

Socialists Should Take the Right Lessons From the Russian Revolution

Socialists have rightly taken inspiration from the Russian Revolution for generations, but many of the lessons drawn from it are wrong for our own time. To make change today, we need to take democratic socialism seriously as a theory and practice.



A demonstration in Palace Square, Moscow, during the Russian Revolution, May 1, 1917. (Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

Radicals have lived under the political shadow of the Russian Revolution for more than a hundred years. Inspired by the example of 1917, generation after generation of socialists sought to learn and implement what they took to be the core political lessons of the Bolsheviks.

Though millions of activists gave [everything](#) to this project and played important roles in winning gains for working people across the world, Leninist parties have never come close to making their own revolution in advanced capitalist democracy. The tragedy of the Bolsheviks' inspiring example was not only that they so quickly succumbed to the horrors of Stalinism, but that they over-projected a revolutionary approach ill-suited for parliamentary contexts.

But this doesn't mean there isn't anything to learn from the Russian Revolution. The revolutionary movements culminating in 1917 demonstrated an important and lasting lesson: capitalism is not eternal, it *can* be overturned. And though there are dramatic differences between organizing under an autocracy and today's welfare states, there remains much to learn from the inspiring, and remarkably successful, efforts of socialists to root socialism in Russia's mass workers' movements.

As I show in my new book [Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics Across the Russian Empire \(1882–1917\)](#), the relevance of this history becomes especially apparent when we analyze not only central Russia, but the entire empire — including Finland, the only nation under tsarism that was granted political freedom and a democratically elected parliament. The big strategic takeaway from the experience of all of imperial Russia taken as a whole is that the only plausible path to socialist transformation in parliamentary countries is a radical form of [democratic socialism](#).

Bolshevik Exceptionalism

What came to be known as “Leninism” was founded on the myth of [Bolshevik exceptionalism](#). This school of thought, pushed by the early Communist International and subsequent generations of [Stalinists](#) and [Trotskyists](#), argues that by 1917, the Bolsheviks had uniquely broken from the mealy mouthed socialism of [Karl Kautsky](#) — the Second International’s “Pope of Marxism” and the main theorist of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) — whose reformist, parliamentary-focused orientation led the SPD to infamously support World War I in 1914 and oppose socialist transformation in its wake.



Luise and Karl Kautsky in 1902. (Rosaluxemburgblog / International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam)

Divergences between the Bolsheviks and the German Social Democracy, it is [said](#), reflected Lenin’s strategic break from “Kautskyism.” One of the reasons this interpretation has remained so influential is that most of the literature has focused almost exclusively on revolutionaries in the imperial center and ignored the non-Russian borderland socialists. But the latter represented over 75 percent of organized Marxists in an empire where Russians only [made up](#) 42 percent of the population.

Even a quick examination of the other socialist parties in imperial Russia explodes the case that the Bolsheviks were the only current around that looked dramatically different from socialists in Western

Europe. *All* underground parties in autocratic Russia operated differently than the German Social Democratic Party. The reason for this was simple: tsarist repression pushed all socialist parties to organize in a dramatically different way than in the West.

Russia's radicals enthusiastically *agreed* with Kautsky's strategy, and they were able to implement it in practice because autocratic conditions made possible an exceptionally militant workers' movement. What went wrong in Germany was that the openings and obstacles of parliamentary politics, combined with organizational bureaucratization, [pulled](#) both working people and socialist leaders away from the orientation articulated by Kautsky up through at least 1910.

At the core of this strategy of revolutionary social democracy was a commitment to building a mass socialist party capable of organizing workers, at the head of all the oppressed, to advance the class struggle and the fight for democracy toward a revolutionary rupture with capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.

Unlike future Leninists, Kautsky argued that this path would at some point require the election of a socialist majority to parliament, and that this body would serve as a centerpiece of workers' rule. On the organizational question, he [believed](#) that while leftists should aspire to patiently win over workers' parties to accept and implement a Marxist program, this did not require expelling moderate socialists so long as they accepted majority decisions.

Bolshevik exceptionalists fail to see that this was precisely the strategic vision that animated imperial Russia's radicals.

The Myth of “Democratic Centralism”

According to Leninist accounts, whereas the German Social Democrats and their followers worldwide advocated a broad party that diluted its politics and discipline to preserve unity with moderate socialists, the Bolsheviks from 1903 (or 1912, depending on whose telling) onward built a “party of a new type”: a tight-knit organization that implemented the deliberative-but-disciplined method of [“democratic centralism”](#) that only accepted into membership the most committed and militant members of the working class, not “opportunists” — moderates oriented toward class-collaborationist blocs with liberals and employers — or not-quite-revolutionary “centrists.”

There are lots of problems with this story. First of all, it isn't true that either the Bolsheviks, or the empire's underground socialists in general, were particularly organizationally disciplined. They were definitely not practicing under tsarist rule what [later](#) came to be called “democratic centralism,” which the Communist International's 1920 membership conditions [defined as](#) the understanding that the party could “fulfil its duty if it is organized in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline bordering on military discipline prevails in it, and if the party centre is a commanding and authoritative organ.”

An autocratic context actually made the empire's parties far more fluid and decentralized in practice than their counterparts abroad: party committees in Russia were consistently arrested and broken up, preventing solid organizations or stable bureaucracies from cohering. To evade the secret police, socialist party leaderships were generally obliged to live in exile, ensuring that parties almost inevitably organized in a bottom-up way by forcing the local committees to take their own initiative. “An autocratic context actually made the empire's parties far more fluid and decentralized in practice than their counterparts abroad.”

And because revolutionaries in exile often did not understand the conditions that socialists were facing back home, local cadre in all parties frequently clashed with, or simply ignored, their official party leaderships abroad. Resolutions passed in Paris or articles written in Geneva were not necessarily implemented on the ground in imperial Russia.

Most socialist work on the ground was organized by workplace militants through shop floor or

citywide committees unaffiliated with any particular Marxist tendency. As historian Michael Melancon [notes](#), up through 1917, the “plasticity of the boundary lines between the various groups suggests that Russian political parties had not yet achieved a high degree of definition; they were movements, operating in daunting circumstances, rather than parties.”

As such, almost every underground Marxist current in the tsarist empire, including the Bolsheviks, functioned with a degree of local autonomy, political plurality, and open political debate [exceeding](#) virtually all Leninist organizations of the twentieth century.

No Party of a New Type

Events across imperial Russia also refute the traditional Leninist [argument](#) that the secret to Marxist success is the formation of a “party of a new type” open only to “real” revolutionaries. Far from believing in the [maxim](#) “better fewer but better,” the empire’s most effective radicals tended to be good-faith builders of broader workers’ parties together with moderate socialists.

Revolutionary social democrats’ successes in Finland, for example, were possible because they worked within and transformed the SDP along the lines [envisioned](#) by Kautsky. Despite being one of the most moderate socialist parties in Europe when it was founded in 1899, Finland’s party made a left turn after 1905, as Russia’s first revolution radicalized Finnish workers and created the space for a young group of “[Kautskyists](#)” to win the SDP’s leadership in 1906. From then on, Finland’s revolutionary social democrats pushed the party to stop making blocs with liberal parties and to affirm socialism’s final revolutionary goal.

But after the revolutionary excitement of 1905 cooled down, moderate socialism still remained a large force within the workers’ movement and the SDP. The strength of moderate socialism inside the party in Finland, like in Germany and the West, was not caused by a “mistaken” party model. Rather it reflected the fact that workers and socialists in parliamentary contexts were relatively politically moderate because they had [openings](#) to promote their interests through strong organizations and electoral politics — unlike in underground Russia where, as Kautsky [put it](#), workers literally “find themselves in a state in which they have nothing to lose but their chains.”

After 1906, Finland’s revolutionary social democratic leaders [tempered](#) some of their radicalism for the sake of party unity. The costs in terms of revolutionary purity were outweighed by the benefits of practical political [effectiveness](#), since hyper-factionalism or a fractious organizational split within the SDP would likely have marginalized the radicals, disoriented most workers, and paralyzed the socialist movement’s forward march.



Crowds during a general strike in Helsinki, Finland, 1905. (National Board of Antiquities, Archives for Prints and Photographs)

This belief that a united party was needed to lead Finland's workers to power was eventually proven right. Moderate socialists in Finland *did* ultimately support (if somewhat grudgingly) the 1918 revolution, as poignantly illustrated in a letter by moderate socialist leader Anton Huotari to his eldest daughter written a few weeks into the subsequent civil war.

Asking her to take responsibility for the family were he and his wife (also a socialist activist) to be killed, Huotari [explained](#) why the two of them had supported the seizure of power: "Though we had some doubts in regards to the current armed struggle, we considered that we owed the movement the whole of our working capacity once the decision to struggle for state power was taken. We have grown up with the social-democratic movement and our duty calls on us."

Similar organizational dynamics were even common in the rest of Russia, where repressive autocratic conditions made it much easier for radicals to win and cement their political hegemony. For instance, the powerful Latvian Social Democracy — the largest underground Marxist current in the empire by the eve of the tsar's overthrow — wisely [rejected](#) Lenin's calls from 1914 onward to expel its Menshevik minority. By maintaining party unity under radical leadership, the party built up overwhelming support among Latvian workers and peasants, seizing power in late 1917 with the overwhelming support of the population as a whole.

Like in Finland, the party that took power in Latvia included a large number of moderate socialists — only in May 1918 did a final organizational split with the Latvian Mensheviks take place. For their central role in October and the subsequent Civil War, the Latvian Marxists became widely known as "midwives of the revolution."

Lenin's Bolsheviks also functioned for most of their existence as a relatively loose tendency within the broader Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, organizing together with non-factional socialists and Mensheviks who advocated blocs with liberals. Full organizational splits with moderates only became the norm across Russia's vast territory after the Mensheviks joined the

liberal-led Provisional Government in May 1917.

The Bolshevik-led [party](#) in late 1917, to quote one [historian](#), was not “the jealously exclusive sect of popular mythology” but more of a “catch-all party for those radical Social-Democrats who agreed about the urgent need to overthrow the liberal-dominated cabinet, establish a socialist government and end the war.”

“The big lesson of imperial Russia was not the need for tight Marxist discipline or an opportunist-free party. Greater organizational and political cohesiveness certainly did not always translate into greater effectiveness.”

The big lesson of imperial Russia was *not* the need for tight Marxist discipline or an [opportunist-free](#) party. Greater organizational and political cohesiveness certainly did not always translate into greater effectiveness — as made clear by the impasse of Rosa Luxemburg’s [hyper-narrow](#) party in Poland. Rather, the influence of radicals generally hinged on being the best builders of, and an organic tendency within, a wider workers’ party — a practice that would have been impossible had the empire’s revolutionaries excessively walled themselves off organizationally from other socialists and worker militants.

Promoting working-class unity through a multi-tendency “big tent” political instrument meant socialists had to wrestle with a variety of political compromises and strategic dilemmas. But that was a necessary trade-off for anchoring their project in the working class as it actually was, not as they wished it might be. Unfortunately, there was no one weird organizational trick to changing the relationship of forces between moderate and radical socialists.

The State and Revolution in Autocratic Russia

One of the few things that both [Stalinists](#) and [Trotskyists](#) have always agreed on is that the October Revolution was made possible by Lenin’s April 1917 “re-arming” of the Bolsheviks with a new theory of [state and revolution](#), which argued that it was necessary to smash the capitalist state and replace it with a government of bottom-up workers’ councils. In their view, this “dual power” strategy for socialist revolution was and [remains](#) relevant for [all countries](#), regardless of the presence or absence of a democratic parliament.

One basic problem with this interpretation is that it’s factually wrong. Lenin did not have to “[re-arm](#)” the party to fight for [soviet power](#) in April 1917. In fact, revolutionary social democrats across the empire from 1905 onward had been oriented to establishing a government of workers and peasants based on popular organs such as the soviets, to implement the social demands of working people and spark the international socialist revolution. This [remained](#) the orientation of the Bolsheviks and their non-Russian allied parties up through October 1917.

Though Lenin on a personal level began [rethinking](#) state strategy in early 1917, for the party as a whole, a strategic break did not come about until well after October, when the Bolsheviks for the first time declared their revolution to be “socialist” and a model for the rest of the world. As historian James White’s eye-opening [research](#) has shown, Bolshevik leaders in 1918 began changing their historical accounts of the Russian Revolution in order to better export the soviet model internationally.

Even *had* Lenin’s new theory changed the practice of Bolsheviks and allied non-Russian radicals in 1917, it still would have been an unjustifiable leap to claim that Russia’s experience demonstrated the worldwide viability of a new model of socialist revolution premised on smashing the existing parliamentary state and replacing it with council (i. e. soviet) rule.



Vladimir Lenin, March 1919. (Wikimedia Commons)

Unlike in Western Europe, in [1917](#) Russia, there was neither a parliament nor a capitalist state to smash. The February Revolution's insurrection had broken up an autocratic monarchy, leaving a political vacuum that was tenuously filled by an unelected, illegitimate Provisional Government and the newly created workers' and soldiers' councils.

The population rightly saw the latter authority as far more democratic and representative than the former. Both before and after February 1917, Russia's political arena was thus fundamentally different from the parliamentary regimes of Central and Western Europe, where workers overwhelmingly [attempted to use](#), rather than discard, existing parliaments to promote radical social transformation.

Kautsky, the State, and the Finnish Revolution

Revolutionary social democratic [strategy](#), shared by [Kautsky](#), [Luxemburg](#), [Lenin](#) and [borderland Marxists](#) across Russia, clearly distinguished between socialist strategy in parliamentary contexts and socialist strategy in autocratic contexts. While supporting an orientation to armed uprising in tsarist Russia, Kautsky thus [rejected](#) the relevance of an insurrectionary strategy for parliamentary regimes, where a majority of workers would try to use the existing democratic channels to advance their interests.

Contrary to a common [strawman](#) argument made by [Leninists](#), this approach neither envisioned a [purely](#) "electoral road to socialism" nor did it downplay the importance of non-parliamentary mass organizing. To the contrary, revolutionary social democrats argued that electoral work was important principally because it helped build up class consciousness and workers' organization outside the state — a [dynamic](#) that has [been](#) amply [demonstrated](#) in the US [revival](#) of socialism since [Bernie's](#) insurgent run in 2015.

But very much unlike Bernie — and unlike post-1917 democratic socialists [across](#) the [world](#) — Kautsky's intransigent focus on promoting the final goal of socialism meant that he generally [rejected](#) making parliamentary compromises and argued that socialists should only take executive office like presidencies during a socialist revolution.

A consistent [orientation](#) to winning a socialist parliamentary majority and democratizing the existing state, Kautsky argued, was necessary to generate sufficient power, popular legitimacy, and institutional strength to lead a revolutionary rupture when the moment came. And since the capitalist class would inevitably seek to prevent socialist transformation through all means at its disposal, mass

action and, if necessary, armed self-defense would be [required](#) to protect a voter mandate for socialist change.

The viability of this strategy was well illustrated in Finland. After 1905, the Finnish Social Democratic Party sought to implement Kautsky's "tried and tested" [approach](#) of building up dense working-class power through patient organizing and parliamentary activity in the direction of the final goal of socialism. In contrast, Russia's underground socialists [focused](#) much more on disruptive strikes, since [autocratic](#) conditions made building strong unions and constructive parliamentary work impossible.

By 1907, over one hundred thousand workers had joined the Finnish party, making it the largest socialist organization per capita in the world. And in July 1916, the Finnish Social Democracy made history by becoming the first socialist party in any country to win a majority in parliament.

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Events in 1917 developed remarkably closely to a revolutionary scenario long predicted by revolutionary social democrats. After tsarism's overthrow in February 1917, Finland's socialist leaders used parliament and their popular electoral mandate to push through a series of radical democratic and social reforms, including the dissolution of the police and the creation of a workers-led popular militia. In response, Finnish and Russian ruling elites arbitrarily dissolved Finland's parliament in July, setting the stage for a defensive, socialist-led seizure of power in January 1918 to restore the democratically elected socialist majority and implement its political mandate.

To quote Finnish scholar [Risto Alapuro](#), the "ballot box did not prove to be the coffin of revolutionaries, as so often has been argued. In Finland's case the ballot box turned out to be their cradle." True to Kautsky's push for real [republican democracy](#), the new Red Government's draft constitution [established](#) the democratic republic long envisioned by revolutionary social democrats.

Finland's experience lends credence to the democratic socialist case that anti-capitalist rupture under parliamentary conditions likely requires the prior election of a workers' party to the state's democratic institutions. But we should be wary not to overgeneralize to today from Kautsky's intransigent tactics for prewar Germany or Finland — "[low-inclusion](#)" constitutional monarchies with precarious political and trade union liberties, restrictions on suffrage locally, an unelected and unaccountable executive branch, as well as a parliament with restricted powers.

Effective socialist politics will look [different](#) in an autocracy, a low-inclusion parliamentary regime, or a democratic [welfare state](#) in which there are significantly greater openings for transformative [legislative](#) reforms and robust [trade unionism](#).

Projecting Dual Power Abroad

Ignoring the lessons of the Finnish experience, the new Bolshevik leadership after 1917 broke with revolutionary social democratic strategy by insisting that establishing socialism required delegitimizing and destroying parliamentary institutions elected through universal suffrage.

Under the guidance of Lenin and Trotsky, the new Communist International's 1920 "[Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism](#)" declared that in all countries, the "task of the proletariat consists in breaking up the bourgeois state machine, destroying it, and with it the parliamentary institutions, be they republican or a constitutional monarchy."

[Arguing](#) that the Bolsheviks' tactics for the tsarist regime's Duma — an illegitimate sham parliament established after 1905 — were relevant for the rest of the world, the theses concluded "the new

[Communist] parliamentarism emerges as a tool for the annihilation of parliamentarism.” Parliaments would still be a useful platform for radical agitation, but they [could](#) “in no way become the arena for the struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the position of the working class.”

Though [some](#) Leninist [authors](#) have recently [objected](#) to calling this approach “insurrectionary,” these explicitly [insisted](#) that replacing a parliamentary regime with workers’ councils everywhere required “the immediate political and technical preparations for the insurrection of the proletariat.” Over the following decades, Trotsky continued to [affirm](#) that [insurrection](#) was a necessary step in any dual power strategy, since the old state would not voluntarily cede the way to workers’ councils.

The democratic socialist [critique](#) of this approach is not, as [some](#) have suggested, based on “a fetish of violence” or minoritarian “putschism.” Its main problem lies elsewhere: by dramatically underestimating the [popular legitimacy](#) and [contradictory nature](#) of [real](#) parliamentary institutions, it marginalized radicals and made anti-capitalist social transformation less likely.



The Norwegian Labor Party’s national conference, 1923. (Wikimedia Commons)

Left debates today are still shaped by this tendency to treat parliaments as, at best, only platforms for socialist agitation rather than also as arenas in which socialists should try to genuinely win a majority to pass pro-worker policies. And whereas Bolshevik-inspired socialists [tend to](#) prioritize protests and “base building” over work in the electoral arena, democratic socialists [argue](#), and have [demonstrated](#) in practice, that labor and electoral work are *equally* strategically important and these can and should be [mutually reinforcing](#).

Concerning long-term strategy, Leninists failed to make a coherent case for why socialists could not, as traditionally [expected](#) by the Second International’s Marxists, win and wield a majority in parliamentary bodies to promote revolutionary change — against both capitalists and unelected police, the army, and bureaucratic state structures. Pointing to the very real [obstacles](#) facing such a project, and the numerous [capitulations](#) of leftists in power, does not prove that there exists any viable

strategic alternative to it.

Leninism's strategic innovations on questions of the state and revolution [isolated](#) radicals during the 1918–21 revolutionary wave. At a moment when a vast majority of workers tried to use parliaments to push toward socialist transformation, the early Communists misspent their energies arguing against such attempts and denouncing reformist leaders. The irony of this approach is that it only aided the hegemony of moderate Social Democrats, who propped up capitalism in Germany, Austria, and beyond in the name of defending parliamentary rule.

Not only were there no successful insurrections in capitalist democracies, but as sociologist Carmen Sirianni [explains](#), in no such country did anything more than a minority of workers even nominally support a dual power strategy, even at peak moments of revolutionary intensity.

In the wake of these sobering defeats, the Communist International's 1922 Fourth Congress rather ambiguously projected the possibility that electing a "[workers' government](#)" to the existing state could become a starting point for a socialist revolution. Advocacy of such governments by Leninists marked a significant move back toward revolutionary social democracy, which helps explain why [many Leninist](#) currents have [rejected](#) both the letter and spirit of this approach.

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Others, however, built on its pragmatic adjustment to parliamentary contexts. For example, one finds very little light between Kautsky's vision and US Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon's 1940 [defensive formulations](#) about a universal suffrage-backed transition to socialism that would only resort to force if, as could be expected, capitalists refused to respect the popular will.

To the extent that the most [open-minded](#) thinkers and organizations coming out of the Leninist tradition — from the "[left Eurocommunists](#)" in the 1970s to currents like [Anticapitalistas](#) in Spain today — have developed upon this "workers' government" approach, *and* simultaneously moved [away](#) from efforts to build "parties of a new type," it is unclear what makes them distinctly Leninist.

That said, the Comintern's 1922 reorientation itself was only a *partial* shift back toward revolutionary social democracy, because even though it was now acknowledged that electing a socialist majority to parliament could potentially be a step toward revolution, Communists still implausibly declared that councils were the only possible form of workers' rule.

[Leninists](#) have never made a compelling [case](#) for why workers should "leave behind liberal parliamentary institutions" in which capitalist forces have lost their political hegemony. Experience since 1917 has unambiguously shown that institutions of "bottom-up" participatory democracy like councils, strike committees, and neighborhood assemblies, can become essential [supplements](#) to Left-led parliaments — but not replacements for them.



Meeting of workers at Putilov Plant, Petrograd, July 1920. (Boris Souvarine Papers — Soviet Russia Photos / The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Library)

Because Leninists tend to focus more on exposing than transforming existing states, the project of [democratizing the state](#) — through initiatives like subordinating unelected governmental bodies to parliament, eliminating antidemocratic structures like the US Supreme Court, and giving public employees and trade unions substantial governance powers — has lost the centrality it had in early socialist strategies. This is a particularly major limitation in the United States, [by far](#) the [least democratic](#) of the world’s advanced capitalist countries.

On the one hand, we have an elected executive branch, a parliament with substantial powers, real civil liberties, and a long history of working-class incorporation in the polity, which is why political scientist [Konstantin Vössing](#) categorizes the United States as a country with the “highest inclusion.”

On the other hand, antidemocratic [institutions](#) and [laws](#) are major obstacles to majoritarian rule and winning pro-worker reforms — though not inevitably [insurmountable](#) ones, as the history of the New Deal in the [1930s](#) demonstrated. But none of this [makes](#) a dual power strategy relevant, since workers will certainly grow strong enough to democratize the US regime far before they are strong enough to overthrow the entire state.

Lenin’s [claim](#) that democratic republics are the “best shell” for capitalism ignores the fact that parliamentary democracy [was largely won](#) by workers, for workers. As Trumpism and the [events](#) of January 6, 2021 have made clear, pushing to delegitimize (rather than expand) existing majoritarian institutions is generally a right-wing project.

Making the Right Wager

Nobody can predict exactly what form the transition to socialism will take. But that doesn’t mean all proposed socialist strategies are created equal — or that it’s impossible to weigh their relative merits

today.

Because there has never been a successful socialist overturn in an advanced capitalist democracy that can give us a clear road map for socialist transformation, all left strategies today can and should be judged primarily by the extent to which they effectively [scale-up](#) working-class and socialist organization. Find what [works](#) and drive it as far as you can go — while keeping your eyes on the prize of a socialist world free of capitalist domination.

In so far as inflexible Bolshevik-inspired strategies in capitalist democracies [cut against](#) and minimize demonstrably [successful](#) power-building efforts today — whether in [labor](#) or [electoral](#) work — in the name of a particular vision of future revolutionary upsurge, they undercut any conceivable advance toward socialism. Even in the extremely unlikely event that future conditions of crisis create an opportunity for insurrection in a long-standing capitalist democracy, only a well-organized and powerful socialist movement would actually have the power to effectively seize such an opening.

“The central task, and the key political dilemma, is how to fight for transformative reforms that strengthen and unite the working class, especially in ways that open up, rather than close off, avenues for further organizing workers to overcome capitalist domination.”

Moreover, we might never get a chance to overthrow world capitalism down the road unless we can avoid climate disaster by [winning green social democratic reforms](#) within the next decade or so — a task that requires, first and foremost, a massive increase in the [organized strength](#) of working people after forty-plus years of neoliberal atomization, union decline, and social democratic party decomposition across the world.

Unburdened by an unrealistic and overly prescriptive strategy for socialist transformation, one thing that sets democratic socialists apart today in all [arenas](#) of class struggle is a consistent focus on [identifying](#) and scaling-up the practices, campaigns, and organizational forms that are demonstrably working to build labor and socialist power, while winning tangible victories for working people.

Put simply, the central task, and the key political dilemma, is how to fight — both inside and outside the state — for [transformative reforms](#) that strengthen and unite the working class, especially in ways that open up, rather than close off, avenues for further organizing workers to overcome capitalist domination.

Though learning the right lessons from 1917 hardly guarantees socialist success, clinging to the wrong ones will guarantee continued failure. Karl Marx’s strategic [advice](#) in the 1850s has lost none of its relevance for today: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past.”