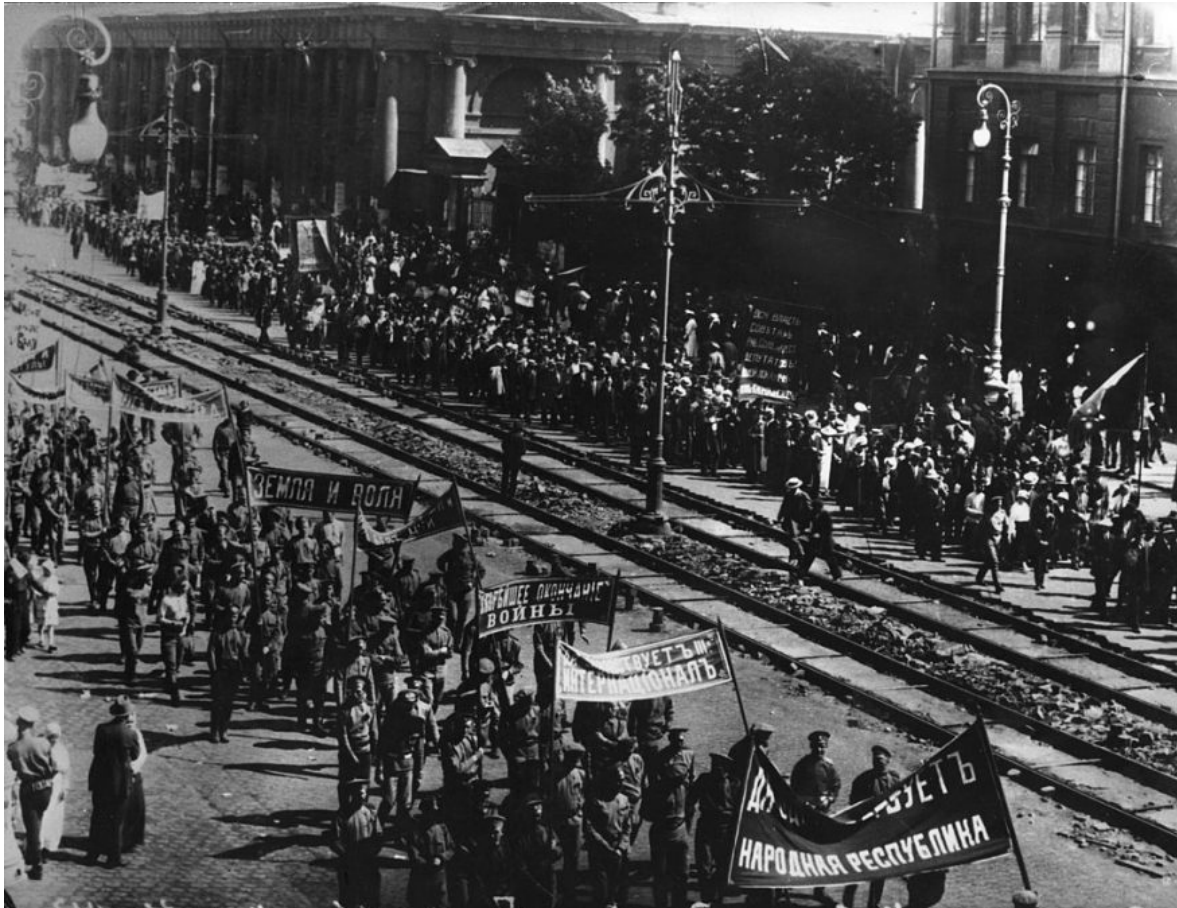


Which Way to Socialism?

Is there a democratic road to socialism? And if so, what does it mean for socialists today?



A demonstration in Petrograd during the Russian Revolution, June 18, 1917.

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The upsurge of socialist politics in the United States has [sparked](#) a [renewed](#) strategic [debate](#) on how to [overcome](#) capitalism. One issue, in particular, continues to divide [democratic socialists](#) from their Leninist critics: Can the prevailing institutions of political democracy be used for socialist transformation or does the entire existing state need to be overturned?

Though there is no way of answering this ahead of time with absolute certainty — and though a rupture with capitalism remains a distant prospect — grappling with this question is not an academic exercise. Whether socialists wager on a democratic road to socialism has important implications for how activists today relate to electoral politics, the labor movement, and organization-building.

This is an edited transcript of the debate on democratic socialism between Eric Blanc and Charlie Post at the recent [Socialism in Our Time — Historical Materialism](#) conference in New York City.

Eric Blanc

I want to start off by saying where I think we agree. First of all, the existing state cannot simply be used by workers to build socialism. For any anticapitalist project to succeed, we'll have to confront the hegemony of big business [over the economy](#), and we'll have to confront the top state bureaucracy as well as the military. Because of these structural constraints, we need a revolution to break the economic and political power of the capitalist class.

In order to succeed, that revolution is going to have to resort to, and rely on, extra-parliamentary mass action and disruption. So, there's no purely electoral road to socialism. We agree that that effective socialist politics — both today and down the road — requires combining electoral interventions with mass action from below. Another thing we agree on is that the obstacles towards getting to socialism aren't just external, they're also internal to the labor movement. In other words, there's a tendency for strong workers' organizations to become bureaucratized, in which their leaderships begin to accommodate themselves to the status quo.

One final thing that I think we can probably agree on is that we don't actually know for sure what a socialist transition will look like. Nobody today can be certain that their strategy is the best one. But we have to make a political wager based on our analysis of the past and the present.

The main difference between us concerns how we think such a revolution could realistically happen in a capitalist democracy like the United States. Conditions here are obviously different from the conditions of [Russia 1917](#), where there was no parliamentary state, nor a tradition of political democracy.

I want to polemicize here against the traditional Leninist view of revolution.

According to this conception, there will at some point be a deep crisis and the emergence of institutions of dual power (like workers' councils). For the revolution to succeed, these dual power institutions will have to, through an insurrection, overthrow the entire existing state and place all power into the hands of workers' councils or some equivalent form of organization.

My point is not to accuse traditional Leninists of advocating minoritarian violence or being obsessed with armed preparation. The dictionary definition of insurrection is "an instance of armed revolt versus the existing authority or government." So, by necessity, *any* dual power strategy is by definition going to be an insurrectionary strategy, unless you think the capitalists are going to voluntarily cede power (which none of us do).

The key question is whether you think a socialist revolution will take place against the *entire* state or whether you think some key institutions of the current state — e.g., democratically elected parliaments and administrations — can and should be utilized by the working class for anticapitalist rupture.

The case I want to make here is a Marxist case for democratic socialism. This is different from social democracy and it's even different from the democratic socialism of someone like [Salvador Allende](#).

The core idea of this strategy is that in conditions of parliamentary democracy, the

path to socialism is very likely going to have to pass through the universal suffrage election of a workers' party to government. Such a government, in alliance with struggles from below, would seek to democratize the existing state and implement anticapitalist changes in the economy, leading the ruling-class minority to resort to antidemocratic sabotage of the elected government and the revolutionary process. Defeating this reaction — through the power of mass action as well as the actions of our elected representatives — would culminate in a complete break with capitalist control over the economy and the state.

Just electing a workers' party is hardly sufficient to get to socialism — but without the leverage afforded by such an election, socialists very likely won't have the popular legitimacy or social power to overcome capitalism. At the same time, to keep the political process from stalling halfway, we're also going to need mass strikes and deep extra-parliamentary struggles. We'll also very possibly need the emergence of some forms of bottom-up, dual power types of institutions, which can be combined with (rather than replace) representative bodies elected by universal suffrage.

Of course, we don't know exactly what that this process will look like. But the main point is that you can't realistically expect a dual power / insurrectionary strategy to become relevant for a capitalist democracy. Whether we like it or not, a government elected by universal suffrage has vastly more popular legitimacy than the tsarist autocracy.

The main argument against the case that Charlie and Leninists have put forward is that there's no past or present evidence that a majority of workers in conditions of a capitalist democracy will ever — even if all socialists consistently argue for it — move in the direction of supporting the replacement of parliamentary democracy with something like workers' councils. The overwhelming historic experience is that, whether we like it or not, working people will try to use the existing institutions of political democracy under capitalism to further their interests and to transform society. If you look at the past 150 years, the hard reality is not only that there's never been a victorious struggle to overthrow a parliamentary state and put power into organs of dual power. The point isn't just that it hasn't happened (there hasn't been a lasting democratic-socialist transformation either). But, unlike democratic socialism, the insurrectionary approach has never even come close to being taken up by a majority of workers under a parliamentary regime.

And so that poses a huge strategic challenge for socialists. Does it really make sense to hinge our strategy for overthrowing capitalism on something that is such an unlikely possibility? Of course, all sorts of unexpected things can happen in political life. But it doesn't follow that we should base our political vision on what is by far the least likely scenario for success.

A lot of people on the revolutionary left for decades have believed that if only socialists and labor leaders had been firmly committed to the Leninist approach, then workers would have already won power and we'd be happily living under a socialist democracy right now. I just don't think that's actually accurate.

First of all, this fails to grapple with the depth of working-class support for parliamentary rule and universal suffrage. Second, it underestimates just how hard it is

to overthrow capitalism. There's no one quick secret fix, no surefire strategy that can avoid the contradictions of social democracy or that can easily overcome the immense power of capitalists (and their proxies) to absorb and/or repress challenges to its rule. The key question is: What strategy places us in the best position to overcome these obstacles? We need to participate in and identify with the democratic-socialist project of building mass working-class power and transforming the state — always with an eye on pushing in the direction of anticapitalist rupture.

I would argue that much of the Leninist left has undermined its ability to effectively confront and overcome these obstacles by adhering to an approach to electoral politics that has marginalized them from the majority of working people. I think we need to unhesitatingly intervene in the current anti-establishment electoral upsurge, to build up our strength so that when there's a new crisis like that in Greece 2015, the real radical left this time can be strong enough to overcome the obstacles confronting us — the economic power of capitalists, the top state apparatus, the labor bureaucracy, etc.

Of course, we're nowhere near a moment of revolutionary rupture in the United States. The immediate stakes of today's debate are whether radicals can consistently move away from a tendency to downplay, or abstain from, the electoral arena. So, one of the practical implications of this debate concerns how seriously we take electoral politics, whether radicals should abstain or limit themselves to leftist propaganda campaigns, or whether we should fully seize the opportunities presented by campaigns like that of [Bernie Sanders](#) and [Jeremy Corbyn](#).

Taking a more critical and less dogmatic approach to assumptions about the generalizability of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* can help socialists to begin thinking more critically about other issues too, such as party-building or using the Democratic Party [ballot line](#). So rethinking the democratic road to socialism, I hope, can act as a "gateway drug" for wings of socialists to be less dogmatic and to grapple with the actual conditions in front of us today.

Charlie Post

I want to first start off by thanking Eric for moving this away from sort of cosplay warping of Lenin versus [Kautsky](#), to a more substantive discussion. And, I think there are many points that we do agree on. We do think that there needs to be a radical break with capitalism. We agree on that.

We also agree, at least in the abstract, on the social basis of reformism. It is not the product of a bad theory but the existence of a full-time officialdom in the trade unions, in the parliamentary political party, in social movements of the oppressed, etc.

This gets us to what I think is our fundamental disagreement. At the beginning it appears to be a subtle disagreement, since we do agree that any revolutionary transformation of capitalism will involve some combination of electoral activity and mass disruptive social movements.

I would like to pose the debate in a slightly different from the way Eric has posed it. For me, the question is, do we give *equal weight* to electoral politics and mass strikes and the like? Or, do we prioritize one over the other? We need to recognize the very different logics of an electoral project that aims, first and foremost, at winning office;

and the dynamics of building tumultuous, powerful, and discontinuous social struggles.

Now, for me, this is not about democratic road versus insurrectionary road. Instead, I actually think that the position I'm defending envisions a much more radically democratic form of rule opposed to the capitalist state — one that is based on the ability of working people in their communities and their workplaces, and the like, to actually make and carry out decisions that shape their lives. Such a new type of state would involve the easy recall of elected officials, etc. In a word, a “council-state” would be a superior and more radical form of democracy.

And, ultimately, our disagreement is not simply around an insurrection, but whether or not the overthrow of capitalism will require a rising tide of discontinuous working, mass working-class struggles, mass strikes first and foremost, other forms of mass disruptive struggles that will culminate in the radical restructuring — destruction or *smashing* — of the core of the capitalist state institutions. We know that the armed forces, the police and military, and the civil service bureaucracy, have been historically the core obstacles to the implementation of an anticapitalist program. I don't believe that the strategy Eric puts forward actually eliminates the need for an insurrection. Rather, by giving equal way to winning elected office and mass struggles, he tends to confuse what will be necessary in order to overcome resistance from the core of the capitalist state — and to destroy them and substitute something more radically democratic.

This argument is going to be familiar if you have read the [piece](#) I did, in *Jacobin*. Let's imagine that we had a truly radical workers' party, a socialist party of the sort that Kautsky and Eric envision, coming to power. This is a party truly committed to an anticapitalist transition — is ready to pull the trigger and go after private control of industry, taxing the rich, all these sorts of things that we believe are going to be necessary to have this radical break with the logic of capital.

Now, it would also have to be one that is prepared to overcome, not only capitalist resistance in the form of investment strikes, but from *within* the existing state. How could, what my Canadian comrade David Camfield has called a “class-struggle government” deal with the resistance from within the capitalist state?

They would face both the passive and active resistance to the implementation of any anticapitalist measures, first from the permanent unelected state bureaucracy and civil service. Second, they would face the opposition to and probably repression of workers' organizations and a possible coup d'état, from the military repressive apparatus. The [fate](#) of Allende regime in Chile, which promised a parliamentary road to socialism, supported by organs of popular power, should be a constant reminder of the real danger of capitalist state repression of democratically elected governments.

Now, I disagree with Eric that there has never been a time in an advanced capitalist democracy when a significant portion, if not a majority of workers, were open to the idea of dual power. I think that there were several [conjunctures](#) between 1918 and 1923 in Germany where that was possible.

But I am willing to concede that an election of a hard, left government may realistically be a necessary element of a rupture with capitalism today. But once they

take power, they face this resistance. Now, a consistent advocate of Eric's strategy might say, "Well, organs, a popular power in workplaces and working-class neighborhoods, could check such a resistance."

However, and this is the key point, to effectively block resistance from the bureaucracy and the military, these organizations of popular and working-class power, would in fact, have to become a substitute state. You would have to have dual power. This, of course, must be preceded by years of organizing by a radical workers' party — organizing lower-level civil servants, organizing in the military — all with the aim of preparing rank-and-file public employees for a revolutionary crisis where they would cease obeying the legal/legitimate orders of their superiors. Put simply, we would need to break with the structural logic of the capitalist state.

In other words, a radical socialist party would have to, in fact, destroy the existing capitalist state and replace it with a workers' state, based on workers' councils. Even if you kept the left government and parliamentary institutions, the real power would have to be shifted from the hands of the civil service bureaucracy, and the military, to that of working class and popular organs of power.

If such a radical socialist government did not pursue these tactics, again, we'd end up either with austerity (as did Mitterand in France and [Syriza](#) in Greece) or face brutal military repression (as did Allende in Chile).

Now, even in our current nonrevolutionary period, I think our disagreement can have important implications for immediate strategy and tactics. I think, in the present period folks with Eric's politics and folks with my politics can do really fruitful work together in unions, social movements, independent socialist electoral campaigns, and the like. However, the question of whether to prioritize electoral or extra-electoral organizing leads to practical differences. I believe that attempts to use — in any manner, shape, or form — the Democratic Party to prepare for socialist politics is a utopian illusion. The Democratic Party is not a membership organization with even formal membership accountability. Instead, it is completely and utterly [dominated](#) by capital and is a thoroughly electoral machine.

Eric Blanc

I'll be honest, Charlie, I don't think you responded to my main political challenge against Leninists: that is, you didn't show that there's an alternative to getting to the point of a revolutionary rupture in the absence of some sort of democratically elected workers' government.

In fact, your whole scenario was premised on my argument about the centrality of such an election for breaking with capitalism. So either you agree with me or there's some confusion here. Because your entire description of an anticapitalist break took place in the context of a workers' party getting elected to government within a capitalist state, right?

I don't disagree with much of what you describe about the need for mass action and organs of bottom-up power to defeat the counterrevolution and antidemocratic state institutions — but everything you described was in the context of the political legitimacy and structural power generated by a workers' party getting elected to the governmental institutions that the majority of people in this country currently consider

to be the legitimate, democratic authority.

So the argument you laid out just now is not an insurrectionary strategy per se. It's definitely very different than the [October 1917](#) model. An insurrection means you have an armed revolt against the existing state as a whole — and that's not the scenario you laid out.

There's a huge political difference between dual power as envisioned by Leninists traditionally and a left government that — on the basis of a popular mandate expressed through universal suffrage elections — is fighting against a minority of capitalists, state bureaucrats, and military leaders. That's totally different. I don't see how you can plausibly call an armed struggle that takes the form of *defending* the existing elected government an “insurrection.” It's clearly a different phenomenon. I think some of the ambiguity of this discussion concerns how we conceive of the capitalist state. Leninists, at least those who firmly uphold Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, believe that all existing state institutions are inherently pro-capitalist by their very structural nature. This is really one of the deepest limitations of the Leninist tradition, particularly in its hardest forms.

The basic problem with this is that it unhelpfully conflates universal suffrage and parliamentary institutions with capitalist rule. This is a huge analytical and political error. In reality, democratic parliaments and universal suffrage were and remain conquests won by the labor movement against the capitalists. They are gains that have to be defended — and expanded — through struggles from below.

Calls to destroy the entire existing state fail to acknowledge a huge contradiction *within* the existing state. There's a deep structural contradiction between the democratically elected organs of the existing state (which *can* be fruitfully used by workers) and the rest of the state (the top bureaucracy, the military, etc.), not to mention the capitalist economy. Why should Marxists insist on “smashing” all democratically elected parliaments and replacing these with workers' councils? And why, for that matter, should we “smash” public schools, social security, Medicare, or other key existing institutions of the state? But if you acknowledge the need to maintain and transform some key institutions of the existing state — Charlie's take on this is ambiguous at best — then you are much closer to democratic socialism than you are willing to admit.

The key insight of the Marxist vision of a democratic road to socialism is that we have to lean on that contradiction between the existing forms of political democracy and the antidemocratic structural institutions and relations that usually keep such democratic bodies (and public services) subservient to big business. If you can't lean on that contradiction to open up a political breach, you're not going to have the power and legitimacy to win socialism.

If there was a viable alternative to electing a workers' government to power, then maybe you're right. But insofar as you haven't actually presented an alternative, it means that whether we like it or not, you have to deal with the contradictions of social democracy and democratic socialism. There's no secret fix.

And contrary to what Charlie argues, there's no universal formula for how much to weigh electoral politics and mass action. How you combine and prioritize these

depends on the concrete context and moment.

The far left for much of the century since 1917 pursued a somewhat dogmatic stance of prioritizing mass action and downplaying electoral politics. In practice, what this has generally translated into is marginalization. It's meant that when there have been possibilities for a rupture, the existing revolutionary left was far too weak to be able to intervene effectively.

This debate might seem abstract, but it has immediate political ramifications: For example, are we as the Left right now going to intervene fully in the Bernie Sanders campaign to rebuild a mass socialist movement in the United States? Or, are we going to affirm a politics that makes us feel good — because it sounds very revolutionary on paper — but that in practice keeps us marginal and, consequently, creates the most amount of free space for our opponents in the Democratic Party and the union officialdom? I think that our responsibility is to seize the moment, to build a radical politics rooted in a strong working-class movement — and that means a commitment to the democratic road to socialism.

Charlie Post

Alright. Let me start first with what I think, is a slight caricature of the October Revolution 1917. Did the workers' councils confront a unified state apparatus in crisis? Well, the reality was very different.

By October 1917, revolutionaries had built soldiers' councils and military discipline had broken down, much to the regret of both the provisional government and the tsarist generals. In Russia revolutionaries clearly understood the need to undermine the legal/legitimate discipline of the officers over the ranks, by promoting and organizing the self-activity of the soldiers, sailors. So that by the time the [Bolsheviks](#) took power, which was relatively bloodless, on October 25, 1917, the existing state had imploded as a result of the deep fissures within it, brought about by the organs of dual power.

Now, this gets to, the question of the concept to the capitalist state. I think that Eric is right that universal suffrage was a conquest of the working class. Absolutely no question about that. However, the parliamentary form is not. The parliamentary form essentially allows capital and the classes closest to it, particularly the professional-managerial middle class in the twentieth and twenty-first century, small proprietors in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, to sort out their political differences and find unity.

The reality is that the growth of universal suffrage has gone along historically with the denigration and, subordination of parliamentary and elected institutions within the capitalist state. This is one of the points that Lenin raised in *State and Revolution*, but few developed systematically, when he recognized argued that Marx did project the possibility of a peaceful road to socialism in the nineteenth-century United States or Britain if there was universal suffrage. But this was before power basically had shifted from elected legislatures, to the executive branch in general, and its unelected bureaucracy in particular. As a result, taking power primarily through parliament means holding office in what increasingly has become, an empty shell.

To be clear, I don't call for socialist abstention from electoral politics, etc. Rather we

have to clear about which has priority — what is the source of real social power? I agree, that the popular legitimacy of capitalist democracy is stronger today than it has been at any point in the history of capitalism. This makes possible and likely that a real class struggle government may be one step toward a revolutionary rupture with capitalism.

However, this does not mean that the election of such a government gives working people structural power. And not only because capital continues to control the process of accumulation and can go on investment strikes and hold any elected government hostage.

Again, the center of power in the capitalist state, the places where capitalist domination over labor is crystallized and institutionalized, has shifted from elected, elected bodies like the parliament, to unelected bodies: the civil service, the bureaucracy, the military. And the idea that by taking office, we have power, I think, is an illusion.

I also think that unless you have a political project that understands the prioritization of mass disruptive struggle over electoral politics, aimed at winning office, then you will not have an organization that is going to be able to intervene in both in the episodic struggles to promote working-class self-organization, and in a revolutionary crisis. Such preparation would require rank and file-run, militant unions of civil servants, rank-and-file soldiers, and other state personnel. Building such organizations will not happen unless you have a socialist party that prioritizes those nodes of real power, over simply winning elective office.

So, yes, I do believe there is this fundamental difference. And, I do think it reflects onto how we relate to the social-democratic resurgence in the Democratic Party.

While I would try to agitate for Bernie to run as an independent after he loses the Democratic nomination, I acknowledge that the space for an independent left campaign in 2020 is much smaller than it has been at any time since 2000.

As I argued in an [article](#) that appeared in *Socialist Worker* a few months ago, the pressures on people supporting Bernie this time, are much, much greater, in terms of eventually going along with whomever the Democrats nominate, than they were four years ago. Bernie's chances of winning the Democratic nomination are, I think, are much less today than in 2016. In 2020, Sanders faces all sorts of neoliberal scum like, [Kamala Harris](#), [Cory Booker](#), and [the like](#), who are putting forward all the same radical demands — Medicare For All, free college tuition, etc. As Sanders recently admitted, his ideas are no longer radical; they are mainstream.

No question that lots of people who are interested in socialist ideas will be attracted to Sanders's campaign in 2020. Whatever radical potential, it will be dissipated as long as the insurgency remains within the Democratic Party. Our ability to organize in the medium-to-long term is going to be tremendously undermined, as it has been every time in the last one hundred years, when the labor movement, the social movements, and the Left attempt to use the Democratic Party to build our movements and or even prepare for a "[dirty break](#)."