

To Be Effective, Socialism Must Adapt To 21st Century Needs



Vijay Prashad

IS socialism making a comeback? If so, what exactly is socialism, why did it lose steam toward the latter part of the 20th century, and how do we distinguish democratic socialism, currently in an upward trend in the U.S., from social democracy, which has all but collapsed? Vijay Prashad, executive director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#) and a leading scholar in socialist studies and the politics of the global South, offers answers to these questions.

C.J. Polychroniou: Socialism represented a powerful and viable alternative to capitalism from the mid-1800s all the way up to the third quarter of the 20th century, but entered a period of crisis soon thereafter for reasons that continue to be debated today. In your view, what are some of the main political, economic and ideological factors that help explain socialism's setback in the contemporary era?

Vijay Prashad: The first thing to acknowledge is that “socialism” is not merely a set of ideas or a policy framework or anything like that. Socialism is a political movement, a general way of referring to a situation where the workers gain the upper hand in the class struggle and put in place institutions, policies and social networks that advantage the workers. When the political movement is weak and the workers are on the weaker side of the class struggle, it is impossible to speak confidently of “socialism.” So, we need to study carefully how and why workers — the immense majority of humanity — began to see the reservoirs of their strength get depleted. To my mind, the core issue here is [globalization](#) — a set of structural and subjective developments that weakened worker power. Let's take the developments in turn.

There were three structural developments that are essential. First, major technological changes in the world of communications, database management and transportation that allowed firms to have a global reach. The global commodity chain of this period enabled firms to disarticulate production — break up factories into their constituent units and place them around the world. Second, the third world debt crisis debilitated the power of national liberation states and states that — even weakly — had tried to create development pathways for their populations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The debt crisis led to [International Monetary Fund] IMF-driven [structural adjustment programs](#) that released hundreds of millions of workers to international capital and for the workforce of the new global commodity chain. Third, the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern bloc, as well as the changes in China provided international capital with [hundreds of millions of more workers](#). What we saw is in this period of globalization was the break-up of the factory form, which weakened trade unions; the impossibility of nationalization of firms, which weakened national liberation states; and the use of the concept of arbitrage to force a race to the bottom for workers. These structural developments, from which workers have not recovered, deeply weakened the workers' movement.

Trade [union](#) density declined, national liberation states surrendered, the reservoirs of working-class power depleted. If you don't have worker power behind you, the ideas you uphold — socialist ideas — are not seen as credible and are dismissed by the academy and the media. The field opened up for right-wing ideas to be seen as reasonable. The idea of a socialist future was destroyed. [Friedrich] Hayek's theory that any attempt to improve the world will lead to serfdom became a general theorem not only of the right, but also of postmodernism. Without the notion of a socialist future, without something beyond the horizon of capitalism, you are left with a politics of tinkering, of reform. This has been catastrophic. Why join a political force and sacrifice your time if the best that you are going to get is a small percentage increase in benefits? The turn to the right comes in this space, since the right suggests a future based on identity and fellowship grounded in [racism and patriarchy](#). But at least it offers a kind of future. Without the idea of a socialist future, the possibility of building socialist movements is negligible.

In the West, the dominant strand of socialism has been that of social democracy, which today, however, has all but collapsed, while democratic socialism appears

to be making a comeback, especially in the United States. What are some of the main differences that distinguish democratic socialism from social democracy?

The distinction between “democratic socialism” (which comes from the Michael Harrington/Barbara Ehrenreich tradition) and “social democracy” (which comes from European Marxist movements) is one of context (U.S. versus Europe) and one of politics. The European tradition emerged out of the trade union movement to create political parties with Marxism as the governing ideology. Those parties became key to the Second International, their heyday being in the late 19th century, with the German Social Democratic Party as the most emblematic. The break between social democracy and the left came when the parties of social democracy adopted an evolutionary theory for socialism (associated with Bernstein) and when they later voted in favor of World War I. But, until then, these were the main Marxist parties, defining the left wing of politics in Europe and in Russia. Their antipathy to communism would only arise in the Cold War, when the democratic socialists built their own anti-communist political tradition. Both would share this anti-communist framework during the Cold War. Nowadays, the gap between these traditions and the communist traditions is much more limited. The left is so weak that to rehearse arguments about social democracy, democratic socialism, communism and anarchism seems like the narcissism of petty differences. It is important that the left produce an attitude of openness toward left-wing groupings and left-wing ideas. There is no need for a fundamental unity of all groups, but there has to be an attitude of common work and common struggle. Differences are important and should be held. But they are comradely differences. I fear that the Western left is so divided not only by ideas but by sectarian arrogance and by even sectarian hatred that it will not be able to create a genuine flank against the hard right.

How do we explain the appeal of democratic socialism today among a growing percentage of young people, especially in the United States, a country where in fact even the use of the term “socialism” was something of a taboo?

Frankly, we should not exaggerate the turn to socialism. There is definitely a turn away from neoliberal policies that have created a desert of society. But this has created all kinds of political possibilities — cynicism is one, evidenced by [low voter turnouts](#) and a general malaise of overwork, and another is political polarization to the far right and toward socialism. There is certainly a turn away from neoliberalism, but this should not be seen as any kind of automatic turn

towards socialism. Socialism has to be built. It requires immense amounts of work. A precarious workforce combined with a toxic cultural world does not make it easy to build political parties that require overworked people to come to meetings. Political education is essential to a socialist movement, but this again requires commitment and time. Furthermore, the socialist movement is anachronistic in the sense that socialists try to live with values that are not entirely rooted in our time, where the values are the values of the ruling class. We are under an obligation by our own values to live with a horizontal attitude to each other, obligations that appear bohemian to the mainstream and that take time for us to honor. I say all this merely to remind us that for the past hundred years, socialist organizers have had to do two simultaneous things — be amongst the class of workers and peasants and be outside the prejudices of our times. This requires an attitude of fellowship with everyone and yet sternness about the hierarchies to which we are heirs. Let's not minimize this challenge, which has been with the movement for over a hundred years.

In the past, socialism drew its strength primarily from the working-class people, but this is no longer the case today and, in fact, multiculturalism and identity politics have become focal points for social mobilization for many progressively oriented movements throughout the Western world. Can the universal values traditionally espoused by socialism be reconciled with the pursuit of a political agenda built around multiculturalism?

There can be no socialist movement that ignores the question of class. Taking the issue of the precarious workforce or landless workers and so on is central to the class struggle. But workers are not merely workers — we have cultural identities and we have to struggle with social hierarchies. So, there is no point starting this conversation by making a binary between class politics and identity politics. All politics is about class and identity. The point is the character of the political platform. I think that there is too much in multiculturalism and identity politics today that reflects a bourgeois orientation. For instance, a multiculturalist politics that is about individual advancement is certainly bourgeois. On the other hand, a politics of socialism that ignores racism and patriarchy, that ignores caste and transphobia does not reflect the actual stresses and desires of the precarious workforce and the landless workers. Identity politics of a class character are necessary. There can be no socialist movement in India, for instance, that is not at the same time against the hierarchy of caste. In the West, the question of race is

central. Marx, in *Capital*, which was published in 1867, wrote that “labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin when in the black it is branded.” This has been an axiom in the socialist movement, although not always raised to theory and into praxis. But it must. There is no question, to underline the point, of juxtaposing class and identity or suggesting that class politics are universal. They are simply not. All working-class movements must adopt a politics that is against social hierarchy and then must act on that politics!

Assuming that political leaders who identified themselves with democratic socialism came to power, what aims and goals should they be pursuing that would be conducive to the needs of economies and societies in the 21st century? In other words, what should socialism be all about in our own age and time?

The most immediate matter to take charge of is a kind of salvage. We need to assert the importance of turning the social surplus toward ending hunger and illiteracy and toward addressing fundamental problems of social and economic life — such as the catastrophe of the [climate](#) and of endemic joblessness. There are funds to do all of this, but we have to sharpen the class struggle to get them. The wealthy have been on a [tax and investment strike](#) for the past 50 years. They have refused to pay tax — with tens of trillions of dollars hidden in [tax havens](#). They do not invest for social development, since they rely upon subcontractors on the global commodity chain to do the investment. The world of finance has increasingly become inert, unwilling to build value for investment in the productive sector. That money is used in an endless casino. We need to fight to recover the money from tax shelters and from the casino and put it to immediate use to end the social atrocity of hunger and illiteracy and to put it toward a pivot away from carbon-based joblessness. There is a lot we can do if we had power, real power, power not only from a surprise election, but power of the precarious workers and the landless workers behind the political forces that win elections. No point running a government if you don't have an organized mass force to drive the social policy from the hall of government to the home of the poorest worker.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books

and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books. Previously published: <https://truthout.org/to-be-effective-socialism-must-adapt>