

Not Populism, Not Socialism, but Communism Will Get It Done

by Charles Andrews

The ruling classes of developed countries get a lot of pushback these days from the masses they hold in contempt. The voters whom U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton insulted as “deplorables” went and put Donald Trump in the Oval office in 2016, daring to elect someone who was not a vetted ruler of capitalism. Then his near opposite, self-identified socialist Bernie Sanders, came back stronger than ever for the 2020 presidential primaries. Socialism has become a recognized political stance that cannot be red-baited off the stage.

Our concern is the United States, but we should note that the same discontent boils in other developed countries. In France the Yellow Vest protests launched in late 2018 and persist into 2020. People demonstrate weekly at major intersections in cities and towns across the country. The movement is distinct from an earlier shock to French politics (although with overlap): the arrival of the far-right Le Pen party as a major vote-getter. Neither group belongs to the French elite, who are groomed to a haughty manner in exclusive higher schools of management. The latest of these, President Macron, is widely mocked for his airs – and fought bitterly when he demands that working people live their retirement years in nineteenth-century penury.

The British Establishment, accustomed for centuries to well-tailored suits and gentlemanly rotation of parties in parliament, has fallen apart. The Tories lost their smooth airs in successive prime ministers: nonentity David Cameron, then ineffectual Theresa May, now vulgar Boris Johnson. The Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, supposedly a left-wing firebrand, could not or would not unite workers around a stand on globalization. Voters trounced him and Labour for that. The British working class seethes over de-industrialization and austerity.

Mass discontent with the ruling class flows in two broad currents – populists and socialists. They are opposites in some ways, and the elite like to call them extremes of the right and left; this is neither accurate nor perceptive.

Capitalism ruins people’s lives in different ways. Populism and socialism speak for two sets of victims. They suffered in different ways, and they have different grounds for resentment and anger.

Who Are The Populists?

The core of United States populists are factory workers in the industrial Midwest. Capitalist de-industrialization scarred their lives. Look at the employment figures for three states in the Rust Belt: Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Percent Change in Employment

	Manufacturing jobs		Private nonfarm jobs
	Mich., Ohio, Pa.	All U.S.	All U.S.
1970-80	-10.1%	4.7%	28.2%
1980-90	-15.6%	-6.8%	21.4%
1990-00	-1.7%	-2.6%	19.5%
2000-10	-44.7%	-37.5%	-1.2%

Stat. Abstracts, establishment data

Manufacturing employment in the three states declined ten percent during the 1970s, while manufacturing jobs in the entire U.S. grew almost five percent. Workers and their unions were unable to stop the flight of jobs – to the South, for example, where wages are lower. One reason shows up in the contrasting growth of private jobs overall, which was 28 percent; manufacturing jobs were on a long-term shrinkage, partly because of technical advances that introduced robot painting arms and other automation to automobile and large-appliance assembly lines.

The U.S. economy did not move displaced workers into new work at the necessary pace. Workers had to scramble for a job, and their bargaining power went soft. Real median wage earnings for all U.S. workers reached their peak in 1973, and they have stagnated and fallen ever since, right up to 2020.

In the 1980s, the collapse of the industrial Midwest became undeniable. Manufacturing employment in the three states fell another fifteen percent, and seven percent in the United States as a whole. The area became known as the Rust Belt, pockmarked with abandoned factories and battered communities around them.

The damage had been done. Manufacturing employment almost stabilized in the 1990s. Then another punch hit hard. In 2001 U.S. capital brought China, by now transformed into a dog-eat-dog capitalist economy, into the World Trade Organization. During the 2000-2010 decade, the three states lost 44 percent of their remaining manufacturing jobs! The loss for the entire U.S. was nearly as big, 37 percent. Capitalists shut factories that made kitchen faucets, power hand tools, tire jacks, light bulbs, and on and on. Corporations made deals for production in China, where the ruling “Communist” regime gleefully offered workers for hire at dirt cheap wages. The output was shipped back to the U.S. and sold in Walmart.

A generation of workers in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and other hard-hit states were forced into early retirement or junk jobs like greeter at Walmart. Their children get to the teenage years and fall victim to opioids, alcohol, and suicide. “Deaths due to opioid-related overdoses ... corresponded to a death rate of 10 per 100,000 people in 2015, which has more than tripled from 3 per 100,000 people in 2000.”¹ The suicide rate among white people increased 32 percent from 2000-2017. The Black suicide rate, always less than half the white rate, increased 16 percent in the same years.²

Populist Angers

There are three big populist angers. The most important one is anger at elites. It is understandable, to put it mildly, that victims of economic stagnation and global outsourcing lost respect for the elites who run the United States. Corporations abandoned their communities in the 1970s and 80s. After 2000, with the help of Wall Street, presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama in succession, State Department bureaucrats, Congress, and professors on the make, with ideological blessing by Establishment economists, firms took what manufacturing was left and sent as much as they could to China.

One institution after another fails its basic duties. Populists learn contempt for hospital and college and museum executives who grab \$300,000 to several million dollars a year. The higher up you look in an institution, it seems the worse the character and competence gets – in companies, community agencies, and national government.

Nothing seems to work. It takes longer and longer just to build a bridge, and cost overruns leap to astounding multiples of the original contract.

Pity the elites. In ordinary times they tally up fat profits, approving a few crumbs of reform for the rest of us, and populism is a small fringe. The great communist intellectual Robert Briffault described the situation with bitter sarcasm. The common person, he writes, could not “help feeling that diplomatic experts, accredited government officials, financial experts, cool-headed business men, journalists, must understand what they are talking about. ... It appears preposterous that one should set up his crude impressions against the considerate judgment of trained and accredited experts drawing large salaries.”³ Now common people have to ask themselves, what is going on and why are we always shafted?

An elite liberal smears populists

Mass contempt for the elites is serious stuff! That is what a liberal elitist tells complacent members of the ruling class. Robert Reich, who was President Clinton’s secretary of labor, who has a reputation as a liberal economist, who is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, pleaded with fellow elitists to toss the masses some reforms – from the top down, like the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century. He said in 2005:

“The working class that we used to call it, and the poor, will increasingly become vulnerable to demagogues who come along and take their frustration and their anxiety and turn it into and divert it toward targets of animosity. We have seen angry populism. We saw it in the 1890s, prairie populism. It was an angry, divisive populism. It was an angry, divisive populism that blamed a lot of people, some of them who were scapegoats for that populism. ... The politics of resentment is carried upon and depends upon anxiety and frustration, and is utilized by demagogues to further their own selfish purposes.”⁴

Reich gives workers this choice: either accept the (progressive) elite, or you will commit the sin of angry populism and follow a demagogue. He repeated this line in 2010: “America’s three-decade-long lurch toward widening inequality is an open invitation to a future demagogue who misconnects the dots, blaming immigrants, the poor,

government, foreign nations, ‘socialists’ or ‘intellectual elites’ for the growing frustrations of the middle class.”⁵ Notice how Reich slides from immigrants to elites: working people crushed by de-industrialization must not blame either.

Immigration, economics, and globalization

Populist anger number two is anger at immigration. Many immigrants work at the low and high ends of the wage scale. No one can deny that waves of immigrants displaced Blacks and poor whites who previously got low-wage jobs in construction, sweatshops, and packing plants. In the U.S. era of surging industrialization from the early nineteenth century to the 1930s, the economy could absorb immigrants; the solution was to unite workers and fight the boss to get wage increases for everyone. But that approach has not worked for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs after the economy enters long-term stagnation, since 1973.

At the high-salary end, United States employers bring in programmers, registered nurses and the like, trained in India, the Philippines or wherever, even when there is no shortage of the needed skilled workers.⁶ This is no way to run an economy so that a young person can grow up aiming to be a nurse or a software designer, get the education she needs, and thrive.

Immigration is an emotional way to look at a serious problem. The essence of the matter is globalization, in two forms. One way is that companies outsource production to low-wage countries then import the stuff through the open door of “free trade.” Or conversely, employers bring in labor to keep wages down. The elites brand anyone who raises these economic issues a xenophobe, an isolationist, a racist. The governing elites give corporate employers what they want, while it remains an enormous challenge for workers to form a trade union.

Populist anger number three is racist antagonism. It is not universal among populists, nor is it the same thing as anger at immigration. Racists make Black people in the U.S. a target of hate despite the fact that Blacks’ ancestors have been here longer than the forebears of European-Americans. In Britain, anger about Irish people is racist, while anger at Polish immigrants has a different, more recent economic basis.

If anything justifies a distinction between left-wing populism and right-wing populism, racism is it. Right-wing populism in the U.S. enjoys display of the slaveowners' confederate flag or Nazi symbols. When it becomes a more formal ideology, those who sink to this garbage call themselves white nationalists. A right-winger like Steve Bannon plays the game of calling himself a nationalist but not a white nationalist. He wants to combine ordinary working people and domestic capitalists into one group, one "folk" if you will.

Modern populism bears little resemblance to the U.S. populism of the 1870s to the 1890s. That was the People's Party of farmers, who fought extortion by railroads that carried their crops to market and suffered plunder by other monopoly corporations ("trusts"). In the South, many Populists understood that "Negro voters" were their natural ally; poor whites scratching a few acres and Black sharecroppers had common enemies: the revived planter class and the owners of the cotton gins and mills. But other Populists tried to take votes from the Democratic Party by outdoing its opposition to Black rights and a Black vote.

The main weakness of populism in general is that it sees no viable path forward. What should be done about the misrule of the elites? How should the economy be restructured so that working people enjoy prosperity for their work? Populism has no good answers. A new wave of socialists does advocate policies and programs.

Who Are The New Socialists?

Compared with populists, socialists are more likely to live in large cities, especially commercial, cultural and governmental centers rather than industrial towns. When they have the college preparation, they typically aim for a career in the public and "non-profit" sectors, but many of them can only find work in retail, food service, or delivery. Socialists are more diverse than the populist crowd, as the jargon goes, especially socialists under age 40.

Just as populists today are not the old Populists, socialists are different than the brawny, hammer-wielding stereotype drawn from the great industrial union drives of the 1930s and 1940s. Socialists inherit demands from that time such as legal protection for trade union organizing and an up-to-date minimum wage, but they also

raise new ones in response to contemporary capitalism. Socialists want government action against economic inequality, such as higher taxes on the rich. They support regulation of how corporations deal with their employees, customers, communities, and the air and ground and water they use. They want guaranteed health care for all, government-operated or financed out of general tax revenues instead of health plan premiums.

Sometimes socialists call for state ownership of certain industries like banks and electrical distribution networks. Some of them shy away from public ownership of all corporations, while other socialists embrace it. Either way, though, a comprehensive and distinctive vision of socialism is missing, undefined, and left to the future. The common excuse, often spoken as though it is a virtue, is, “Just be democratic about it.” Most socialists do not know what their socialism is.

Another central element of contemporary socialism is civil and social equality regardless of race, ethnic identity, immigration status, gender, and religion. It often verges on identity politics, which dwells on these distinctions to the virtual exclusion of broad class demands.

Populists and socialists are different people, and they stand for and against different things. They differ on participation on sanctioned politics, too.

Comparison

Populists tend to be alienated from the unending opera of controversies that make up the politics of the electoral parties, the news media, and Congressional business. They have a healthy skepticism for policy experts, but they can be aroused to support a man of boorish contrast to the haughty elites, like Donald Trump. At one edge some populists are ready to take up arms – not for a different economic system, not for a definite change in institutions, but for a particular leader and some vague slogans.

Many socialists come to socialism after toiling in Democratic Party politics to elect progressive candidates or enact modest, workable reforms. Other socialists form their outlook during college years, when a young person may have time for activism and independent ideological reflection. But when college is over, capitalism confronts them with huge student debt, no job in the

career they prepared for, and sky-high rent in the cities they need to be in. Some years later when they start a family, the outrageous cost of a health plan slams them, too.

The capitalist elites love to place themselves in the center. They condemn populists as right-wing or fascist. They also make it an insult to be “extreme left” or socialist, warning of so-called totalitarianism. The diagram of right, center, and left is how the elite smears the mass of populists and socialists.

The kernel of reality is that populists and socialists are not only different but sometimes directly opposite in their views. Populists have a gut animosity to the elites, which often becomes not only distrust that government will help them but outright animosity to public institutions.

Socialists are ambiguous about government. Many socialists aim to persuade the ruling capitalists that it is in their own interest to get behind reforms: “A single payer Medicare plan for everyone will save companies money!” Other socialists acknowledge that the ruling elites must be pushed hard to do the right thing. A few socialists claim that mass movements can eventually enact enough reform to change capitalism into ... whatever socialism should be. Socialist strategies accept the existing constitutional order and processes. They work within the legal order; even defiance of a particular law is conducted as civil disobedience, which has legal blessing under certain conditions.

Divided Over Globalization

Populists and socialists are divided over globalization, too. Populists know the deep suffering of discarded industrial workers. They simply hate globalization.

Socialists, unfortunately, have a shameful 40-year record during which they largely ignored globalization, with the notable exception of the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization. Occasionally, socialists advance demands for “good” globalization, such as writing labor and environmental standards into the North American Free Trade Agreement. These are as much for the benefit of workers in Mexico and other countries as for U.S. workers. Socialists typically celebrate cultural and social globalization, as though you could enjoy them under world capitalism without economic ruin.

Finally, socialists have shown no awareness that global production chains will be cut up if we achieve socialism in a world that is still mostly capitalist. A socialist United States will need to build its economic independence.

Similar to globalization, populists and socialists differ about immigration. Socialists might or might not support the absurdity of open borders,⁷ but in general they welcome immigrants. Today, when unions are almost gone in the U.S., particularly in the private sector, socialists are at odds with populists, who know that immigration has helped bosses reduce wages in construction, food preparation, and other industries.

Few high-skill occupations are unionized, and those that are, are typically not militant. A fine exception is the National Nurses Union. With good old-fashioned class struggle, it has done what classic socialists advocate: it unites RNs without discrimination and has won good contracts from hospitals, as well as a pioneer California law that tells hospitals the RN-patient ratios they must maintain in their operating rooms, ICUs, etc. Still, populists know young women who run up against the shortage of RN training programs and are forced to abandon their ambition of becoming a registered nurse.

At worst, populists lose sight of the economics, let right-wing politicians work them up over cultural differences, and end in violent attacks on immigrants. Such thuggery must be fought blow for blow.

Socialists have decried the brutal imprisonment and tortures of immigrant families by the Obama and Trump administrations – while skirting around the undeniable economic issues. So far in the twenty-first century, socialists have not mounted a campaign for 1) regulated admission of immigrants, 2) a workable, mandated path to citizenship, 3) full equality for immigrants, and 4) government programs for communities that receive immigrants and need schools, clinics, and housing – the cost of which current residents cannot be expected to bear through local sales and property taxes.

Populists and socialists both know the social order is rotten. One way or the other, it blocks every path to security and relative prosperity like what their parents attained. Things look to be even worse for their children.

Populist Vision

Every big movement has a vision. You can't keep your eyes on the prize if you don't know what the prize is!

Populism has a cloudy vision of returning to better times. It demands to unroll globalization and outsourcing, revive manufacturing, and end uncontrolled immigration. Good; then what? In positive terms, populism wishes we could restore the individual's economic foundation and the security that is imagined to reside in it. This vision sees reliable jobs that last for a working lifetime except as the individual embarks to change it. If there is a trade union in the picture, it is run on business lines and preferably based on a craft. The vision often includes significant opportunity to start and grow a small business.

The real problem with the populist vision is that it is long gone and will not come back. That does not mean we must accept the elite social vision that succeeded it: domination by big corporations, Wall Street finance, and an arrogant government that serves them. We need our own new vision.

Socialist "Vision"?

What about socialism? The firmest socialists will tell you that we need public ownership of the means of production so that we can produce what people need, not what makes the most profit. Nice, but vague. To fill it in, some socialists tell us that publicly owned firms can operate more or less on their own while the government sets interest rates, encourages some products with credits and discourages other production with taxes. Other socialists advocate an overall economic plan.

They all insist that the plans and government measures must be a result of democratic planning. They are at a loss to give the phrase real meaning. The mantra of democratic planning reveals that while socialists have mechanisms in mind, along with lots of idealism, they have no vision of a new society.

Capitalism is a historical mode of production. Its early revolutionaries overthrew the rulers of agrarian societies in which peasant farmers were forced to pay levies, rents, taxes, or tithes to lords, gentry, and landlords under customary and formal legal terms.

Capitalism changed all that, culminating in industrialization, which added machinery to land as a crucial means of production.

Capitalist economy turned out an endless variety of new products, was accompanied by new ideologies, and enforced the new economic relations (workers took wages with “freedom of contract,” or they starved). Capitalism discovered new kinds of labor. Today, its victories and advances are over; it has entered irreversible decay and become a vicious enemy of historical progress.⁸

Socialism aims to be the next mode of production. It needs a basic vision. We do not need a complete picture, but we foresee new principles of society and a new worldview, just as the philosophy and politics of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment anticipated the bourgeois triumph.

Socialists, however, offer little more than the empty phrase, democratic planning. Many of them put off the classic call for public ownership of the means of production, too. What it all comes down to is that socialists believe in and work for *humanized capitalism*. The group Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) justified its support for Bernie Sanders by claiming, when he directed the supporters of his 2020 presidential run into the Biden campaign, that they had “built independent[!] working-class power around a transformative and broadly popular agenda that includes Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, and College for All.”⁹

Some socialists openly accept a capitalist economy provided such reforms are allowed. They will tell you that Sweden has rather little public ownership of the means of production but has (actually, once had) an all-round system of public welfare. People pay a huge percentage of their wages in taxes and in return get child care, health care, vacation, pension, etc.

Humanized Capitalism?

Socialists cannot see beyond a humanized capitalism. Their solutions to its outrages, even if they were workable as a whole, do not give us a vision of liberation, of passage to a new economic and social order.

Five hundred years ago the radical bourgeois did not aim to reform feudalism by demanding a more accountable king, equitable award of royal monopolies, reasonable rents, and abolition of the

lord's first night with a farmer's bride. No, they brought forth a new vision. They advocated individual liberty, especially economic freedom. They welcomed the physical sciences for their power to advance agriculture and industry (while compromising with religious beliefs). Their new regimes replaced kings, downgraded hereditary nobles, and put the Church in its place. Instead, select groups of bourgeois ruled in legislatures and executive cabinets.

Today, even billionaires wring their hands over a basic problem like inequality. Bill Gates wrote, "I very much agree with (Thomas) Piketty that high levels of inequality are a problem – messing up economic incentives, tilting democracies in favor of powerful interests, and undercutting the ideal that all people are created equal." Then he ordered a \$644 million, five-deck yacht for fourteen guests and the 31 crew needed to serve them. But it will be an ecological yacht powered by liquid hydrogen from two super-cooled tanks.¹⁰

So-called enlightened businessmen will talk with you about measures that could humanize one or another aspect of capitalist society. But every capitalist presumes the inequality between those who work and those who take profit. You may swat down one outrage, and two more will pop up.

For Capitalists, Two Tricks in a Magician's Bag

Neither the vague populist vision nor reformist socialist visions get working people to victory. So it is no surprise that some capitalists help one or the other of the two ideologies get an audience.

To be sure, most capitalists go along with their conventional rule and endorse its supreme illusion, bourgeois democracy. But Steve Bannon has been financed by capitalists who keep populism in waiting, to be suited up as fascists if needed. They are like the German capitalists who backed the Nazi party and pushed Hitler into power in 1933 over the objections of centrist capitalists.

Socialists are less likely to have overt capitalist financial support. The notable fact is that corporate media will publicize socialist candidates and front groups. The media anoint them as the leaders of a struggle, knowing that their bark may be loud but their bite is weak.

The Communist Vision of Socialism

Against inequality, exploitation, and oppression, communists bring us the vision of a society of no rich and no poor, grounded in good work for all. Liberals and socialists will agree on greatly reducing poverty, perhaps even eliminating it. But they reject the vision of no rich and no poor. No rich?! That is impossible, unnecessary, too harsh (and maybe I'll be lucky).

The material equality that communists put forth is not new, but it was utopian in the past, an equality of poverty. Early Christians are said to have practiced it. Soon enough, the elders of the faith and then the priests postponed equality until you get to heaven.

A new world of liberated work is growing in the womb of history. Late capitalism tries to strangle it. More and more people are confined to low-wage, servile, precarious jobs, when not tossed aside completely. They prepare and deliver food, drive executives to meetings and welcome them at hotels, tend the sick and old and impaired, conduct phone calls and Web chats according to rigid scripts in the customer support centers of corporations, and on and on.

Industrial labor has shrunk just as working the farm did when countries developed industrial production.

New forms of work can and will become the life of everyone.

Communists do not propose to enact a society of no rich and no poor by decree. Nor can we let the rich exist but tax their profits. A no rich, no poor program supports every worker to participate fully in the new mode of production. As routine labor shrinks but still exists, it should not be a lifetime sentence for anyone but a chore shared by all. Everyone will join in the increasing range of socially engaged, highly skilled work, melding study, imagination, and the doing.

A Social Project, Then a Plan of Investment

Rigorous socialism is often taken to be public ownership of the means of production and a planned economy. A plan need not issue orders to every factory and office every morning. Rather, the basic job of a plan is to allocate the sum total of investments so that together they realize a social project. A plan replaces the capitalist rule that

the supreme purpose and criterion of economic activity is profit on investment. By itself, socialist planning is an instrument.¹¹

We cannot specify the details of socialist economic relations and the precise steps toward no rich and no poor. This truism is no excuse for reformism. The over-arching communist project is the historical escape from capitalism to a society of no rich and no poor. A succession of tasks will arise to get there. These replace the series of industries that capital piles into one after another in the unending drive to accumulate profits. The chant of democratic planning is a tactic of evasion. It is a substitute for scientific study, mass debate, and the leadership that pulls it all together.

Socialism is how communist society begins. Raise the banner of no rich, no poor and start moving toward an equal wage and the blossoming of human work for all. At some point, society will not need a wage form. Marx briefly described it. Note how he focuses on going to the next kind of work after agrarian and industrial labor. He spoke of the “higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; ... then can ... society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”¹²

Communists uphold the vision of no rich, no poor. They lead the way to institutions that make it real. They rally the working class to create their own political regime, one that can build a new society and beats back the inevitable attempts to restore a few privileges, then the little rich, and then billionaires.

Communism: Vision, Mission, and Movement

The communist vision shows us the main features of the future from a distance. Vision is a result of scientific analysis of history, especially of the unstoppable development of our productive powers and the deep-set resistance to it of those who benefit from capitalism. These exploiters, apart from an eyedropper of exceptions, will not hand over their class wealth. They cannot imagine life without class status; they cannot remold their class values.

Vision shows us all this – but must we *do*? We contemplate the vision; we carry out the mission.

The communist mission is that working class becomes the ruling class. This is the only way we can destroy capitalism and create socialism. We aim to abolish the capitalist class. Some of its current members can be pensioned off, some will flee to exile, and the rest will become working people.

The working class has fought for and won concessions, reforms, even modernization of capitalism that capitalists themselves did not want. But a ruling capitalist class will not concede socialism itself. Pass laws that amount to socialism and expect the elites of capitalism to execute them faithfully? Ridiculous. *We* must run all institutions, all of society.

From fundamental rule at the national capital through all levels to each neighborhood, working people will make the decisions and carry them out. Like any ruling class, the working class needs its leaders, officials, and organizations of political and legal power. The English bourgeoisie, upon its revolution of 1640, refined institutions of rule continuously for several centuries. The working class already has valuable experience, both good and bad, in how to structure and run a state from the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba.

Previous ruling classes rewarded effective, loyal officials with a heightened position in society, perks, a wink of the eye at taking a privilege here and a gift (bribe) there. In fact, the more an official did these things, the more closely he bound himself to capitalist rule.

The working class cannot realize the program of no rich, no poor while staffing institutions of power by the same means. Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Fidel Castro never cared about wealth for themselves and their families. The selection and testing of officials must be turned around. For example, each of them must accept the rule that prevailed for a time in the Soviet Union: Party members earned no more income than a typical worker. No matter how high up you were, no matter how highly educated, as a communist you accepted the median wage. Your prosperity went hand in hand with the prosperity of the masses.¹³

Only communism raises the banner of no rich, no poor, and only the communist movement accepts the mission that the working class shall be the ruling class.¹⁴

The U.S. Communist Movement Today

How many communists are there? How firmly are they organized? In the United States today, communists are a mere speck among the working people. Nor is any of the communist party groups more than a proto-party, despite their dedication. Hard realities can account for that, but it does not help that most of the time they hide the communist vision and mission.

During the 2020 election cycle, socialists poured enormous energy into urging people to vote for Sanders, or a third-party candidate or ... They were like ants shouting arguments at an elephant, the working people.

The few communists and communist groups would do better to get basics in front of as many workers as they can, drawing a handful past the lures of populism and socialism to communism. The 2020 election is another step in the disintegration of capitalist democracy. Vote as you think best, but we can tell you for sure that U.S. capitalism has exhausted its capacity for even partial mass prosperity. A crisis is inevitable that will force all of us to decide: do we make the move to toss out capitalism, to march to no rich and no poor?

Thousands of people fight hard in working-class struggles, are committed to getting rid of capitalism, believe in socialism, and have no illusions about change under the capitalist constitution. Historians of socialist society will honor their energy, dedication, and courage. What they need in the approaching era of revolutionary crisis is a forthright communist vision – or at least a clear ideological struggle between two opposed views of it.

The communist movement in the U.S. must almost start over. During the long era of capitalist industrialization, the working class could win significant progress in wages, hiring rules, living conditions, public health, occupational safety, a social safety net, and democratic rights. Communists were at the fore of these struggles. They are the most dedicated to the cause of the working class, they wage class struggle and oppose class collaboration, they prove the value of social unionism (which fights for the unemployed and the entire working class) over business unionism, and they carry the working-class view into all democratic issues, foreign policy, etc.

Revolution had not become a historical necessity, and it rarely became a serious choice; perhaps France and Italy at the end of World War Two, where communists led the armed anti-fascist resistance, were such exceptions. Meanwhile, in largely agrarian, pre-capitalist Russia and China, revolution became the only way out of a mode of production that suffocated almost the entire society. Communist leaders found the way.

Now capitalism has reached the end of its road in its most developed economies. The long era of achieving important gains for working people through reform struggle is over. The last major reforms for the working class in the U.S. were won in the early 1970s, capping the stormy 1960s with Medicare for people 65 and over, the Nader protections for workers and consumers, and an array of democratic movements by Black people, women, etc.

Revolution was so distant that it was easy to pay it lip service. Now it has arrived on our doorstep. The communist movement needs to break habits that have become unhelpful, renew its ideology, and mold itself to serve an explicit communist vision.

The proto-communist trend in the U.S. can do these things with study and effort. The notorious traitor to socialism Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) wrote, "The movement is everything, the final goal is nothing."¹⁵ Sorry, Mr. Bernstein, the communist movement *will* carry out its mission. Anything less prolongs capitalist exploitation.

The important mileposts of a communist movement can be noted in succession: a durable communist core gathers and persists, defining the vision; a communist voice on the conflicts of the day is received throughout the working class; the communist party has earned wide respect because of its views and its history.

A revolution is a mass uprising. It succeeds when the masses choose the path and look to their trusted sisters and brothers – because now they are ready to defy capitalist terror and overthrow capitalist rule, seeing that only this thing called communism will get it done.

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Notes

¹ Monica Alexander et al, "Opioid Deaths by Race in the United States, 2000–2015," 2017, p. 2 at

https://www.monicaalexander.com/pdf/opioids_race.pdf. Their data show that the increase from 2000 to 2010 was almost all among white people. From 2010 to 2015 the death rate increased among both white and Black people.

² "Age-Adjusted Intentional Self-harm (Suicide) Death Rates by Race and Sex" at <https://www.mdch.state.mi.us/osr/deaths/suicideUS.asp>.

³ Robert Briffault, *Breakdown: The Collapse of Traditional Civilization*, Coward-McCann, 1935, p. 96.

⁴ Robert Reich, "How Unequal Can America Get Before We Snap?," talk at University of California at Berkeley, April 5, 2005, formerly at http://berkeley.edu/media/gsp/ucb_reich-snap.mp3

⁵ Robert Reich, *The Nation*, July 19, 2010.

⁶ Norman Matloff, "Debunking the Myth of a Desperate Software Labor Shortage: Testimony to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Immigration," revised Sept. 9, 2000, at <http://heather.cs.ucdavis.edu/itaa.real.pdf>. Regarding programmers, Matloff writes, "Readers of the articles proclaiming a shortage would be perplexed if they also knew that Microsoft only hires 2% of its applicants for software positions, and that this rate is typical in the industry. ... the Department of Labor found that the vast majority of H-1Bs have salaries under \$50,000, while the national median salary in this field is \$60,000. [Salary figures are from the late 1990s.] ...in 19% of the cases, the employer was not even paying the wage promised in the visa application."

⁷ Lenin said, "What does the 'method' of socialist revolution under the slogan 'Down with frontiers' mean? We maintain that the state is necessary, and a state presupposes frontiers. The state, of course, may hold a bourgeois government, but we need the Soviets. But even Soviets are confronted with the question of frontiers. What does 'Down with frontiers' mean? It is the beginning of anarchy. ... The 'method' of socialist revolution under the slogan 'Down with frontiers' is simply a mess." Speech on the National Question April 29 (May 12) [1917] at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/7thconf/29d.htm>

⁸ See *The Hollow Colossus* for analysis of the endgame of capitalist accumulation, laying out how the existing relations of production have turned into fetters on the material productive forces of society.

⁹ "Socialism is the Best Path Forward," Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), April 9, 2020 at <https://www.dsausa.org/statements/socialism-is-the-best-path-forward/>

¹⁰ <https://www.gatesnotes.com/Books/Why-Inequality-Matters-Capital-in-21st-Century-Review> and <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/feb/09/bill-gates-orders-500m-hydrogen-powered-superyacht>

¹¹ See this writer's *No Rich, No Poor* and *The Hollow Colossus* for more on the organization of socialist economy.

¹² Critique of the Gotha Program, I, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>. The phrase "productive forces" would be better conceived as "both material and conscious advances."

¹³ The Soviet Union dropped the rule in the middle 1930s when the country was under tremendous pressure to industrialize as soon as possible to overcome Nazi attack.

¹⁴ The two fundamental studies of communist political science are Lenin's short books, *The State and Revolution* and *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*.

¹⁵ Or, "To me that which is generally called the ultimate aim of socialism is nothing, but the movement is everything," E. Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bernstein/works/1899/evsoc/ch04-conc.htm>