

AUSTERITY IS OVER!

IF WE WANT IT

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2015 is the year of elections. It has been and will continue to be dominated by electoral politics and their limits. The UK general election is just one of a series of important national elections happening across Europe. The consequences of Syriza's election in Greece in January will continue to play out through the rest of the year, and the elections in Spain and Portugal are also likely to be significant. As such, the frame of electoral politics is going to be hard to escape until 2016 at the earliest.

An electoral turn was not the immediate future we anticipated after the financial crisis. So, how did we get here? Crucially, austerity didn't exactly do what we expected it would. The flurry of fat cat shaming and bank-bashing that followed the 2007–08 collapse only amounted to a momentary sense of awkwardness from which we were quickly distracted.

The official narrative was that public spending, rather than the financial sector, had become dangerously bloated. Cue an era of targeted austerity where the very poorest of us had our social wage (our access to services, relief, public resources) slashed to bits whilst our real wages plummeted and our jobs vanished. In the first instance we were told to tighten our belts just until the system stabilised but that squeeze has turned into the new normal, a silent redirection of wealth into the pockets of the very rich.

For a brief period we hoped this upward redistribution of wealth would be transparent enough to kick-start new social movements, but what started out promisingly peaked in 2011 and has yet to reapproach those heady heights. While we knew austerity wouldn't reinvigorate the economy, we failed to anticipate the extent of its success: the cuts have passed the threshold where lives are at stake, and the working class has been largely powerless to stop the onslaught.

Austerity has been, and continues to be, very successful. Not in boosting the economy, certainly not in improving the lives of anyone but the richest few, but in terms of an intensification of neoliberalism's anti-democratic mechanisms. Perhaps, in this context, it should come as no surprise that people are picking over the bones of political approaches whose abandonment may have been premature.

Austerity can't just be voted out

Closest to home we saw the effects of election fever in the Green Surge at the start of the year. The dramatic increase in the size of the Green Party can be explained to varying degrees as the galvanizing effect of the Scottish independence vote, the increased traction of Syriza and Podemos, and the viral logic of social media.

What's interesting is that lots of social movement participants – activists, autonomists, anarchists and libertarians – are also joining. Some are doing so for precise reasons, but for many 'surgers' it seems the Green Surge doesn't constitute a strategy so much as the kind of thing that happens in the *absence* of one. It also points to lessons that might be painful for us to face up to. The electoral turn was partly caused by the failure of the movements of 2011 to bring about the necessary level of change. An impasse was reached in both the pure horizontalist rejection of representative politics and the initial attempts to address the crisis of social reproduction independently of the state and capital. One of the positive effects of the electoral turn is its indication of a wider acceptance that an electoral expression of the movements will probably have to play some part in an effective contemporary Left politics, although such a strategy is not without its risks.

There's a hint of 'something that happens in the absence of a strategy' in projects such as Left Unity. We could read Left Unity sympathetically as an attempt by the (post-)Trotskyist Left to rid itself of a frequently bitter sectarian culture, and hence as a positive move. However, the name of the project reveals its foundational problem in that it's easy to worry that it simply amounts to selected parts of the 'old Left' huddling together around an electoral strategy which lets them put off the more radical, and indeed more difficult task of rethinking that the present situation requires.

15M in Spain was, in part, a revolution against the old Left: not only the neoliberal Left but also the old 'revolutionary' Left. Podemos represents an adaptation by segments of the old Left to the new political common sense created by 15M. One of early slogans raised by Podemos was '*turn the social majority into a political majority*'. Around 70% of the population said they supported the camps and demonstrations of the 15M, yet the remaining 30% still managed to elect the conservative People's Party in 2011, which has since tried to ban protest and hamstring future movements.

The Greek experience is less clear but fairly similar. The 'national unity' government of conservative New Democracy and 'social democratic' Pasok instigated a massive crackdown on the movements, which along with the devastation caused by austerity demoralised movement actors until an electoral turn seemed the only hope. Unfortunately as the year goes on it's likely we'll see the limits of this electoralism made stark.

Syriza ran into heavy traffic as soon as it got elected. This is regrettable but not surprising given the EU constitution was specifically designed to lock in neoliberal policy irrespective of the individual governments who took power. In fact almost

every neoliberal reform aims to insulate governance from democratic pressure, from anti-trade union laws and the lifting of capital controls, to introducing pseudo-market structures into public services and indebting countries and individuals.

These neoliberal changes work to break up old forms of working class power, route around points of working class leverage and prevent any return to social democracy through the ballot box. The economic crisis has broken the neoliberal deal, whereby stagnating wages were offset by access to cheap credit to maintain living standards. But while the bailouts of the financial sector have moved the nation state back to centre stage as a political actor, other neoliberal mechanisms remain in place.

The neoliberal apparatus is designed to be insurmountable, yet if a turn towards communism – or even social democracy – is desirable, its mechanisms need to be revealed and either evaded or overcome. Electoral politics even at their point of failure can be useful if they can clarify the anti-democratic devices working against collective action, and they will likely play a role in a successful fight against neoliberalism. But they cannot be sufficient: even if the electoral turn opens up a space in which to articulate certain problems, it is unable to provide solutions to our present problem of leverage.

Beyond the Electoral Turn: The Social Strike

Neither austerity nor the movements that germinated in its shadow have behaved the way we expected them to, so we shouldn't write off any of these electoral projects prematurely. But if the Green Surge was symptomatic of a lack of strategy – at least from the position of wanting radical change – we need to talk about developing strategy after and beyond the electoral turn. If we anticipate a return to extra-parliamentary politics, central to this will be the unresolved question of working class leverage.

Emerging from the question of leverage is the proposal of the Social Strike. The Social Strike is not an event, but a strategic orientation with three key functions: making visible the conditions of austerity and neoliberalism; disrupting the circulation of capital; and directly socialising, collectivising and communising our social relations, reproduction and struggles.

At its crudest, the Social Strike is an attempt to address the question of exercising leverage within our present conditions. Principally this has taken the form of the strike – the withdrawal of labour – and this has historically underpinned most expressions of working class power.

But strikes at the point of production are losing their effectiveness, at least in the Global North. The number of days lost to strikes in the UK is at a historic low and much contemporary industrial action is more gestural than forceful. The broad Left response to this is to demand the reversal of anti-trade union laws, to which some would add electing a more combative union leadership. Those would both be good things but they're insufficient. Strikes have primarily been inhibited by changes in class composition, in particular changes in the experience of work and changes in the organisation of production.

The idea of a Social Strike relates to the concept of the 'social factory', the idea that the sphere of production has escaped the factory and spread across society. Strikes were dominant and effective in the era of the mass worker – with expansive workplaces, clear lines of class antagonism on the shop floor, and standardised working hours and breaks giving clearer opportunities for communication and agitation. Many 'mass' workplaces have now been broken up through outsourcing, work has become more precarious and forms and patterns of work have diversified. All these things make it harder to establish the common interests and leverage a successful strike requires.

Making Visible

Some movements have tried to address this problem by finding ways to express the new common conditions politically. A pioneer of this approach can be found in the Italian EuroMayday movement which used festival-type marches, along with the icon San Precario, the patron Saint of Precarious workers, to make the common condition of precarity a visible and political problem. Other examples include the recent 'Vaga de Totes' women's strike in Barcelona, which aimed to reveal the usually invisible, devalued and feminised work of social reproduction, and the Spanish Real Democracy Now! platform, which attempts to bring neoliberalism's anti-democratic mechanisms of governance into focus.

Disrupting Circulation

The 1980s and 1990s saw a 'logistics revolution' that aimed to shift capitalism's infrastructural weak-points away from well-organised workforces. The introduction of shipping containers and the 1990s road-building program (partly defeated in the UK by the anti-roads movement) aimed to break the dock and railway unions, while a new gas-based energy infrastructure finished off the National Union of Mineworkers.

Worldwide supply chains coordinated 'just-in-time' by barcodes and networked computers have facilitated the relocation of production to the global south. Yet while old forms of working class power were dismantled, the process of automation and relocation produced new weak points. 'Just-in-time' or lean production, relies on keeping very low stock levels in shops and factories with barcodes allowing new stock

to be ordered just-in-time for it to arrive where it's needed. The fuel blockades by farmers and truckers in 2000 showed just how vulnerable modern capitalism is to disruption of transport infrastructure: a weakness amplified by the strong tendencies towards monopolies and oligopolies in the modern economy. As a result there are a small numbers of very large logistics centres in the UK that have vital infrastructural roles.

Workers at those sites would seem to occupy key points of material leverage. However they tend to be employed under precarious, non-unionised conditions. Some activists have realised the potential here, as demonstrated by Occupy Oakland's port shutdown. Working unofficially with the unionised dockworkers they have led the way in the move from symbolic occupations of city parks to tactics that disrupt the circulation of capital. It's a lesson that seems to have somewhat generalised in the USA with the Black Lives Matter demonstrations also beginning to occupy highways. Of course there are other examples of those without a shared workplace gaining leverage by blocking circulation – the Argentinean unemployed workers movement, the Piqueteros, are a case in point.

It's not hard to imagine how effective a logistics strike could be if supplemented by social movements deploying tactics such as Reclaim the Streets-style street occupations.

Socialise, Collectivise, Communise

There are several problems with a strategy of disruption though. The most obvious is that for highly disruptive strikes to work, and not be isolated and crushed through militarised policing, they need high levels of legitimacy in wider society. Such support is of course possible. A 2013 poll by Spanish newspaper El País showed 89% support for the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages campaign of direct action, eviction-blocking and *escraches* (protests outside politicians' houses).

Another problem with a strategy of disruption relates to the issue of visibility. Those sectors with the most leverage tend to become the most visible, often at the neglect of more 'invisible' work. An increasing section of the economy and the waged labour market is comprised of caring work. Socially reproductive work has a dual character that causes problems for disruptive strategies, in that it reproduces us both as workers for capital but also as human beings and social actors. How can care workers go on strike without causing harm to those they care for and about?

To address these problems we need to develop the third element of the social strike, one that aims to directly socialise (or communise) social relations and struggles. Most obviously this involves striking (or otherwise acting) in ways that maximise feelings of collectivity and enhance general levels of sociability. For a recent example of a tactic that tried to socialise a strike we could look to Bradford IWW's organisation of a collective crèche during last year's teachers' strikes. More generally this element of the social strike provides a route to link up the two extra-parliamentary forms of exercising power: the power of disruption (strikes, blockades, occupations, etc.) and the power of self-reproduction (solidarity networks, socialist clothing banks, pay-as-you-feel cafes, etc.).

Perhaps we can see the projects and campaigns to directly address the crisis of social reproduction as a means of socialising society and therefore moving things in the direction we want it to go. But we can also see them as reclaiming some of the resources needed to make more directly antagonistic tactics possible and successful. The traditional response to any unlimited strike is to starve out the strikers and their families. When we go on all-out strike we are trying to cause a crisis in the reproduction of capital while the bosses try to provoke a crisis of social reproduction amongst the workers. Those who can hold out longest win. For us to win would require us to seize the means of reproduction.

Attempts to socialise and collectivise struggles also helps to broaden social networks and establish legitimacy for more disruptive tactics, especially when they are tied to politicising a specific problem and exposing the inability of 'established channels' to address them. Perhaps the natural accompaniment to this tactic is a reinvention of the 'good work strike'. Traditionally this targets the needs of bosses in the work process rather than the needs of other workers. A classic example is the refusal of transport workers to stamp tickets, but a side effect of this tactic is to reveal how the demands of capital and management get in the way of actually addressing people's needs. A contemporary version might take aim at the bureaucracy of neoliberal managerialism, refusing to participate in – or acting to otherwise reveal – the endless audits and performance management that does so much to prevent people doing the actually useful part of their jobs.

Onwards

2015 will continue to be the year of the electoral turn. There's probably no escaping this even if we want to. What this means is that whilst we participate in its unfolding – testing its limits and remaining vigilant to the new spaces it creates – we can also use it as a year of experimentation. Treat this as an open call. Where might a Social Strike work? What are 21st century capitalism's new weak points? How can we make use of the new electoral entities and the openings they create? Most importantly, with the traditional strike tactic (and with it the old Left) increasingly disarmed, what do we need to create in order to build leverage?

**The bamn editorial collective
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