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Rebuilding the Left in a Time of Crisis

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Edward Lewis (EL): In *In and Out of Crisis* you comment that the financial crisis opens up the possibility of reversing the many defeats that the left have suffered over the past thirty to forty years. We are right now in a situation in the United Kingdom where despite the fightback that is taking place there are serious concerns that we will face deep and great defeats. So can you explain how we've got to this point – neoliberal capitalism looked relatively fragile to some people immediately in the wake of the crisis, yet right now a very aggressive neoliberal agenda is being pursued, with at least some popular support.

Leo Panitch (LP): Well, let's begin with the moment of defeat. One has to be careful when drawing these historical parallels, but I think to some extent we may have been living through a period not dissimilar to what the left was living in after the great defeats of 1848 – that revolutionary moment. And it wasn't until the late 1880s, with the great dock strike and the emergence of the mass trade unions and the mass socialist parties in the 1890s, that you really saw the left coming together in new organizational forms – really the first mass organizations of the subordinate class in history that were formed. And if you think about it – that was forty to fifty years after 1848.

If you date the defeat of the British left in the UK from was the defeat of the Bennite/Livingstone insurgency in the Labour Party that would mean that we're in the late 1870s in terms of the comparison with 1848. And what we might have to look forward to then in the next ten years is the emergence of movements of class reformation, the development hopefully of post-Leninist and post-social democratic parties, as people will have learned the lessons of their failure. And a new type of trade unionism, which is not merely defensive, and is a *class* trade unionism rather than a *sectoral* trade unionism. That's what's on the agenda I think, that's what is possible for the left in the 21st Century and we shouldn't get too despondent about the length of time under which we have been suffering defeats.

EL: Where do you think the momentum for those kinds of developments is likely to come from?

LP: Well in order to get at that I think we need to go back to the way you quite rightly framed the first question. One might have thought that this crisis would provide an opening and an opportunity. Will the gloss finally come off neoliberalism? The first thing to say about this is that the thirty years of defeat for the left have been thirty years of tremendous success for capitalism, both in ideological terms and in terms of the actual spread and deepening of capitalist social relations. There has been a commodification of almost every aspect of social life and a spreading of capitalist social relations to places and to classes that hadn't been so commodified.

So we have to be careful and sober when we see that the contradictions within that process of capitalist dynamism have now come to a head. This dynamic period of capitalism constantly produced crises. There were 72 financial crises in the 1990s around the world, most of them in the south – but not entirely – and most of them were serious. But they were able to be contained. This one is *much* larger, much bigger; it's also an *American* crisis in the sense that it began in the heartland of the empire itself. But so far, even though it's clearly going to kick off a significant period of stagnation, it's still been contained, in the sense that globalization has not been reversed as it was in the 1930s.

Now, when we ask whether the gloss has finally come off neoliberalism, that may be true, in the sense of the demystification of neoliberalism, but this had already been happening over the last ten years, when people already no longer believed that what was really going on was freeing markets from states – that was the ideological representation of what was going on, but in fact states were more and more than ever involved in making this global capitalism, in containing these crises. It was only at the ideological level that markets ever escaped states. And it became ever clearer to people that in the real world, markets relied ever more on states to promote and facilitate this marketization, to come in as lenders of last resort every time a barrier was reached and a crisis occurred. People have recognized that we have very active states in that sense. And I think that people will now be more realistic than ever that rather than them being released from the state, they will have a greater awareness that they've been living under a capitalist state, it.

EL: On that point – so when someone like George Osborne comes along and talks about the need to diminish the role of the state, as it's become overbearing, and that that is the cause of this debt crisis – at some level you don't think that that will wash, that people will see that nonetheless the government will still be acting as a manager of the economy.

LP: We'll have to see. I'll think it's more possible now than ever that that type of B.S. – the notion that people are going to live on charity, that they've been oppressed by the state etc – will not wash. I think the ability to win so much support behind what was really a tax revolt has declined. Sure, most people, including working-class people, didn't want to pay taxes, they didn't feel that what they were getting out of welfare state, was worth it. But the cover that justified this tax revolt, that 'when we're liberating markets we're liberating you' – and the occlusion of the power of the state in doing that – I think that portrayal is harder and harder for people to credit. And increasingly I think if people succumb to this going to be not because they're ideologically convinced by it, but because they see, really that there's no other alternative than capitalism.

So it comes back to this – there will be struggles, we can see that there are struggles, whether it's university students here or it's the opposition to the cuts in France or Greece or the G20 protests in Toronto. The key question is whether these protests continue not to be able to yield a more promising permanent form of organization so as to be able to do more than protest. I hope that with the ideological clarification that can come at the current moment, some of the organizational horses (so to speak – to pick up your question about where is this going to come from) will start emerging. If all we're left with is one series of protests after another, then we will fail.

EL: In terms of the organizational forms that need to be developed in order for the left to move forward, you discuss the need for new political parties and for a new form of trade unionism. Let's start with the unions.

LP: What is our agenda in this respect is massive. We face a trade union movement which moved from the militancy – often successful – of the 60s and 70s to an entirely defensive mode. A trade union movement in this country radically opposed to going into Europe in the 60s and 70s, that shifted when it was hit by Thatcherism, to the hope that Europe would save them, and whose politics largely began to revolve around 'can we find ways for Brussels legislation to prevent what both Thatcherism and to some extent even New Labour was doing.' That has failed as well. I think the illusion that the European left was going to be able to withstand this much better is now clear. In North America, especially in Canada, where the movement resisted concessions that the Americans readily engaged in, it's now become clear that we may have looked tall relative to the American labour movement, but it's only because they were on their knees. Those unions which led the struggle against concessions, which was trying to educate people as to the nature of neoliberalism etc – they now are too engaged in concessions. I'm thinking of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union in the face of the latest crisis.

Even those unions that have in the service sector been more successful in terms of organizing, such as the Service Employees International Union, has mainly done so by doing a deal with employers that will not leave much scope for militant action by newly organized workers. This is what I call credit card unionism.

It's becoming clear that we are going to have to have a *radical* reformation of the labour movement, maybe even like in the 1930s crisis, which saw the emergence in the United States of a very different labour movement, sidelining the old AFL craft unions with new industrial unions which were much more class unions. What's on the agenda now is the big question of whether we're going to need new class organizations, organizations that maybe need to be founded as much in neighbourhoods as in factories, which are mobilizing people not just in relation to workplace struggles but into struggles in every facet of their lives – as creditors, as people whose families expected their children would go to university and are not going to be able to go to now, and in other respects.

So this is clearly a very large and important agenda.

EL: What do you think has changed that means that community-based, neighbourhood-based, organizing is also necessary now – or was it always also necessary?

LP: It was always necessary. And I think one of the reasons that we suffered some such defeats was that the working-classes became bereft of what had originally been a large element in the formation of trade unionism to begin with, as welfare state benefits replaced the kind of community benefits that trade unions had originally provided. When trade unions emerged, before the welfare state, they often were playing the role of providing for the community a central space of meeting, a guarantee of a funeral benefit, a guarantee of a social benefit etc. And in that sense, trade unionism was a community trade unionism. And increasingly, ironically, one of the contradictions of the welfare state was that the things that trade unions had done were now taken over by the state. And union people lost those capacities. My Dad learned Robert's Rules of Order through his local union branch and benefit society, where workers had to run their own meetings. Incidentally, I have increasingly found that people that I was teaching at first year university, and sometimes fourth-year university, knew less about running a meeting, knew less about politics, than my Dad with a grade 5 education. He'd gotten his knowledge out of the community-based nature of the labour movement.

So what had been there was lost. I may be romanticizing how much it had been there but I think it had been there to a significant extent. Of course it was the way capitalism developed that mainly destroyed it – workers tended to live together, much more than they do now, in working-class communities. With the automobile, with the transformations of suburbanization, workers got dispersed much more throughout the modern city.

So it isn't going to be easy to rebuild this community trade unionism, but I think it needs to be done, it needs to be on our agenda, and I think there are increasing grounds for us to think that that is possible.

EL: Such as?

LP: Well, I think, we've run up against the limits I think of network politics – 'we should bring together anti-poverty groups with trade unions etc.' It's mostly been a popular front thing at the top. But in a variety of struggles going on at the moment you see a more genuine interaction at the base. It used to be the case that activist workers in the U.S. would look north to a place like in Canada to see the way the UAW was integrated into a community like Windsor. Now you see Canadian workers looking with admiration at this taking place in Wisconsin. And this doesn't come out of nowhere. What doesn't usually make the radar in terms of national news coverage in the United States are struggles by nurses, for example, which are reported in the local newspaper but are never reported at the national level.

So I'm hopeful. Insofar this involves an explicit commitment to the need for organization, it means overcoming a lot of young people's semi-anarchism. The great anti-capitalist globalization moments of Seattle 1999, Genoa, Quebec City and so on, were very enervating. It was evident that a new generation had emerged. But it was a new generation that – not surprisingly – was suspicious about bureaucratic trade unionism, about political parties, about struggling in the state to transform the state. This was captured in the attraction to the Zapatistas, to what John Holloway now calls changing the world without taking power. But there's no changing the world without taking power, and that means there's no changing the world without permanent organization of the subordinate classes. And I'm seeing an increasing number of young people who were energized by the anti-globalization movement, and who are still showing up at G20 protests etc, interested in how to move beyond the current struggles they're in, not least around university issues, etc, to join in the struggle to create new, very broadly defined working-class organizations.

And they are thinking not in terms of the old industrial working-class organizations obviously. We're talking about young people who are often engaged in casual employment themselves. That's one of the reasons one perhaps can't count on factory or office-based organization because so many young people will take a job in one sector for three months and then another sector for three months, and move from being a labourer in one context to being a service worker three months later. That doesn't mean they can't be organized, on the contrary. But that's what's on the agenda.

Do you think that the notion of the working-class remains a vital one? Because it's not prominent in much of the activism that I come across – it's there in aspects of the Marxist revolutionary left and elsewhere, but it isn't highly prominent. Does this reflect objective changes in the nature of class, so that there are difficulties in pointing to 'the working-class' and identifying it effectively, or is it a symptom of a political and organizational malaise?

It's a very good question. Workers aren't born identifying themselves as workers – as you might think reading some Marxist literature. It isn't an automatic identification. That's the whole point about liberal capitalism, in which we're not, in a constitutional legal sense, born into a class.

EL: It's not a caste system.

LP: It's not a caste system, it's not a slave system. So it's always been the case that you could articulate the identity of people along all kinds of dimensions. And you know people tend to think it's been replaced by different types of identities – women's identity, or ethnic identity, or racial. That was *always* a problem in terms of working-class unity. The working-class was never homogenous. It was always a problem when the great unions and great original working-class parties emerged, to try to get people to see that they had a common denominator in contesting exploitation and oppression in capitalism.

There was a tendency, however, to try to efface the other identities, in order to build the strength of the class. And I think that we need to learn from identity politics, from the movements of women, of people of colour, of refugees and of immigrants. I think that class organization can be strengthened rather than weakened if those identities are valorized, are developed within class organizations. I don't know whether we can rekindle class as the common denominator. But I think people are frustrated by the limits of identity politics[?]. I'm going to say this (and it's harder for me to say it as a white socialist than someone who's a black socialist, and there *are* black socialists who say it, in the United States at least, increasingly so) – what good does it do a working-class black person, when we have an equal proportion of black lecturers at every university? Ok, if there are 12% of black lecturers now in American universities, let us say, and 12% of the population is black. How much has that helped the mass of black people? When women increasingly say there's still a glass ceiling in the corporate sector – well let's say there wasn't and you had an equal proportion of women. What would that mean for most women in this society?

I do think that identity politics, which has scored real victories, is increasingly running out of steam, especially in the face of this crisis. People are really feeling the objective costs of not being able to maintain standards of living. In fact, some of the main victories of identity politics were precisely about improving standards of living and economic independence. The victories in North America in the 70s of the women's movement (which I think then came here) included, crucially, that women could get a credit card. Because in the 50s and 60s it was hard – the male bread-earner got a credit card. The great victory of the left in the Democratic Party in the 1970s was the Community Reinvestment Act, which required banks to put 5% of their capital to lending to poor communities in great American cities. That was the start of the integration of black people into mortgages. On the other hand, of course, this was also a deepening of capitalism in the subordinate communities of identity – blacks, women etc. They were being financialized. The limits of that in this crisis are increasingly clear – getting them deeper into financialized capitalism was a victory, but a victory full of contradictions.

So I see a basis for a mobilization around class which will not succeed unless people's other identities are valorized and built on and used to strengthen the class organizations representing them.

EL: And you seem to also to be suggesting that if those movements join forces with class organizations they themselves will be strengthened – so that ordinary women and black

people, say, will gain more from being part of a class-based movement as opposed to connecting with a politics of identity that accepts capitalism.

LP: That's right, in so far as the mass of people are spoken for in identity politics by middle class professionals, or even businessmen or lawyers or what have you. They are middle and upper middle class led organizations. Historically there have been ethnic groups, for instance, and sometimes women's groups, who've been led by working-class people, or at least by professionals who identify with the socialist project, and seek to develop stronger class identity or consciousness. Certainly where I come from, in Canada, if you were a businessman or a lawyer in the city I grew up in, in Winnipeg, for a very long period you had to be a socialist in the Jewish community, or the Finnish community, or the Ukrainian community. Even though these were Ukrainian, Jewish or Finnish organizations – you just had to be socialist, in order to have any legitimacy within that community, and this was because the working-class element within that community was dominant, was hegemonic. This is true today in Toronto with the Philippino community but it's very, very rare with most of the ethnic 'identity' organizations.

EL: The other aspect of organization that we were going onto discuss, aside from the unions, is political parties. You talk about the need for new political parties – what do you mean by this?

LP: As I said before, I don't think that the working-class as we've known it historically, has been a political force except insofar as it was organized through those great social democratic and communist parties. To some extent, it was even what made workers citizens. Part of the appeal of German social democracy to workers was 'we'll get you the vote, we'll make you full German citizens.' And to some extent that was how the Australian Labour Party, and to some extent the British Labour Party, gained support from women – by saying we'll get you the vote. So the formation of the *class itself* was to some extent done through parties. And of course the great Swedish or German parties were engaged in creating people's class identities: from workers education associations to the party conferences as the workers parliaments. (Although this was less developed in by the Labour Party, what there was of even the latter aspect of it was destroyed by Blair and to some extent even Kinnock before him – the Labour Party conference was sidelined because it was too radical in the 1980s).

So the very creation of the class to some extent was done by parties. Moreover, since class struggle is resolved at the level of the state, parties are essential for bringing together the disparate demands of working-class people and other demands that arise in society, and carrying them in a coherent manner into the state. All too often that has not involved *transforming* the state. It's just been at the level of policy – 'we'll introduce this policy or that policy' – in the way that is very distant from the class, and doesn't involve changing the deeply undemocratic nature of most state organizations. Nor does it involve dealing with the deep division of labour that exists within most state organizations.

EL: So part of a new political party…

LP: …would be to address that. I think it is crucial people here in Britain to reclaim what was the project of the 1970s, inside the Labour Party and to some extent outside the Labour Party. Now there was a lot of flakiness at that time there was a lot of political fixing, a lot of infighting inside the party, and there was Militant deploying archaic Bolshevik language and tactics. But although they had all kinds of limitations of their own, the Bennite movement,

the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, the municipal socialism that (believe it or not) people like Blunkett were leading up in Yorkshire in the 1970s – these were about saying that the state and the party are not democratic and that the only way we are going to be able to hold on to the old reforms and go beyond them to put socialism back on the agenda must involve democratizing the party in order to democratise the state. It isn't just a matter of policy. I believe was correct and indeed John Holloway who today speaks of changing the world without taking power, was part of this thrust as a key figure of what was called the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group…

EL:…They published *In and Against the State*.

LP: Yes, and it was extremely creative in terms of the idea of getting into the state, whether at the municipal level or at the national level, precisely in order to refashion the state in such a way that inside the state you continue to be a class organizer. You can use the resources of the state to organize the unorganized to give them capacity to struggle against you inside the state, to push you inside the state. This was a central theme in the 1980s of the Workers Party of Brazil, which put itself forward as a post-Leninist, post-social democratic party precisely in these terms, although it later turned into a typical social democratic party.

The defeat that the parliamentarians inflicted on the democratic, let's call it Bennite, insurgency in the Labour Party, using the threat of Thatcherism, and the power of the media to designate the whole Bennite left as 'the loony left' has enormous implications in terms of demobilizing the broader British left. But what needs to be revived, is just this sort of Bennite image of renewing class politics as transformative democratic politics. Now they wanted to begin democratizing the Labour party, which I never thought you could, do. I thought you could raise this type of political orientation in the Party but that the Party would inevitably split and that this would render it electorally unviable for a long period – and this would be used to close down the debate, which is indeed what occurred.

I'm now 65 and since the 1960s, my generation realized, when we got politicized, that the old social democratic parties and the old communist parties had run their course historically, that they were no longer capable of organizing the class, developing the class, carrying through a socialist project. Some of us tried an independent socialist politics that involved building new independent socialist parties. We had successes in places, not in building parties, but building a new base for this.

EL: What did those successes look like?

LP: In Ottawa for instance I was part of the Ottawa Committee for Labour Action that built very strong links with newly organized public sector unions. We kept waiting for a new party formation to come along that we could attach our public sector base to: teachers, nurses, postal workers, public employees generally. It never came along so we tried to do it ourselves in the early 80s, bringing together the very broad left in Ontario to very successful, non-sectarian conference to this end. , But some of the key people who came at that time were really burnt out. They had come out of – I'm about to give you another example of failure – they had come out of the new Trotskyist, Marxist-Leninist or Maoist organizations that had formed since the 1960s, searching for a better Leninism, which I never did – I was never a Leninist. But others did and I admire them, they were very committed people. And that too has failed. I mean they still hang on in the Socialist Workers Party. And they can have an impact to some extent. But that's been a failure, building a new

Leninist party's been a failure as well, and the Trostkyist organizations have always been looking for a better form of Leninism.

I hope that your generation will be able to get past this. To be disheartened because we didn't succeed is like saying Marx didn't succeed with the First International. And I think conditions are increasingly there for you to succeed, partly because I its clear your generation will not set out to build a better type of Leninism.

EL: I don't think Leninism has much natural traction with people of my generation. On the other hand I'm not sure that the concept of political parties does either.

LP: Yes. I don't care if we call it 'party' or not but there has to be some form of getting beyond the disparate, ad hoc protest politics, the diversity of tactics – which is very unsolidaristic – and getting beyond the kind of network politics – the 'movement of movements' politics. We need to be actually developing the types of organizations which are permanent, in which people develop the capacities to be political actors in a more permanent way.

EL: Membership organizations?

LP: Membership organizations, dues paying organizations, educational organizations, and organizations that are prepared, not just to make proposals to the state, but to risk going into the state. Maybe at first at the municipal level. I'm not saying one should rush into electoral politics. Not at all. But we need to be prepared to say – 'look, we will at some point be putting the question of state power on our strategic agenda.'

EL: So this is a type of capacity-building politics you are concerned with at the party and at the union level. And you think that there are bases there in society which may feed into this, you are hopeful of that.

LP: I have no doubt that we will see through the 21st Century repeated attempts in places across the world to do this. I have no doubt whatsoever. If you ask me whether I am confident that they will be more successful than they have been in the last 30-40 years I'm not so sure. But that the attempts will be made – I have no doubt. The important thing therefore is to try to put as much useful thought as we can into trying to make them successful.

EL: Is there any more flesh you want to put on the bones of the outline you've given of how to move forward?

LP: One of the crucial things has to do with the division of labour and the way that interacts with the new modes of communication. Young people today need to go back and read a very important book (and very few people took it seriously on the revolutionary left) written during World War One by Roberto Michels, who ended up being a fascist but who at that time was a social democrat. The book is called *Political Parties: The Iron Law of Oligarchy*. It argues that in mass socialist working-class organizations a division of labour inevitably emerges between the leaders and the led and there's both psychological and organizational reasons for that. There's great insight in that book, but we need to figure out how to build the types of organizations that build in the institutional and psychological means of preventing those tendencies, or at least minimizing those tendencies. One of the things we need to ask, without being technologically determinist, is whether the new modes of

communication of the type that you are engaged in, provide a means of helping us overcome that old division of labour in working-class organizations.

EL: That sounds to me even more acute when you're not just talking about, say, a workers cooperative, but you're talking about something that's prepared to go into the state – which inevitably will seek to and naturally will impose such divisions of labour.

LP: Exactly.

EL: Let's end by talking about the lessons of this crisis that relate to the organizational questions we've been discussing.

LP: One of the lessons I would want to draw is: be careful of what your demands are. When I was your age, when capitalism was approaching full employment in the 1960s, we felt very confident about our ability to make any wage demand we wanted, because even if that bankrupted our employer we could pick up another job down the road. And if our bosses told us to work harder we were quite prepared to tell them to fuck off because we thought we could pick up a job very easily. And as students it made us very bolshy because we weren't worried – 'well ok if we don't get a job until we're 35 we'll still be able to get a job.' And that produced a lot of the militancy and it produced a lot of the profit squeeze in the 1960s and 70s and it produced a lot of the fiscal crises in the state. So, in other words, it wasn't just Thatcher's ideas, or financial capitalist ideas that destroyed the Keynesian welfare state, it was its internal contradictions, which actually came out of the victory of the reforms. The Keynesian reforms which had earlier been won laid the grounds for workers to get greater access to markets and capitalism's consumer goods and we were often the agents of actually using the reforms to get just that. So we need to think very carefully about what we want to win in the current context. If universities are going to be allowed to be more and more marketised, it's not good enough for us to introduce a graduate tax, because we're still going to have universities that are increasingly businesses.

EL: And that relates not so much to the fees issue in any case, does it – it relates to the division of funds and the withdrawal of the teaching grant.

LP: Exactly. So we need to think very carefully about what we're being defensive about, and what we're asking for in the context of this crisis. Similarly, when we look to the Chinese proletariat, and see the remarkable strikes that have occurred, let's look soberly at this. Globalization has essentially been about the creation of new working-classes. People say class is an old concept and fewer and fewer people are workers in the old sense – on the contrary. There have been never so many workers on the face of the planet as there are today, even in the *old sense* of industrial workers or workers in factories! Because what has happened is that capitalism has been able to jump on the backs of new proletariats that have been created around the world. That's what globalization to a significant extent has been about.

Now we see even capitalists, saying we need a wage-led growth in China. Because if we're no longer, with this crisis, going to be able to have workers in Britain, the U.S. and Canada buying all this stuff on credit, then the Chinese workers are going to have to buy it themselves. Well, yes it's possible that the Chinese working-class will be able win wage increases. It'll involve overcoming or transforming the unions there (which are really control agents for the Party and for managers), but if the Chinese proletariat succeeds only in the way in which Western unions ended up succeeding in the 20th century – that is, succeeding

in terms of making their members individual consumers – then we're not any further along. In fact, given the ecological crisis, we're in a sense much worse off.

So the type of unionization we need is one which focuses much more on changing conceptions of standards of living in a way much more oriented to collective services – the provision of free transport, rather than individual cars, just to take that one example. So there too I think we need to be very careful about what we hope for – not just hope that the Chinese proletariat can organize, as an independent class, but what kind of a class it will be as it organizes independently. And that speaks to what we would need to do with the new trade unionism that might happen here.

EL: So relating that to the kinds of demands that you see being made here, what's the connection?

LP: Right, the type of *immediate* demands we need to make here, in our societies (and we won't succeed unless we can make immediate demands, not just long term ones) need to be the ones that reduce competition among the working-class. The struggle for pensions needs to be put in terms of the re-creation of a universal pension system, rather than employer-based benefits, which divides the working-class. We need to go back to the demand for a universal pension. That builds into the long-term strategy as well, because those pension demands need to be built into the long-term infrastructure, not to be invested in bond markets and stock markets and derivatives. Those pension funds should be available to the state for long-term infrastructure development.

That should go hand-in-hand with a long-term demand for nationalizing the banks and transforming them, or taking those that were nationalized because they were bankrupt in this crisis, and not running them in the same way as they were run before which is what's been done in Britain. They should be turned into public utilities, oriented to allowing us to undertake democratic economic planning. And that's about the decisions about what's invested, how it's invested, where it's invested etc. This needs to be the essence of a democratic economy.

The type of short term demands we make, need to be built with that in mind.

EL: It's difficult, though, isn't it, because what is simple as a rallying point is basically just to say 'no' to what the government is now doing. 'Don't get rid of this.' And when you start saying something which to some ears is a bit more esoteric, you may fail to get the level of unity around that – some people think you're longer term project is a good idea but others aren't so sure, it's harder to conceptualize than simple resistance, and so on.

LP: That's absolutely right. It's dangerous. And people sometimes therefore give up on winning or even demanding the type of reforms that would provide an *opening* to the more structural reforms we need. But if we don't risk that, we will be in a cycle of defensive struggle and losing defensive struggle increasingly. So the type of organizers we need to develop, the type of cadre we need to build, the type of people who can go to a student meeting and motivate the struggle, need to be those who have developed the skills and capacities and depth that allow them to be good at taking a defensive struggle and saying 'we can both fight it, and maybe fight it more effectively, if we can link it to a set of demands that are forward looking. They need to be visionary in terms of a socialist strategy. That doesn't mean socialism tomorrow. But it means building out of this defensive struggle socialist capacities.

It's been done historically, there's no reason it can't be done now. But I agree it's a risk.

EL: But also do you think it is present in the left as it currently is constituted here?

LP: It's present. It's not present in great enough numbers; it's hardly at all present in the current organizations. That said, I've said some very critical things of the Leninist formations, or at least the Trotskyist ones who wanted to build a better Leninism. But they were good at developing people who could engage in immediate struggles but at the same time encourage people to read and think and argue about how to move them toward socialist goals. One could build on the tendencies within these formations, but only by taking them in a direction that's less bothered by whether Lenin was right in 1911 or not. •

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Leo Panitch *is a political economist and theorist based at York University, Toronto, and is co-editor of Socialist Register. His most recent book is In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives (with Greg Albo and Sam Gindin). Leo spoke to New Left Project's (NLP) Edward Lewis about the long crisis of the left and his ideas for a reinvigorated anti-capitalist strategy. The discussion focuses on the labour movement, class and identity politics, proposal for a new kind of political party as well as some of the immediate questions faced by the left at the present juncture.*

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