

Critical political issues raised by the Occupy movement

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Many important political issues are being raised by the growing Occupy movement. The international scope of the movement, its denunciations of the operations of finance capital and its emphasis on the need for genuine social equality resonate with wide layers of working people in every country.

The protests are the anticipation of a broad political movement of the working class. Significantly, the movement has not emerged around trade union demands, but on political questions centring on the need for a fundamental reorganization of the economy and society as a whole.

There is an essentially anti-capitalist thrust to the protests. They reflect an emerging recognition that the profound problems confronting broad masses of people—the “99 percent”—cannot be resolved by a few patchwork reforms.

Another significant feature of the movement, at least in the US, is that it has developed largely out of the control of the various pseudo-left groups, all of which spent the past three decades promoting various forms of sexual and identity politics as they wrote off the revolutionary role of the working class. Fearful of what the emergence of this movement represents, with its emphasis on the class issue of social equality and its anti-capitalist coloration, these forces are now seeking to bring it back under control.

This is the aim of a recent article entitled “Autonomous Zone on Wall Street?” written by Doug Singen and posted October 11 on *Socialist Worker*, the web site of the International Socialist Organization in the United States. Having long ago rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the fight to develop its political independence, the ISO plays a critical role as a “left” prop for the Democratic Party.

Purporting to set out the basis for building a revolutionary movement in the United States, the article fails to even mention the central political question that has confronted the socialist movement in the US for more than a century—the attitude to the Democratic Party.

The break from the Democratic Party is the starting point for the development of an independent political movement of the working class. Without such an orientation, denunciations of capitalism and insistence on the need for a revolutionary perspective are more often than not so much hot air aimed at turning youth and students away from a struggle in the working class and bringing them back under the wing of the Democratic Party.

The ostensible target of Singen’s article is a group he dubs “prefigurationists,” who maintain that a revolutionary movement must somehow “prefigure” a post-capitalist society and create in the present a model for the future. But instead of dealing with this tendency from the standpoint of Marxism, which long ago analysed these sorts of utopian socialist perspectives, Singen attacks the “prefigurationists” from the right. In any case, they are not his real target. Singen uses such tendencies to direct his fire against the development of a revolutionary perspective.

Singen insists that the movement can go forward only if it begins to

advance a series of reforms which meet the immediate concerns of broad masses of people and draw them into revolutionary struggle.

The revolutionary socialist movement has always advanced the demand for reforms, but it fights for such demands from the standpoint of the struggle by the working class to take political power in connection with explicit socialist demands.

This is not Singen’s perspective. Nowhere does he explain that even the most limited demands for reform—such as increased taxes on Wall Street and the corporate elite—would require an all-out political struggle against the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

Take the demand for a minimum living wage, for example—by no means a revolutionary socialist demand. The implementation of such a necessary measure would entail a head-on conflict with the entire trade union bureaucracy, which, as the situation in the auto industry reveals, is the chief enforcer of the low-wage regime through which the Obama administration is seeking to make American capitalism “internationally competitive.”

In Singen’s hands, the demand for reforms is not aimed at raising the consciousness of participants in the Occupy movement by placing before them the necessity of a turn to the working class and the struggle for political power, but at reinforcing illusions that if the protest movement is strong enough, pressure can force the government to rein in at least some of the worst excesses of the banks and finance capital.

Nowhere does he point out that any meaningful regulation of the corporate and financial oligarchy is a complete impossibility within the framework of contemporary capitalism. Nor does he explain that in the midst of the greatest breakdown of the world capitalist economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s, any proposal for genuinely progressive social reform leads inexorably to the question of a struggle for political power.

The program of the bourgeoisie in every country is to destroy all the social gains made by the working class over the past 100 years in order to meet the vampire-like demands of the banks and finance capital for ever-increasing resources to pay for their speculative, parasitic and quasi-criminal activities in the financial markets.

Singen is just the latest in a long line of opportunists who seek to separate so-called immediate demands from the struggle for political power on the basis that workers must be somehow led through a series of stages before they come to an understanding of the need for a fundamental change in the social order.

But as the Occupy movement and the wide support it has won have revealed, millions of people are starting to become aware that the mounting social, economic and political problems they confront require a fundamental change in society as a whole and are looking for the means to achieve this goal.

The task is to make clear that these aspirations cannot be met by piecemeal reforms and that the as yet somewhat ill-defined political strivings of masses of people reflected in the Occupy movement can go

forward only to the extent that they are transformed into a conscious political struggle to break the grip of the financial oligarchy on the levers of political power.

Marxism long ago addressed the question of the relationship between reform and revolution, explaining that rather than the accumulation of “reforms” somehow leading to revolution, the situation is the reverse. Any serious reforms are always the by-product of mass struggles by the working class that threaten the very existence of the capitalist order. And Marxism has made clear the relationship between immediate demands and socialist revolution.

In the founding program of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky explained that it was “necessary to help the masses in the process of daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of *transitional demands*, stemming from today’s conditions and today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.”

Singsen wants to build a bridge pointing in the opposite direction: away from the conquest of political power and back into the confines of the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

His real target is not the utopian “prefigurationists,” but those who advance a revolutionary perspective and are fighting to transform the instinctive anti-capitalist sentiments of the participants in the Occupy movement and the hundreds of millions around the world who support them into a conscious political struggle aimed at the taking of power by the working class and the establishment of international socialism.

Singsen’s organic class hostility to such a perspective and that of the entire pseudo-left fraternity of which the ISO and its international collaborators are integral components is summed up at the end of his article: “Finally, it is important to be realistic about the prospects for change in the US today. Anyone who thinks such a fundamental transformation is possible in the US in the immediate future is both exaggerating the growing but still very small number of people committed to this kind of change—and underestimating the strength of the political, military social and economic forces arrayed against our struggle.”

This makes clear the essential content of Singsen’s argument. Since we are not in a revolutionary situation today in the United States, it is impermissible to fight for the overthrow of corporate power through a political struggle against its chief defenders and props, including the Democratic Party and the trade unions. The overthrow of capitalism can be raised as a future perspective, as a goal towards which the movement can aspire. But it cannot be made the basis for the political struggle which is carried out in the present conditions because these conditions are not revolutionary.

It is therefore necessary to advance a “realistic” set of demands and perspectives. The aim of such a position is clear. More than 100 years ago, Lenin polemicised against the opportunist wing of the working-class movement in Russia, known as the Economists, who sought to confine the working class to so-called immediate demands rather than the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy. As Lenin explained, to be “realistic” according to such forces means fighting for what is possible in the given circumstances, and what is possible always turns out to be what is going on at the present time.

In the case of the present-day situation in the US, the ISO’s “realism” means working within the trade unions and the environs of the Democratic Party, against the Tea Party and the Republican Party in general, and getting on board the Obama 2012 campaign as the “lesser evil” compared to a Republican victory.

Singsen’s insistence on “realism” is aimed at obscuring the underlying economic and social processes that have created the objective foundations for the emergence of a revolutionary situation.

Let us recall Trotsky’s analysis of how a revolutionary situation

develops:

“The first and most important premise of a revolutionary situation,” he wrote in 1935, “is the most intense sharpening of the contradictions between the productive forces and the property relations. *The nation stops going forward*. The arrest in economic development and, even more, its regression signify that the capitalist system of production is definitely worn out and must give way to the socialist system.

“The present crisis, which encompasses all countries and thrusts economy back decades, has definitely pushed the bourgeois system to absurdity. If, at the dawn of capitalism, ignorant and starving workers broke machines, today it is the capitalists themselves who destroy machines and factories. The further maintenance of the private ownership of the means of production threatens humanity with degeneration and barbarism.

“The basis of society is economic. That basis is ripe for socialism in a double sense: modern technology has advanced to a point where it can assure a high standard of living to the nation and to all mankind; but the capitalist system, which has outlived itself, dooms the masses to ever-increasing poverty and suffering.”

These lines were written almost 80 years ago, but there could hardly be a more accurate depiction of the present objective situation in the United States and internationally.

Of course, objective conditions do not in and of themselves determine the transition to socialism. A revolution takes place through the conscious activity of men and women who enter into political struggle. That is, a revolutionary situation arises from the reciprocal action of objective and subjective factors.

The political consciousness of the working class in the United States and internationally is not yet revolutionary. But that is not the end of the matter. Vast changes in the economic situation and the struggles in which masses of people are either engaged or about to be engaged—of which the Occupy movement is an expression—create the conditions where the gap between social consciousness and social being can be closed.

The closing of this gap constitutes the work of the revolutionary party. The crucial question is the assimilation by the most politically advanced sections of the working class of the basic conceptions of Marxism and the key lessons of the historical struggles of the socialist movement. This is crucial in order to expose the “bourgeois fictions which poison the consciousness of the masses.” (Trotsky)

In discussions held by Trotsky with leaders of the American Trotskyist movement in May 1938, he explained that the program of the revolutionary party had to take its point of departure from the objective crisis of world capitalism and not the existing level of working class consciousness. “The program,” he insisted, “must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to vanquish the backwardness. That is why we must express in our program the whole acuteness of the social crisis of the capitalist society, including in the first line the United States. We cannot postpone or modify objective conditions which don’t depend upon us. We cannot guarantee that the masses will solve the crisis; but we must express the situation as it is, and that is the task of the program.”

Singsen’s “realistic” assessment of the United States is characteristic of what Trotsky explained was the metaphysical mode of thought of the conservative petty bourgeois, counter-posing a revolutionary to a non-revolutionary situation.

However, he wrote, “the most striking features of our epoch of capitalism in decay are *intermediate* and *transitional*: situations between the non-revolutionary and the pre-revolutionary, between the pre-revolutionary and the revolutionary or... the counter-revolutionary. It is precisely these transitional stages which have a decisive importance from the point of view of political strategy.”

The political situation in the United States, and indeed in every country around the world, has entered such a transitional stage. The dynamic of development is grounded in fundamental economic and social processes.

The bourgeoisie in every country, above all the United States, cannot rule in the old way. It has no economic solutions to the crisis of its order and has to mount ever deepening attacks on the working class on the one hand while preparing for war against its international rivals on the other.

At the same time, the working class cannot live in the old way and is driven into struggle against the new order being imposed on it by the bourgeoisie. This means the eruption of social and political struggles in which the fight for political power becomes the key question, not as some far off distant goal, but arising out of the immediate situation itself.

The victory of the working class in these struggles, which have already begun, depends on the establishment of its independent interests and the building of the revolutionary party through a relentless ideological and political struggle against petty-bourgeois organizations like the ISO, which work to prop up the *ancien regime* and prepare the way for counterrevolution.



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