

## The U.S. Democratic Party and the Left

Conversation with Ingar Solty and Max Bohnel on the labour movement, the Occupy movement, and the challenges of history

By [Socialist Project](#)

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*The conversation was translated by Sam Putinja from Toronto.*

**Max Bohnel (MB):** Let's talk about the Democratic Party and the left in the United States. The Democrats have held their party's nomination convention and partly due to Mitt Romney's campaign troubles Barack Obama is now ahead again in the polls. Is it possible to make out who has turned away from Obama in disappointment and who still supports him?

Sept. 20: to mark the one year anniversary of the movement in New York, Occupy Wall Street protesters wore masks of President Barack Obama, Republican candidate Mitt Romney, and the Monopoly Tycoon. [Photo: [current.com](#).]

**Ingar Solty (IS):** For a long time now a strong wind, coming from large sections of capital, not least organized by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, has been battering Obama; namely the fossil-fuel industry, the healthcare-industrial complex and Wall Street. Within the labour movement, with the exception of a few smaller and medium-sized trade unions such as National Nurses United ([NNU](#)) or the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America ([UE](#)), who pursue an independent and a class-struggle oriented political strategy, the member unions of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) and Change to Win (CTW) have more or less grudgingly declared their support for Obama as early as spring 2012. This, despite Obama breaking his key

election promise of passing the [Employee Free Choice Act](#), and the betrayal of unions in Wisconsin during the Scott Walker [recall election](#) when he limited his support to a message sent via Twitter.

The hope among many leftists for a leftward shift in the public sector unions after the defeat in Wisconsin, failed to materialize after the left-wing challenger Danny Donohue lost the election for the leadership of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in June. This is, after all, the biggest public sector union next to the National Education Association (NEA). It remains to be seen what revitalization of public sector unions will emerge out of the victorious Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike, which mobilized a huge section of the city's working-class against austerity measures in education. Apart from this, there is the spectrum encompassing the Occupy movement, though it is unclear what will result from there.

**MB:** Hasn't Occupy aided the re-election of Obama? Isn't the election one reason why the movement is in crisis?

**IS:** In view of the fact, that it is a difficult task for many on the broad Left to counter right-wing populism without lapsing into a very contradictory apologia for Obama, it would seem obvious to interpret the election year – and the threat of a Republican president and a right-wing libertarian vice-president – as being responsible for the very real demobilization of Occupy that has occurred. It seems plausible to interpret it as a conscious decision to fall into line behind the “lesser evil” of the Democrats. Obama has undoubtedly tried to obtain new political capital from a cooptation of Occupy. His political experiences have probably taught him – without recourse to the theories of the French Regulation School – that long-term reforms for the renewal and stabilization of capitalism from above are paradoxically dependent on resistance coming from below. The premier example of this is FDR's [Second New Deal](#), which he pushed through in the best long-term interests of capital, but against the resistance of large segments of the capitalist class, and with the support of the powerful labour movement of the time.

You can see how Obama tried to co-opt Occupy with [left-populist speeches](#) such as the one in Osawatimie, Kansas at the end of 2011. The attempt at cooptation, even if it was genuine, nevertheless failed. Excitement for Obama has waned and this may well be one reason why capital is now leaning toward Romney. This also means a Green New Deal, which the resigned [Christina Romer](#) had more or less advocated, is no longer being proposed. Already in Obama's 2011 State of the Union address there was only half-hearted talk about high-speed trains and the like, and no longer in any programmatic fashion. In 2012 references to a green-capitalist economic conversion, a “post-bubble economy,” as Obama used to call it, completely disappeared from his vocabulary. It could be that Obama still privately desires this. Politically, however, he's given up on it because he knows its implementation, against opposition from the powers that be, would require a completely new set of circumstances, as for example, a dramatic intensification of the crisis on top of massive resistance from below.

Even if Obama, as the first “post-civil rights politician” [according to Tariq Ali](#), realized at some point, that his centrist approach to the stimulus program, “Obamacare” etc., was the wrong strategic approach, he could not go back now. With regard to the new export-oriented growth strategy he is pursuing as a result, however, Obama does not require a strong Left nor strong trade unions but rather the exact opposite. Most people on the left are beginning to understand this.

**MB:** So you're saying that Obama's turn toward austerity and the export-oriented growth strategy makes a cooptation of the Occupy spectrum impossible?

**IS:** Yes, exactly. There is however a further crucial factor. One of the most interesting aspects of Occupy and the Tea Party appears to me to be that ultimately they are two sides of the same coin. When abstracted from the quite specific conditions of their respective origins, the Tea Party is the rightwing, and Occupy the leftwing response to the crisis of hegemony of [neoliberalism](#).

This hegemonic crisis is concretely manifesting itself in the increasingly obvious failures of liberal-parliamentary institutions to deal with capitalist contradictions. From deregulated financial markets to mass unemployment, the working poor in the low-wage sector, the precariousness of labour, the increasing social inequality and its impact on liberal democracy, immigration and integration policies (especially in Europe), up to the safety of nuclear power plants and climate change, one crisis extends into another. The "state" and "rulers" fail in the eyes of the public who see "Washington," Berlin, London etc. as being "broken."

It is this dysfunctionality and "ungovernability" that has led to an astonishing culture of pessimism amongst the organic intellectuals of the bourgeoisie who are filling the columns from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times* via the *Washington Post* to the *New York Times*. Oftentimes this is being expressed with a juxtaposition of the assumed swift and bold changes which the Chinese government is capable of and the "paralysis" of the U.S. political system. It is remarkable when the former ideologue of triumphalist liberalism, [Francis Fukuyama](#), says that the U.S., because of its political paralysis, has "little to teach China" and when the ideologue of free markets and the "hidden fist" of the American Empire, [Thomas L. Friedman](#), in his book on green capitalism, wishes the U.S. "could be China for one day" and thus do - with the same authority as the Chinese state - what in his view needs to be done to renew capitalism.

In their own right, the movements of the Left and the Right are expressions of this consciousness of the crisis from below. I find it striking that the Occupy movement developed despite a Democrat occupying the White House, and that its actors frequently expressed their motivations for becoming active with specific reference to their personal disappointment and disillusionment with Obama.

It's interesting to compare this with Germany, where for a number of reasons, the Occupy movement never really took off. The American clientele of Occupy correspond closely with the clientele of Germany's [Pirate Party](#), which skyrocketed to 15 per cent in the opinion polls earlier in 2012. These are young, often highly qualified, precariously employed wage-earners, who-despite all their heterogeneity - stand in clear opposition to the racist and classist exclusionary discourses of the rightwing populists. In terms of their worldview, they are oriented toward an inclusive egalitarianism that stretches from social-liberal via social democratic to socialist critiques of neoliberalism.

In Germany the emergence of the Pirate Party amounts essentially to a political articulation of the notion that the crisis of bourgeois democracy in neoliberalism can be resolved by sending new, "better," and transparent parliamentarians bound by an imperative mandate, into the post-democratic Bundestag, coupled with the implementation of "direct democracy" by means of plebiscites. Here, the lesson of the U.S., that single-issue plebiscites, with the right amount of money, can be utilized to enforce some of the worst kinds of decisions, even

with respect to economic issues (just think of the quite recent referendums that would make the Employee Free Choice Act unconstitutional in various Republican-dominated states), has not been learned.

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In contrast, Occupy in the U.S. appears to be headed in a completely different direction. To exaggerate a bit, the German Pirates are today where Obama’s supporters were in 2008 as they voted for him with messianic-liberal expectations of salvation, and believed that this, and not (extra-parliamentary) self-organization – in the workplace, in the community, in independent political formations etc., – would solve all their problems. In other words, we are dealing here with a significant advance in consciousness, which in view of the anti-leftwing policies of Obama not only complicates the politics of lesser-evilism, but also makes very likely the emergence of Occupy 2.0 and resistance to local, regional and national austerity policies regardless of whether the new president will be the old one or not.

**MB:** What in your opinion then is the actual reason for the crisis of Occupy?

**IS:** I think the crisis Occupy finds itself in would have occurred even without this being an election year. It is a crisis every spontaneous movement, no matter how lively and dynamic it is – and Occupy was indeed tremendously dynamic – at some point necessarily enters into if it fails to channel its energy into mass political organizations with long-term perspectives. Naturally this is easier said than done because the question regarding organization is nowhere as complicated as in the United States, which is the only advanced capitalist country that still has a political system that originated in the period of classical liberalism.

**MB:** Can you elaborate on that?

One can see this wonderfully in Charlie Post’s new book [The American Road to Capitalism](#). From a political-Marxist perspective, Post asserts the thesis that the actual American “bourgeois revolution” occurred not during the War of Independence from 1776 onwards, but during the [Civil War](#) (1861-1865) between the pre-capitalist South and the early-capitalist North. From this latter period the bourgeois duopoly of Republicans and Democrats first emerges. In other words, while in Europe during the 1870s and 1880s strong socialist working-class parties emerged challenging the existing (feudal-)conservative and (bourgeois-)liberal parties, in the U.S. all historical attempts to establish a working-class based, programmatic and mass membership party capable of challenging this duopoly failed with the demise of [Eugene Debs’](#) Socialist Party around the time of World War I.

This failure has had tremendously devastating effects for the Left that manifests itself even in language. The contemporary language of the political spectrum in the U.S. – conservative and liberal (in the past one also heard the adjective “radical,” today one often hears about a “moderate” or an “Independent”) – still dates back to the era of classical liberalism.

You can see how dramatic the difference is when you look at the meaning of the prefix “social.” In Europe, the recognition of the “social question” in the first half of the 19th

century led to the emergence of mass organizations referring to themselves as “socialists” or “social democrats.” From minor reforms to revolution, “social” meant, and still means today, the need to ameliorate or overcome the contradictions of capitalism. As a result, it is regarded as “common sense” that capitalism is inherently un-social, i.e. as being inclined to results that most consider as unequal and unjust. And the successes of the socialists’ challenge to capitalism can be observed in the fact that the prefix “social” was assumed by the forces of the Right which, out of fear of social revolution, aimed to appear as caring about the poor, as well as the working-class. Hence, “social conservatism” in Europe, most notably in Germany, Austria and France, has historically been the moniker of conservatives critical of capitalism; the usual distinction is between “market conservatives” and “social conservatives.” In the U.S., however, a “social conservative” is what in Europe would be called a “values conservative” or “cultural conservative.” The prefix “social” as a political recognition of the inherent crisis-proneness of capitalism and a reflection of, and bourgeois response to, the self-organization and attempt at self-liberation by the wage-dependent classes does not even exist in the collective “common sense” of the United States.

Instead, being left is widely associated with being a “liberal,” which is ultimately just another word for the top-down perspective of a bourgeois who thinks we should be nice to the poor, either because he fears revolts and social disintegration (crime, cultural and ethnic conflicts etc.) or because he thinks higher wages are needed for aggregate demand, i.e. for the stabilization and reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole. In other words, the historic emancipation of the socialist project for liberation from the liberal one, which in Europe was successful over the course of the 30 difficult years following the conservative turn of the liberal bourgeoisie during the Europe-wide 1848 revolutions, in some ways still needs to be (re-) accomplished in the United States.

But, how is an anti-capitalist movement supposed to be successful, if it does not even have its own name? American “common sense” regards a socialist as someone over in historically war-torn and politically unstable Europe, and not as a legitimate political actor on the left of the U.S. political spectrum. Such a movement is bound to remain in a subordinated position to the compromise-oriented section of the Bourgeoisie, which is liberal and has historically been connected to the Democratic Party. Of course, this is not to say that the Left in Europe does not have to emancipate itself from the SINO parties, the Socialist-in-Name-Only parties. Indeed, they have largely converged with the Democratic Party during the neoliberal era inasmuch as their Third Way approaches were modeled after Bill Clinton’s New Democrats. And they have undoubtedly been moving institutionally toward becoming (social-) liberal parties. That is to say, parties with increasingly less programmatic orientations, mass memberships, and rank-and-file democracy.

The point is that linguistically the distinction between socialism and capitalism is still real in Europe and can more easily be reclaimed by old and new parties to the left of traditional social democracy, such as the German Left Party, the Left Front in France, the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, or the post-communist Scandinavian left parties.

**MB:** So the crisis of Occupy needs to be seen as the result of the historic weakness of the Left in the U.S., which is due to inherited historic structures, and the lack of national mass political organizations to the left of the Democratic Party?

**IS:** Yes, exactly. Any spontaneous social movement ultimately depends on large mass political organizations that help build the working-class internally. And help it become active in the political process seeking (counter-) hegemony externally by forming coalitions with



non-antagonistic allied classes.

The Democrats assumed the role of a quasi-social democracy between the 1930s and the 1960s during the New Deal Coalition. However, they were never in principle a programmatic mass or class-based party in the west-European style, and they had to operate in a political system in which the federal state was and still is powerful in imperial foreign policy, but weak in domestic welfare-state policies. The Democratic Party thus functions to this day according to the classical-liberal model of dignitaries and notables, with all the associated problems present in an increasingly unequal class society. Congress is in fact almost the exclusive domain of millionaires or people financially dependent on millionaires or billionaires like [Sheldon Adelson](#), Newt Gingrich's personal ATM machine.

All attempts by the workers' movements to establish a rank-and-file democratic, class-based third party at the national level have failed historically. As a result, and beyond the classical anarchism/socialism schism, no question has so split the U.S. Left than the question regarding organization. Do you pursue an electoral reform strategy in favour of a proportional-representation/instant run-off voting system? Do you try and work through the Democratic Party in an *entrism* kind of fashion, possibly based on internal political formations such as the Working Families' Party? Or do you make another attempt at building a class-based, new third party, such as the Labor Party USA, which unfortunately failed during the 1990s? It is an incredibly difficult question. For these reasons, things appear to me to be such that Occupy, whose crisis set in well before the beginning of 2012, is not a victim of the election year. It is more so the victim of the extremely difficult position in which the Left in the United States generally, and for historic reasons, finds itself.

The fact that under such conditions it is difficult to decide upon a political strategy appears to me to be a fundamental reason why all attempts at establishing a new left party have failed. Despite all the leftist dissatisfaction with Obama, both the hopes of having a leftwing challenger in the democratic primaries, as well as the efforts by many leftwing intellectuals such as [Stanley Aronowitz](#) and [Rick Wolff](#), in the direction of a new party have not borne fruit. We should not forget that with the socialist senator [Bernie Sanders](#), one of the most popular politicians in the United States, there had been a suitable candidate for the Left. His potential candidacy could at least have opened up the space for a debate about leftwing alternatives to Obama.

As influential public intellectuals such as Chris Hedges keep arguing, if the Left in the U.S. does not develop a credible, radical political project, independent from Obama and "the liberal class," then the desire for a programmatic alternative to the intolerable status quo is going to come from the Right. Without visible solidaristic and humanist alternatives, the likes of right-wing libertarians such as Paul Ryan and Ron Paul in combination with authoritarian Christian fundamentalists by the likes of James Dobson and Tim LaHaye are going to fulfill the wishes for a comprehensive worldview and broad vision for the future. They represent the ideological undercurrents of a Republican Party that has increasingly shifted to the right and is rightfully feared not only by organized workers in the U.S. but also by the geopolitical and geo-economic targets of the American Empire. •



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