

Self-Managed Class-Struggle Alternatives to Neo-liberalism, Nationalisation, Elections

By Lucien van der Walt

The 1970s-plus rise of neo-liberal policies profoundly destabilised Left currents that sought social change through the state. Old statist roads – the social democratic Keynesian welfare state (KWS), Marxist central planning as exemplified by the Soviet Union (USSR), and post-colonial nationalist import-substitution-industrialisation (ISI) – had some achievements.

But all had, on the eve of neo-liberalism, entered economic and political crises, and inherent flaws.

The subsequent neo-liberal victory entailed more than shifts in ideas and policies. These were part of a deeper shift in capitalism that reflected and reinforced the historic failure of statist roads. To follow the old routes today, whether through new Left parties, or efforts to win state elites to defunct policies, is futile.

What is needed is a working class Left approach freed of the failed statist past, resolutely opposed to capitalist and nationalist solutions, and rooted in historical anti-statist, libertarian Left traditions. While the Left remains statist, it is crippled by past crisis and current powerlessness, under intellectual and political siege.

What might this rebooted Left politics involve? It must centre on self-managed class-struggle and universalism, rejecting notions that nationalisation or political parties (or localised projects/struggles without a clear strategy of radical rupture), can enable fundamental change. As an example, this article discusses the bottom-up collectivisation of the anarchist/syndicalist Spanish Revolution, 1936-1939, and its strategic implications.

Sequence, statism, struggles

It was not neo-liberalism that destroyed the KWS, USSR-type Marxist regimes and ISI. Their failure *preceded and was a precondition* for neo-liberal victory. These systems were wracked by mounting economic problems (stagflation, industrial decline and balance of payment crises, respectively), and popular disaffection (exemplified by the global 1968 revolts).

The implosion of the KWS's "first world," Marxism's "second world," and ISI's "third world" arose from deeper processes. Besides massive class revolts, there was a global economic crisis, ongoing globalisation of capital structures, and changing geo-political conditions.

Neo-liberal inequities should not generate nostalgia. The KWS never removed class or other inequality, and involved a massive bureaucratization of society. USSR-type systems were exploitative state-capitalisms. ISI relied on cheap labour, and labour-repressive regimes.

Nationalisation, used in all three, never ended the fundamental division into classes of order-givers/order-takers, exploiters/exploited. Hopes of "nationalisation under workers' control" were illusions.

Neo-liberalism as phase

Neo-liberalism was initially one of several ruling class responses to the 1970s' implosion. States, regardless of ideology, were waging class war to re-establish profits and power, revealing their true character: institutions of ruling class domination, helmed by economic and political elites.

Neo-liberalism's striking success, compared to rivals, led to its rapid spread.

This was no post-modern nor post-industrial era, but globalised classic capitalism, akin to the 1870s-1920s'. Economic liberalism once again corresponded to state and capital structures, and immediate ruling class needs.

Working class crisis

Why did the working class and peasantry not use the 1970s to pose systemic alternatives? Because failed statist models dominated Left opinions and organisations. People were trapped between the old i.e. the dying "three worlds," the new i.e. neo-liberalism, and the empty alternatives: the radical Right or the society's fracture into competing identities.

It is impossible to return to the KWS, USSR or ISI models, out-of-sync with global realities. Variants of neo-liberalism now provide the empty choices of mainstream "politics."

Historically, elections have rarely led to major policy changes – this is truest today. Where Left parties win elections, e.g. France, 1981, Greece, 2015, they find it impossible to halt neo-liberalism.

Left disillusion, falling expectations and millenarianism

Disillusion sees Left aspirations retreating from ambitious change. This is exemplified by mainstream Marxism – Communism – morphing into social democracy (e.g. Kerala) and neo-liberalism (e.g. China), and by "third world" nationalism morphing into crude chauvinism plus neo-liberalism.

Today's social democratic and nationalist proposals are extremely modest: tinkering with state welfare, Tobin taxes, trade barriers, nationalisation, more "diversity" in management etc.

When adopted by states, these proposals get welded onto neo-liberal capitalism: welfare and tax reforms become pro-capital, nationalisation bails out corporations, "diverse" managers prove equally exploitative etc.

Reforms remain possible, but not on a scale ending neo-liberalism. For example, post-apartheid South Africa has managed to expand its state welfare system. But this provides no long-term unemployment coverage, is means-tested and minimalist, with e.g. \$30 monthly child support grants for the poorest. Further expansion is blocked by elite accumulation, and future fiscal sustainability is questionable.

Left desperation leads to millenarianism, like “redwashing” Dilma’s Brazil, Li’s China, Castro’s Cuba, Putin’s Russia, and Maduro’s Venezuela, or euphoria over empty spectacles, like Obama’s election.

Progressive projects and theory are also under siege from irrationalist post-modernism and crude identity-based mobilisation – all backed by Establishment forces, despite their rebellious image.

Something missing

Big revolts keep emerging, but without a universalistic, radical Left project, they falter, as with the “Arab Spring.” The only currents shaking the current order are the radical Right, including religious fundamentalists – none offering anything but a graveyard peace.

Unless realistic, appealing, organised Left alternatives are presented, the working class will remain able to *disrupt* neo-liberalism, but unable to transcend it – or will veer Rightwards.

One current hopes alternative institutions, like cooperatives, lead to socialism. Another dismisses decisive mass confrontation with the existing order, on a systematic programme, as “dogmatic” and unnecessary. “Revolution” gets redefined as building “spaces” of daily resistance. Modest acts like skipping work get construed as assaults on capitalism. With “revolution” no longer a desired or decisive rupture – only daily life – larger strategy and theory get dismissed.

Compared to top-down statist and party politics, any stress on building local, democratic relations must be welcomed.

But notions that capitalism, neo-liberal or not, can be slowly, peacefully “exited” or “cracked” through cooperatives, local projects and daily choices are flawed.

Collectives, class-struggle, self-management

The existing order rests upon centralised institutions of exploitation and coercion, states and corporations, not popular consent. It’s not possible to carve out alternative economies on any substantial scale, involving more than a minority, because ruling classes *already* monopolise key resources.

A truly different order requires real revolution, not small battles, but a final conflict. States and corporations will not go gently; their survival rests on violence and enclosure. Changing the world is not possible without a rationalist strategy and theory that addresses these realities.

Means of administration, coercion and production can only come under collective ownership, and democratic control, through collectivisation and self-management, undertaken from below, by the *popular classes.* Not through states and nationalisation, as the “three worlds” proved, nor through building localised projects or daily resistance as end goals.

This requires accumulating popular *power*: building capacity through universalist, independent, democratic, mass organisations, forged in direct *class-struggles* – and winning these to creating a global, libertarian, stateless socialism, including a realistic appreciation of the tasks. Only as *part* of such a project can co-operatives, projects and daily choices aid revolution.

Building revolutionary counter-power and counter-culture requires rejecting notions that theory is “dogma,” plans “authoritarian” etc. Today’s capitalism is sufficiently similar to earlier incarnations that historic working class experiences and theory – especially the libertarian Left’s – remain valuable.

For example, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement, centred by the 1930s on the 2-million-strong National Confederation of Labour (CNT), promoted self-reliance, self-activity, and revolutionary collectivisation. A bottom-up, well-organised yet decentralised union, with a minuscule full-time staff, its influence was even greater than its enrolled membership.

CNT had mass bases in manufacturing, services and mines, but also significant bases in neighbourhoods and villages, plus close links to anarchist youth, women’s, unemployed, rent-strike and propaganda groups, soldiers’ and sailors’ cells. It published dozens of newspapers, including mass-circulation dailies, radio, film, books and leaflets.

In 1936, CNT led the defeat of a military coup by the radical Right. CNT structures then implemented sweeping collectivisation, drawing in other unions. 2 million workers were involved in urban collectives, including 3,000 Catalan enterprises e.g. public transport, shipping, power, water, engineering, auto, mines, cement, textiles, hospitals. Two-thirds of farmland underwent collectivisation, involving 5-7 million.

The core economy came under efficient worker/peasant self-management through assemblies and committees; capitalist relations were abolished; daily life, including gender relations, changed for millions; production was democratically co-ordinated at industry and regional levels. Power was relocated from state and capital to collectives, congresses and militias.

This was not nationalisation, but *collectivisation,* prepared by decades of patient work. Revolution emerged directly from established mass organisations involved in daily struggles – not spontaneously, nor from cooperatives, nor from the margins.

The CNT had a comprehensive revolutionary programme, including military defence, economic planning, and internationalisation.

This was, however, stalled in an effort to maximise Left unity against the resurgent Right. The cost of unity was suspending the programme, leaving the revolution isolated, collectivisation incomplete. But the CNT’s “allies” turned on it, precipitating the Right’s 1939 victory.

Conclusions

However, the emancipatory aspects of Spain’s Left revolution show self-management as essential weapon in class-struggle, nucleus of a new, better society. The revolution failed by stopping midway, not through excessive ambition.

A renewed Left requires, not nostalgia, nor post-modernism, nor crude identity-based politics, but an overarching vision of a new society, realistic strategy, a working class/peasant focus, and a universalist, modernist outlook. It requires unifying multiple sites and struggles into mass movements, consolidated into democratic organisations, and developing capacities and ideas to defeat *and* supplant ruling classes.

Daily struggles must prefigure the new world, but prefiguration is not enough: radical, systemic change is essential. There is much to learn from historic Left traditions, not least anarchism/syndicalism, and the CNT.

Lucien van der Walt is Professor of Industrial Sociology at Rhodes University, South Africa, works on labour and left history and theory, and is involved in union and working class education and movements.