public hearing on the matter for the summer of 2003. A new and very effective child advocacy organization, Stand for Children, anxious to promote the funding of after-school programs in the local middle schools, has also joined the group.

14. This new coalition calls itself Citizens for Livable Communities and has attracted about a dozen core groups that include some local trade unions, peace, student, and minority group organizations.

15. Even union members sometimes are suspicious of progressive taxation. The Carpenters’ Union in Salem backed my campaign, but I had to work very hard to convince them that a progressive income tax in Salem was far more beneficial to workers than various flat tax proposals now floated by the right.