

PUTTING SOCIALISM ON THE AGENDA

David McReynolds

THE DOW-JONES SKITTERS AROUND 600, gold sells for nearly \$200 an ounce, a housewife writes Ann Landers to ask if it would be dangerous to make tuna casseroles for her family with tuna cat food, unemployment is officially rising toward 7%—unofficially estimated to already be past 10%, inflation in the New York City area has risen 24.8% the past three years, real earning power of workers has decreased for the first time in years and, in response to all this, President Ford offers WIN buttons and recipes for rock stew and water soup.

Capitalism is making its usual response to an economic crisis: the government is issuing handy guides on how to fight inflation by buying less, thus absolutely infuriating housewives who couldn't buy less and still feed their families. General Motors took an ad in the *New York Times* of November 20 to explain that it was our duty as Americans to buy cars because if we didn't we would have an economic crash. And in the midst of all this, corporate profits are running extremely high. Whoever is suffering from the deepening crisis, it is not the huge corporations—whatever price is to be paid will be paid by the working people, by those on welfare, by those retired. At the end of this tunnel—if there is an end—we are assured of a “normal” level of 4% unemployment. And the one thing which will remain untouched is the massive and massively wasteful military budget.

It is doubtful if U.S. capitalism can easily remedy the current crisis which began before the Arabs lifted the price of oil. For some years U.S. power was sufficient to maintain an artificially high value for the dollar, permitting the export of inflation to the rest of the world. Partly as a consequence of the Vietnam War and the attempt by capitalism to wage that war without paying for it through taxation (which would have sharply accelerated the already massive opposition to the war), the dollar was weakened, and until the oil crisis, U.S. capitalism was threatened by West European and Japanese competition.

But I am not an economist and must leave for others a discussion of the causes of the crisis and the chances for capitalism finding a remedy. I am concerned here with the political impact of the crisis on the “regime” controlling the United States. For it is here at last that one sees political movement involving the trade unions, and sees some chance for turning the energy we saw in the sixties into new channels, away from concern with the foreign adventures of U.S. capital, and toward a concern with domestic change that would break the power of that capital over foreign and domestic policy.

The establishment is in crisis because it refuses to deal with inflation and unemployment by expanding federal social programs and creating new ones. In 1932 Roosevelt was able to ameliorate the crisis by just such means, although the limited efforts of the New Deal did not end the depression—that did not end until the economy shifted to war production for World War II. But people were so stunned by the economic collapse that they were willing to believe it was an accident, an aberration, one that could be dealt with by symbols and gestures, by the ritual magic of rhetoric, the assurance that we had nothing to fear but fear itself. In fact we had a great deal to fear and a heavy and terrible price to pay—for one consequence of that world depression was the rise of fascism and a World War that took 40 million lives.

Gerald Ford is stuck in a totally new situation. He confronts a non-white minority which is hostile and aware when, in other decades, it was fearful. The cultural revolution that swept Black America in the fifties and sixties brought new expectations but no fulfillment. The “race question” is still hanging fire. Deep as the pain of inflation and unemployment is for white workers, it is a tragedy for non-whites who were already living on the margin and have now been driven below the margin of “survival with decency.” There is fear, anger and danger in the ghetto, and an unwillingness to settle for public service TV commercials appealing for brotherhood.

Ford confronts a generation of young adults who grew up during the Vietnam War, who recall that the government lied and was caught in its lies, who saw the American self-image destroyed at My Lai and in a thousand similar “incidents” in Vietnam, climaxing in Nixon’s obscene Christmas bombing of Hanoi. This is a generation which cannot forget and may be unable to forgive. Even as this is written there are more than a half million men underground, in exile, with less than honorable discharges, or with prison records because they clashed in one way or another with the military during the war. If one adds their friends and families, Ford confronts a rock hard core of bitterness which his various “clemency” plans have done nothing to dissolve. A regime with any sense would grant unconditional amnesty to this group if only to remove it as a recruiting ground for those of us who are not prepared to grant the government an amnesty, who do not want to forget Vietnam, and who want to finish the fight begun during that war.

Finally, Ford is faced with all those millions of “good Americans” who, like the good Germans, got through the racial turmoil and the Vietnam war without ever questioning the right and wrong of the situation. Nixon’s massive victory in 1972 showed that a majority of Americans, no matter how skeptical, still wanted to believe that some-

how the blacks, the students, the radicals were wrong and that the political establishment could achieve peace with honor and bring order to our streets without a social revolution.

Now at last even this silent majority, these good Americans, have been utterly betrayed by Watergate. One can state the facts but such a statement hardly suggests the depth of the events: a Vice President and a President forced to resign from office in order to escape criminal trial. Never in our nearly 200 years of history has such a scandal hit us. The very men who made their reputations as champions of law and order, the representatives of legality, trapped in an incredible network of lies, evasion, bribes, extortion and cover-up reaching up, out and through the government, touching the FBI, the CIA, the Justice Department. (And exposed not, as the perennially optimistic liberals would have us believe, by some inherent check and balance in the system but by the accident of an aging Southern reactionary, a tough and even vindictive judge, two inexperienced reporters, a night watchman and a largely black Grand Jury.)

Roosevelt could go before the nation in 1932 and draw on a vast "will to believe." Ford goes before a nation whose will to believe has long since been betrayed and broken. It is a nation that has seen too many assassinations not to assume there is some conspiracy, a nation that correctly assumes this government does not desire to check the growth of its secret police functions.

LET ME SHIFT BACKWARD NOW, to the sixties, for if we make a response to the current crisis, we need to involve those who were active in the sixties and in a sense the question is whether we can combine that cadre with this crisis. The movement of the sixties was remarkable in several ways. It was created fresh, without significant help from the Left, which barely existed. The term New Left meant not only certain new attitudes on the Left, but the emergence of a Left where there had been none for many years. Traditionally, Marxists argued that labor was *the* base for revolutionary change in an industrialized society. But the reality of the sixties was that labor was—with a few outstanding exceptions—not only cautious or conservative, but reactionary. The trade union movement often found itself in direct conflict with demands from the black community for entrance into certain skilled trades. In foreign policy the AFL-CIO was more bitterly anti-Communist than the State Department, and willingly served as an agency for the CIA. The "free trade unions" became an agency for betrayal and oppression, allied to U.S. capital as the Communist unions were allied to the Soviets.

It was typical of the New Left movement that it was often torn apart by the cultural revolutions around it, and diverted from build-

ing a movement that could wage a struggle for political and economic power. Specifically, the peace coalitions wrangled at terrible length over whether women should have at least half the seats on the leading committees (an entirely legitimate point in itself) while showing only token concern about whether blacks should have guaranteed representation, and showing absolutely no concern about workers.

Fundamentally the movement, while deeply idealistic and courageous, never understood either Vietnam or the American situation except in terms of slogans and romantic images. The Vietnamese revolution was seen as a flurry of NLF flags, of smiling children, of women carrying rifles. And change in America was to be achieved by an assault on Washington—the 1971 “Maydays.” Certainly I supported the Maydays and am not unhappy to remember I was among those arrested, but the movement young felt that such a single convulsive action could substitute for a longer revolutionary process. As a result, they were badly demoralized when the Maydays failed to end the war, and retreated into communes when Nixon won re-election. They had never grasped social change as a *process*, seeing it only as a series of dramatic pitched battles—thus, for example, the strange SDS “Days of Rage” in Chicago, in which marching with clubs and smashing windows was viewed as a revolutionary act.

As a result of New Left policy, we not only failed to win the support of workers, but expressed a frequent disdain for them, which they reciprocated. I generalize, obviously. Many of us working in the movement sought hard for labor support, and sought hard to remind the movement that the army, the workers, *the people*, were not the enemy, and that “off the pigs” was not a revolutionary slogan but a stupid indulgence. And we had our impact.

By the end of the Sixties the movement had begun to change. The conspiracy jury trials had a sobering effect: here were all these working class slobs who watched TV sitcoms and read Readers Digest and went to Mass, and they were finding Angela Davis not guilty. The great surges of Left activity in the sixties had taught lessons that could only be learned by experiment.

Most of all the movement, while still middle class, had hardened. It began very naively with Teach-Ins to inform the government what was happening in Vietnam. It moved on from there to realize the government *knew* what was happening, and finally came to the understanding that Vietnam was not an accident but deliberate and in the nature of the American system. By 1972 when the Paris Agreements were signed, the “peace movement” had become a movement committed, either consciously or as an unspoken assumption, to changing the nature of America so that no more Vietnams would flow from it.

The limitations were obvious throughout—the middle class had

thrown up a primarily youthful movement which had tried to achieve change on its own by sheer force of idealism and energy. So long as the movement remained liberal it could not hope to get at the real problem, which was and is the nature of American capitalism. But even when the movement became radical, it could not hope to solve the problem on its own without an alliance with working people.

However, by the time the movement had reached a stage where it groped toward forming some kind of party, the direct American involvement in Vietnam ended and the energizing and unifying element was lost. It was widely reported and generally assumed that the movement was dead. People retreated into their own lives, into work, into marriages, into communes. Peace settled over the campus, the ghettos were silent.

Beneath this, however, rests that base of hundreds of thousands who were radicalized by the war and are now frustrated but unforgiving. The unexpressed anger and alienation of that group cannot be easily measured, but it is very deep, very real. It is against a background of apathy and anger, of disillusionment and fury, that the current crisis emerges.

Certain responses are obvious. The liberals will propose a "radical" program to wrest power from the Republicans. Various conferences and coalitions are already springing into existence to respond, rhetorically at least, to the crisis. There will be a flurry of demands for wage and price controls, for government action to provide jobs, to stimulate the economy. But another response is possible and is also taking place—a non-sectarian effort to use the current crisis to put socialism on the agenda, to argue with workers that we don't have to settle for 4% unemployment as normal, that we don't have to accept lousy mass transit, poor housing, a polluted environment, an artificial energy crisis—that while socialism cannot solve many problems, and cannot heal broken marriages or cure drug addiction or prevent alcoholism or guarantee sexual happiness or spiritual peace, socialism *can* provide full employment and capitalism cannot. Socialism can provide decent housing for all, decent medical care for all, decent care for the aged, equality for non-whites, and a foreign policy that is not based on murder. And the alternative to socialism is not only continued unemployment, but also a continued loss of our freedom to a military-industrial complex totally free of democratic controls.

The question immediately before us is to bring the cadre of the sixties into action—into an open, sensible advocacy of socialism even as we relate to immediate demands.

We may well fail again, as we have in the past. But inherent in the tragedy of a crisis is also the hope for the kind of authentic change which cannot be achieved when the suffering caused by capitalism is

limited to the few, the weak, the powerless. It is when the many are touched that questions are raised. We might wish it otherwise, might wish the change could come without the suffering and the crisis, but life doesn't seem to work that way and people do not respond to the rational logic of utopian appeals. They respond because circumstances compel them to think, and to act.

The trade unions, silent during the sixties, are hurting now. Unemployment threatens them. Inflation hits at them. The system has lost the ability to inspire trust. The chance may be at hand to reach beyond the limits that contained us in the sixties. All the hard questions of social change are before us now, no longer theoretical, but real, boring, tedious, and necessary.

THIS ARTICLE IS MORE than the statement of a hope, it is also a report from the front, so to speak. The peace and civil rights movements have already begun actively to seek out labor support for building a coalition of radical change, not aimed at finding an immediate answer but at building a movement that looks several years ahead. It would be foolish to be too optimistic, but it would also be a kind of betrayal to fail to see the chances that exist now, to realize that change *may* be possible if we can add our experience and energy to the objective situation and create a movement on the Left which can articulate the great silent anger, the suffering baffled hopes, of the people of this country.

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TRENDS IN AMERICAN LABOR

Sidney Peck

IN THE FALL OF 1970, speaking at an anti-war teach-in at an upstate New York college, I urged the assembled students to express their support for the defiant autoworkers, then striking the giant General Motors Corporation. In the discussion that followed, I was astounded at the depth of anger many students expressed toward the autoworkers and the UAW. They were very critical of the "materialistic spirit" of workers, arguing that labor was concerned only with gaining higher wages. Comparing this crass motive of unionized autoworkers to get more money with the moral concern of students to end the war in Vietnam, they decided that no basis existed for political solidarity between themselves and organized workers. I did my best to counter this view, citing the effective alliance