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Part VI. Making a Difference

2. The Social Change Agent

This chapter is addressed to fellow socialists.

Solidarity

By ‘socialist’ I mean a person or organisation that is committed to the socialist project, whose universal principle is *solidarity*. So let me reiterate what I mean by ‘solidarity’.

Solidarity entered the English language from the French at the Chartist Convention in London in April 1848 and was popularised by Julian Harney of *The Northern Star* and Ernest Jones in *The People’s Paper* – leader of the left-wing of the Chartists and supporters of the Communist League, for whom Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

The 1864 Rules of the International Workingmen’s Association began with the maxim: ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’, and went on to say that all efforts at the emancipation of the working class had hitherto failed for want of solidarity. These two principles – self-emancipation of the working class and solidarity – together make the irreducible and inseparable foundations of the socialist movement.

The French workers had adopted the word *solidarité* on the barricades of Paris in the first working class uprising against the bourgeoisie. The French had learnt the hard way that without solidarity the army could defeat them one barricade at a time, as they had in 1832. The anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1840), also called for ‘universal solidarity’. By 1848, the Chartist movement, which had united the disenfranchised 5/6 of the population of Britain against the ruling bourgeois class, had also learnt their lesson the hard way. The *Northern Star* (1850) wrote: ‘Communism, taken as a whole, means a reorganisation of all the elements of society, so as to create a solidarity of interest’. The *People’s Paper* declared: ‘the solidarity of the people would one day be realised, and if it did not secure its fruits in 1848, it was not the people’s fault.’ (6 November 1852).

The two founding principles of socialism – self-emancipation of the working class and solidarity – are inseparable. That self-emancipation is necessary is almost self-evident. If the working-class* is to take public political power, it can equip itself for that task only through the work of freeing itself and abolishing the conditions of its own exploitation. No one can do that on their behalf. This process of self-emancipation is how working-class self-consciousness, that is, class consciousness, is constructed. Without a struggle for self-emancipation, there can be no working class, only billions of individual wage-workers, socially and politically controlled by their masters.

* I use ‘working class’ to refer to the entire class of people who depend on wages, or similar, for their living and their savings. But I interpret this category politically, depending on a person’s commitments.

The opposite of self-emancipation is attaining freedom as the gift of another party. Such a thing is impossible. A class that is freed by the action of another class or group is only thereby subordinated to its liberators, even if they are well-meaning. How, then, is a socialist group, whether a party or a mutual aid organisation like the First International, to foster the liberation of the working class if the liberation of the working class is to be *its own* achievement. The answer to this lies in the principle of *solidarity*.

The need for solidarity arises from the fact that the working class does not come into the world ready-made as a single, homogeneous, organised stratum of society. It comes into the world divided into economic strata, trades, and national, religious, and ethnic groups, and spread across the globe in numerous cultural and linguistic communities. It can only realise its own emancipation by uniting all of these disparate sections into one movement with common aims. Along the way, the aims of different sections of the class may differ, but they retain their autonomy within the movement remains until they voluntarily submit to a shared discipline.

When one group finds itself under attack, *provided they fight back*, then other sections of the workers' movement have a duty to come to their aid. This duty and its practice is called 'solidarity'. The results of solidarity are three-fold. In the first place, as a result of the aid received from others (including non-proletarian forces) the struggling group may survive. Secondly, they learn who their friends are, and coming at their hour of need, they will not forget this.

But more importantly, through their struggle, whether the struggle is successful or not, their collective self-consciousness, self-determination and self-confidence are enhanced. However, this is not automatically the case; sometimes 'helping' someone is a violation of solidarity.

If another group comes in and rescues them, then the 'rescued' group may be grateful, but their working-class self-consciousness is not enhanced, but actually subsumed under that of the rescuing party. Indeed, this is often the reason for mounting a rescue mission. Philanthropic organisations may rescue people in distress in the hope of recruiting them to their own religious doctrine.

But there is an even more pressing danger involved in rescuing groups in distress. Coming from outside the concrete conditions in which a group is struggling, the rescuer will be ignorant of the terrain, so to speak, and more often than not, in their well-meaning efforts actually make things worse. For example, strikers often rely on social pressure within a community to deter scabbing, but when an outside group comes in and throws their weight around, they can undermine delicate relationships, which makes it easier for the scabs to force their way through, and when the outside agitators leave the strikers find themselves in a worse situation.

The principle of solidarity, which guides how different sections of the workers' movement come to each other's aid, avoids such dangers and helps ensure that the self-consciousness of both the struggling party and the party offering solidarity is enhanced in the very process of bringing them closer together. It is a simple rule:

When coming to the aid of another party, do so under *their*
direction.

You do it their way, not your way. If your beliefs are such that you cannot place yourself under their direction, if you believe they are so misguided, then solidarity action is impossible. But if they are part of the workers' movement then ensuring that they are not defeated remains important, and you will surely be able to find *some* way of supporting them according to their own practices. This may be by donating to their fighting fund or sending a message of solidarity or whatever. But if you are going to participate in the struggle of another section of the workers' movement, then the principle of solidarity demands that you do so *under their direction*. The working class is unified by voluntary association, not by conquest.

Every part of the workers' movement is obliged to offer solidarity to other parts of the workers' movement and its allies, however remote they may be. If the demands of solidarity, as outlined above, make solidarity action either impossible or undesirable, then there are other options.

If the struggling group is *not* part of the working class or one of its allies, then you may decide to intervene according to your own practices. Equally, you could simply join in their struggle on the other side.

If the other party is pursuing a *common end*, but there is no possibility of collaboration – as is frequently the case with parties sharing a common enemy but little else – then mutual 'exchange' or instrumental collaboration is in order. This means *negotiating* a public agreement to coordinate each other's actions in an agreed way which meets the objectives of both parties. This is the basis of alliance politics, which is appropriate for actions such as protests, in which the various participants have nothing in common except for being against the IMF, or such like.

In particular, all human beings share the same Earth and the environment that sustains life. Of all the forms of collaboration the ancient Greek city-states developed, the most enduring was the *amphictyony* (see Bederman, 2001), in which a number of states bound themselves and each other to maintain and defend some sacred place. The greatest of these, the one responsible for maintenance of the Oracle of Delphi, had 17 member states, and endured from the end of the Trojan War around 1100 BCE until 191CE – more than a thousand years. Socialists should regard the Earth and its environment as a sacred place and join in Solidarity with all those committed to defending and maintaining it.

Finally, you may decide self-consciously and deliberately to *take over* another's action on the basis that even with assistance, they are doomed to failure. This approach, which is the diametrical opposite of solidarity, is the method of *colonisation* or is sometimes called *philanthropy*. It could be characterised as a takeover, and within the workers' movement such a takeover would only be carried out through negotiation and mutual agreement.

To demonstrate how fundamental solidarity is to the workers' movement, it should be observed that, alongside equality, solidarity is the guiding principle of majority voting which remains the fundamental decision-making process of the workers' movement. Consensus is *always* the aim of deliberation, but when consensus fails, actions are decided upon by majority vote (on the basis of the

principle of the moral equality of all persons) and thereafter, the minority is obliged to offer *solidarity* to the majority by adhering to the collective decision.

Solidarity is thus an *ethical* principle, a duty, thoroughly grounded in the history of the struggle against capitalism, but not dependent upon strategies for the achievement of a socialist utopia.

The socialist utopia can be imagined as a society in which the principle of solidarity is universal. Nothing else needs to be specified. There is no requirement for centralised economic planning or abolition of money or capital, or the abolition of national borders. All these are open questions that we can leave to posterity, who will be more intelligent than we are.

Socialist Revolution

I can only speculate on the path by which a socialist society will eventually be achieved. For that matter, human life on Earth may end or descend into a chaotic dystopia and destroy all the gains of the Enlightenment before any socialist utopia is attained.

However, it is reasonable to suppose that somewhere along that road, if Socialism is ever to be realised, there must be a socialist revolution.

It is simply impossible to anticipate the conditions under which this will happen. Revolutions have been made under the banner of Socialism, but hitherto no revolution has managed any real and enduring step 'towards' Socialism. Some could be regarded, perhaps, as *experiments* in revolutionary socialism. But it is worth thinking about conditions which are necessary preconditions for Socialism insofar as they lie *within the horizon of foreseeable consequences* of actions we take today.

One condition that does *not* fall within that horizon is the preparation of a revolutionary party, acting on behalf of the working class, especially in the case of parties that are *not* organically connected to the working class. First, because the capacity of any of the parties existing today to act on behalf of the working class lies only in the remote future, and second because a socialist revolution does not require a party acting *on its behalf*. Third, an effective revolutionary leadership of the working class, capable of leading a socialist revolution, could only arise organically, and, I would contend, through the principle of solidarity and most likely in the heat of a terminal crisis of capitalism.

Social Change

Despite refusing to orient their actions towards the achievement of a socialist utopia in some remote and unforeseeable future, socialists *are* social change advocates. As such, socialists tend to be active in all kinds of activities in politics, 'civil society', and economic activity. Basing themselves on the principle of solidarity, socialists will find many allies. Socialists practice alliance politics that allow people with diverse motives and ideologies to collaborate toward common ends.

The socialist 'party' is really the party of solidarity. But here I use the word 'party' in the nineteenth-century meaning of the word. In this sense, a party is not tied to membership lists, assets and office-holders, but refers to all those who practise solidarity. This does not mean, however, that socialists advocate

the 'structurelessness' that Jo Freeman exposed more than 50 years ago and that Laya Hooshlari shows is rampant in grassroots activism today.

If winning just a single battle is to have a positive impact in terms of social change, 'leadership' always entails being a role model, a coach, and an educator. Local activism only becomes social-change activism to the extent that collective knowledge is passed on and accumulated, and grassroots organisation strengthened. Collective knowledge has to be embedded in the movement itself, not diverted into party-building. Granted, someone newly inspired by the socialist project, perhaps through the experience of solidarity, needs some supportive structure to learn about Socialism and practise solidarity. But we have to think carefully about the kind of organisation that can provide such support.

Social change activism is just as much about building organisational structures as is politics or business. However, social change activism rarely endows leaders and delegates with the kind of wealth, power, and prestige which political and economic hierarchies inevitably do.

Workers have been struggling against the corruption of their organisations by bureaucracy and the privileges of office since at least the sixteenth century, as evidenced by the documents of the Goldsmiths' Guild (see Blunden, 2016, p. 42). Grassroots organising confers few privileges on its leaders and it is here that the basic work of solidarity is done.

Only the corrupt officials (though there are plenty of them) in municipal politics materially gain from their office. For socialists, serving at the municipal level is a service to the community.

Parties formed to contest elections at various levels, trade unions, and NGOs that appoint paid officials are all vulnerable to bureaucracy and corruption. Socialists have a duty to combat this tendency. Social change requires good unions that defend the interests of their members, propagate the ethic of solidarity, and reformist political parties that use their parliamentary representation to promote social change and where possible, introduce 'non-reformist reforms'. Only a working class which has learnt how to combat bureaucracy and corruption can possibly achieve Socialism. You can't run the country without structure.

In *Recognition or Redistribution?* (2003), Nancy Fraser cites André Gorz's (1967) concept of 'nonreformist reforms'. This refers to reforms, which, once enjoyed, prove to be very difficult to take away. Public health and public education services are prime examples of 'nonreformist reforms'. Such reforms not only meet the needs of working people, but motivate working people into political action when these public services are threatened. They also improve the capacity of the working class and poor to run the economy, should the opportunity arise.

Fraser points to the necessity of considering the first- and second-order consequences of reforms since reforms can have perverse effects when implemented under neoliberalism. Fraser points out that reforms can inadvertently affirm existing inequalities rather than producing the transformation which may have been intended.

For example, the highly successful reform introduced by the Hawke Labor government in Australia to introduce compulsory superannuation, funded by employers, while delivering genuinely worthwhile benefits to working people, also produced perverse outcomes. It meant that women and workers in irregular employment entered retirement reliant only on welfare payments. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the majority of workers, enjoying generous superannuation, lack any incentive to defend the level of the Old Age Pension. As a result, the Old Age Pension has fallen behind the average level of superannuation. It has also made the organised working class dependent on income from capital in their old age.

Nancy Fraser concludes that the most important benefit that socialists can secure is 'parity of participation', that is, to ensure the greatest possible degree of participation of all marginalised or exploited groups in the social and political life of the country. Amartya Sen (2002), the welfare economist, addressing the persistence of all forms of subordination, concluded that the single most important reform in countries like his native India was promotion of female literacy. He argued that only such a measure could ensure that economic benefits would flow to the next generation.

The duty of solidarity encompasses legislative activity as well as opinion formation by participation in social movements and the direct challenging of injustice in grassroots organising, trade union activity and nationwide campaigns on an indefinitely wide range of issues.

The good life for a socialist is immersion in such struggles.

The purpose and value of building explicitly socialist organisations must be assessed in the light of the above. I have already argued that the building of a revolutionary party for the purpose of preparing the leadership of a future socialist revolution is misconceived. This does not mean that one should not build socialist organisations. However, I see no reason not to refer to socialist organisations as 'parties'. If 'party' is taken in the sense of being a Bolshevik Party, then no, but if by 'party' one means an alternative government built with the aim of contesting elections, then that is fine. But with a caveat.

If running in an election is not genuinely oriented toward winning seats in government and using this position in the service of solidarity, but for some other purpose, then this is also misconceived.

If the aim is merely to have MPs in a position to conduct propaganda or if the election campaign itself is merely a vehicle for propaganda, then the question is: propaganda for what? Such propaganda risks becoming self-serving. If by 'propaganda' one really means education, then fine, but election campaigning is not an effective way of doing education unless it is largely successful.

The primary point of running an election campaign is to get good socialists elected to Parliament. If not today, then at some future time. But a campaign has to be successful at least in terms of getting someone elected eventually.

In the light of this, socialists should lend their support to parties with a program consistent with the solidaristic ethic of Socialism, and being socialists, they must do so *under the direction of that party*, as demanded by the duty of solidarity.

Other forms of organisation and activity

Political parties are really only useful to running in elections. Hiring full-time organisers or purchasing assets, such as buildings and printing presses, does not need a party. Depending on the use such assets are meant for there are better ways of acquiring and maintaining them.

One of the legacies of the myriad parties built during the 1960s and 1970s has been their publishing houses. While these enterprises may have benefited in the beginning through access to the cheap labour provided by a party, the best of them still survive and flourish, Lawrence & Wishart, International Publishers, Verso, Pluto, Arena and Haymarket have all outlived the parties that established them and ensure that socialists who have something to say can get their work into bookshops and libraries. Parties now publish freely using the internet. It is now just as easy to set up a new publishing house as it is to launch a new party, and if there are writers whose work needs to be read, that is a good project for socialists, publishing magazines, journals, books, or poetry.

Maurice Blackburn, labour lawyers in Melbourne, were established to serve the union movement in 1919, and continue to represent causes. Defending the underdog in court or using the courts to fight government policy is a worthwhile avenue for socialist activity. If you are a lawyer, you can earn your living in the service of solidarity.

Creating art – especially books and movies which contribute to the socialist cause is an excellent and timeless pursuit open to the artistically talented socialist, and art is far better practised independently of political direction.

Or you can do as many young socialists do, exercise your duty of solidarity by travelling to poorer countries and providing education, health and other services to people who are otherwise denied them. The Fred Hollows Foundation which has saved more than three million people from blindness, though few people now remember that Fred Hollows was a Communist.

As an academic or school teacher, a socialist has the opportunity to participate in educating the next generation. You can do that in a government or even a private school, or if you are a particularly inspired educator you can found your own school.

Even raising your own family is an opportunity to be a socialist and a model for other parents. No matter what your social position, your conduct can inspire others.

In short, there are unlimited opportunities to promote socialism, i.e., the ethic of solidarity.

When a socialist acts in accordance with the principle of solidarity, they do so as an *agent* of this idea. The idea and practice of solidarity are deeply embedded in modern society and widely understood. When you act in solidarity you are not acting alone, but rather as part of a widely understood and supported commitment held in common by millions of people.

Socialists share with all citizens anxiety about their capacity to make a difference, to have a voice in social and political affairs and are seek structural change, not just gains that will be eradicated in the next economic or electoral cycle. In other words, what is nowadays called ‘agency’.

This I will address directly in the next chapter.

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