

Politics of the Communist Manifesto—Part 2 - How to fight for reforms?

Monday 22 August 2011, by [BRENNER Johanna](#), [RESNICK Bill](#) (Date first published: 1 January 1998).

“The communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.”

MASS REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS burst into history often in mysterious ways, surprising even revolutionaries by their sudden strength. But they don't materialize from thin air and don't get built in a day. In looking back we see they incubate in reform struggles, in everyday resistance to exploitation and oppression.

But how do efforts to make life better within capitalism connect to a revolutionary challenge to capitalism?

Marx had the right idea: to fight for reforms but to engage in them in a way that somehow helps realize socialist goals. Easier said than done!

Intense and ever-present tensions between winning in the short-run and building for the long run yield to no simple, straightforward answers. Indeed, easy formulas have proved inadequate and shortcuts demoralizing. If we've learned anything from our activism, it is to recognize the contradictions and to live with them.

We suggest a few principles: criteria to assess strategies for reform efforts, in terms of how well they balance what sometimes seem competing needs for short-term victories and long-term political development.

For us, socialism is impossible without radical democracy. Both in how we organize and in what we organize for, our reform efforts should be places where we practice what we preach. Campaigns that mobilize activists like foot-soldiers taking marching orders from a center may be efficient in some ways. But they also duplicate the hierarchies of a capitalist, patriarchal society, hierarchies that undermine people's belief in their own abilities and their trust in others.

Effective, committed radicals develop in movements where everyone has meaningful, thoughtful roles; where responsibility and authority are shared, leadership positions rotated. Reform campaigns have to be organized in ways that require activists to engage in broad discussion and debate. Meetings should discuss the politics of the campaign, not just the mechanical details.

On the other hand, there's never enough time. We're always behind . . . and folks are anxious to get out and do, not talk. Besides, they have plenty of other responsibilities—jobs and families at least. Not everyone can or wants to participate at the same level.

Yes, adjustments have to be made to these realities. Still, our job as socialists in movements is to push as hard as we can to make thoughtful, responsible participation a central value—as important as whether or not we win the fight.

There are not only different ways to fight for reform, there are different reforms for which to fight. Reforms respond to felt needs, and that's why new people get involved; but needs can be met in different ways. As socialists, we are interested in reforms that empower people and give them the sense that they can work with others to change and manage their communities and their country.

Here's an example from our work around welfare reform, where child care for working mothers is a big issue. We are joining with others to organize for increased public funding—on the principle that child care is a right, like public education—and for higher wages for child care workers.

But we're also arguing that parents are entitled to paid time off to regularly participate in schools and child care centers. This demand addresses parental desire for involvement in their kids' education. It also envisions different public institutions—where decisions are not made unilaterally by administrators and experts but emerge from a democratic and negotiated process.

On the other hand, this is hardly a winnable demand: Public schools are suffering cutbacks, child care workers are not unionized, and where's the money to pay parents going to come from anyway? What's the point in organizing for something that isn't politically on the cards?

The point is that this demand is a very concrete way of talking about the abstract idea of a democratized public sphere. And unless we help people to envision that ideal, we will fail to respond to one of the greatest strengths of political conservatism in the United States, a profound disbelief in the possibilities for democratic public life.

The left—for its whole course of development, before and after Marx—has been predicated on and flourished in popular belief systems of Enlightenment optimism: that humans could manage their mutual affairs through beneficent and rational government, that economy and society could be run by a democratic state, that problems are resolvable through rational public choice and administration.

The great disaster of the Communist experience, the mixed results but uninspiring bureaucratic operation of Social Democracy and its helplessness in the face of global capital, and the furious assault by the right has cast doubt on this whole project.

But alongside skepticism about the possibilities of a democratic polity, working-class people have also developed democratic practices in many areas of their personal life: in intimate relationships, in childrearing, in ideals of tolerance and a personal right to dignity and respectful treatment.

Building on these democratic ideals and demonstrating they can be institutionalized in democratic communities—these must be the goals in reform struggles.

The tension between working for reform and building toward more radical commitments can be intense in coalitions where dominant forces have very restrictive political agendas. We don't dictate the ideas and practices of coalitions and reform movements we work in, so there is often a conflict between the strategies we would like the movement to take up and what others, especially organizations more tied into existing power structures, are willing to support.

Thus, in the struggle for child care, some partners will object to our emphasis on progressive taxation and democratic structure, afraid these demands might offend elites and more mainstream organizations whose support is needed. Or they might oppose demands they regard as unrealistic, likely to undermine the movement's legitimacy.

Our job, as socialists, is to find a way to propose radical ideas and democratic practices, even though we may risk being marginalized.

To reinforce and build democratic commitments and practices is so central, because broad-based movements do not grow just based in rational calculations of self-interest. Indeed, most of the time, for nearly all working people, personal interest can be faster satisfied through individual striving.

If, for example, family income is falling, families will do better by getting some training, a second or a third job, sending their teenagers to work, rather than by taking the risks involved in joining a movement. As necessary as movements are to win anything for the working class, they won't form without overcoming the apparent rationality of individualistic striving.

This is why our organizations must be infused with democratic ideals and solidarities. Then, day-to-day struggles can be profoundly fulfilling, as people come to feel good about their personal power and their comrades in struggle.

In the end, when we engage in reform movements, we have to measure success not simply in terms of the good we've done. Although we do need to win real things for real people, we also have to measure success, win or lose, by the quality of the working relationships we've built and whether the alliances made within the reform movement self-consciously bridge existing divisions within the working class.

We measure success by the increased skills and critical understandings of the people who planned and participated in the campaign and by the enrichment of our own politics; by how well we've helped to develop our own and others' critique of capitalism, especially the links between capitalism and other forms of domination.

Finally, we measure it by the extent to which, through their own activity, activists have developed confidence in their ability as working people to live democratically at the grassroots and one day collectively manage society.

Johanna Brenner and Bill Resnick

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 72, January-February 1998.

* Johanna Brenner is co-ordinator of Women's Studies at Portland State University and Bill Resnick is a radio commentator on KBOO (90.7 FM). Both live in Portland, Oregon, where they are active in feminism, environmentalism and urban transformation.