

Politics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 4 - On class power in the transition

Monday 22 August 2011, by [HOLMSTROM Nancy](#) (Date first published: 1 January 1998).

“...The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.”

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER the publication of the *Manifesto*, Engels declared that its general principles remained as correct as ever, though parts were already antiquated. The passage above is certainly one of those basic principles which—given the history of the past 150 years—is more important than ever before to clarify and reaffirm. Part of the reason revolutions made in the name of socialism have resulted in bureaucratic tyranny is that Marx’s basic conception of socialism has been misunderstood or rejected.

The quote above should be taken to refer both to the goal of a revolution by the working class and the means to it, similar to Marx’s first rule for the International Workingmen’s Association: “The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.” As Hal Draper demonstrated, this was never the dominant conception among those calling themselves socialist. Since Stalinism has discredited the very idea of socialism, it is more crucial today to develop a vision of socialism that is both attractive and seems possible.

The simplest characterization of a socialist mode of production is that, unlike all class societies, there is no ruling class that extracts surplus labor from the direct producers; the direct producers are the ruling class. But the working class cannot be the dominant socio-economic power without direct control of the state, so if the working class is the ruling power, it must first of all be the ruling political power—in fact, not just in name as in the bureaucratic mode of production. Yet once the proletariat is the ruling class (politically), it will have to extend its power socio-economically, or not survive. (Hence winning power is the “first step.”)

This definition of socialism is strikingly different from definitions offered by various kinds of socialists for whom working class rule is unnecessary to socialism. Their “socialism” meant simply post-capitalism, an economy that disallows private property of the major means of production and has no juridically recognized social divisions. Such a broad and negative definition serves neither the explanatory nor the political purposes Marx intended (why one should struggle for it is unclear) and is compatible with bureaucratic class rule.

I stress that it is working-class control of the economy and the government that defines socialism, rather than participation, a much vaguer and weaker concept. As the slogan in France May `68 went, “I participate, you participate, he/she participates, we participate...they profit.” They profit because they control—and that is what the working class needs to do to ensure that no one else profits from their labor.

But as to how exactly the working class would exercise its power, Marx notoriously said very little. In the Paris Commune, however, where for the first time in history working people took power and started to displace the old government machinery with their own, Marx said he had found “the political form . . . under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.” It is striking that

throughout the twentieth century, wherever the working class has contended for power, similar institutions have sprung into being, the soviets in Russia in 1905 and 1917, workers' councils in Hungary in 1956.

In a socialist society, since "productive labor" would no longer be restricted to labor productive of surplus value, "direct producers" would include all those who live by their labor, in and out of the home. This should be institutionalized in community and consumer councils, in addition to (wage) workers' councils.

This direct democratic control of the government by working people goes far beyond liberal democracy because it transcends the narrow political and legal sphere to which democracy in the liberal sense is necessarily restricted and would require a revolutionary transformation of capitalist social relations.

Nevertheless, just as socialism would include the best of capitalist technology, so too would it include the best aspects of liberal democracy. As the working class is not a homogeneous entity with identical ideas and interests, the expression of its interests requires a multi-party system.

Means inevitably condition the ends. As Marx and Engels were aiming for a society ruled by the working class, only self-emancipatory means would be effective in leading to it. A truism, perhaps, but one overlooked to tragic effect.

As for specific proposals, Engels cautioned that the practical application of the *Manifesto's* principles must depend on historical conditions. Nevertheless, the importance of grassroots involvement and democratic control in all organizing efforts cannot be stressed too much. If "every cook can govern" (Lenin), it will only be through a great deal of practice, and first of all a belief that he/she can and should govern.

A recent study showed that the single most important variable in determining success in union organizing drives was the degree of active rank-and-file involvement in all kinds of activities collectively creating a "culture of solidarity." These should include workers' families and communities. Rather than focusing just on bread-and-butter issues, greater success came from focusing on issues like fairness and dignity because, I suspect, they help to transform people's sense of themselves, to see themselves as worthy of better things and capable of achieving them.

Similarly, struggles for public services should be combined with the demand that they be under popular control. More important than the likely difference in the quality of services is the relationship the recipients have to the programs, and the effect on their consciousness.

As Rosa Luxemburg contended, until a socialist revolution is successful, the most important result of any struggle is the building of working-class self-confidence and organization. This transforms the struggle for reforms in a more radical direction, and expresses an understanding of self-emancipation of the working class as both means and end of a socialist revolution-the only way to ensure that the next time around, the battle for democracy will not be lost.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 72, January-February 1998.

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