

# **On the workers' government discussion : We need to provide a credible political perspective**

vendredi 13 janvier 2012, par [RAO Nathan](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 11 janvier 2012).

**The following guest column is by Nathan Rao, a Toronto-based socialist writer. It responds to previous posts on this website by John Riddell [1] and David Camfield [2].**

**John Riddell, January 11, 2012**

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Thank you to John Riddell and others for this interesting discussion. So long as we keep front and centre the long list of caveats Riddell provides (and David Camfield enlarges upon), I agree with Riddell's concluding paragraph with respect to the relevance today of the debates from nearly a century ago : "The relevance of its workers' government discussion lies rather in alerting us to the possibility that working people should strive for governmental power even in the absence of a soviet-type network of workers' councils."

Precisely in order to tackle the "crisis of politics" that David Camfield correctly mentions, it is essential to argue that "ordinary working people" can and must strive to run government according to their needs and aspirations - while simultaneously insisting that beyond "government" also lies the problem of capitalist social relations and the state that sustains and deepens them.

There's also a "defensive" reason for addressing this question head on. While there is certainly a "crisis of politics", the central role of government remains. As the old saying goes, politics abhors a vacuum. If the radical Left is unable to provide at least the beginnings of a credible outline of what our solution to the central problem of what a genuinely anti-capitalist government (or "workers government" to use the term in this exchange) might look like - and of the organizational project and strategy for getting there - you can be sure that politicized working people, students and so forth will continue to support (however grudgingly) the existing organizations of the neoliberalized "Left" or "centre-Left" as a "lesser evil" against an increasingly aggressive capitalist class and Right.

This is exactly the situation that we see in today in Canada, France and beyond - and it is one of the principal obstacles to the emergence of a radical-Left project with any kind of mass support.

David Camfield is concerned that "most radical worker activists" will not find the "demand" or project (of a "workers government") relevant.

Firstly, I'm curious to know who he is talking about and how he is gauging their political/electoral behaviour today. Who and where are these workers who are presumably active in their workplaces and around broader working-class issues, but who don't understand the importance of the question of who runs government and the state ? At election time, but also in terms of whom they look to for

guidance around the major questions affecting them, most working people with some basic class and political consciousness end up throwing their support behind (to use the Canadian example) the NDP (or even the Liberals) at election time and look to the organizations in their orbit at other times. I think those with a more advanced consciousness tend to do so as well, but there are also those who “drop out” and abstain (the political content of which is hard to assess) and a very small minority who seek to build alternative groupings.

The point for me here is that not addressing the “government” question in practice simply yields the terrain of politics and government to the neoliberalized “Left” and “centre-Left” (actually centre-Right in the case of the Liberals). There may be small numbers of radical worker activists who don’t fit into this pattern of behaviour, but I’m not sure they are statistically and politically significant enough to act as a guide for the strategic debates of the anti-capitalist Left. And even they would surely understand the importance of who holds the levers of governmental power in this society.

Secondly, there’s a much bigger problem than the possible reaction of a small number of radical worker activists to the “workers government” slogan. It’s the fact that there are so few radical (or even not so radical) worker activists to begin with ! Camfield and Riddell highlight the general absence of “sustained, mass workers’ struggles,” but they don’t go far enough in examining the reasons for this. In particular, they ignore one explanation that for me is key, overarching and directly related to what we are talking about here : the lack of a credible political perspective – or the lack of a perspective for “governmental power even in the absence of a soviet-type network of workers’ councils,” to use the language of this exchange.

Indeed, with all the changes and problems that Riddell and Camfield enumerate, why on earth would groups of workers enter into any kind of serious and sustained process of struggle and confrontation if there are not even the beginnings of a credible prospect that their efforts won’t be a glorious waste of time (or worse, given the loss of wages, the possibility of job loss and repression, etc.) ?

As Camfield rightly says in his point # 3, until the entrenchment of neoliberalism this credible prospect took the form of Social Democracy, Stalinism and Third World nationalism. These forces offered not only the seemingly credible prospect of longer-term improvements, but given their weight in society and the state, and given differences in capitalism and the state themselves (pointed out by Camfield in his point # 2), they could also deliver immediate gains. So it made perfect sense to enter into struggle to exert pressure upon employers and the state, from whom concessions could be extracted through the intermediary of Social Democracy, Stalinism and Third World nationalism.

But we can all agree that that mechanism of struggle and change (which was always uneven and imperfect) is now a thing of the past. So do we just throw our hands up in the air and wait for “sustained, mass workers’ struggles” to fall out of the sky into our laps ? That’s one option that can sustain small groups who alternate between propaganda and (hyper)activism around local and short-term issues. Other small radical-Left groups will continue to carve out a niche within the neoliberalized organizations of the “Left” and “centre-Left,” also waiting patiently for a heroic surge in working-class struggles as they become further and further embedded in the life and outlook of the bureaucracies where they find themselves. Most of the small radical Left in Canada today combines elements of both of these approaches. On both counts, it’s a losing proposition.

We have a responsibility to break out of this strategic impasse by mapping out a credible political perspective for today – and this is where the question of “governmental power even in the absence of a soviet-type network of workers’ councils” may fit in, as does the corollary question of what type of organization and strategy can lead us toward that goal.

If we shirk this responsibility, it makes it hard to fathom why we on the radical/anti-

capitalist/revolutionary Left even bother to pretend that we exist as a real political current - as opposed to scattered groupings of well-meaning people ; curious cultural or intellectual remnants of a long-gone era.

**Nathan Rao**

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\* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/we-need-to-provide-a-credible-political-perspective/>

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**Notes**

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

[2] See on ESSF (article 23992), [Workers' governments and the crisis of politics.](#)