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Taking the Right Lessons from Lenin and the Russian Revolution

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Abstract

Eric Blanc's article, "Taking the Right Lessons from Lenin and the Russian Revolution," critically examines the enduring influence of Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution on socialist movements, highlighting the challenges of applying revolutionary strategies in parliamentary contexts. Blanc argues that while Leninist parties have played significant roles in advancing working-class interests, their revolutionary approach has been less effective in advanced capitalist democracies. He emphasizes that the Russian Revolution demonstrated the potential to overthrow capitalism but warns against overgeneralizing its strategies. Blanc critiques the myth of Bolshevik exceptionalism and the rigid organizational discipline often associated with Leninism, proposing instead a more flexible and inclusive approach to building socialist movements. By analyzing the experiences of socialist parties across the Russian Empire, particularly in Finland and Latvia, Blanc illustrates the effectiveness of uniting radical and moderate socialists within broader workers' parties. He argues that a strategy rooted in democratic socialism, adaptable to varying political contexts, offers a more viable path to socialist transformation than the insurrectionary models promoted by early Leninists. Blanc concludes that the key to advancing socialism lies in scaling up working-class and socialist organization through transformative reforms and democratic engagement, rather than adhering to prescriptive revolutionary strategies.

Keywords: Lenin; Bolshevik Revolution; Democratic Socialism; Revolutionary Strategies; Labor Movement

Tomando las lecciones correctas de Lenin y la Revolución Rusa

Resumen

El artículo de Eric Blanc, "Tomando las lecciones correctas de Lenin y la Revolución Rusa", examina críticamente la influencia duradera de Lenin y la Revolución Bolchevique en los movimientos socialistas, destacando los desafíos de aplicar estrategias revolucionarias en contextos parlamentarios. Blanc argumenta que, aunque los partidos leninistas han jugado roles significativos en el avance de los intereses de la clase trabajadora, su enfoque revolucionario ha sido menos efectivo en las democracias capitalistas avanzadas. Él enfatiza que la Revolución Rusa demostró el potencial para derrocar el capitalismo, pero advierte contra la sobregeneralización de sus estrategias. Blanc critica el mito del excepcionalismo bolchevique y la disciplina organizativa rígida a menudo asociada con el leninismo, proponiendo en su lugar un enfoque más flexible e inclusivo para construir movimientos socialistas. Al analizar las experiencias de los partidos socialistas en todo el Imperio Ruso, particularmente en Finlandia y Letonia, Blanc ilustra la efectividad de unir a socialistas radicales y moderados dentro de partidos de trabajadores más amplios. Argumenta que una estrategia basada en el socialismo democrático, adaptable a diversos contextos políticos, ofrece un camino más viable para la transformación socialista que los modelos insurreccionales promovidos por los primeros leninistas. Blanc concluye que la clave para avanzar el socialismo radica en ampliar la organización de la clase trabajadora y socialista a través de reformas transformadoras y el compromiso democrático, en lugar de adherirse a estrategias revolucionarias prescriptivas.

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Palabras clave: *Lenin; Revolución Bolchevique; Socialismo Democrático; Estrategias Revolucionarias; Movimiento Obrero*

Introducción

Radicals have lived under the political shadow of Lenin and 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 showed in my recent 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.

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.

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” (Marxists Internet Archive, n.d.)

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.

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” (Melancon, 1990).

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.” (Kautsky, 2009).

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.

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.” (cited in Blanc, 2022, p. 252).

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 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 (Blanc, 2017).

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 (White, 1985).

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.

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 Sanders’ insurgent run in 2015-16.

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.

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." (Alapuro, 2011). 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" (Marxists Internet Archive, n.d.).

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" (Marxists Internet Archive, n.d.).

Though some Leninist authors have recently objected to calling this approach "insurrectionary," the theses 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.

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 (Sirianni, 1983).

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.

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.

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.

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.

Anti-democratic 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 (Lenin, 1917). As Trumpism, Bolsonarismo, and the spread of right-wing authoritarianism have made clear, pushing to delegitimize (rather than expand) existing majoritarian institutions is generally a right-wing project.

Conclusion

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." (Marx, 1852).

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