

After Seattle: Strategic Thinking About Movement Building

by Martin Hart-Landsberg

The Seattle anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) actions have justifiably generated a lot of excitement, renewed political activism, and considerable serious discussion on the left about next steps. For the first time in a long time, we are in the position to think and act strategically, with movement-building in mind. In what follows, I evaluate the Seattle experience; examine several political initiatives; explore the relationships among issues, campaigns, and movements; and suggest political criteria and a program of action to guide our organizing efforts. My aim is to help achieve the political clarity and unity necessary to realize the potential of the period.

Celebrating Seattle

The Seattle actions were noteworthy for their inclusiveness and creativity, as people of many different ages, motivated by many different concerns, joined together in opposition to the WTO and the neoliberal policies that define its agenda. Those directly involved in the demonstrations withstood attacks by the police and National Guard with incredible spirit, determination, and solidarity. Demonstrators have done an excellent job carrying the message of those days back to their communities, often to

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large and enthusiastic audiences. Many have published useful summaries and critical analyses of the events.¹

While we celebrate the battles won on the streets of Seattle, it is important that we not lose sight of the broader social developments that give the Seattle events even greater political significance. The following are among the most important: a substantial and growing number of working people are angry that their working and living conditions have shown little (if any) improvement during this period of economic expansion. In addition, many are coming to understand that this situation is not the result of a natural, evolutionary process (often called "globalization"), but rather of conscious choices that reflect political interests defined primarily in terms of capitalist imperatives. And many are also beginning to realize that working people throughout the world face similar trends and political processes, and that joint action is not only possible but necessary if positive changes in living and working conditions are to be achieved.

The overwhelming majority of people who participated in and supported the Seattle demonstrations would not define themselves as radicals, but their understandings and motivations demonstrate receptivity to a radical understanding of capitalism and socialist-oriented political action. The post-Seattle period thus represents an important and exciting opportunity for those of us committed to building strong and democratic movements for socialism.

At the same time, there is nothing automatic about the future direction of political developments. Most of the teach-ins, both before and after the WTO protests, offered an array of political perspectives, from anticorporate to anticonsumerist to anticapitalist. Some presenters advocated elimination of the WTO; others called for its reform through the incorporation of labor and environmental side-agreements. Calls for defensive struggles to protect labor rights or the environment often mingled uneasily with calls for new forms of living and working in intentional, self-sufficient communities.

Therefore, this period requires—if not demands—that we think carefully about how to respond to the anger and energy people are feeling and expressing. In other words, we need to

develop a strategic focus that can help us build movements for change that embrace the principles of equality, democracy, and solidarity in both practice and vision. Lacking such a focus, it is all too likely we will miss a highly favorable moment for making real progress towards socialism. However, urgency does not always bring clarity.

A Flawed Strategy: The China Campaign

Concern over deteriorating labor and environmental conditions motivated many working people to oppose the WTO. President Clinton, recognizing the seriousness of this concern, sought to blunt its radical potential by acknowledging it and advocating adoption of a labor study group as a first step towards the incorporation of labor standards into the WTO. A number of activists and groups involved in the Seattle actions have proposed a different response to this concern, one that they hope will strengthen ties between labor and other social groups and popular opposition to the WTO. Their strategy is to direct popular energy into a campaign opposing China's entry into the WTO. Unfortunately, this is a seriously flawed strategy. Such a campaign misdirects the political energy of the period. It is unlikely to deepen an understanding of the nature of capitalism or build a socialist-oriented movement for change.

Shortly before the Seattle meetings, the United States and Chinese governments agreed on terms under which the United States would approve China's entrance into the WTO. These terms said nothing about labor rights or environmental standards. However, for the agreement to have force, the U.S. Congress must first vote to grant China permanent Normal Trade Relations (NTR).

Groups such as Public Citizen and leaders of the AFL-CIO oppose the China deal for a number of related reasons. They consider China to be a "world-class" dictatorship, unfair trader, and exploiter of working people. They believe that China's entrance into the WTO will intensify downward pressures on working and environmental conditions in the United States and elsewhere. In sum, they find the China deal to be symbolic of all

that is wrong with current globalization dynamics and they are convinced that they can use the momentum from Seattle, as well as public distrust of China, to win the vote against NTR for China and strike another blow against those that support unregulated international capitalism.

Recognizing the potential significance of the China-NTR debate, the *Wall Street Journal*, in a front-page story entitled "WTO's Failure in Bid to Launch Trade Talks Emboldens Protestors," offered a profile of leading progressive voices in the movement to keep China out of the WTO:

The [WTO] talks' collapse left foes of free trade euphoric. And they left Seattle with a new energy, intent on fighting the Clinton administration's next major trade goal: getting China in the WTO. "China. We're coming atcha," yelled Mike Dolan, master planner of the Seattle protests, as he celebrated the disintegration of the WTO ministerial meeting. "There's no question about it. The next issue is China."²

The article quotes a number of people associated with the AFL-CIO making similar statements. AFL-CIO spokeswoman Denise Mitchell said, "The China vote is going to become a proxy for all of our concerns about globalization." The article also highlights the position of Jeff Faux, president of the progressive Economic Policy Institute (EPI), who opposed China's entrance into the WTO because its presence would make it "impossible to get labor and environmental standards." The reason is that China is not only a dictatorship, it is also too big a country to push around.

This strategy of making the China issue our main issue is problematic for several reasons. Most importantly, it encourages people concerned about labor and environmental conditions in the United States to see China as largely responsible for these conditions, not U.S. capitalists or capitalism in general. This leads people to think that the best response to U.S. problems is to force China to change its system, perhaps by adopting U.S.-shaped labor and environmental regulations, and by extension, that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with U.S. capitalism.

These are not abstract fears. A case in point is an article by Robert E. Scott, an EPI economist, which was published in the progressive journal *WorkingUSA*.³ Scott opposes China's entry in

the WTO for several reasons, the most important of which is that its statist system does not allow for fair trade. Thus, its admittance into the WTO will result in increased trade problems for the U.S. economy.

Scott proposes three conditions which, if met, would allow him to end his opposition:

First, the United States should oppose China's WTO membership unless and until China agrees to include enforceable labor rights and environmental standards as core elements of the agreement. Second, the United States should not enter into any trade agreement with China that does not deliver quantifiable commercial benefits. . . . [This requires China to] agree to maintain or appreciate the value of its currency as needed . . . [and] agree to achieve quantifiable, numerical targets for import penetration at the product and industry level, under strict timetables. Finally, all of these agreements must be enforceable through a clearly defined multilateral mechanism. Any changes required to make the WTO structure compatible with the necessary enforcement mechanisms would have to be put in place (p. 87).

There can be no mistaking the politics driving this article. Scott calls not for dismantling the WTO, but for strengthening it by adding labor and environmental standards as well as new enforcement mechanisms for oversight of exchange rates and economic activity in general.

What is it about China that excites such strong demands? While Scott states that China "exploits labor and represses human rights" (p. 83), his attack is primarily directed against the non-market features of the Chinese system. According to Scott, "Unfair competition is built into China's economic system" (p. 84). The reason is that China uses "a number of market-distorting government policies, including requirements for technology transfer to domestic firms, local content and offset requirements and import and foreign exchange licensing arrangements" (p. 84).

Significantly, when highlighting the growing U.S. trade deficit with China in key sectors such as computers and telecommunications equipment, Scott points out that China's high-tech exports to the United States are produced largely by U.S. and other foreign multinationals operating in China. He says, for example, "As in the case of computers, the United States exports parts and

jobs to China's 'export platforms' (foreign-owned factories within China that import parts and export finished goods), and it gets assembled phones in return" (p. 84). Yet, Scott raises no critical questions about the destructive operation of U.S. multinational corporations or the logic of export-led capitalism. His attacks are leveled only against Chinese state policy, and in particular those parts of the Chinese system that appear to deviate from neoliberalism.

No doubt many people mobilized by the events surrounding the Seattle protests could be attracted to the campaign against China's entrance into the WTO. The Chinese government is not democratic, and most Chinese workers labor under difficult and harsh conditions. Moreover, there is little doubt that Chinese workers, and especially farmers, will suffer greatly from their country's entry into the WTO.

Still it is important to realize that the campaign against the China deal is not a solidarity campaign. Comparisons to boycott actions against apartheid-era South Africa or Burma are revealing. In those cases, we had democratic forces within the country calling for trade and investment boycotts as part of their own internal strategy for achieving change.

To date, no independent movement of Chinese workers has called for international support for a campaign to keep China out of the WTO. In fact, even organizations operating in Hong Kong that seek to promote independent labor organizing in China have refrained from supporting such a campaign.⁴ Moreover, many militant and independent labor movements, including those in South Korea and Brazil, as well as many third world NGOs, have gone on record opposing the extension of WTO powers to include oversight of labor and environmental conditions. Thus, pursuing a campaign that makes such demands a critical element of its strategy is bound to endanger the international solidarity that was built during the Seattle actions. This accomplishment should not be lightly cast aside.

The anti-China campaign makes sense only if the primary goal is reform of the WTO through adoption of labor and environmental side-agreements. But, such a goal not only undermines

international solidarity, it also sets back the political development of a socialist-oriented movement in the United States. There is a growing radicalization taking place within the U.S. working class and our efforts should be directed towards deepening the process, not blunting it. A movement that calls for reform rather than rejection of the WTO, and encourages workers to celebrate neoliberalism and pressure other countries to restructure their political economies along similar lines (so as to solve “our” problems) clearly leads in the wrong direction.

We should oppose making China the focal point of our political work. Our response to those who want to know our opinion on this issue should be that the Chinese people would be better off if their country remained outside the WTO, as would the working people of all countries, including those in the United States. That is why we oppose the WTO and seek to dismantle it. Fundamentally, the China-WTO issue represents a struggle among elites in both the United States and China. Our attention and organizational efforts should be focused on developing campaigns that speak directly to workers’ concerns in the United States and other countries, and that promote rather than weaken international worker solidarity.

An Alternative Campaign: Ratification of ILO Labor Conventions

There are other more productive ways to respond to the deterioration in U.S. working and living conditions, which keep the focus on U.S. capitalism. One way is to take advantage of the U.S. government’s rhetoric. The president and most members of Congress, for example, claim to support strong labor rights. Yet their “actions” tend to be limited to criticisms of labor conditions in other countries. We should challenge the president to endorse, and the Congress to ratify, the seven fundamental labor Conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The ILO has adopted more than 180 international labor Conventions. These Conventions, in the words of the ILO, “are international treaties, subject to ratification by ILO member States.” The ILO Governing Body has decided “that seven Con-

ventions should be considered fundamental to the rights of human beings at work” and should be “implemented and ratified by all member States of the organization. These are called Fundamental ILO Conventions.”⁵

These seven core labor standards are designed to protect freedom of association and organization (Convention numbers 87 and 98), abolish forced labor (Convention numbers 29 and 105), guarantee equality in employment and remuneration (Convention numbers 111 and 100), and eliminate child labor (Convention number 138). At this time, the United States has ratified only one of these fundamental labor standards, number 105. The ILO notes substantial divergence between U.S. national legislation and four of the fundamental Conventions: numbers 29, 87, 98, and 100.⁶

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) issued a report for the WTO General Council (as part of the latter’s review of trade policies) which illuminates U.S. noncompliance with its international commitments.⁷ The report notes, for example, that many U.S. workers are denied the right to join trade unions and bargain collectively. “In the public sector approximately 40 percent of all workers—nearly seven million people—are denied basic collective bargaining rights” (p. 2). And in “the private sector, the law does not protect workers when the employer is determined to destroy or prevent union representation” (p. 3). Examples cited include regular, unpunished firings of trade-union activists and the use of permanent replacement workers during a strike. The report also notes that agricultural and domestic workers, as well as certain kinds of supervisory workers and “independent contractors,” are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act.

The ICFTU report finds ongoing race and gender discrimination in the United States in both hiring and remuneration and the ongoing use of child labor, especially in agriculture and garment sweatshops. It also finds increased use of forced labor in prisons and in U.S. dependent territories, such as the U.S. commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, where “imported” foreign workers are often forced to work under condi-

tions resembling debt peonage.

The U.S. record of ratification of these fundamental labor standards is among the worst in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. A campaign to publicize this fact and demand ratification of all seven Conventions has the potential to sharpen class-consciousness and deepen popular understanding of capitalist imperatives. Such a campaign also can promote greater international solidarity between U.S. and other workers. For example, conversations with workers in other countries could help the U.S. labor movement learn more about alternative legal frameworks and how they have influenced, and been influenced by, labor organizing and workplace struggles.

A campaign to ratify the seven fundamental ILO Conventions represents only one possible alternative to the campaign to keep China out of the WTO. I have highlighted it to illustrate the choices we face and the importance of using well-formed political criteria to guide our political efforts. Other campaigns also deserve our support, including those that promote living-wage contracts, the transformation of the public sector, and opposition to sweatshop production and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank policies.

The Political Challenges of Campaign Organizing

Our challenges extend beyond developing sound political criteria and using them to determine which campaigns have the greatest progressive potential. We also face the challenge of working within our communities to share and win support for our political criteria and choices. For example, opposing the China campaign could lead to redbaiting or charges of sectarianism. More importantly, even when there is general agreement about which campaign to pursue, there is no guarantee that the campaign will realize its potential.

Campaigns are themselves complex political processes. There is no issue so "pure" that it guarantees that the associated campaign will promote grassroots participation; a class-conscious, anticapitalist perspective; and international solidarity. There is

always the danger that pressures from both inside and outside the campaign will moderate the politics and narrow the focus of the campaign, with disastrous political results.

For example, I have advocated a campaign for ratification of ILO core Conventions, seeing it as a vehicle for movement building. However, such a campaign, if dominated by reform elements, could easily fail to achieve this objective. Organizers could limit actions to postcard campaigns directed at members of Congress; people could be encouraged to see ratification of these Conventions as the ultimate answer to U.S. labor problems. The outcome would certainly be a political dead-end. An examination of conditions in Germany and France, countries that have ratified all seven core Conventions, should make clear that ratification in and of itself has limited ability to challenge and transform capitalist dynamics. Even Guatemala has ratified all seven!

Similarly, some antisweatshop campaigns come dangerously close to presenting sweatshops as an historical anomaly that can be ended by using consumer campaigns to encourage capitalists to change their behavior. As a result, many participants begin thinking in terms of good capitalists versus bad capitalists rather than developing an anticapitalist consciousness. Even campaigns against the IMF and World Bank are divided along fix it/nix it lines, leading to competing political understandings and visions of change.

In short, campaigns can differ in terms of their organization dynamics and political focus even when addressing the same "issue." And, as is true with issues, some campaigns are more likely to promote favorable political outcomes than others. Therefore, we must also give careful attention to the choices we make when organizing campaigns if we are to succeed in building on the promise of this period. Happily, there are historical experiences that can help us develop criteria for, as well as suggest approaches to, successful campaign organizing.

Learning From History: The Example of May Day

An examination of the struggle for a shorter workday, which came to be symbolized by May Day demonstrations and strike actions, has much to teach us about how to organize around

“reform” issues while simultaneously building militant, national, working-class movements and revolutionary visions. More specifically, the history offers important insights into how to maximize the radical potential of our campaigns and build meaningful international solidarity. It also highlights the critical nature of the relationship between campaigns and movements.

The struggle for a shorter workday in the United States began in the late eighteenth century, even before the establishment of the first trade unions. The goal was the ten-hour day. A key aspect of the campaign concerned the way organizers framed their demand. They argued that the ten-hour day was needed not only to protect the health of workers, but also because the long and exhausting workday was a barrier to more revolutionary change. A circular issued in 1835 by Boston workers advocating the ten-hour day highlights the connection: “We have been too long subjected to the odious, cruel, unjust and tyrannical system which compels the operative mechanic to exhaust his physical and mental powers. We have rights and duties to perform as American citizens and members of society, which forbid us to dispose of more than ten hours for a day’s work.”⁸

By 1866, although many workers still worked more than a ten-hour day, the labor movement had set its sights on achieving an eight-hour workday. Organizers continued to advance the demand for shorter hours as a necessary step in a longer process of social transformation, not as an end in and of itself. At its first convention in 1866, the National Labor Union (NLU) declared, “The first and great necessity of the present to free the labor of this country from capitalist slavery is the passing of a law by which eight hours shall be the normal working day in all states of the American Union.”⁹

The International Workingmen’s Association, also known as the First International, issued a similar statement, written by Karl Marx, two weeks later, which said: “The legal limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvements and emancipation of the working class must prove abortive. . . . The Congress proposes 8 hours as the legal limit of the working day.” Noting the fact that workers in both

Europe and the United States were demanding and striking for the eight-hour day, the resolution continued as follows: "As this limitation represents the general demand of the workers of the North American United States, the Congress transforms this demand into the general platform of the Workers of the World."¹⁰

One argument used by employers against the demand for a shorter workday was that granting the eight-hour day would disadvantage them relative to employers in other countries. The effective response was to make the demand for a shorter workday an international demand, advanced by national labor movements as they saw best, in a manner that allowed each movement to support and gain support from the struggles of workers in other countries.

The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada (precursor to the American Federation of Labor [AFL]), which formed in 1881, quickly took up the demand for the eight-hour day. At its 1884 convention, it called for organized efforts to achieve the demand by May 1, 1886, when it planned to conduct massive strikes against employers who still resisted. There were indeed massive strikes that day.

These strikes provide the context for the May 4, 1886 Haymarket Square tragedy. On May 4, at the conclusion of a meeting called to protest police violence against striking workers, a large force of armed police entered the square and ordered the meeting to end. Before any action could be taken, a bomb was thrown into the audience. One of the police was killed instantly; many others were wounded. The police responded by firing at the assembled workers.

Business and government leaders, frightened by the growing strength of the labor movement, took advantage of the Haymarket incident. The police arrested eight working-class leaders and charged them with the murder of the policeman at Haymarket Square, despite the fact that most were not even present at the meeting. They were charged with encouraging the bombing through their speeches. All eight were found guilty in a highly rigged trial; four were hung, one apparently committed suicide.

The surviving three eventually were pardoned. The Haymarket Martyrs became the symbol for May Day.

In spite of intense repression, the labor movement continued its eight-hour offensive. The AFL, at its 1888 convention, passed a resolution targeting May 1, 1890, as the date for labor to take massive strike action to achieve its goal. Educational and organizational campaigns, including demonstrations, were scheduled to take place in the intervening period.

As in 1866, the U.S. call to action was taken up by the international workers' movement. The Second International was founded in France in 1898. Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, sent a communication to its meeting in Paris, informing those present of the AFL's strike strategy and asking for their support. A French delegate was preparing to offer a resolution calling for coordinated international actions by workers to win the eight-hour day. In recognition of the U.S. request, he selected May 1, 1890 as the designated day.

Unable to organize a general strike for May 1, the AFL eventually decided on a strategy that called for one group of workers to spearhead the struggle. In 1890, it was the carpenters. Other workers were to strike if they could, but all workers were encouraged to demonstrate their support for the demand. Workers continued to view the eight-hour day as a step in a larger struggle against capitalism. This understanding is captured by the slogan which New York demonstrators displayed on a banner at their meeting: "NO MORE BOSSES—WAGE SLAVERY MUST GO AND THE 8 HOUR DAY IS THE NEXT STEP IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT. THE SOCIALIST COMMONWEALTH IS THE FINAL AIM."¹¹

There were more strikes on May 1, 1890, than on any previous day in U.S. history. That day also proved to be an international day of action by workers. Strikes and demonstrations took place in most of the world's main industrial cities. The initial resolution of the Second International calling for action on May 1, 1890, was not intended to establish a May Day tradition. But the success of the day encouraged labor movements throughout the world to maintain that day as their day of collective struggle; May Day

thus became international workers' day.

In the struggle for the eight-hour day, as in all struggles that are framed to engender vast social change, political differences developed over time. In many countries, the official trade-union movement began seeking ways of undermining the radical significance of the day. Some began organizing May Day celebrations on the closest Sunday so that they would not have to organize strike actions. By the early 1900s, the AFL was even denying that it had any role in the origins of May Day and actively opposed strikes on that day.

The Second International struggled mightily against this trend, officially calling on workers' movements to maintain actions on May Day and, to the greatest degree possible, engage in strikes and organize events that deepened the class understanding and class character of the struggle. But over time, victories as much as defeats—and even more so repression—gradually weakened the movements and traditions that kept alive the revolutionary spirit of May Day. The U.S. government sought to portray May Day as a holiday of foreign inspiration by promoting its own official labor day. In 1955, making clear what was at stake, the U.S. government declared May 1 to be Loyalty Day.

Although capitalists and their supporters no longer fear May Day, activists can still learn a number of important lessons from the history of the struggle for a shorter workday. Among the most important: specific demands for change should be placed in a broader, revolutionary context. Solidarity should be built by highlighting common national concerns and creating a framework for linking national struggles. And, the success of campaigns ultimately depends on the strength of the movements that promote them.

Revitalizing the May Day Tradition

Beyond the value of the historical lessons noted above, May Day remains important in its own right because it continues to offer a unique opportunity for rebuilding a radical movement. First, considerable interest in the history of the day remains. This affords organizers a wonderful opportunity to reconnect work-

ing people in the United States with the country's history of labor militancy. Discussions of May Day history also provide a useful opportunity for activists to develop criteria for movement-building as well as learn how reformist trade-union politics and government repression can weaken labor activism and solidarity.

The framework for organizing May Day activities can and should be maintained as well. As we have seen, May Day actions sought to combine encouragement for immediate struggles with promotion of a long-term struggle to transform society. In contemporary terms, May Day actions should encourage resistance to current injustices in the workplace and community. But they should also encourage a belief in and commitment to the development of a radically new society. Thus, May Day organizing demands a serious effort to build community alliances.

One of the most exciting aspects of the anti-WTO effort was that it focused people's attention on capitalism and the need to overcome it. For example, individuals and movements engaged in social experiments involving new ways of living—whether through voluntary simplicity or the creation of intentional communities—were motivated to demonstrate against the WTO by the realization that their experiments could not be sustained as long as capitalism, with its drive to commodify every aspect of human existence, continued to prosper.

Their growing opposition to capitalism as a social system has created new possibilities for building labor-environmental alliances with a class perspective. By encouraging representatives from these and other key social movements to plan community-sponsored May Day events and actions jointly, activists can help deepen and broaden such alliances and, in the process, create a social framework within which resistance to the structures and organizational forms of capitalism can be combined with new visions of working and living.

As noted above, the history of May Day also highlights the importance of the relationship between campaigns and movements. May Day actions were organized by worker-community movements, which were in turn strengthened by these actions. As these movements weakened, it became harder for activists to

ensure that May Day actions retained their radical orientation. Eventually, the day itself lost its social significance. This is an important lesson because many contemporary activists, no doubt buoyed by the success in Seattle, have tended to focus almost exclusively on organizing new actions or campaigns. While these activities are an important way to create connections and inspire future activism, they do not automatically lead to the development of movements capable of transforming capitalism. In other words, we must strive to ensure that our actions and campaigns are part of, and enrich, a broader movement-building strategy.

Building a Movement while Responding to Peoples' Immediate Needs

Successful movement-building involves creating strong, accountable, and politicized organizations; a community-based structure that connects these organizations; and a common commitment to struggle based on a shared vision of the future. At the same time, movements for social change must be responsive to peoples' immediate needs.

There are many ways activists can help build strong organizations within a community-based structure. First, we must take seriously the task of organization-building. This means that campaigns and activities need to be organized in ways that encourage those who participate to join and become active in the organizations that speak to their concerns. It also means that organizations must take advantage of these actions to mobilize and engage their membership.

Second, we must ensure that organizations take internal education seriously. Many church, labor, environmental, student, and social justice groups have been successful at generating participation at events, but far less successful in creating an internal space where members can discuss past actions, expand their political understandings, debate strategy, and participate in planning future actions.

Third, we must unite the many organizations into a community. One way is to create informal gatherings where activists from these organizations can share experiences and develop strategies

that integrate the activities of their respective organizations into a common project.

All three tasks can and should be combined. For example, activist meetings should help promote greater understanding of, and respect for, the concerns of the various participants and the communities they represent. This understanding and respect should then be integrated into the internal education programs of the various organizations. In this way, people from different parts of the broader community can learn to appreciate the strengths and struggles of others. Solidarity is thereby built from the bottom up, not from the top down. This solidarity makes it easier for organizations to plan common events and actions and to secure broad-based participation from their respective membership.

Successful movement-building also requires the development of a shared vision of the future. This, in turn, requires the development of a clear and well-focused political program of action. Ultimately, it is through political action that trust is built, community is formed, and new possibilities for living and working are imagined and created. If socialism is to provide the framework for achieving human liberation, it must be based on principles of equality, democracy, and solidarity. Therefore, these principles must guide the development of our political program and the proposed actions must, in turn, give these principles concrete meaning and strengthen people's commitments to them.

A program of action must also respond to people's immediate needs. Since capitalism has left many working people struggling for survival, there is no shortage of needs to address. There are also many creative and increasingly successful efforts to improve conditions for working people in the United States and other countries. These include living wage struggles, antisweatshop struggles, and struggles directed at expanding and transforming the public sector. The first effort has already received a lot of publicity, so I will focus attention here on the second and third.¹²

Antisweatshop Struggles

Antisweatshop struggles have considerable potential to ad-

vance the movement-building process. Beginning in the early 1990s, a number of groups began targeting apparel and footwear sellers such as the Gap and Nike for the brutal labor practices of their subcontractors operating in the third world. The practices highlighted included child labor, unsafe and abusive working conditions, starvation wages, anti-union repression, and intolerably long hours. Antisweatshop activists built coalitions with unions, community and human rights groups, and third-world NGOs, and organized demonstrations and consumer boycotts to demand economic justice for third-world workers.

The efforts of these activists succeeded in bringing visibility to the human dimension of an increasingly complex global structure of production and encouraging consumers to think of their purchasing decisions in more political terms. Demands for change eventually grew strong enough that companies were forced to respond.

The corporate response has so far been limited, however. Some companies have instituted codes of conduct that have led to a decrease in child labor and improved safety conditions. Most have not. All companies continue to resist wage increases and unionization. In general, the leading firms in the apparel and footwear industries have focused their energies on trying to remove the issue from public view through use of the Fair Labor Association (FLA). The FLA was established in 1998 as a result of meetings—convened by the White House—that included companies, unions, human rights, and religious groups. Despite its initial promise, the FLA clearly serves corporate interests. It does nothing to ensure livable wages or acceptable work hours; its monitoring system is corporate-controlled and limited in scope; and its enforcement mechanisms are almost nonexistent.¹³ College and university students, who have re-energized the antisweatshop movement, have challenged this corporate attempt at obfuscation most forcefully.

Under the umbrella of the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), students are demanding that school-licensed products be produced under conditions that are responsive to the needs of third-world workers. This means that workers

should be paid a country-specific living wage, have the right to unionize without fear of retaliation, and enjoy safe working conditions. While a number of colleges and universities agreed to sign codes of conduct in line with these demands, no mechanism existed to secure corporate compliance. To overcome this problem, the USAS developed its own monitoring organization (with input from third-world human rights and labor groups), the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC). Students are now working to force their respective schools to withdraw from the FLA and join the WRC.

Fired up by the anti-WTO actions in Seattle, students have employed militant and highly spirited sit-ins and lockdowns at schools such as Johns Hopkins University, the University of Michigan, the University of Oregon, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Wisconsin. Some victories have been won. In February 2000, the University of Pennsylvania became the first school to withdraw from the FLA, followed shortly by the University of Wisconsin and Johns Hopkins. That same month, the University of Michigan, the University of Indiana, and Oberlin College agreed to join the WRC.

Student activists also have worked hard to place their antisweatshop work in a broader political context. For example, the Student-Labor Action Committee at Johns Hopkins demanded not only that their university withdraw from the FLA and join the WRC, but also that it agree to pay a living wage to all who work at Johns Hopkins itself (including those employed by subcontractors), and create a shared committee to oversee school labor practices. By April 2000, victories include the university's withdrawal from the FTA and commitment to raise wages for the lowest-paid workers as well as report annually on its compensation policy. The students won strong support from community organizers, local high schools, unions, churches, and the city council. They still hope to make their school the first private-sector employer to adopt a living-wage agreement. This would be no small accomplishment. Johns Hopkins University and Health System is the largest private employer in Baltimore as well as Maryland as a whole.

The potential of these antisweatshop struggles lies in the fact that they encourage resistance to the corporate dominance of education, promote student-labor alliances, and strengthen international solidarity. They also draw new people into political movements for change.¹⁴

Public Sector Struggles

The struggle for social justice must be broadened, not only to include more people and to respond to more issues, but also increasingly to directly challenge capitalist institutions and imperatives on both an ideological and material level. One way is to develop new organizing campaigns around the expansion and reconceptualization of the public sector. The ideological struggle over the public sector is of immense importance to the future of socialism.

For historical reasons, most working people cannot conceptualize alternatives to a world anchored in private property. As Daniel Singer explains:

The ideology of private property is triumphant today neither because people are especially fond of it nor even because the propaganda in its favor is so overwhelming. The campaign is successful because of a void, because of the Soviet bankruptcy and the social-democratic failure. Why fight for something else when it turns out that it is either roughly the same thing with another label or a different, though no lesser, form of exploitation? For social property to be attractive once again, it will have to be perceived as the means to an end, as an instrument enabling the "associated producers" to gain mastery over their work, over their social environment, and thus, in a sense, over their fate.¹⁵

This fight to reclaim and revitalize notions of the public sector and social property must be waged on both national and local levels and as part of a long-term strategy. As a first step, we should organize in defense of public spending. While living-wage and antisweatshop initiatives help reduce inequality and encourage commitment to the construction of a "society of equals," far more can and must be done through the public provision of essential goods and services, including quality health care, education, housing, and economic security. Therefore, we must fight to

ensure that adequate resources are progressively obtained and channeled into desired public programs. At the federal level, this means opposing the reduction or privatization of social security and supporting the use of the "budget surplus" to increase social spending.

However, given our goal of social change, our strategy cannot be limited to the defense or even expansion of existing state programs. We must combine support for social spending with a strategy that encourages the transformation of the public sector. In other words, we must begin to make real the notion of social property. This strategy is best directed at state and local government activities and must be based on the creation of a shared political project that involves public-sector workers and labor and community groups.

Education may well provide the best starting point. The public education system in most cities and states is in crisis. Most teachers are underpaid and overworked and feel alienated from the larger community. School facilities are run down and budgets are tight. Moreover, hostile initiatives directed against the public-school system and teachers win growing support from large numbers of private-sector workers. One example of this is the use of standardized tests to shape the curriculum and monitor teacher and school performance.

Working people are victims of these trends. Perhaps the biggest losers are children from working-class families who end up receiving an increasingly narrow and low-quality education. And, of course, belief in the public sector is another casualty.

One response to this situation is to facilitate meetings between public-school teachers sympathetic to radical change and activists from different communities who share a common political commitment. The WTO experience has already helped to identify some participants. The meetings should have a one-item agenda: creating a responsive, engaging, and liberating system of public education.

Participants in the struggles against exploitation, imperialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and environmental destruction understand that an educational system that helps young people

develop appropriate values, skills, and commitments will enhance their efforts. Anti-WTO and antisweatshop actions have demonstrated that many students are eager to be involved in political struggle for a better world. Activists thus have every reason to work with politicized teachers and students to create space within the school system for a new, empowering curriculum that reflects and equips students to respond to current challenges. In other words, we must work to redefine the meaning of a public education.

The critical struggle for such a new education ultimately will take place within the school system, which means the leading voice in that struggle must be that of teachers. To this end, many public-school teachers need opportunities to learn more about working-class history and social change and the interplay between these topics and pedagogy. Activist groups of teachers must therefore increase their educational and organizing efforts among teachers while simultaneously helping to build links between the educational community and the broader activist community. One potential gain for teachers is increased community support in terms of dollars and respect. An even greater benefit is the ability to offer a meaningful educational experience to willing learners.

A political push organized in this fashion can create liberated spaces in the public-education system and mobilize people outside of activist circles who care about what is happening to public education. Ideally, the process will slowly transform existing notions of public education. People will generate new expectations for "their" system, including that it function as a democratic and responsive arena for advancing new visions of society, with public-school teachers serving as guardians of the public interest. Similar efforts can and should be launched around healthcare and social services of all kinds.

While there are limits to how far such a process can develop within the existing capitalist system, the experience gained in the struggle should provide people with a greater appreciation of both the benefits to be enjoyed when institutions are organized according to principles of equality, democracy, and solidarity as

well as the desirability of having an economy based on social rather than private property. This is movement-building that challenges capitalist rationality and puts working people in a position to shape their own social visions.

Of course, all organizing initiatives should be understood as parts of an integrated political strategy. For example, the movement to reshape public education requires the existence of a community of activists that are involved with, and accountable to, democratic and politically mobilized organizations. And at the same time, it is only through efforts to win living-wage agreements, stop sweatshops, advocate for new labor laws, plan May Day activities, and remake the public sector that it is possible to create such a community.

Final Thoughts

In writing about political strategy, it is all too easy to move to the extremes. I hope I have avoided that trap. I do not want to minimize the obstacles to movement-building or overstate them. Rather, my position is that we are in a period of possibilities.

Current economic, social, and environmental trends, as well as the initiatives and struggles highlighted above, strongly suggest that U.S. capitalism is ideologically vulnerable. And this is happening during the longest business cycle expansion in U.S. history; the next recession is bound to expand organizing opportunities greatly. Our challenge is to become better at learning from, and contributing to, ongoing mobilizations and struggles. If we succeed, our efforts may be rewarded by the creation of a movement powerful enough to offer a meaningful challenge to capitalist-inspired policies and practices. And if that movement enjoys relations of solidarity with movements elsewhere, the possibilities become truly exciting.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Doug Henwood, "Reports and Pictures from Seattle," *Left Business Observer* Website, <http://www.panix.com/~dhenwood/Seattle.html>; Bill Resnick, "The WTO's Nude World Order," *Against the Current*, March-April 2000; and Jeffrey St. Clair, "Seattle Diary: It's a Gas, Gas, Gas," *New Left Review*, November-December 1999.
2. "WTO's Failure in Bid to Launch Trade Talks Emboldens Protestors," *Wall Street Journal*, December 6, 1999.

3. Robert E. Scott, "WTO Accession: China Can Wait," *WorkingUSA*, September-October 1999.
4. See, for example, "China and the WTO—No Hope in Sight," *China Labour Bulletin*, September-October 1999.
5. "What are international labour standards?" ILO Website, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/norm/whatare/>
6. "Fundamental ILO Conventions," ILO Website, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/norm/whatare/fundam/index.htm>
7. "Internationally-Recognized Core Labour Standards in the United States, Report for the WTO-General Council Review of the Trade Policies of the United States," International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Geneva, July 1999.
8. As quoted in Philip S. Foner, *May Day: A Short History Of The International Workers' Holiday, 1886-1986* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), p. 8.
9. *Ibid*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid*, p. 12.
11. *Ibid*, pp. 44-45.
12. Much useful information on the living-wage movement can be found in Robert Pollin and Stephanie Luce, *The Living Wage: Building a Fair Economy* (New York: The New Press, 1998); and David Reynolds, "The Living Wage Movement Sweeps the Nation," *WorkingUSA*, September-October 1999.
13. For a critique of the FLA, see Medea Benjamin, "What's Fair About the Fair Labor Association? Putting the Fox in Charge," *Against the Current*, March/April 1999.
14. For discussion of the political significance of the antisweatshop movement, see Norm Diamond, "Anti-Sweat Politics," *Science as Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1999.
15. Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), p. 230.



August 6, 2000, marks the tenth anniversary of the sanctions against Iraq. In Washington, DC, on that day, a National Mobilization to End the Economic Sanctions on Iraq is planned. Online flyer at: <http://www.nonviolence.org/vitw/pages/96.htm>. For more information, contact Kate Reuer, Fellowship of Reconciliation, P.O. Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960; ph: (914) 358-4601. You can also contact Danny Muller, Voices in the Wilderness, 1460 West Carmen Avenue, Chicago, IL 60640; ph: (773) 784-8065. There are antisansctions protests planned at the Democratic and Republican national conventions this summer as well.

August 6 is also Hiroshima Day. On that date in 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. A second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki three days later. In U.S. schools, it is taught that the dropping of the bomb was necessary "in order to save American lives." The secret, however, is that almost the entire military leadership of the United States was opposed to dropping the bomb, and yet Truman proceeded to do so anyway. The reason: to end the war immediately in order to stop the Soviet advance in Asia. Hiroshima thus stands for a double human tragedy: the most terrible event in the Second World War outside the Holocaust itself; and the event that marked the beginning of the Cold War. We recommend the close study of Gar Alperovitz's incomparable book, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).