

Workers' governments and the crisis of politics

Friday 13 January 2012, by [CAMFIELD David](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2012).

The following is a guest column by David Camfield, an editor of New Socialist Webzine. It was submitted in reply to my article, "A Workers' Government as a Step Toward Socialism." [1]

John Riddell, January 10, 2012

John is right that "The Comintern's decisions on governmental policy were rooted in a political environment that no longer exists."

Before offering some comments on the demand for a "workers' government" (WG) today, I think it's important to clarify what kind of government we're talking about. There has been a lack of clarity about what distinguishes a WG from a far more common phenomenon: left governments in capitalist states that rule for capital, as "administrators of the capitalist order" as John puts it.

This lack of clarity has led to cases of revolutionary socialists mistakenly supporting examples of the latter.

I think a WG should be understood as a government of working-class forces (or worker and peasant forces) in a capitalist state (or some other exceptional institutional setting other than working-class rule) that objectively doesn't rule for capital. This means a government that disrupts capitalist rule in some ways rather than just reproducing it. For this to happen, a government must actually engage in "a resolute struggle at least to achieve the workers' most important immediate demands against the bourgeoisie," to use a phrase from the 1922 Comintern resolution (from "The Comintern's Unknown Decision on Workers' Governments"). This is only possible when the balance of class forces is very favourable to the working class (or workers and peasants).

A WG is different from socialist democracy: a government organized through new institutions like workers' councils through which the exploited class(es) rules. The Paris Commune and the soviet government in Russia formed in 1917 were examples of socialist democracy, not WGs.

WGs have historically been extremely unusual, unstable and inherently short-lived. Perhaps the left Social Democrat governments in the German states of Saxony and Thuringia in 1923 would qualify as WGs, along with the government of the People's Assembly in Bolivia under Torres in 1971. The FSLN government in Nicaragua immediately after the fall of the Somoza dictatorship might also qualify (I haven't reviewed the history of any of these examples in detail). No government in the world today is a WG.

I think any useful socialist political reflection on the demand for a WG today needs to consider such

issues as:

1. The current era is obviously not one of wars and revolutions, with a high level of working-class struggle and working-class radicalization in many places, as was the case in the years after the Russian Revolution when the “workers’ government” question arose. “Sustained, mass workers’ struggles” that pose “the possibility that working people might form a government” are few and far between.
2. The room that governments within capitalist states in almost all countries have to act in ways that aren’t sanctioned by capitalists even for short periods of time is very limited today, less than was the case in the early 20th century. This is because individual capitalist states are more tightly subordinated to international capital through bond and currency markets. In many cases, individual states are also subjected to pressures from international capital via the WTO, IMF, WB, investment pacts like NAFTA, etc.
3. The three main forms of mass left-wing politics in the 20th century — social democracy, Stalinism and Third World nationalism — were all in deep crisis before the century’s end, their popular credibility as political alternatives to the neoliberal status quo (let alone capitalism) tremendously weakened. Most of the formerly reformist and more radical political forces of the exploited have accepted neoliberalism.
4. As a result of these and other changes, there is a crisis of politics. One aspect of this is that the belief that it is possible to really change society through taking political power (however this is understood) has declined. Even in highly-politicized France, to quote two members of the NPA, “in their great majority the activists of the ‘social movement’... continue to not pose the question of organizing on the political map” (in other words, in a party or other political organization).
5. There are today no revolutionary workers’ political organizations of significant influence, and few really significant workers’ political organizations to the left of reformism.

I think that today in most countries it makes little sense for socialists to put effort into arguing that “working people should strive for governmental power even in the absence of a soviet-type network of workers’ councils,” as John puts it. For one thing, the demand won’t seem relevant even to most radical worker activists. For another, the conditions required to make a WG — as opposed to a left government that objectively “administers the capitalist order,” no matter what its rhetoric is — possible simply don’t exist in most places.

However, in Greece today it would make sense to call for a WG — a government that would reject austerity measures and exit the eurozone in a way designed to favour the working class. Egypt and Chile today may also be places where the demand is meaningful.

Other contributions to this discussion are published at A Workers’ Government as a Step toward Socialism“; see:

Nathan Rao (ESSF article 23993), [On the workers’ government discussion : We need to provide a credible political perspective.](#)]]

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/01/10/workers-governments-and-the-crisis-of-politics/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 23908), [Comintern's 1922 World Congress: A 'workers' government' as a step toward socialism](#).