

Britain: we need an anticapitalist alternative

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The left in Britain needs a new strategy, argues Simon Hardy, and that must mean a new attempt to unite and build a new anticapitalist organisation

Sometimes the ruling class can be more alert to the opportunities posed by a crisis. Milton Friedman, a right wing economist who spent his life fighting to dismantle the welfare state, said of his own project that it would only come to fruition in a time of great upheaval.

‘Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change’, he wrote, ‘When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.’

And indeed Friedman was right. Crises are written into the DNA of capitalism. Capital treats each and every one of them as an opportunity to re-organise society in its exploitative interests.

Austerity and sweeping privatisation that we see across Europe are part of this drive to make working people pay the costs of the capitalist crisis, and to use tax revenues to secure the wealth of the world’s richest people—the investors, financiers and bankers who sit at the top of the system.

Not content with the staggering wealth they have accrued over the last decades, the 1%—as they have been called by the occupiers of London, Syntagma Square, Wall Street, and beyond—are using the crisis to bring about another massive shift of wealth and power into their own hands.

A growing number of people are starting to see through this agenda.

Strategy

But two questions are faced by everyone who wants to see the plans of the rich frustrated and ultimately defeated.

The first is how to stop the cuts and austerity. Workers Power has been consistent in its message that if we want to stop the government then we have to bring it down through mass strikes and protests.

The second is what kind of organisations we need to bring about. This second question becomes all the more important once you ask the first, because once we know what’s necessary then we quickly become conscious of the inadequate response of the working class movement—the failure of the existing leaderships and organisations to fight to bring down the austerity governments of Europe.

Transforming the trade unions is central to this task. Building a rank and file movement is a necessary part of the struggle against the bosses, because we can’t rely on the leaders of the big unions to do what has to be done—they are too venal, too conservative and too bureaucratic. The left as well as right union

leaders see no alternative to working within the capitalist system, the reality of the profit system and the restrictions imposed by its governments and laws.

We also need a united anti cuts movement: one that can bring together the direct action campaigners with the trade union activists and the far left parties, one that involves the union leaders willing to fight but not one which submits our actions to their veto.

Currently there are three national anti cuts campaigns and numerous local committees ? but there is no real co-ordination or democratic forum to bring them together. Unfortunately, sectarian rivalries of far left organisations each attached to their own ?branded? anti-cuts campaign ? SWP with Right to Work, Socialist Party with the Shop Stewards Network, Counterfire with Coalition of Resistance ? has so far obstructed the development of a united movement. All of them tend to tailor their strategy to attracting big name union leaders to their platforms We need to overcome this combination of opportunism towards the leaders and sectarian obstruction of maximum unity of the resistance so that the militant wing of the movement maximises the pressure it puts on the TUC and the unions leaders and builds up an alternative leadership to them.

Moving beyond resistance

We need a winning strategy for the anti-cuts movement. But the resistance against austerity also poses fundamental questions about what kind of society we want to live in.

By seizing public space and making a global criticism of the politics of austerity and inequality, the Occupy movement has put anticapitalism back on the political map. In doing so it has poses a series of question to us all, including the organised left, which our movement is yet to fully answer.

How do we move beyond capitalism? What kind of alternative do we need? How do we unite in a new political organisation that can win this alternative system? And how do we relate our vision of what a new society should look like to our practice ? how we organise to win in the here and now?

These are vexing questions for the movements of the day ? not least because rarely in modern history has there been such a deep crisis of capitalism, yet such little faith in the possibility of an alternative system. However the conditions are the best they have been for a generation to popularise radical anticapitalist ideas.

The idea that wealth should be democratically socialised in the interests of the producers, what Marx dared to call socialism, is always a rational idea, but today it?s also a burning necessity.

But the working class has only ever become convinced of the practicality of this idea when mass political organisations have made it the order of the day.

That?s the challenge for today?s movement and the far left organisations. Can they build new political organisations, beyond the existing left, able to make socialism credible again?

Workers Power, along with others, has begun discussions on how to answer these questions. We want an open discussion with new layer of activists working together in the anti-cuts movement who share a desire not to ?go on in the same old way? and explore new avenues for unity.

This crisis is so serious, so deep, that carrying on in the same old way is simply not good enough.

Our view of what a new organisation should look like is in the process of development. We expect it to change and undergo refinement through the course of the discussions we undertake.

But as a starting point a new organisation needs to go beyond the co-ordination of resistance to show how the cuts can be beaten and name capitalism as the fundamental problem.

It needs to have a perspective of transforming the working class movement ? supporting and developing rank and file initiatives from below, opposing sectarian divisions and building a united anti-cuts movement. It must see the fightback in Britain as part of an international struggle. We believe it should support all the revolutions in the Middle East against dictators and back the Palestinian people against Israel.

We also believe that a new organisation needs to be open to new layers whether or not they agree with all of our ideas.

Our role in the movement

Workers Power is a Trotskyist organisation ? we believe that a political instrument similar to that which brought the working class to power in Russia is needed. But we accept that Bolshevism has a bad name in the movements of today. It is tarnished both by the legacy of Stalinism and, it has to be said, by the cynical manoeuvring of many on the British left.

Many activists who have come into the movement in recent years have seen grassroots and horizontal networks build vibrant and inspiring campaigns, when the traditional labour movement has shown inertia and passivity in the face of today?s new tasks. But they are also coming to realise that the millions of people still organised in the labour movement, able by strike action to bring the profit making system to a halt ? will be essential for our ultimate victory over it.

It?s beholden on us to help a new generation of activists rediscover the revolutionary democratic tradition of Bolshevism but in the context of the practical tasks our movement faces. We need to combine, for example, the openness, participation, and democracy of the assemblies, with the social weight and discipline of the organised working class, but without its undemocratic bureaucracy.

Importantly, we need to have some humility about our own tradition, modest about the forces that we can bring and determined that a new political project is genuinely the property of a new generation of activists. It has to be thoroughly democratic and avoid the bureaucratism that has undermined previous left initiatives.

Debate has to be fraternal but honest. A principle of all rational argument is that either side will think they are in the right ? we need to respect differences as well as working for clarity and unity.

We are not therefore saying, like many on the left still are, simply ?join us?. Neither are we saying that we should rush into founding a new organisation without serious reflection and discussion. But we see that there is mood amongst a new generation of activists to engage in fraternal debate about how we win ? not just against the Tories in Britain, but how we get rid of this capitalist system once and for all.

We can learn lessons from the international left too. In recent years the foundation of organisations like P-Sol in Brazil, the NPA in France or Antarsya in Greece show that it can be done. But in this day and age, with everything that is at stake, we have to work towards unity that can deliver victory. That means left groups should put aside narrow, organisational interests and look to the growth of the wider movement.

In Britain attempts to forge a new left have a poor record. The lessons of past efforts should be debated. But the worst attitude now would be that these previous attempts did not work, so why try again? The class struggle goes forward in ebbs and flows, in the process of a retreat we can often work out how to advance. It falls on the revolutionary left today to begin that discussion again.

If you are interested in this project, or what to know more information, then please contact us on info [at] workerspower.net or call 0207 708 4331

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