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# ORGANISATION AND AUTONOMY: A NEW KIND OF SOCIALIST VISION?

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JOYCE STEVENS

**A**ll but those who hold the narrowest view of who constitutes the left today would agree that the left is broad, diverse, and has considerable potential. There also seems to be a fairly common view that we face many problems in being able to realise that potential. The Broad Left Conference itself was one response to these problems and aimed to make some progress in establishing broader agreement on some common goals and aspirations.

We wouldn't have been there if we hadn't thought that this was a major project requiring care and hard work. The urgency of succeeding in this project was underlined by many of the discussions. I would suggest, however, that much of the very important work that is already performed by the left goes unrewarded because socialist policies are in a crisis at a number of levels. This is reflected in widespread scepticism about socialism as it has been presented in the past and in the possibilities of constructing a superior form of socialist society today.

If we are unable to tackle this problem at the same time as we shape other goals, we will continue to find many of our efforts are unable to be directed towards long-term solutions to social, cultural and economic problems.

The main points of my argument about this problem are as follows:

- \* That one of the most basic problems confronting the left today is how to devise a vision of socialism and a strategy that touches the consciousness of the majority of the Australian people.

- \* That we need to strengthen forms of co-operation and understanding between the disparate and oft-times contradictory elements of the left.

- \* That these problems are closely connected to one another and their solution relies on a realisation that there are many

sites of socialist struggle today and that, in general, there are no hierarchies of importance in respect of them; a realisation that models or visions of socialism need to draw on the concerns of all these arenas of socialist struggle; and that both short and long term socialist solutions require the continued existence of autonomous movements and more developed forms of political co-operation, including coalitions and parties.

The links between these problems and the fundamental theoretical issues that underlie them need to be explored in the course of developing immediate points of co-operation and programs.

## The alternative

There are many reasons why the majority of Australians don't identify with socialism. Of course, we don't expect that tiny minority who own most of the resources to do so. But there is still the overwhelming majority, most of whom are workers. While quite a few of these also do quite well under capitalism, even among them there is strong dissatisfaction — about the assault on the environment, on women's rights, on Aborigines, on living standards, on social welfare and the threat of nuclear holocaust among others. Yet, despite all of the potential that exists, we have to say that socialism as an alternative has not gained in popularity in recent times.

These problems can't be overcome simply by exposing the many sins of capitalism. Nor is it enough to criticise the obvious failures of the "socialist" countries, or of a social democracy that develops bureaucratic public sectors in the name of socialism.

People seem to need more tangible guarantees about what socialism could be. Even in the realm of the economy, where

change from private to public ownership is supposed to be the most dynamic aspect of socialism, there are many unsolved problems. The relationship between the market and planning, and the plan and individual initiative are as yet unresolved questions. As one visiting Chinese comrade put it recently — "If we put everything into the plan we don't even have time to read it, let alone carry it out".

We also know that changing from public to private ownership of the means of production won't necessarily solve all the other contradictions, but may perpetuate them or reproduce them in new forms. Obvious examples are unemployment, repression, state control of women's fertility, and the stabilisation of the family as an economic unit, armed hostility between "socialist" states, nuclear power stations and other environmental problems, as well as cultural and political conformity. These problems exist alongside an over-centralised state apparatus and bureaucratic practices which impede or deny the possibility of political pluralism under socialism and the practice of a developed worker-consumer control of society.

No one is going to believe that we can produce something different simply because we criticise others or proclaim ourselves to have different aims. Alternatives must also exist in our practice and in the theory and goals that guide our work. The possibility for this already exists in the many political movements that have developed in the past 15-20 years as the result of the multiple contradictions that beset patriarchal capitalism.

The elements of a new society are being sketched by the struggles for land rights, to keep uranium in the ground and foreign bases out of Australia, against private ownership and exploitation, to preserve some of the finite resources of the earth, seas, and atmosphere, to end the sexual division of labour and the sexual exploitation of women, to overcome racism and the economic and cultural imperialism of industrially developed countries.

### A new socialist vision

In order to realise the potential for such a socialist model we must move beyond seeing the workers' movement and its central economic interests as being the only pivot for socialism. A new socialist vision should reflect the concerns of all the radical movements as well as the economic imperative.

This is not to suggest that we must discard everything from the past but, while drawing on the rich store-house of socialist and radical theory and practice, we need to discard ideas that no longer assist the development of a contemporary socialist practice. I include in this "discard" basket the idea that we need to build a movement based on class that will "represent" all liberatory struggles. Such an aim has as its logical conclusion the need for a vanguard party that sees all, hears all and always has the right line — or at least until a new generation of leaders exposes its shortcomings.

Socialism is, of course, profoundly about realising the class interests of workers, and class struggle is an indispensable element, but even these class interests cannot be realised if they are seen narrowly in economic terms or in forms of organisation that exclude the political working out of other social contradictions. An argument for political pluralism before and under socialism is not about being nice, or pandering to bourgeois democratic models. Rather, it is based on the belief that, firstly, it is impossible to predict the full consequences of any major social action; it *may* solve the problems targeted or may go only some way in this direction but, succeed or fail, it also helps to bring a new set



*'Broad, diverse, and with considerable potential': International Women's Day, 1984.*

of contradictions. Secondly, that, because of this process, the resolution of contradictions and healthy dynamic political life require *specific* forms of political organisation that represents the interests of those affected — in a sense, a network of social and trade unions representing diverse interests.

This does not, however, mean that parties and/or coalitions are not needed, for no area of political representation is an island, but intersects with and requires complex interaction with, other forces as well as autonomy.

### The dynamism of autonomy

The dynamic role of autonomous political activity in respect to society as a whole, as well as in changing socialist goals and priorities, can be seen if we take a glance at the women's movement. Apart from brief periods of social aberration, such as wartime, it is difficult to find advances in the social position of women, as a sex, that have not been accompanied by a vocal or strong women's movement. The flowering of socialist feminism in the late 19th and early 20th century was surrounded by a mass feminist movement for the right to vote, and the women's liberation movements of

the '70s were a complex amalgam of broadly-based issues and radical politics which helped to transform socialist politics and sections of the labor movement.

The theories produced by feminists and other autonomous movements were influential in such changes, but the other decisive element was their political strength and activism. Where political interests have no strong political representation they tend to become marginalised and patronised by pious resolutions. But, where vigorous political movements exist and share some common view of long-term goals — such as a common view of what socialism is — they can help to transform the political agenda, including the content of class struggle.

Like the early socialists and marxists, contemporary feminists, environmentalists, Aborigines and others have churned up and questioned the prevailing ways of explaining the world and have suggested new models for future social, racial and sexual relationships. They have reawakened hope for a more liberated and just society.

At the same time, most of us are here because we have also experienced limitations in our own specific areas of work. We have come to realise the need not only to be immersed in the practice and theory of individual and autonomous movements, but also to make a commitment to finding ways to promote cross-overs and joint activity. It is impossible, for example, to think of how we can defend and extend any of the gains made in public health, whether it is in community, women's, Aboriginal or other health areas.

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*'Churning up and questioning the prevailing ways of looking at the world'*



without also making a co-operative and concerted effort to save public health from the inroads of privatisation — the assaults of medical specialists and private profiteers, including the assault on Medicare.

There are many pitfalls to coalition politics but, in actual political practice, as opposed to the grand plan, there are always pitfalls. I, personally, have been unable to find any easy ways to confront class, sex, race, environmental, age, disability, sexual preference, and other prejudices in coalitions and other forms of co-operative political work. But where there is sufficient common ground to make co-operation possible, there are also some avenues for interaction on issues around which there is not so much common agreement, and the existence of autonomous movements gives weight to this. So that, while we might have a strong argument for co-operation on health care, one would not counsel Aborigines to give up their autonomous movement for sovereignty and land rights, or women their autonomous concerns about women's rights to control their own bodies and other issues.

### A new kind of party

I also believe that a political party committed to the style of politics I have described, i.e. commitment to autonomous radical movements, and willingness to draw on the whole storehouse of socialist, feminist and radical theory where it helps to promote a modern socialist vision and practice, can also play an important part in such a process.

The role of such a party should not be to substitute itself for the mass movements or to establish for itself the role of bestowing accumulated wisdom. Its basic role should be a commitment to political work in all mass movements for social justice and change, and a desire to illustrate concretely the connections between the various sites of exploitation and oppression and the forms of resistance that can be developed around them. I see it as also playing a role in helping to develop marxist-feminist-socialist theory and education, helping to develop programs and strategies, as well as helping to promote diverse forms of coalitions and alliances within the broad left movement.

I cannot envisage a political party which incorporates the whole of the left. Many are dedicated to work in the Labor Party, others to vanguardism of various descriptions and others, again, to belonging to no party at all. But I do think that there is the basis for a far more effective left political party than already exists.

Why do it at all? The two main alternatives offering are to work in the Labor Party or to continue to be satisfied with the loose networks that presently exist. In respect of the latter, there is a strong argument to support the need for these informal networks to have firmer links. A new party could also adopt more of the network form of organisation and much less of the centralised party form. If such a party were serviced by an open newspaper and journal, these could play a crucial role in promoting discussion and suggesting directions for theoretical and practical work.

Such a party could bring together activists but not seek to strait-jacket or dominate their work in mass movements. Unity of purpose could spring from shared strategies and

programs, not the forming of tight blocks in political movements. A viable left party could also help to close what I believe to be a damaging split in the development of the two most dynamic theories about social change — marxism and feminism. I refer to their increasing integration into academia and less and less into the specific problems of political practice and movements. This is not a question of separating theoretical development from the realm of intellectuals, who play a very important part in the whole socialist process, but of returning the two disciplines to the environments which produced them, and the application of theory to the problems of developing political practice.

In the short and long term, the problem of how to construct more effective forms of left organisation is as much part of the process of building towards socialism as any program or strategy. Will there ever be a day when conditions favour the formation of a mass party of the left that can heal all the splits and divisions? I don't think so — there is certainly no model anywhere to suggest it and some evidence to show that it could only be achieved temporarily by instituting harsh disciplinary measures which are unproductive and unacceptable. Revolutionary strategy is never crystal clear and diversity is an essential element of the process. But the problem is that we tend to be immobilised by such diversity, or accept that disparate groups are the only form of left organisation to be considered, while others work in the Labor Party — some because that is where they think the left should work, and others waiting for a split or the true revolutionary vanguard to emerge.

I cannot canvass the arguments for being in or out of the Labor Party but, in respect of a more effective left party, my own experience has been that at least as many Labor Party members say that we need such a party so that they can continue their work as there are those who exhibit hostility to the project. Certainly, the work of all the left would be considerably more difficult if there was no left wing in the Labor Party. But the fate of the ALP also seems to depend on other things, and that includes a healthy extra-parliamentary left — by which I don't mean one that has no interest in parliamentary politics, but one that is oriented towards political action and organisation that is not tied to the ballot box.

Without a more attractive alternative than exists at present, the ALP could easily become the main magnet for those on the left who want to work in a political party. There are many of us who do not consider this viable — the alternative is to see the left in the terms I have suggested and build towards a new form of left political party. If enough of the left decide that it is worth the effort it can be done.

We could build a mass party of the left that recognises that capitalism and patriarchy can only be defeated by a political struggle which is waged in the parliaments and the streets, in the workplaces, in the homes and bedrooms of the nation, in the rainforests, in the suburbs and countryside, in the schools and universities, in the theatres and at and around the Aboriginal sacred sites and lands.

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Joyce Stevens works at the Women's Employment Action centre in Sydney. She was formerly National Women's Organiser for the Communist Party.