



# Bhaskar Sunkara's "Socialist Manifesto"

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Andy Yorke reviews, "The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality", by Bhaskar Sunkara, published by Verso

Bhaskar Sunkara is probably the most influential socialist writer on the US left today. He founded the Jacobin magazine/website in 2011, remains its editor, and is a prominent member of the Democratic Socialists of America, DSA, which, with over 92,000 members, is the largest left wing organisation in the US for a century. His Socialist Manifesto (2019) is aimed at educating the DSA's influx of new members and inspiring others to join it. The Manifesto, like Jacobin, expresses an ambition to put socialism back on the agenda for US radicals after an absence of many years.

An important aspect of the development of the DSA is a debate around the party's strategy, tactics and programme, which is conducted openly and publicly and is addressed to tens of thousands of young activists. Several of its leaders and theorists claim Democratic Socialism is the only effective socialist strategy for the 21st century and their argument forms part of an international discussion within left reformism and left populism. Jacobin has become a key arena for developing and propagating this strategy, along with the theory and history to support it, alongside other organisations with which it maintains links such as the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the European Left Party and its UK sister journal Tribune.

The theoreticians of the DSA argue that both 'classical' social democracy and revolutionary Marxism have failed. They conclude that what is needed is a 'third' way between the exclusive parliamentary and state oriented 'classical reformism' and the 'insurrectionist' 'dual power strategy' of revolutionary communism. Their strategic discussions include a critique of both traditions, backed up by thinkers such as Karl Kautsky, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Milliband who they claim laid the foundations for a 'transformatory' strategy that avoided the Communist and the Social Democratic positions.

Insofar as the Manifesto presents a strategy, it is one that starts not from the existing circumstances in the USA but from an imagined election of a left reformist government. This is then expected to act as a bridge to a more radical democratic socialist government and transition in which mass struggles provide a driving force to create a 'rupture' with capitalism. The total inadequacy of such an approach to politics has since been cruelly demonstrated by the failure of both Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn to fulfil the hopes that Sunkara placed in them. More broadly, the democratic socialists in the DSA and Jacobin aim to maintain their long-held strategy of working within the Democrats, the second party of US imperialism, and to support its left-liberal 'progressive wing', at least at elections.

Amongst the questions posed by the Socialist Manifesto are:

What is fundamentally wrong with capitalism and with what can it realistically be replaced?

Is creating an independent working class party possible in the US today and, if not, how can electioneering on a Democratic Party ticket solve this problem?

Can a socialist transformation be achieved not by a revolution that smashes the capitalist state but by electing a socialist government which will undertake a longer term transformation of both the state and the economy?

Is bourgeois democracy a form of class rule that needs to be replaced or a vessel that can be filled by working class interests?

Is socialism the replacement of private by cooperative ownership or is a democratically planned economy necessary?

Do we need an international revolution or is there a national road to socialism?

What kind of programme do we need, a classical minimum-maximum one or a programme of transitional demands?

What kind of party do we need, a so-called Big Tent party of reformists, revolutionaries and libertarians, focused on elections and community level reforms, or a revolutionary combat party engaged on all fronts of the class struggle?

This article aims to look at the Socialist Manifesto on these questions, dealing with both its solutions and its evasions and silences.

### A modest Utopia

The first section of The Socialist Manifesto is entitled 'A day in the life of a socialist citizen' in the USA, and is a brief attempt at what socialists in the late nineteenth century like Edward Bellamy and William Morris were fond of; giving a picture of what socialism will look like. This device conveniently hides the fact that such writers do not know how their future, much better, society is actually to be achieved. Sunkara does at least acknowledge that Marx and Engels rejected such 'recipes for the cook shops of the future' but, undeterred, he insists that today this is 'a crucial task to win people over to the idea that things can be different'.

Sunkara's 'thought experiment', as to how the transition from capitalism to socialism might have taken place, focuses on workers who play little or no part in it and are scarcely political. One works in a small bottling plant and ends up setting up a small business (!) along with his neighbour, Fred, who is a paediatrician. Liberation comes to them from outside and from above, by laws passed by an elected social democratic, then democratic socialist, government that sets up a workers' council. How Sunkara envisages this change coming about is worth quoting at length:

'A new, left-populist movement, fronted by Bruce Springsteen, wins the presidency and a majority in Congress. With the help of a rank-and-file resurgence in the labor movement, the president and Congress usher in the kind of reforms Sweden already enjoys. Health and education become social rights; child care and housing are made affordable?

"Luckily, for most of the next decade, the new working-class political coalition of labor unions, feminist and anti-racist social movements, environmental activists, coheres a political program capable of beating back the capitalists. Still, there are divisions? Some want to preserve gains already won by making tactical concessions to capitalists. Others are less compromising, but though they push the system to its limits, they don't believe it can be transcended. They settle for as much socialism as capitalism can take, supporting cooperatives and helping enlarge the public sector to mitigate the power of big corporations. Finally, there are radicals who want to break from capitalism entirely and create an even more democratic and egalitarian society.

"? capital flight and the continued political resistance of outnumbered but still powerful elites need to be taken on directly. The nation is convulsed by strike waves matched in their intensity by owner lockouts. Social movements make heard long-muted demands for justice and equality, and people entirely new to politics hit the streets. Workplaces are occupied, and bosses are even kidnapped by radicalized workers?? These measures provoke turmoil as capitalists muster desperate acts of resistance. But in the end banks are nationalized, and the state takes over all private firms.? It can do this because, ??in the end, a socialist coalition has a mandate to change society?.

Sunkara would perhaps argue that this rather fanciful sketch is meant to show what a socialist transition would look like, not present the strategy needed to win power. Nonetheless, all the questions of theory, strategy and tactics raised in the Manifesto, and generally evaded by all democratic socialist theorists, are encapsulated in this account. Instead of 'luck?', what programme does a party need to achieve power? Where is the state in all this, the armed forces, the CIA,

the far right, the militarised police? Would the bourgeoisie, which has a powerful state because the elites are, by definition, a minority, really muzzle all these forces out of respect for the socialist coalition's 'democratic mandate'? It never has anywhere else.

Sunkara does not answer these questions in his utopian sketch. What is worse is that he does not answer them anywhere else in this book-length Manifesto, including its 15-point 'roadmap for challenging capitalism and creating a democratic socialist alternative to it' at the end. While he does argue the need, ultimately, to break with the Democrats and form a working class party, at point 11, it is clearly easier for him to imagine an advance centred on a 'left populist' and rainbow coalition-style movement (which one could also imagine might not have completely broken free of the Democrats). In the final analysis, despite the reference to struggles to enable it, this is an electoralist road to power, notwithstanding the huge barriers to winning a socialist majority in the presidency and Congress, the least likely scenario for socialism in the US.

For Sunkara, democratic socialists are differentiated from social democracy by their concern to go further and abolish exploitation and capitalism. So, he rejects a strategy of gradually reforming capitalism as impossible, but equally rejects revolution, despite asserting the importance of a 'Marxist framework', leaving him to present a strategy of transition to socialism that navigates between them. In this, the struggles for electoral victories, for militant trades unions and political reforms are combined to create a 'rupture' with capitalism, supposedly the only possible route to socialism:

'Democratic socialists must secure decisive majorities in legislatures while winning hegemony in the unions. Then our organizations must be willing to flex our social power in the form of mass mobilizations and political strikes to counter the structural power of capital and ensure that our leaders choose confrontation over accommodation with elites. This is the sole way we'll not only make our reforms durable but break with capitalism entirely and bring about a world that values people over profit.'

This 'sole way' rules out a revolutionary workers' movement, led by a party committed to the overthrow of capitalism in favour of a route through parliament, backed by strikes and the streets, and spread internationally.

A Social-Democratic bridge to Democratic Socialism ? or vice versa?

Between his opening sketch of democratic socialist transformation and the closing political 'roadmap', the great bulk of this book (it is not really a manifesto at all) is an account of socialist history and theory from Marx and Engels, through the figures of the Second International, then Lenin and the Bolsheviks, to the European Labour and Social Democratic traditions, ending with the 'class-struggle social democrats' Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. From these, Sunkara draws lessons positive and negative to explain and justify his radical, democratic-socialist strategy (he uses both terms interchangeably).

He displays a flair for a popular, concise presentation of socialist history and theoretical debates, but both his account of the history of Marxism and where he himself stands within it, go very far towards its revisionist, reformist right wing without identifying completely with it. His central idea is that the crux of Marx's thought is a 'radically democratic essence', this ensures that he does emphasise the democratic demands and reforms that Marx championed against both the bourgeoisie and the anarchists, but he downplays the lessons that Marx drew from history. From the 1848 revolutions, Marx and Engels learned the necessity not only of working class political independence from liberals and radicals but also of the need to "smash the state". This would make the revolution permanent, as they put it, by establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, the democratic revolution can develop into the struggle for socialism. From the Paris Commune of 1871, Marx stressed one great addition to the programme, the key elements of the destruction of the bourgeois state and of its revolutionary replacement; the dismantling of the standing army, the arming of the popular masses, the election of recallable delegates on workers' wages and the implementation of decisions by the popular organs of the revolution, not a separate bureaucratic apparatus.

Sunkara writes off both Social Democracy and Communism as 'twentieth century socialism' and 'false starts', with democratic socialism in the end representing a 'better sort of socialism'. He gives a harsher critique of what he calls

the 'Bolshevik experiment' in Russia; asserting that it presents only negative lessons, that is, centralised planning and 'collective authoritarianism' ending in failure. In line with his self-professed radicalism, combining 'my social-democratic heart' and 'Marxist brain', his open bias is towards post-war European Social Democracy, with its welfare state, presenting it almost as a golden age where 'democratic socialism came close to becoming a reality' and many could lead 'decent, fulfilling lives':

'The twentieth century, for both good and ill, left socialists with plenty of lessons? We can learn from this history that the road to a socialism beyond capitalism goes through the struggle for reforms and social democracy, that it is not a different path altogether.'

The best of the post-war European social democrats, and something of a model for what he hopes Sanders and Corbyn might do, is Olof Palme, Sweden's prime minister from 1969 to 1976 and 1982-86, when he was assassinated. Palme, referred to at the time as a 'revolutionary reformist', undertook major interventionist measures in the economy with state investment and indicative planning which were, in Sunkara's phrase, 'not necessarily anti-capitalist' but were accompanied by measures, 'to expand workplace democracy, and give workers a say in many areas of production'.

The background to Palme's reforms was a wave of wildcat strikes in the early 1970s and the adoption by the union federation, the LO, of the Meidner Plan, which envisaged using 'excess' profits to gradually increase workers' shares in companies to the point of their socialisation. Palme's reforms were similar to those advocated by proponents of the 'Alternative Economic Policy' in Britain's Labour Party, such as Tony Benn. Palme's reforms also involved important extensions of women's rights, showing 'just how much sexual oppression could be diminished within capitalism?', and an outspoken, non-aligned policy for neutral Sweden, which involved openings to Cuba and fierce criticism of Apartheid in South Africa. Yet, for all that, Sweden remained an integral part of the imperialist order with its huge mining and industrial corporations owned by 'the fifteen families'.

Sunkara has to return to Marxism for an explanation as to why Olof Palme's radical reforms ultimately came to a halt:

'Social democracy was always predicated on economic expansion. Expansion gave succour to both the working class and capital. When growth slowed and the demands of workers made deep inroads into firms' profits, business owners rebelled against the class compromise? Thinking they had abolished the business cycle they forgot a core tenet of Marxism is that the contradictions of capitalism and its tendency towards crisis cannot be resolved within the system. In doing so they ironically ended up undermining their own voting block, the true source of their power.'

Sunkara correctly calls this the 'the structural dilemma of social democracy?', where its dependence on private sector profits for reforms and need to limit business opposition means it shies away from working class mobilisation or left wing policies, and then loses support, elections and power. So, Palme lost the 1976 election and by the time he returned to power in 1982, the neoliberal revolution was well underway and social democracy worldwide was in headlong retreat. Sunkara's 'social democratic dilemma' is the nearest he comes to the Marxist critique of reformism. But even this does not shake his faith in social democracy as a necessary first step towards democratic socialist transition.

Yet the entire experience, both in Europe and in Latin America, confirms the problems of the Swedish model when it comes to opening a road to a transition beyond capitalism. This shows that social democratic and Labour governments, even when they did manage short periods of important social reform, Britain in 1945-48, Sweden in the 1970s, in government and in opposition eventually provided not a bridge but rather a barrier to a transition to socialism. Sunkara avoids examining the reasons why or explaining why things would work out differently in the new century, if Sanders or Corbyn had not been defeated before they got near to power. Certainly, the Attlee, Mitterand and Tsipras governments raised hopes of major change, but only to dash them cruelly and open the door to the right wing.

Where reformist 'socialist' governments, generally in the semi-colonial world, were forced to go further by working class pressure as well as domestic capitalist sabotage and imperialist blockade, they ended up being bloodily overthrown. Tellingly, Allende's fate in Chile is referred to only once, and then as an aside, in what is overwhelmingly an account of democratic socialism in the imperialist countries. Indeed, Sunkara downplays this evidence against the

possibility of a peaceful road by dismissing the possibilities of revolution in the 'third world' anyway, whilst the advanced countries' imperialist character is largely ignored in his account of social democracy.

Linked to this omission is an even more fundamental one: the role of the state as an apparatus of coercion protecting capitalism and its ability to block even serious and sincere attempts to reform capitalism, let alone transcend it, is completely missing from his imagined scenario and largely absent from his historical account. When he says, 'they will do everything to stop us?', the 'everything' is limited to media attacks and capital flight, ignoring not just distant history but the threats in 2015 by an unnamed general of an army mutiny against a Corbyn government. His "social-democratic dilemma" surely applies to the decades-long democratic socialist transition over the course of several leftward moving governments imagined in Sunkara's first chapter. Either they limit their policies and capitalist opposition, creating the danger of disintegration like previous 'experiments', or they act decisively to cut through the deteriorating conditions, in which case the capitalists ramp up their resistance, going beyond economic sabotage to far right revolt, state repression and imperialist subversion. Only working class mobilisation led by a party committed to revolution could break that. Missing, too, are the obstacles existing within the reformist organisations themselves, whether nominally workers' parties like UK Labour or openly bourgeois ones like the Democrats that he envisages as instruments of the new type of reformist leaders.

The massive Corbyn movement's capture of the leadership of the Labour Party (2015-2019) showed this. Precisely because he needed to keep right wing forces, the bulk of the MPs, within the party in order to have any chance of winning an election, those forces were eventually able to blow up the project before it could get into government. Worse still, left democratic-socialist leaders have contained and restrained their followers in the party rank and file and the unions, so that the latter, which Sunkara imagines will be a countervailing force to capitalist pressure, are in fact paralysed and demoralised. The democratic socialist approach inevitably leads back to social democracy, that is, reformism, with its dilemma and built-in failure and betrayals, the exact opposite of Sunkara's imagined progression from social democracy to democratic socialism.

### Between reform and revolution

Sunkara presents an ideal, reified conception of 'socialism' as a movement that unites different tendencies, thereby obliterating the main lesson of twentieth century experience and the distinction that revolutionary socialists like Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky drew between reform and revolution. Instead, he looks to a 'radical' democratic socialism 'navigating between social-democratic reformism and revolutionary Leninism'.

Before the First World War, many of the parties and unions of the Second International appeared to have been won over by Marxism. This was particularly true of the German Social Democracy, SPD, whose main theoretician, Karl Kautsky, is now undergoing something of a revival. Beneath the formal Marxist programme, however, the practice of the party was overwhelmingly electoralist and this concentration was successful in its own terms. By 1913, the SPD was the largest party in Germany's parliament. Behind its Marxist façade, however, the party developed a powerful bureaucratic apparatus and leadership. This trend was even more pronounced in the Free Trade Unions, associated with the SPD.

As in Germany, so also in other countries, the bureaucrats were utterly committed to parliamentary life and negotiating with the employers under capitalism and, when the crisis came, in the shape of imperialist war, economic breakdown and revolution, they proved to be not simply reformist but pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist and, finally, actively counterrevolutionary. Their collapse into support for their own governments in WWI was followed by collaboration in suppressing the Russian, German and Spanish revolutions. After the Second World War, social democratic parties and unions supported their own imperialisms in the semi-colonial world to win ruling class acquiescence for the welfare state, and in part to pay for it. In fact, the acquiescence of ruling classes to these social reforms was made not so much because of the persuasion of the reformists but from apprehension at the rise of (Stalinist) Communism. In the words of the British Tory, Quintin Hogg, in the House of Commons in 1943, 'We must give them reforms, or they will give us revolution'.

Sunkara picks his way highly selectively through the history of reformism, particularly that of the SPD, precisely to avoid coming to such a conclusion. Although he sums up the great anti-war figure Karl Liebknecht as "an impatient man guided by his morals above all else" he merely rebukes the right wing SPD leaders Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske as "bureaucratic", despite their collaboration in the murders of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, which he then condemns in moral terms as "decisive and cruel measures".

He tries to spread the blame for the SPD's betrayal of the working class from the leaders' support for the war to the rank and file, who were "mostly conflicted" over it, while "workers weren't going to risk everything they had" by opposing the war. We could add, certainly not with those leaders! We are even invited to understand the concerns of SPD officials (good party administration is necessary to win elections) and the vacillating Kautsky, the tone is one of criticism of people who are basically part of our movement. Sunkara's detailed portrait of the SPD's capitulation is so concerned to explain the motives of the pro-war leaders that its neutral tone becomes almost sympathetic, as if he were describing a falling out between comrades rather than a bloody conflict. Compare that with Luxemburg's condemnation of the SPD after the betrayal of voting war credits in 1914 as "a stinking corpse". His bias is clear; the revolutionary left, from Liebknecht to Trotsky, is typically treated with less patience and nearly always mentioned negatively.

Sunkara tries to appropriate Rosa Luxemburg for democratic socialism, quoting her conception of reformism as the "labour of Sisyphus", doomed to see its reforms repeatedly rolled back by a capitalism it fails to abolish even when the latter enters a severe crisis. However, he fails to add what she concluded from this: "Those people who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform in place and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society". not to the realisation of the socialist order, but to the reform of capitalism; not to the suppression of the wage system but to the diminution of exploitation, in a word to the elimination of the abuses of capitalism instead of to that of capitalism itself." In short it means adopting the historic mission of liberalism.

The programmatic split in "socialism" that Luxemburg pointed to inevitably became an organisational reality, with Lenin's Bolsheviks breaking from the reformist Mensheviks and then, with the outbreak of WWI, fighting to break revolutionaries from the bankrupt Second International to found a third, revolutionary International. Without this, no revolution would have occurred in 1917. Lenin characterised the SPD and Labour as "bourgeois workers' parties" and their pro-capitalist leaders as "social chauvinists", while labelling the ineffective oppositionists who demanded both sides unite and tried to navigate between them, as "centrist".

Karl Kautsky became the archetype of such a figure, at first hesitating to publicly attack Eduard Bernstein's Revisionism, then swinging leftward, as the voice of Orthodoxy, to work closely with Rosa Luxemburg from 1899-1909. He also stood closer to Trotsky and Lenin than to the Mensheviks during the 1905 revolution. But Luxemburg's fight to adopt the mass strike tactic in Germany, which would have required the SPD to break from its passive electoralism, eventually saw Kautsky break with her to become the leader of the "Marxist Centre", advocating a "strategy of attrition" rather than a "strategy of overthrow", a counterposition similar to Gramsci's "war of position" versus a "war of manoeuvre". In the latter form it is now very popular amongst those evolving from revolutionary to left reformist or populist positions. This beautifully encapsulates centrism, that is, revolutionary theory combined with reformist practice, with the latter winning out whenever push comes to shove. Kautsky's left-centrism survived until the outbreak of WWI, when he failed to denounce the SPD leaders as traitors, and only later opposed the war on pacifist terms. Finally, he denounced the October revolution and became its bitter literary opponent, deservedly earning the soubriquet "the renegade Kautsky" from Lenin.

Tellingly, when asked in an interview who he preferred, the revisionist Bernstein or the revolutionary Luxemburg, Sunkara answered "Kautsky" before adding "maybe more Luxemburg". Although he praises Rosa Luxemburg's reply to Bernstein, *Social Reform or Revolution* as "the finest synthesis of Marxist orthodoxy yet written", he fails to recognise that it condemns his attempt to straddle the clear line she draws between the two. This is the approach of Jacobin as a whole, lefts and rights. Because the starting point is a social democratic struggle for reforms, however

radical and structural, the rhetorical homage to Luxemburg covers what is, in reality, a version of Bernstein's gradualism, a programme for a stage which potentially never ends, look at the twentieth century 'god that failed' in Sunkara's words. His captivation with the 'profound gains of reforms', repeated at several points in the book, explains the sympathetic reading Sunkara gives to Eduard Bernstein's 'evolutionary socialism'.<sup>[2]</sup> He described Bernstein as 'not explicitly rejecting Marx, but instead using ambiguities in his thought to defend new positions'. Sunkara upholds Marx but performs a similar operation in the Manifesto to defend a new democratic-socialist strategy.

A revolutionary strategy does of course include the struggle to defend and extend reforms and democratic rights and within that strategy elections can play a tactical role. While it is possible, even necessary at times, for revolutionaries to give critical electoral support to 'bourgeois workers' parties', or even to work within them, the aim is not just to push them to the left but to organise workers and their unions to demand their leaders break from capitalism, break from reformism and, when they will not, to found a new, revolutionary party.

Associated with this soft peddling on reformism, three crucial dimensions are missing from Sunkara's account. The first is the role that class struggles (including the oppressed) played in the development of capitalism since Marx's time. What we are given is largely a history of leaders, parties and governments. Secondly, although there is reference to Marx's theory of value, there is none to his theory of crisis. Thirdly, there is a complete avoidance of Lenin's theory of imperialism, which connects the advanced countries' wealth to semi-colonial exploitation. Given Sunkara's wide knowledge, and ability to sum up political debates in a few sentences, these omissions can only be conscious and deliberate.

As a result, his account lacks any sense of urgency when it comes to anti-capitalist transition. Only at the end does he raise the spectre of catastrophic climate change, reluctantly admitting 'we probably don't have thirty years to make reforms the way social democrats did in the post-war period'. Despite writing this over ten years into the Great Recession and the years of grinding austerity, when state borrowing to bail out the capitalist banks and corporations was repaid at the expense of working people, he can still say, 'now is the best time in human history to be alive' and praise capitalism for its technological dynamism, having raised so many Chinese workers out of poverty in the last two decades!

Without acknowledging the theories of Marx and Lenin, he notes the system's tendency to crisis, but nowhere does he face up to its limits or its ultimate breakdown as, once again, it threatens humanity, in Luxemburg's words, with the alternative 'socialism or barbarism' through environmental destruction or inter-imperialist war. Instead of Marx's capitalist ruling class emerging 'dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt', Sunkara emphasises the capitalists as victims of their own system, whose competition locks even good bosses into being bad. In his imagined transition they are all "worn down by years of inroads" so that ultimately the lion lies down with the lamb, and they don't challenge the democratic 'mandate' of the left government with subversion or coups. Sunkara's analysis has to play down the violence inherent in capitalism, the bourgeoisie and the state, to make it fit with his conclusions.

Linked with this, Sunkara breaks with Marx's historical materialism when he approves one aspect of Bernstein: 'Bernstein was right to question the teleology that ran through the Second International Marxism. Borrowing from Kant, he believed that socialism was something that morally and ethically ought to be, not something that wasn't necessarily destined to be.' If this is true, why is socialism necessary? Sunkara replies:

'There is an ideological motivation for a more radical socialism, the moral idea that the exploitation of people by other people is a problem in desperate need of a solution. Capitalism both creates the preconditions for radical human flourishing and prevents its ultimate fulfilment.'

This last flourish flows from his focus on 'the profound gains of reforms' and America's supposed 'space for us to win reforms in the here and now', but equally looks back to the golden age of social democracy and capitalism, the post war long boom. In the twenty-first century reality of US decline, austerity and pandemic, even the rich US bourgeoisie needs every penny it can extract from the working class and semi-colonial world in its tightening race with

China and other competitors. Replacing Marx's historical materialist approach and scientific socialism with a moral and 'radically democratic essence' (and the philosophical idealism it represents) has always been at the heart of democratic socialism and is carried over by Sunkara from the DSA's founder, Michael Harrington.

Marxism without revolution?

Sunkara presents socialism in non-class terms as an 'ideological choice' and as the extension of 'radical democracy'. But without revolution, is it possible to simply reform away capitalism?

Sunkara writes off the Russian Revolution (and does not even consider any others) as a 'failed experiment' that led to 'authoritarian rule', with Lenin and Trotsky responsible for the rise of Stalin and dictatorship. Yet, in 1917, the Russian workers took power and defended it through their elected delegate councils, soviets in Russian, organised into a national congress whose executive constituted the government, a genuinely working class government. The real history of the many revolutions of the 20th century would show the development of similar sorts of organisation, such as the cordones industriales in Allende's Chile.

Sunkara's imagined transition in his first chapter takes place without a revolution and with tame workers' councils acting as an adjunct to a socialist government and planning from above, rather than as the motor of revolution that develops out of the class struggle and creates the government. He rejects the soviets taking power in the Russian revolution, and the struggle for workers' control as economic chaos, not as the starting point for the struggle for working class power, and the crucial first step towards any democratic planning.

Sunkara states 'the international revolution didn't come' but passes over the fact that the defeat of the 1918 German revolution, by the same SPD leaders he treats with kid gloves, was the greatest blow to Soviet Russia, prolonging its destructive civil war and setting the Soviet government down the road of isolation and ultimately degeneration. That this was not inevitable is shown by the fact that it still took ten years before Stalin's dictatorship could triumph, against the struggle by the Left Opposition led by Trotsky, which of course Sunkara leaves out completely. For him, the Russian revolution was doomed to fail and to fall into 'authoritarian collectivism'.

Sunkara gives a concise account of the Russian revolution, its degeneration and its political debates and struggles, but his political judgements are simplistic and chime with those of bourgeois liberalism: Lenin's concept of the soviets in 1917, as expressed in *State and Revolution*, was "naive and utopian", while Trotsky, who fought to restore democracy in the soviets from 1923, is a 'tragic' figure who however led to Stalin's dictatorship, which 'had its genesis in the repression that he had helped engineer during the civil war', as if the desperate measures forced by imperialist invasion had any responsibility for the totalitarian nightmare erected by Stalin. In fact, in his more sympathetic treatment of Mao and Stalinist China, or Yugoslav style economy and musings about socialism in one country (if it's the US!), there are many parallels between his democratic socialism and the bureaucratic states and reformist politics of Stalinism.

Sunkara supports, in very abstract terms, Marx's concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and traces its recurrence in the works of Luxemburg, Kautsky and Lenin. However, in doing so, he avoids Marx's essential point that the working class must be armed and organised into a commune-state that forcibly keeps down the capitalist forces seeking to crush it. In fact, he implicitly prefers Kautsky's parliamentary version and conveniently loses sight of it altogether when he comes to his "democratic socialist" government. How will it defend itself when it comes under attack from officers' conspiracies, mass fascist gangs, full-blown coups, or imperialist attack? Sunkara makes no attempt to address why the various reformist socialist governments that did try his more radical transition, such as the Popular Front government in Spain or Allende's Chile, were defeated or overthrown, he just avoids these examples.

Related to his sympathetic account of the SPD bureaucracy, Sunkara gives a positive account of the Mensheviks and the possibilities of a socialist coalition government in 1917. He backs the left-Menshevik Martov against the Bolsheviks, who should have been content to become a 'loyal opposition' within the Menshevik strategy of basing themselves on the constituent assembly as 'a framework for reforms'. The workers should not have sought "to take over the state" via the soviets which should have remained solely pressure bodies on the government.



This reformist strategy would indeed have meant no second, that is, socialist, revolution would ever have taken place, but neither would a peaceful socialist transition have replaced it. Rather, there would have been a counterrevolution led by the Tsarist generals with the support of the British and French imperialists. We do not have to guess what it would have been like since it actually happened in Finland, with the slaughter of tens of thousands of workers, a repeat of the crushing of the Paris Commune but on an even larger scale.

What Sunkara cannot answer is why this framework for reform did not work from February to October 1917, instead sparking sabotage and coup attempts countered only by revolutionary armed action? The idea that, in a backward, war-torn Russia, a stormy Weimar Republic on the Neva was possible, is completely unrealistic. Sunkara has to doctor history to justify his democratic socialist schema.

Ultimately, he rejects both the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks as "wrong in 1917" but blames the latter for the revolution's degeneration and Stalin, remaining silent about how many would have died in war, poverty and counter-revolution under the Mensheviks, if the workers had allowed them to play out their treacherous role in saving capitalism and disarming the soviets. He explains the degeneration of the Russian revolution not by material factors like its isolation, for which the German Social Democrats were primarily responsible, but with the trendy academic (and idealist) critique of the supposed "teleology" or "determinism" of classical Marxism, which he links to revolutionaries' supposed disregard of democracy.

Sunkara wants to skip the twentieth century and go back to Marx and Engels, but in reality downscales them from revolutionists to radical democrats. Engels asserted that "bodies of armed men" were at the state's core, and Marx, too, was crystal clear that, "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes" and that, "the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it, and this is the precondition for every real people's revolution on the Continent".

Drawing on the experience of the Commune, Marx noted that, "Having once got rid of the standing army and the police - the physical force elements of the old government- the rest of public servants, magistrates and judges were to be elective, responsible, and revocable". The Commune already had, in the National Guard, its own armed power, and proclaimed the dissolution of the standing army, along with the state bureaucracy, whereas Sunkara's imagined transition to a "radically transformed, democratic state" fails to mention the police, army, or state bureaucracy. Sunkara says the state would have to be "overcome" but is ambiguous on Marx's famous "smashing" or "breaking up" statement, quoting this later in his account of Lenin's "naïve" conceptions in *State and Revolution*.

Sunkara's assertions that Marx did not lay out the form of the post-capitalist state are clearly misleading in this respect. What is more, working class history and socialist theory did not end with Marx. The further development of the workers' movement led not only to mass parties and unions but to the creation of the soviets during the 1905 general strike in Russia. As Sunkara recognises, Lenin, and for a time Kautsky, saw them as the economic and political basis for such a commune-state, a strategy vindicated in the 1917 revolution.

The Communist International, in its first healthy years before Stalinisation, used this as the basis to differentiate between bourgeois workers' governments that rested on the capitalist state, and a genuine workers' government that, even if elected with a parliamentary majority, fought to develop and base itself on workers' councils and armed militias, disarming and breaking up the bourgeois state. In so doing, like the extra-parliamentary soviet movement in Russia, it would be creating a much deeper "proletarian democracy" (to quote Lenin), "the dictatorship of the proletariat".

### Working class self-emancipation

For Marx, working class "self-emancipation" is not a democratic socialist phrase but a material reality that arises in embryo in all serious workers' class struggles, is realised in revolutions and is necessary, in Marx's words, to create a class "fit to rule", one recasting its own relationship to the means of production, work and power through its self-

organisation and struggle. The real, positive lesson of the Russian Revolution is that without this factor, there is no liberation at all. Equally, it showed that the revolutionary section of the working class needs to be organised itself, so that it can fight for a programme in the working class movement that links its immediate struggles to the struggle for power and the socialist transition, opposing the reformist, bureaucratic misleaders of the movement and fighting to raise wider and wider sections of the class to a revolutionary, anti-capitalist consciousness and activity. As Marx put it in the Communist Manifesto, the Communists are 'the most advanced and resolute section' of the working class, aiming for the 'formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.'

Little of this conception remains in Sunkara's Manifesto, with its focus on elections and governments that remain fundamentally unaccountable to the movement. The class struggle is invoked only as an auxiliary to an elected democratic socialist government in parliament. In this scenario, the government's 'host', the bourgeois state machine, commanded by its generals, police chiefs, judges, top civil servants, is left out of account. When Sunkara says elections are not enough to win power, he merely means we need to add mass struggles to provide pressure and 'ensure that our leaders choose confrontation'. That's not what Marx or the other classical Marxists meant by power. What about situations where mass struggles pose the possibility of developing governmental power based on their own class organisations as in Russia, Spain or Chile?

Sunkara never affixes a class label to democracy, never uses the terms workers' or proletarian democracy, stating that, for Marx, socialism 'essentially meant radical democracy', individual liberties and a free civil society, along with workplace cooperatives. His democratic socialist transition is like a sliding scale of ever more 'radical democracy', thus avoiding revolution and its rupture of history and class society, let alone the creation of a qualitatively deeper, proletarian democracy, already on the road to its own abolition, along with classes themselves. What about leaders on a workers' wage, elected ultimately from the ranks of the workers themselves, who can be recalled if they fail to choose confrontation but, more importantly, have been proven in past battles? Sunkara is right to stress the necessity of a workers' government and politics, but his strategy for socialism is overwhelmingly one from above, when we need socialism from above and from below, a worker's government based on and genuinely accountable to workers' councils and militias which have their own, living reality. His imagined transition is not very democratic in its description either.

Against Marx, who was clear that the working class under socialism would 'regulate national production upon [a] common plan', Sunkara rejects democratic planning, recognising reluctantly that, although bureaucracy might be avoided by this, it would be 'tedious' for grassroots committees and would thus only involve a few. This is a ridiculous argument when such a society could only be produced by mass mobilisation and struggle drawing in millions, and where alternative options could be modelled using AI and robotics, not to rob people of their livelihoods but to integrate production and to eliminate physically exhausting and boring processes. Liberated and educated workers would not need to fear a democratic centralisation that enabled them to find creative solutions to problems. Instead of planning, his imagined transition is based on a market socialist version of 'Parecon', (Participatory Economics) a decentralised model based on cooperatives that gives the illusion of abolishing the wages system and the market but retains state investment banks and planning boards independent of the grassroots. Sunkara insists the market for goods and services must remain because of the 'information problem'.

It is true that Marx did not lay out what form this plan for regulating production would take, let alone live to see the development of giant international monopolies. However, he did already see the limits of disconnected workers' cooperatives:

'If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production ? what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, 'possible' communism?'

In addition, while workers' cooperatives (as a specific economic ownership form) might remove the individual

capitalist, they would only represent the first step towards a break from capitalism and its market system: 'The co-operative factories run by workers themselves are, within the old form, the first examples of the emergence of a new form, even though they naturally reproduce in all cases, in their present organization, all the defects of the existing system, and must reproduce them. But the opposition between capital and labour is abolished there, even if at first only in the form that the workers in association become their own capitalists, i.e., they use the means of production to valorise their labour'.

So, rather than simply reassert workers' cooperatives as the transitional form, par excellence, despite their sketchy adoption in the Commune, the revolutionary movements of the 20th century went further and deeper thanks to the experience of workers' control of factories, workers' councils and the role these played during situations of dual power. The elaboration of Marx and Engels' analysis of the Commune's semi-state model is laid out clearly in Lenin's *State and Revolution*, which revives what had previously been buried during the period of the Second International.

The individual workplace cooperative model is clearly related to a past stage of history before giant monopolies, banking as well as industrial and commercial, just as elements of planning develop organically within them even under capitalism. The common point in the writings of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky is that a democratic and centralised replacement of blind competition must arise out of the knowledge gained and the institutions taken over by the working class itself. A democratically centralised plan, local, regional, national and international, is not an alien imposition. Sunkara and Albert's approach is nearer to Proudhon's 'mutualism' than to Marx's communism, which would be powered not by a bureaucracy but by politically conscious and organised workers themselves.

Today, workplace cooperatives develop where capitalists have abandoned production, but workers' struggles have not been able to generalise or demands for nationalisation under their control have failed. Nationalisation of the giant monopolies, which Sunkara supports as a task for a socialist government and which the workers' movement itself should implement, does not mean breaking them up but running them under a democratic plan based on workers' self-organisation in the workplace and participation and control of the plan.

How foolish it would be to nationalise the big capitalist monopolies with their internal planning (for profit) and then break them up into a plethora of small cooperative units, rather than democratise their organisation of production for social use as part of a larger plan. Sunkara's version does not look very democratic or even consistent, the workplace councils he puts forward only control their own workplace, electing managers for three year terms, without social oversight by the class as a whole. Like the Bolsheviks, however, he does reject syndicalist ideas of workers' control, 'the ridiculous transfer of the railways to the railwaymen, or the tanneries to the tanners'.

In his schema, publicly owned banks and planning boards plan from above, seemingly independent of the workplace committees, rather than being based on them through ascending levels of city-wide and regional committees of elected, recallable delegates as Trotsky argued for in revolutionary Russia. Sunkara's socialism seems to come mainly from above, by electing a democratic socialist government which would then have to compensate the capitalists for their property. This would not avoid the sabotage and dislocation that he blames on workers' control in the Russian revolution, but that were actually driven by Russia's backwardness and the dislocations of years of wartime destruction and months of revolution that followed.

Not only does the democratic socialist strategy have no real answers on how to get through this period of instability and counter-revolutionary reaction, but its model is also neither very democratic nor socialist. In one jaw-dropping remark, he says that, in the classical 'idealized version of central planning, too much seems to be riding on the general population developing a socialist consciousness'! If the working class's consciousness is not changed by taking power, by self-emancipation, making itself 'fit to rule', then who will carry out the socialist transition? The same lack of daily transformation is reflected in comments on women's 'higher pay giving them more power to negotiate over housework, or that 'decades on' there will still be battles against 'racial disparities and the sexual division of labour', conveying the assumption that little in the way of collective living and the 'socialisation of housework' has taken place. It is such developments that Engels and the Bolsheviks saw as the material basis, along with legal equality and reproductive rights, for liberating women as well as being a concomitant of democratic planning and the socialist

transition.

Where the working class is central to the struggle, as it was in Russia, Sunkara can only see disaster or pass over in silence (Spain, Chile). At one point, he even blames workers rather than their leaders for the failure to advance at crucial moments, because they "relied on capitalism for survival"! Against Marx's "emancipation of the workers being the task of the workers themselves", his workers' democracy and their dictatorship over the remnants of the exploiters, Sunkara puts forward a non-class or rather middle class or petty bourgeois conception of democracy as the central axis of change: his "democracy radically extended to the economic and social realms" is neither collective nor consistent.

### Skin-deep internationalism

Sunkara's democratic socialism is designed for the highly developed imperialist USA and seeks its model in imperialist Europe. Though he does not stress this, it is entirely dependent on the capital accumulated by the former colonial powers, not only from "their" working classes but also from the natural resources and super-exploited labour of countries that used to be colonies, now independent but still subordinated to the banks, and other corporations located in the imperialist heartlands. Moreover, because his conception of democratic socialism is basically a Scandinavian welfare state, with more democracy and a growing cooperative sector, he has no problem with the assumption that "socialism can be built in one country", especially such a rich one as the USA. His distinction between democratic socialism and old-fashioned social democracy is only one of degree. This is totally inadequate; socialism has to be thoroughly internationalist, rejecting both imperialism and the mirage of socialism in one country. Yet the Manifesto is littered with little asides revealing the American-centredness of his vision: Socialists ultimately have larger ambitions than "socialism in one country" but "...if it's possible anywhere, it's possible here?".

The Manifesto says almost nothing about imperialism, beyond a single chapter on the "Third World Revolution" centred overwhelmingly on Chinese Stalinism, with a couple of pages on Cuba and the rest of the post-war anti-colonial liberation struggles as an afterthought. While name-checking Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, Sunkara incredibly writes off the possibility of revolutions today in the semi-colonial world, in other words, for the great majority of people living on the planet: "encouraging capitalist growth, while mitigating its worst effects and redistributing its spoils, as the Workers' Party in Brazil and other Latin American Pink Tide governments have done, is the best we can hope for from states in the developing world", as they wait for the advanced countries to move to socialism and a "radical foreign policy" promising global redistribution. The lack of "already developed productive forces" means no socialist economy is possible. In contrast to his Menshevik-style idea that global liberation starts in the wealthy countries, the Bolsheviks' international strategy of revolution recognised that, while it might first succeed in the poorer, weaker countries, this can trigger its spread to capital's imperialist heartlands.

In an age of Latin American reformist-socialist governments and region-wide revolts like the Arab Spring, to write off the possibilities of struggle in the semi-colonial world is, at best, a strategic error, since it is often the "weakest link" that will break first, catalysing the possibilities of revolution in the more central countries of world capitalism. Lenin and Trotsky saw this potential in the case of Russia's revolution, which helped trigger revolutionary struggles across Europe, Sunkara's democratic-socialist tunnel vision cannot, focussed as it is on elections, reforms, and a nationally centred transition.

Imperialism's continued repressive role in the semi-colonies, their continued poverty, dependency and often dictatorship are relegated to a footnote of history or left out, not seen as a central prop of Western, particularly American, affluence, relative as this is for workers in the first world. This is unforgivable in a socialist work produced in the last superpower, whose "arsenal of democracy" was used to intervene into the semicolonial world throughout the twentieth century and still props up dictatorships, especially just as the Trump wing of the ruling class geared up for trade wars, and worse, with its rival China, while pushing Brexit to break up its EU rival. These blind spots of Sunkara, shared by much of the DSA tradition, are, in reality, a concession to the imperialist regime they live and struggle under, a version of what Lenin called left-wing "imperialist-economism".

In reality, the Lula and Chavez projects are the greatest arguments against Sunkara. Not having abolished capitalism,

they have collapsed under the weight of its contradictions and the unremitting opposition of their national capitalist class, as well as imperialism, and despite mass struggles from below. Why would it be any different in the USA, with its notoriously violent, powerful ruling class?

### The test of crisis

Just as he has to abandon socialism under the harder conditions of the semicolonial world, Sunkara's neat scheme also cannot be sustained through periods of crisis, the rise of fascism and revolution. After his blow-by-blow history of the SPD and his analysis of the Russian revolution, his account of the 1920s-1930s suddenly becomes very general. Yet it was here that social democracy revealed itself not as a bridge to socialism but as an obstacle that betrayed and demoralised workers, pushing austerity and allowing fascism to grow.

Unbelievably, he tries to implicate the revolutionary left in the collapse of the crisis-ridden Weimar Republic, born in counter-revolution, dominated by Junkers and tycoons, with the SPD propping up conservative presidents in its final years and creating the conditions for Hitler's rise to power. For Sunkara, it simply collapsed 'under siege from left and right'. Again this is relevant; insisting on unity when capitalism is not working, society is polarising and the ruling class is moving away from liberal solutions, that is, the situation we face, is a recipe for future disaster.

Sunkara's account of Leon Blum's Popular Front government in France is similarly misleading, saying that at least it 'occupied power' to keep out the fascists, while in reality it demobilised a revolutionary situation, including a general strike and a massive wave of factory occupations, that could have joined with the revolution in Spain, and saved it. He exonerates social democracy, albeit by omission, for its role in these catastrophes.

Leaving out the Spanish Civil War, when another popular front government strangled a revolution and led to the triumph of Franco, is another part of his refusal to acknowledge how reformism becomes counter-revolutionary when the necessity of a revolutionary solution is posed by mass class struggle, and the threat of counterrevolution. Had the Bolsheviks followed Sunkara and Martov's advice and maintained a government with the pro-war and pro-capitalist Right Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in October 1917, there would be another name on this list of disasters.

Consistent with this approach, although he criticises the CPUSA in the 1930s for going 'too far in dissolving its identity' in Roosevelt's New Deal in pursuit of a 'popular front composed not just of working-class parties but also middle-class reformers', he does not reject it outright. Nor does he condemn the CP's support for Roosevelt as president or for similar New Deal Democrats, against many candidates of the local and state-wide labour parties that had blossomed in the era. Indeed, he criticises the Socialist Party's leadership because they clung to 'opposition to bourgeois reformers' 'class independence was paramount'. This does not bode well for the democratic socialist commitment to building a workers' party in the USA as soon as possible, and ending its support for the Democrats.

Equally, Sunkara fails to distinguish between the workers' united front, in which revolutionaries can unite with anyone in action in pursuit of a goal that will advance the working class movement, and the Stalinist popular front with its political unity with bourgeois parties or figures around a reformist programme and ultimately a government. If Sanders had won the nomination and had been elected President, with a Democrat Congress, the implication is that Sunkara would have followed basically the same line as the CP.

### Class independence is key

The US working class has great advantages which stem from its multiracial and multi-national origins, even though they were long used to promote disunity, via racism and white supremacy, and political bosses fomenting national and religious divisions to trade voting blocks in return for favours from the bourgeois party machines. If the strengths of these traditions could have been welded together in a workers' party and in class struggle trade unions, this would have mutually strengthened all. What is certain is that being tied to the Democrats and being manipulated by them through the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucrats, led to the decline of Labor as an industrial or political force in US society from the Cold War onwards.

The pronounced turn of the youth toward socialist ideas in the US today, however, shows potential for overcoming this historic weakness. The massive growth of the DSA in only a few years is one sign of this, as were the mass walkouts by teachers and increasing struggles by Black, immigrant and women Americans. Yet the great ball and chain holding back the US working class from the possibility of creating a Labor Party remains the Democrats and the same is true for the sporadically powerful mass upsurges of the Black movement and the women's movement. Jacobin's line, of using the Democrats' hegemony and ballot accessibility as a form of electoral "guerrilla insurgency" entails damaging concessions. Sunkara's Manifesto goes further by adding a democratic-socialist historical excuse for prolonging these illusions, deepening the opportunist "dirty break" into a "no foreseeable break", despite some useful pointers for action in the last section.

Sunkara sees no other way to escape his chicken-and-egg dilemma; how to get "a mass base to win reforms" without giving people proof that politics can change their lives for the better?, which he thinks is necessary to mobilise them to vote for such a government in the first place. This dilemma is of his own making, socialists need to free themselves from this electoral fetish that offers the least likely route to socialism. Remember, his imagined transition kicks off with the incredibly unlikely scenario of a left-populist government winning both the presidency and Congress, along with "hegemony in the unions"! Had Sanders been able to win the Democratic nomination and then been able to win the election in 2020, he would have found himself confronted, first and foremost, by his own Democratic Congress, assuming he had one, as well as a hostile Supreme Court and state governors. If class struggle social democracy can provide the starting gun for the subsequent democratic-socialist struggle, as he claims, why can it not start his first chapter's imagined transition?

Against this, socialists in the USA should struggle for an independent, multi-racial working class party that seeks to win the support of the labour movement by engaging in all its many existing struggles. Certainly, they should demand that Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the rest of the left Democrats break from the Democrats and build that new party, but without sowing any illusions that they would do so without massive pressure from below. Only the DSA at this point could focus such pressure.

Sunkara's strategizing reaches out to Europe, with a simplistic rejection of the EU as an obstacle to socialism and support for Brexit with a phony left wing gloss (Lexit) whilst ignoring that the real Brexit was a Trumpesque, racist blaming of capitalism's ills on foreigners and immigrants. Of course, the EU is an imperialist project but, to the extent that it is able to dissolve borders and integrate national economies, this benefits the working class of Europe. Why erect new frontiers and foment more national rivalries, why drive British workers into the arms of British bosses, rather than fight for the unity in struggle of British and French, Italian, German or Spanish workers? Here again we see the fruits of Sunkara's "socialism in one country" approach.

He looks in some detail at the history of the Labour Party and the Corbyn surge but, overall, he points activists towards building new parties in Europe rather than attempting to take over the main, union-affiliated social democratic parties. While he makes some useful criticisms of their different but reformist methods, he does not differentiate between left populist parties, such as Podemos, and those like Die Linke that are genuinely based on sections of the working class or with a socialist orientation to it, like Syriza.

Syriza, indeed, presents a clear test of Sunkara's strategy. Faced with the intransigence of the Troika, Syriza capitulated, unwilling to mobilise mass forces to resist the austerity programme by direct action. Sunkara simply says Syriza's retreats should be avoided! But how? Sunkara's answer is "mass mobilizations and political strikes to ensure that our leaders choose confrontation over accommodation with elites". Fine, but who was to organise those mobilisations against Syriza? Only a party that had been built on a programme that anticipated just such a confrontation, a revolutionary programme, would have been able to mobilise such a counterattack. The Syriza debacle shows, yet again, that social democratic leaders, no matter how radical their words, will not dare to summon up those below (the Greek workers) when they fail to bend the gods above (the EU, Germany and the IMF). All the threats of mobilising forces outside parliament turn out to be just so much bluff. As Trotsky said, such a leadership cannot simply invoke a revolution to pull its reformist chestnuts out of the fire.

In keeping with his rosy picture of social democracy, while he rightly saw the potential of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn to revive the socialist movement, Sunkara exaggerated the break with capitalism they were pushing for, and obscured their future limits as well as their present failures, as the DSA still does for AOC and her fellow representatives. Labour, much less the Democrats, does not offer the durable, historic socialist advance that Sunkara's democratic-socialist scheme requires: 'a political party should be a decisive link between explicitly socialist currents and a wider workers' movement. If things go right one day, we'll be able to speak of the two as one and the same' a socialist workers' movement' as the socialists win leadership. To win socialist hegemony in the unions and create a mass working class party requires a left that stands for class struggle, internationalist, and revolutionary politics, as well as policies (and struggle) to dissolve the bureaucracy and overcome the unaccountability of its leaders and politicians.

A key obstacle to the struggle for socialism is not just capitalist pressure but the union bureaucracy, which opposes confrontation with capital (or political issues like Brexit) in favour of 'realism' and, at best, limited reforms. Sunkara recognises the problem, but his soft-focus alternative of a 'democratic unionism' based on 'membership engagement' and 'making leaderships more accountable' crucially leaves out the question of policy. Democratic organisation and accountability in order to do what? The transformation he wants can only be achieved by socialists leading a political, rank and file movement in the unions to adopt class struggle policies against the demands of capital.

This question reflects back on the type of socialist organisation and ultimately party to be built; how can the DSA rank and file control their own leaders and politicians? No matter how left wing they are, elected state representatives are outside party control once in office, and their core is always on the right wing of the party because it is most directly affected by the carrot and stick of capital, examples from the SPD in 1914 to Syriza 2015 show that. Looking at the SPD, Sunkara recognises the problem but has no answers other than vague reforms such as term limits. Elsewhere, leading Jacobin activists recognise they do not have a solution to this problem, despite its long history and immediate importance.

That does not mean that revolutionaries should not utilise elections or bourgeois office, or work within the unions or reformist mass parties, but the independence of the working class must be at the heart of our strategy, determining the tactics we use, including the priority at all times of the class struggle over elections, to spread the socialist goal and build up a party of that struggle rather than a vote-catching machine.

Likewise, revolutionaries in the DSA should build an anti-capitalist left, arguing for it to produce an alternative, consistently revolutionary, platform, to fight for within it, while fighting tooth and nail to drop the opportunist 'use' of the Democrats during elections. That is the only way to ensure that the movement created by Sanders and the Awkward Squad does not end up in the notorious 'graveyard' of America's labour and liberation struggles in a rerun of the 1930s and 1960s where, after being contained and ebbing, their activists re-emerge as a new layer of Democratic politicians, caucuses, and pressure groups. Breaking with this dead-end strategy, its illusions and its necessary political compromises will be central to the US left meeting the immense challenges of the twenty-first century.

### A reformist manifesto with Marxist trappings

Talking about the the DSA's precursor, the Socialist Party in the 1930s, Sunkara refers to its 'young leftists navigating between social-democratic reformism and revolutionary Leninism?'. A better description of the Jacobin project and The Socialist Manifesto would be hard to find.

The triumph of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco drove many pre-war social democrats to utter revolutionary phrases and to link up with Stalinist Communist Parties which, under the same pressures, adopted the Popular Front and took up social patriotism in those imperialist democracies seen as potentially friendly towards the USSR. This laid the basis in the post war world for the left wing of the Labour and Social Democratic parties and the CPs to adopt reformist programmes which promised a transition from capitalism, based on state interventionist Neo-Keynesian reforms, such as The British Road to Socialism of the CPGB, Sweden's Meidner Plan and Labour's Alternative Economic Strategy. Even the Fourth International of Ernest Mandel in the early 1960s flirted with socialist governments implementing 'structural reforms?', tied to 'workers' control?'. It is just such an eclectic hybrid of electing a left-reformist government

(class struggle social democrats, then democratic socialists) but with the class struggle playing a subordinate role, that the Socialist Manifesto offers us. It is a dead-end that will slow and obstruct the struggle for socialism in twenty-first century America, or indeed anywhere else.

As a publication, Jacobin is eclectic, many writing in it do not openly reject the Bolsheviks or the Russian revolution and Sunkara even offers us an affidavit for the Bolsheviks' non monolithic internal life before 1917 and Lenin's sincerity but, in the end, the Manifesto plumps for social democracy, aided by class struggle, as the first step on 'the road', to socialism, not the dictatorship of the proletariat. Having been elected, a 'democratic socialist' government will somehow effect a transition as capitalist opposition peaks, but it will be to a future based on cooperatives with no centralised plan.

This is simply a reformist utopia ? as the fate of the Paris Commune, Finland, Germany, Spain and Chile showed. In short, the Manifesto ignores or downplays the inevitable resistance of the capitalist class to being deprived of its property, given the far from democratic instruments it has at its disposal (the army, the police the judiciary) or the auxiliary support they can call on (fascism).

The very logic of an intense economic and political crisis leading to a heightened class struggle does not keep time with the schedules for elections. Equally, elections can produce results at variance with the balance of forces in the workplaces and the streets as both the elections to the National Assembly at the time of the Commune and the elections to Russia's Constituent Assembly in 1917 showed. If a party has ceaselessly taught the working class that winning elections is the only legitimate road to power, then such a disjuncture would wreck its whole schema.

It is true that a revolutionary class struggle could itself produce an elected revolutionary workers' government. Its survival and success, however, would still require the disintegration of bourgeois control over the machinery of repression. The schema of a decades-long transition, without a revolt by the bourgeois state against its "democratic socialist" tenants, without the forcible defeat and destruction of one or the other, is an artificial construction through and through.

The theme of Sunkara's imagined transition is that little will change in your daily life as you get better off materially. His attempt to make socialism more acceptable to the democratic prejudices of his target audience, which seems to be middle class professionals, small entrepreneurs or better off workers, adapts to their middle class (petty bourgeois) ideas on elections, democracy, peaceful roads, and capitalism's sheer 'normality'. Ironically, his imagined transition away from capitalism takes place without much changing in the 'capitalist realism' of everyday life, beyond what was achieved at various times by European socialism, plus more cooperatives and workplace democracy. The revolutionary road, by contrast, envisages a struggle during which the masses enter the stage of history for the first time and consciously plan and erect a new form of democracy, not one run by an alien caste of professional politicians. In the process, they will create new social relations, people with a socialist consciousness, and more liberated, collective ways of living.

Of course, Sunkara does not claim to be a revolutionary and demonstrates this in his treatment of the key turning point in twentieth century history, the October Revolution. He rejects Lenin the Bolshevik in favour of the 'Hamlet of Revolution', Martov. Indeed, he goes on to take a classic Menshevik line in the semi-colonial world, where the absence of 'already developed productive forces' for him means that no socialist economy is possible. Lenin considered Martov a centrist, that is, an inconsistent revolutionary who adapts to (or navigates between!) reform and revolution. Sunkara himself is clearly toward the right side of the centrist spectrum.

Yet recent history has proved Lenin and Trotsky right about the capitalistically 'backward', 'underdeveloped' world. While the state of their productive forces clearly precludes an immediate transition to fully developed socialism, their potential for revolution remains immense. We have seen it in mass revolutionary actions such as the Arab Spring, Sudan, Algeria, Myanmar, Ecuador, Chile, and Colombia. Such actions, however, although they have the potential to open the road to permanent revolution, do not spontaneously lead to workers' power or socialism. To win, these movements require mass organs of workers' struggle, workers' power and democracy and a revolutionary party to fight



for them. Without this, they rarely if ever end even in bourgeois democracy but in bourgeois dictatorship.

Moreover, the same questions of party and class, economy and state will emerge in any mass struggles in the US or Europe, too, raising demands that undermine the economic and political power of the ruling class, not simply promises of reforms once we have a Sanders or Corbyn government elected. In such crises, socialists will need not only to raise demands that challenge capital's power but to fight to build organisations that will, themselves, impose those demands. That is how immediate issues; jobs, wages, prices, housing, working conditions, occupations of threatened workplaces, defence against fascist strikebreakers and the police, can be linked to the struggle for a new society. In their totality, they add up to a programme for an anti-capitalist workers' government.

Last, but not least, the strategy of a so-called dirty break advocated by Eric Blanc, Day and Uetrict and Sunkara envisages growing the DSA as an independent organisation for individual socialists whilst campaigning for candidates like Sanders and AOC, who stand on the Democrat ticket. This is likely to strengthen the Democrats at a time when they could be weakened and independent, class initiatives for a new party could find support. Such a strategy simply will not succeed, cannot succeed. DSA activists need to struggle at the 2021 convention against Sunkara's strategy and for an explicitly revolutionary anti-capitalist one, based on internationalism, class independence, and a transitional programme.

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