

The reactionary politics of Grace Lee Boggs

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The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century

Grace Lee Boggs
University of California Press, 2011

The social crisis in Detroit, the poorest big city in the United States, is reaching the level of a social catastrophe. Devastated by the collapse of the auto industry, the real unemployment rate is close to 50 percent. Tens of thousands live without basic amenities—heat, electricity or water.

These conditions are an indictment of the capitalist profit system that is condemning millions of working people in the United States and around the world to ever-greater misery. Once an industrial powerhouse, Detroit is a scene of devastation, strewn with vacant weed grown lots and tens of thousands of abandoned homes and businesses.

The Democratic administration of Mayor David Bing is implementing drastic cuts in line with the demands of the bankers. The Democrats, who have run Detroit for decades, are assisted in carrying out these attacks by a host of groups that seek to present themselves as “left,” but in fact are tireless defenders of the political establishment. They promote identity politics and other forms of middle class protest in order to stifle any challenge from below to the existing economic and political setup.

One of the better known figures in official “left” circles in Detroit is Grace Lee Boggs, founder of the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership. Boggs, a long time Detroit resident, in collaboration with Scott Kurashige, an associate professor of American culture and history at the University of Michigan, has published *The Next American Revolution, Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century*.

Boggs and Kurashige use Detroit as a focus to advance a right-wing agenda, justifying the impoverishment of the working class and opposing any collective struggle against capitalism.

One is struck in reading *The New American Revolution* by the authors’ utter indifference to the conditions facing the working class. Poverty, homelessness and unemployment are barely mentioned. The problem, assert the authors, is not the capitalist system and the conditions of mass misery that it is creating, but the American people themselves, who are denounced as “self-centered and overly materialistic.”

The authors oppose any notion that revolution should involve the improvement of the lives of working people or a redistribution of wealth. They write, “The next American Revolution, at this stage in our history, is not principally about jobs or health insurance or making it possible for more people to realize the American Dream

of upward mobility. It is about acknowledging that we Americans have enjoyed middle class comforts at the expense of other peoples all over the world.” (p. 72)

Boggs advances the retrograde view that technology itself, not its misuse under capitalism, is the cause of the problems facing society. She writes, “It has also been my good fortune to live long enough to witness the death blow dealt to the illusion that unceasing technological innovations and economic growth can guarantee happiness and security to the citizens of the planet’s only superpower.... At this point in the continuing evolution of our country and of the human race, we urgently need to stop thinking of ourselves as victims and to recognize that we must each become a part of the solution because we are a part of the problem.” (p. 29)

As for the schools, Boggs writes, “We are not going to solve the crisis of public education with more money, more computers, new buildings...” (p. 144)

What Boggs proposes is that the working class accept a huge lowering of its living standards. From this standpoint, the impoverishment of the working class is not an evil to be opposed, but a welcome development that should serve as a model. To call this right wing does not do it full justice.

These positions reflect the interests and thinking of a privileged, complacent middle class social layer that is hostile to the working class. Grace Boggs and her late husband James are considered something of icons in liberal circles. The actor Danny Glover provided the introduction to the book. She has been featured on the Bill Moyers Journal on PBS and has been the recipient of numerous awards, including an honorary doctorate from the University of Michigan and a lifetime achievement award from the Detroit City Council. *The Detroit News* also named her Michiganiaan of the year.

Boggs long ago abandoned revolutionary politics. She first became politically active after graduating from college in the early 1940s. For a time she was member of the Workers Party, headed by Max Shachtman. The Workers Party held that the Soviet Union under Stalin was “state capitalist” and that all the achievements of the October 1917 Revolution had been destroyed. This demoralized perspective, which essentially wrote off the revolutionary role of the working class, became the basis for the evolution of Shachtman and his followers into supporters of US imperialism.

After a brief association with the Socialist Workers Party, at that time the American section of the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky, Boggs left the movement along with a faction headed by historian CLR James in the early 1950s. In her recent book, Boggs says of the SWP that it “was too stuck in the ideas of

the Russian Revolution.” (p. 64) She adds, “I never considered myself a Trotskyite.”

Ever more explicitly rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class, Boggs and her husband James moved rapidly to the right, into the swamp of American petit bourgeois radical politics.

Grace and James Boggs broke with CLR James in 1962. Embracing black nationalism, in 1963 they developed a close association with Malcolm X and began advancing the perspective that the white working class was reactionary and racist. They later played a role in founding the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which sought to organize black workers in the auto plants on the basis of race.

In the 1970s, James and Grace Boggs moved even further to the right, toward full accommodation with the capitalist status quo. As Kurashige writes in his introduction to the book the couple came to the position that “the New Left and Black Power movements had run their course. It was now necessary to move from redistributive justice to rebuilding our cities and reconstructing human relations from the ground up.” (p. 15) This meant “creating models of work, education, art and community that would transform those rebels filled with righteous anger into productive change agents who understood that self-transformation and structural transformation must go hand in hand.” (p. 15)

Such an outlook meant in practice a total rejection of the class struggle and a turn toward individualistic self-development. Following the death of James Boggs in 1993, Grace and supporters founded the Boggs Center in 1995.

One of the major activities of the Boggs Center has been the promotion of urban gardening. The urban farming movement is based on the reactionary and utopian idea that the mass impoverishment facing working people in Detroit and other major cities brought about by the collapse of manufacturing can be overcome through individual efforts. The idea that small gardens on abandoned lots can provide food self-sufficiency for hundreds of thousands of people in Detroit is absurd on its face. Further, it is a diversion from the burning need for the building of an independent movement of the working class to attack the roots of poverty and social inequality, the capitalist profit system.

The bitter irony contained in the rise of the urban agriculture movement is hard to miss. In an earlier period, workers and young people from the South, many of them sharecroppers, migrated to Detroit in search of jobs and a better life. With the collapse of the auto industry and the spread of poverty and mass unemployment in the city, the proponents of urban farming advance as a solution essentially a return to the type of agricultural indentured servitude that workers sought to escape decades ago.

Significantly, Boggs was picked up by the Occupy protests, giving a number of lectures, including one at the University of California, Berkeley with Angela Davis, the academic and former member of the Communist Party. While the Occupy protests attracted broader support because of its focus on issues of social inequality, groups hostile to the working class directed its core leadership. In this milieu, Boggs found a home.

About the Occupy movement itself Boggs rejected any suggestion that the movement should serve as a spark for a popular movement against the capitalist system. Rather than focusing on

corporate abuses, Boggs insisted, protestors should instead be mainly concerned with an internal self-transformation.

A natural corollary of Boggs’ whole outlook is political support for the Democratic Party, and in particular the Obama administration. She writes of Obama’s election in 2008, “Inspired by his eloquence and audacity, his commitment to change we can believe in, and his faith in himself and human possibilities ... we began to heal and redeem our country and ourselves.”

However, she also indicates her concern that “now new sources of anger are being directed at Obama” as “workers feel they can no longer maintain ‘the American standard of living’ that defined the middle class.” (p. 52)

Indeed, the Obama administration has pursued a relentless attack on jobs, social services and democratic rights since its installation. Detroit itself is being used as a testing ground for many of the right-wing policies of the Obama administration, including the dismantling of the public school system and the spread of for profit charter schools, as well as the reduction of manufacturing wages to near poverty levels.

In this book Boggs aims to prevent workers and young people from drawing any political conclusions from the experiences of the past three years. Far from calling on workers to opposed the attacks on its jobs and living standards, she proposes they seek an individualist solution through gardening and other attempts at self-sufficiency.

However, there is no individual solution to the monumental problems mankind faces. The task facing the working class is to put an end to the capitalist profit system and reorganize society on a new higher basis, the production for human need, not private profit.

A crucial part of the struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent social force against the capitalist system is the exposure the role of those like Boggs who provide a political cover for the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. With the acceleration of the economic crisis this task takes on special urgency.



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