

Back to the grassroots?

Stephen Marks on the annual socialist roundup

RETHINKING REVOLUTION SOCIALIST REGISTER 2017
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For decades now, the annual appearance of the latest Socialist Register has offered a menu of worthy but predictable fare. Readers have come to expect the latest contributions to the already interminable bibliography of studies of dead Russians and their legacy, combined with roundups of the state of left and far-left politics around the world.

There is a decent amount of both this year, not bad examples of their type, but much more that is relevant to the dire prospects of Trumpery and Brexit. As Panitch and Gindin point out in their scene-setting contribution, the crisis of neoliberalism which began in 2008 has yet to lead to a break with the old model to rival the break with the gold standard in 1931 or the abandonment of Bretton Woods in 1971.

Instead there has been a loss of legitimacy which affects all governing institutions from established political parties to the EU. The resulting protest movements have fed a new turn to left politics, expressed in forms as diverse as Podemos, Syriza and Corbynism.

But these new movements though they may be class-oriented and class-focussed, are not 'class-rooted' to use the authors' terminology. The reasons are

rooted in changes in the composition of the workforce and in the labour process, with the old collectivism superseded or abandoned. This poses issues of renewal and reconstitution of the working class as a collective which are organisational, not merely matters of ideology or policy.

The answer, or answers, may pass through re-energising the roles of a range of grass-roots organisations from trade unions



and co-ops to consumer and credit organisations. Despite the shipwreck of Syriza the challenge is still to combine entry into government with advancing the transformation of state institutions from below - a theme echoed by a number of other contributors.

Hilary Wainwright, as is her wont, develops the theme of the relations between parties and movements, with particular refer-

ence to Britain. She contrasts the initial promise of Syriza to break the claims of parties to a monopoly of representation of social movements, with a significant statement of Jon Lansman after Corbyn's election. Asked how the Corbyn leadership would relate to the new membership, he replied 'We will mobilise them'. Instead of this implicitly top-down approach, she suggests, the real question is how to use their experience rather than just use them as foot-soldiers.

The most radical and challenging contribution is from Andreas Malm on 'Revolution in a warming world'. For once, the Russian revolution is invoked as directly relevant to today's crisis of global warming - as an earlier example of crisis provoked by disaster in food supply. In that case the disaster was provoked by war - in Syria, by the combination of neoliberalism with the impact of climate change.

If these issues are not addressed with the urgent and radical agenda outlined, for example, by Naomi Klein, then we face the danger of 'the politics of the armed lifeboat', or what has been called 'ecological fascism'. A particularly pertinent contribution from Patrick Bond illustrates in the South African context how impending ecological disaster can and must be brought in to the whole spectrum of social and political struggles.

Where is the British left on this? And if not now, when?