The Problem of Reformism

by Robert Brenner

I WAS ASKED to talk about the historical lessons of revolution in the twentieth century. But since we are primarily interested in historical lessons that are likely to be relevant to the twenty-first century, I think it would be more to the point to consider the experience of reform and reformists.

Reformism is always with us, but it rarely announces its presence and usually introduces itself by another name and in a friendly fashion. Still, it is our main political competitor and we had better understand it. To begin with, it should be clear that reformism does not distinguish itself by a concern for reform. Both revolutionaries and reformists try to win reforms. Indeed, as socialists, we see the fight for reform as our main business.

But reformists are also interested in winning reforms. In fact, to a "very large extent, reformists share our program, at least in words. They are for higher wages, full employment, a better welfare state, stronger trade unions, even a third party. The inscrutable fact is that, if we want to attract people to a revolutionary socialist banner and away from reformism, it will not generally be through outbidding reformists in terms of program. It will be through our theory—our understanding of the world—and, most importantly, through our method, our practice.

What distinguishes reformism is a day-to-day basis in its political method and in theory, not program. Schematically speaking, reformists argue that, although, left on its own, the capitalist economy tends to crisis, state intervention can enable capitalism to achieve long-term stability and growth. They argue, at the same time, that the state is an instrument that can be used by any group, including the working class, in its own interests.

Reformism's basic political method or strategy follows directly from these premises. Working people and the oppressors argue that, under the existing rules and institutions, workers can be made "happy" by a variety of short-term reforms. The problem is not that the state is incapable of making a "good" society. The problem is that the state is not free to "do its job" but must simultaneously maintain the most brutal, inhumane, and unresponsive, employed and unem-

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ing, increasingly productive economy, the state can continually make spending on state services, while regulating collective
bargaining so as to insure fairness to all parties.

Reformists would maintain that workers need to remain organized and vigilant. Under conditions of widespread unemployment and prepared to move against rogue capitalists who won’t be disciplined in the common interest: ready to take active action against employers who refuse to accept mediation at the level of the firm or, in the worst case, to take on entire groups of reactionary capitalists who can’t abide giving up governmental power to the great majority and seek to subvert the democratic order.

But presumably such battles would remain subordinate to the main electoral/legislative struggle and become progressively less common since reformist state policy would proceed in the interest not only of workers and the oppressed, but of the employers, even if the latter did not at first realize it.

Responding to Reformism

Revolutionaries have classically rejected the reformists’ political method of relying on the electoral/legislative process and state-regulated collective bargaining for the simple reason that it can’t work.

So long as capitalist property relations continue to prevail, the state cannot be autonomous. This is not because the state is always directly controlled by capitalists (as democratic and labor party governments, for example, are often, or are). It is because under conditions of relations is territorially limited in what they can do by the needs of capitalist profitability... and because, over any extended period, the needs of capitalist profitability are very difficult to reconcile with reform in the interest of working people.

In a capitalist society, you can’t get economic growth unless you can get investment, and you can’t get capitalists to invest unless you can make what they judge to be an adequate rate of profit. Since high levels of employment and increasing state services in the interest of the working class (dependent upon taxation) are predicated upon economic growth, even governments that want to further the interests of the exploited and the oppressed—for example, social democratic or labor party governments—must make capitalist profitability in the interest of growth their first priority.

The old saying that “What’s good for General Motors is good for everyone,” unfortunately contains an important grain of truth, so long as capitalist property relations continue in force.

This is not to say that capitalist governments will ever make reform work. Economically, in periods of non-boom, when profitability is high, capital and the state are often quite willing to grant improvements to working people and the oppressed in the interests of uninter-
rupted production and social order.

But in periods of downturn, when profitability is reduced and competition intensifies, the cost of paying (via taxation) for such reforms can endanger the very survival of firms and they are rarely granted without very major struggles in the workplaces and in the streets. Equally to the point, in such periods, governments of every sort—whether repre-
sentatives of capital or labor—do what they are committed to capitalist property relationships, will and try to restore profitability by seeing to it that wages and social spending are cut, that capitalists receive tax breaks, and so forth.

The Contradiction of Crisis Theory

It should be evident why, for revolutionaries, so much is riding on their conception that extended periods of crisis are built into capitalism. From this standpoint, crises arise from capitalism’s inherently anarchic nature, which makes for a path of capital accumulation that is eventually self-contradictory or self-determining. But because by nature of capitalists operate in an unplanned way, govern-
ment cannot prevent crises.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of debates over crisis theory. But one can at least point out that the crisis theory has vindicated an anti-reformist viewpoint. Since the late nineteenth century, if not before, whatever type of governments have been in power, long periods of capitalist boom (1890s-1870s, 1890s-1913; late 1940s-c. 1970) have always been succeeded by long periods of capi-
talist depression (1870s-1890s, 1919-1939; c. 1970 to the present). One of Ernest Mal-
et’s fundamental contributions in re-
cent years has been to emphasize this pattern of capitalist development through long waves of boom and down-
turn.

During the first two decades of the postwar period, it seemed that reformism had finally vindicated its political world view. There was unprecedented boom—accompanied by—and seemingly caused by—the application of Keynesian measures to stimulate demand, as well as the growing government expenditures as associated with the welfare state. Every ad-
vanced capitalist economy experienced not only fast-rising wages, but a significa-
tional expansion of social services in the interest of the working class and the oppressors.

In the late ’50s or early ’70s, it then appeared trumaphy that the way to move towards a more just society was to move towards a more just society, lead to increased public spending and state intervention. The next two decades entirely falsified this perspective. Declining prof-
labilities and the perception of government’s inability to make any improvements, led to a sense of despair on the left and right. Under these conditions, one after another reformist government in power—the Labour Party in the late ’70s, the French and Spanish Socialist Parties in the ’80s, and the Swedish Social Democratic Party in the ’90s—found itself unable to realize prosperity through the usual methods of sub-
sidizing demand and concluded that it had little choice but to increase prof-

ability as the only way to increase investment and restore growth.

As a result, virtually without exception, the reformist parties in power not only failed to defend workers’ wages or living standards against employers’ attack, but unleashed powerful austerity drives designed to raise the rate of profit by cutting the welfare state and reducing the power of the unions. There could be no more definitive disproof of reformist economic theories and the notion of the state’s ability to substitute for the market. The state could not prevent capitalist cri-
sis. It could not but reveal itself as supremely dependent upon capital.

Why Reformism Doesn’t Reform

It remains to be asked why the reformist parties in power continued to re-

spect capitalist property rights and sought to restore capitalist profits. Why didn’t they instead seek to defend work-

ing class living and working standards, if necessary by class struggle? Is the event that approach led capitalists to au-

tain irreversibility or a capital flight, why could they not then have rationalized and moved toward social-

ism? We are back to the paradox of reformism.

The key to be found in the peculiar social forces that dominate reformist politics, above all the trade union official-

dom and the social democratic party poli-

cy. What is distinctive of social democratic parties is that, while they are dependent for their very existence on organizations built out of the working class, they are not then in their own
devise of the working class. Above all, they are of the shop floor. They find their material base, their livelihood, in the trade union or party organi-

zation itself. It’s not just that they get their salaries from the trade union or political party, although this is very im-

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portant. The trade union or party defines their whole way of life—what they do, where they meet—as well as their career trajectory.

As a result, the key to their survival, to the functioning in their material and social position, is their place within the trade union or party organization itself. So long as the organization is viable, they can have a viable form of life and a reasonable career.

The gulf between the form of life of the rank and file worker and even the low level paid official is thus enormous. The economic position—wages, benefits, working conditions—of ordinary work-

ers depends directly on the course of the class struggle at the workplace and within the industry. Successful class struggle is the only way for them to defend their living standards.

The trade union official, in contrast, can generally do quite well even if one defeat follows another in the class struggle, so long as the trade union or-
ganization survives. It is true that in the very long run the very survival of the trade union organization is dependent upon the class struggle, but this is a very relevant factor. More to the point is the fact that, in the short run, especially in periods of profitability crisis, class struggle is probably the main threat to the existence of the organization.

Since militant resistance to capital can provide a response from capital and the state that threatens the financial condition or the very existence of the organization, the trade union officials generally seek studiously to avoid it. The trade union and reformist parties have thus, histori-
cally, sought to ward off class struggle by con-
tinuing with terms to it.

Today there is a capitalist that they accept the capitalist property system and the priority of the profitability in the oper-
ation of the firm. They have at the same time sought to make sure that workers, inside and outside the workplace, do not adopt militant, illegal, and classwide forms of action that might appear too threatening to capital and call forth a vi-
cient response.

Above all, with incapable class struggle ruled out as a means to win re-
forms, trade union officials and para-

politic leaders have taken the elec-
doral/legislative road as the fundamental political strategy left to them. With the passive mobilization of an election campaign, these forces thus hope to cre-
ate the climate needed for winning reforms, while avoiding too much offending capi-
tal in the process.

This is not to accept the absurd view that workers are generally chomping at the bit to struggle and are only being held back by their leaders. In fact, workers often are as conservative as their leaders,

more so. The point is that, unlike the trade union or party officials, rank and file workers cannot, over time, defend their interests without class struggle.

Moreover, at those moments when workers do decide to take matters into their own hands and attack the employ-

ers, the trade union officials can be ex-
pected to constitute a barrier to their struggle, to seek to deter or demobilize them. Of course, trade union leaders and party officials are not in every case avverse to class struggle and sometimes they even initiate it. The point is simply that, because of their social position, they can-
not be counted on to resist. Therefore, no matter how radical the leaders' rhetoric, no strategy should be based on the as-
sumption that they will resist.

It is the fact that trade union officials and social democratic politicians cannot be counted on to fight the class struggle because they have major material inter-

ests that are endangered by confrontation with the employers that provides the central justification for our strategy of building rank and file organizations that are independent of the officials (although they may work with them), as well as independent working class parties.

Reformism Today and Regroupment

Understanding reformism is no mere "academic exercise. It affects just about every political initiative we take. This can be seen particularly clearly with respect to both today's strategic tasks of bringing together anti-reformist forces within a common organization (regroupment) and that of creating a break from the Democratic Party.

Today, as for many years, Solidarity's best hope for regrouping with organized (however loosely) left forces stems from those individuals and groups which see themselves as opposed from the left to the official reformist line. The fact remains that many of these factions, explicitly or implicit-

ly, still identify with an approach to politics that may be roughly termed "populist frontism."

Criticize the fact that it was framed entirely outside the camp of organized "social democracy," however, means that Solidarity's strategy of reforming the level of a system in the Communist International first promulgated the idea of the popular front in 1935 to complement the Soviet Union's foreign policy of seeking an ali-

ance with the "peasants" to achieve a power to defend against Nazi expansionism ("collective security"). In this context, the Commu-

nists internationally advanced the idea that it was possible for the work-

ing class to forge a very broad alliance

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This approach fit very well with the Communists' strategic objective of getting the neophyte sectional industrial union to order the Democratic Party. Of course, much of the trade union officialdom was only too happy to emphasize its political role inside the emergent reform wing of the Democratic Party, especially in comparison with its much more dangerous economic role of organizing the membership and fight the employers. The dual policy of allying with the "left" officials to secure the trade union movement and working for reform through electoral/legislative means within the Democratic Party (hopefully alongside the progressive trade union leaders) has remained to this day powerfully attractive to much of the left.

A Rank-And-File Perspective

In the trade unions during the 1970s, representatives of tendencies that eventually ended up inside Solidarity were obliged to counterpose the idea of the rank-and-file movement independent of the trade union officials to the popular front idea of many leftists of supporting the "extant progressive" leadership. This meant, in the first place, countering the idea that the progressive trade union officials would be obliged to move to the left and oppose the employers, if only in defense of the workers. Revolutionaries contended that, on the contrary, precisely because of the virtualness of the employers', offensive, trade union officials would be for the most part willing to make concessions in the interest of avoiding confrontation with the employers. They would thereby allow the bit-by-bit chipping away of the labor movement virtually indefensibly.

Internal divisions among the left have been more than born out, as officials have by large set on their hands as the concessions movement has receipted. Bag and file proportions and the proportion of workers in trade unions dropped from 25-30% in the 60s to 10-15% today.

Equally to the point, revolutionaries in the trade union movement had to counter the popular front idea that the trade union leaders were "to the left of the mark and file." If you talked with many leftists in that period, sooner or later you got an argument that the mark and file were politically backward.

After all, many "progressive" trade union leaders opposed U.S. intervention in Central America (and elsewhere) more firm than the "left" officials. The result was much more clearly than did the membership for extensions of the welfare state, and, even, in a number of cases, came out for a labor party.

Our response to this argument was to contest what "progressive" trade union leaders were willing to do verbally, "politically," where relatively little is at stake, with what they are willing to do to fight the bosses, where virtually everything may be at stake. It cost the well-known head of the IAM William Winpisinger virtually nothing to have a member of the IAM and promulgate a virtually perfect social democratic world view on such questions as the reconversion of the economy, national health care, and the like.

But when it came to class struggle, we pointed out, Winpisinger not only came out clearly against Teamsters for a Democratic Union, but left his machines across the picket line in the crucial PATCO (air controllers) strike.

Over the past decade or so, many leftists have broken with the Soviet Union or China and become open to reexamining their entire political world view. But this does not mean that they automatically move in our direction. For their popular front political strategy corresponds in central ways with a still (relatively) powerful and coherent political trend—i.e., social democratic reformism. If we are to win over these comrades, we will have to demonstrate to them, systematically and in detail, that their traditional popular front strategy of working with the trade union "lefts" and penetrating the Democratic Party is in fact self-destructing.

Independent Political Action

Arousing points in the election campaign, important elements within the leaderships of the Black movement, the women's movement, and even the peace movement proclaimed that they would like to see a viable political alternative to the Democratic Party. Their statements of intent seemed to make the IRA project suddenly much more real. These people are indispensable, at this point, for any practical third party effort for the simple reason that the great majority of Black women, and labor activists look to them, and no one else, for political leadership. But are they serious about IRA?

In one sense, it is obvious that all these forces need independent political action. The Democratic Party has long been seeking to do ever more to improve capitalist profitability and profeesly laze in the interest of workers, women, and oppressed minorities. It has therefore been of descending use to the established leaderships of the union, Black, and women's movements who work inside the party primarily so that they can win something for their constituents or friends. The official leaderships of the movements would thus have no doubt love to have in existence a viable third party. But it is the paradox of their social stratum and their reformist politics that they are unable to do what is necessary to create the conditions in which such a party could come into being.

It is difficult to see how these conditions could be achieved except through the revitalization of the social movements, above all the labor movement, the growth of fighting militancy and fighting unity among the union movement and beyond. Newly-dynamized mass movements could provide the material base, so to speak, for the transformation of political radicalism that could be for less being an economically successful third party. But such movements are just what the established leaderships are afraid to create.

On the other hand, in the absence of a mass movement, the activity and consciousness of the mass movements, it makes absolutely no sense to the established leaderships to break with the Democrats. These elements take the electoral road extremely seriously; for it is the main means for them to secure gains for their constituencies. And the sine qua non for gains through the electoral road is all too self-evident: it is electoral victory. Without electoral victory, nothing is possible.

The problem is that, for the foreseeable future, this would have a chance to win. The political conscious- ness is not yet there. Moreover, third parties are especially disadvantaged here by the winner take all electoral system. In this situation, the established leaderships of the trade union, Black, and women's movements in a double bind: they cannot break from the Demo- crats until the conditions are present that can promise electoral victory for a third party; but they cannot create the conditions for a third party without forswearing, probably for a substantial period, their established methods of winning gains via the electoral road.

It is, unfortunately, not at all surprising that the most serious supporters of a move toward a third party within the established leaderships of the movements—be it found within the women's movement—showed themselves much less interested in "their" own. Twenty First Century Party than with the Democratic Party candidacies of Carole Mosley Brown, Barbara Boxer, and even Diane Feinstein. Just as any revival of the labor move- ment, the social movements, and of the left will have to depend on a break from—the confrontations with—the social and no, to forces that threaten to reformism, so will the project of building a new party to the left of the Democrats.

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