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COMMENTS/RESPONSE TO ARONOWITZ'S "THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION"

Since I am in agreement with much of the Aronowitz article, I will focus these brief comments on points that I would place more stress upon or emphasize differently and give one response to his notions of an "idea drought" and "no new ideas."

1. One key reason for the disarray and demoralization on the broad US Left is its confused response to the massive failure (or perhaps betrayal is the better word) of the Democratic Party (DP).

I would characterize this failure/betrayal as follows:

Under FDR, it responded to the collapse of private capitalism, in 1929, by a reformist (versus a revolutionary) program. The Democrats in government instituted a social welfare state capitalism: government intervention and regulation of private enterprise and of markets to restore employment, income, and economic security. Even in the Democratic Party's retreat after the anti-communist turn of the late 1940s, it kept to a social democratic line believed by its mass base in the trade unions, minorities, the poor, professionals, and liberal intellectuals. The 1960s New Left represented an intense rejection of that anti-communist retreat, but it was quickly dispersed. After Kennedy-Johnson, the Democratic Party steadily abandoned welfare state capitalism in conformity with the larger social shift back to classical (now called "neo") liberalism. Instead of state intervention and regulation, the Democrats competed with the Republicans to deregulate, privatize, and "free" the markets. Over the last thirty years, the traditional mass base of the Democratic Party watched its right and center wings oppose welfare state capitalism, while its left wing failed to stop the deregulation, privatization, and free marketeering. The mass base thus saw its previous gains eroded or lost: its real incomes and job securities diminished and its daily lives and relationships damaged.

I would characterize the Left's confused response as follows:

The sense settled into the Left that "nothing could be done." Old left institutions (unions, "progressive" churches, community groups, minority organizations, left parties, etc.) have mostly been losing strength, activity, and membership for decades.

The "new social movements" flared up, but most also died relatively quickly or were co-opted by the DP; in any case, they were resolutely single-issue and opposed a major commitment to any broad left. As society moved rightward politically and the DP accommodated that shift with its failures and betrayals, the broad left found its component parts unable or unwilling to do much to stop, let alone reverse, the rightward shifts it bemoaned. So, it became depressed and demoralized. Leftists shrank increasingly into various sorts of individualism (including the professionalism Aronowitz emphasizes), consumerism, and/or whatever single-issue movements were active in their time and place. However satisfying these engagements could be, at least for a while, they could not stem the sense that, socially speaking, nothing seemed capable of stopping the broad rightward social shift.

2. The Left's demoralization was both cause and effect of a failure to examine and explain why the welfare state capitalism established by FDR's reformism was not secure; why it could not be preserved, let alone expanded.

The US Left had never offered a sustained structural or class analysis of the weaknesses and risks of a reformist response to private capitalism's Great Depression. Partly, this was because so many of its members had been caught up in the FDR government's programs. Partly, too, there was a sense of a great liberal-left alliance against "big business" and "the Right" that militated against heavy anti-liberal or anti-capitalist criticism. At the deepest theoretical level, even many Marxists worked with a concept of socialism-vs-capitalism as social property and planning vs private property and markets. In that conceptual framework, FDR's reformism seemed a clear step away from capitalism and, at least, toward socialism. Even the radicalism of the 1960s never decisively broke through this way of thinking.

Without a clear, sustained left criticism of social welfare state reformism, the broad mass base of the Left in the US became disoriented and confused -as well as practically damaged — when that reformism unraveled, especially after the 1960s. Leftists responded by attributing the inadequacies and decreases in welfare state capitalism to a betrayal by the Democrats (as if political shifts required no deeper explanation), business greed (as if that were not a constant), and/or cultural shifts to the right (as if they required no deeper explanation). Little in the way of a class analysis of reformism's demise was offered (perhaps partly because such an analysis would have been self-critical for leftists who long supported that reformism).

Thus, when the Right launched its strongest attacks on welfare state capitalism (after the 1960s) and when those attacks persuaded portions of the Democratic base, Leftists felt abandoned and marginalized. Believing that some sort of sea-change in mass opinion was underway (“authentic” or else media-manipulated) Leftists retreated into their current state of isolation or, more hopefully, hibernation.

3. Brief statement of what a left critique of reformism entails:

As FDR stated repeatedly, his reforms intended to stabilize and secure capitalism against its own worst tendencies. Like other welfare state capitalisms in Europe, the US version included state intervention in the economy (including some direct state employment and production of commodities) and state regulation of enterprises and markets. Its chief method of improving employment levels from Depression lows was by managing effective demand — including government purchasing — to induce increased commodity production, chiefly by private capitalist enterprises.

This reformism had one key dimension that rendered it vulnerable to destruction, one dimension that carried the seeds of the demise we are now living through. That one dimension lay in the unchanged internal structure of production, the organization of each capitalist enterprise. Welfare state reformism in the US left in place the private boards of directors and the system of private shareholding that elects them. Reformism constrained them and their profits, but

it left them in their class position as receivers and disposers of enterprise profits.

The reformism of the New Deal thus left in place the social group with the greatest interests in removing its limits and controls on the profitability and freedom of enterprises. Moreover, it left them with the resources - their profits - to actively pursue those interests. Thus, when private capitalist boards of directors felt both the pressure and the political opportunity to undo the New Deal, they could and did do so. In the 1970s, global capitalist competition exerted the pressure and an internal crisis of US welfare state capitalism provided the opportunity. The Reagan "revolution" and the decades since comprise the capitalist program of undoing the New Deal.

4. Brief statement of what this left critique of reformism implies:

For all sorts of reasons, socialism, Marxism, and leftism have mostly been interpreted as variations on one theme: social progress requires socialized goods opposed to private property and rational planning opposed to markets. Most leftists have, thus, more or less favored/pursued/installed socialized property and planning and opposed their opposites. By contrast, Marx's detailed critique of the capitalist organization of the surplus inside enterprises was less studied and less appreciated. It was rarely incorporated explicitly into practical political programs. Yet, for Marx, how a society organized the surplus significantly shaped its structure, politics, and evolution. He distinguished capitalist from feudal, slave, communist and ancient organizations of the surplus. Thus, he understood social transitions, e.g. from say capitalism to socialism, as requiring, by definition, a transformation of one into another social organization of the surplus.

"Organization of the surplus" refers to who produces the surplus and how; who appropriates it; and to whom and why the appropriators distribute it. In a capitalist society, one group of people produces the surplus, while another group appropriates and distributes it. Employees generate profits that are received and distributed by corporate boards of directors. Any reform that leaves intact this basic division, leaves intact capitalism and thus leaves intact the central position of those who receive and distribute the surplus/profits. They will use their resources to secure their position, i.e. the capitalist organization of the surplus.

Modern reformisms such as FDR's New Deal are defined by having left intact the capitalist organizations of the surplus. They have thus proven vulnerable to the desires and strategies of capitalists. Such reforms always have been and always will be insecure, so long as they leave intact the capitalist organization of the surplus.

What, then, could be done to render the gains of reformism invulnerable or at least less vulnerable than they have so far proven to be? The reforms would have to be accompanied or supplemented by a social reorganization of the surplus, one more likely to support and maintain reforms. Indeed, what distinguishes revolutionary from reformist responses to capitalist crises is their insistence on specific reorganizations of the surplus as inseparable from reforms.

5. A revolutionary program today:

Today, a revolutionary program would propose the following reorganization of the surplus:

In every enterprise, the productive workers (in Marx's sense of those who produce the surplus) would become likewise and identically their own board of directors. The productive workers would collectively appropriate and distribute the surplus they collectively produce. The unproductive workers in every enterprise would comprise a second board of directors, such that the decisions about how much surplus is to be produced and how it is to be distributed would require democratic approval by both boards (all workers). In this way, exploitation ends (since those appropriating the surplus are identical to those producing it) and genuinely democratic decision-making inside the enterprise is established.

The political point of this fundamental transformation in all the enterprises of the society would be finally to end the economic foundation for the political, cultural, and economic inequalities that undermine real democracy and full political and cultural participation. It would remove the capitalists and thereby make the distribution of the surplus serve the reproduction of collective enterprise and democratic decision-making over the surplus's social utilization. It would thereby enable "reforms" rooted in a basic economic change and therefore more likely to last, unlike the New Deal and welfare states everywhere.

Today, the mass of working people is increasingly agitated about the abuse it suffers from a neo-liberal globalization that has deepened economic insecurities, aggravated and militarized political instabilities, and provoked cultural wars. At the same time, that mass is alienated from reformism, given its latest experience of the fragility and reversibility of reforms. These circumstances create a special opportunity for a new revolutionary left formation to seize the moment.