

Commentary

Is Revolution Possible in Canada?

Since the late 1890s the socialist movement has been split on the issue of whether reform or revolution is the way forward. The issue is usually not framed correctly, because the stated goal of both sides in the debate is reform of society. The real issue is whether or not reform of the capitalist system is possible or whether reform can only be achieved through the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and its replacement with socialism.

Since the collapse of the Keynesian social welfare state in the early 1980s and the adoption of neo-liberalism, an increasing number of individuals who call themselves socialists have reached the conclusion that capitalism cannot be reformed. The current financial and economic crisis gripping the entire capitalist world has accelerated this process and broadened the discussion about the necessity for socialism. However, there is still a serious disconnect

on the issue. When pressed, most of those who agree that capitalism cannot be reformed also take the position that an anti-capitalist, socialist revolution in Canada is impossible.

The rationale for the impossibility of revolution in Canada is varied. Some claim that the Anglo-American capitalists are very democratic. Others claim that the Canadian working class is too affluent to opt for revolutionary change. Still others accept a theoretical possibility of revolution, but raise objections to organizing revolutionary organizations on the basis that the number of revolutionary socialists is too small, that resources are too limited and that workers are not ready to take up revolution. Regardless of the particular rationale, the conclusion is always the same, that the revolutionary forces have no option but to put organizing for revolution on a

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Barak Obama's Imperialism with a Human Face

By all accounts, Barak Obama was the star attraction at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, with many of the leaders present eating out of the palm of his hands. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was photographed repeatedly smiling, shaking hands and talking to Obama, as were the leaders of Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua and all the Caribbean countries.

The Summit, which was held under the slogan "A Prosperity Agenda for the Americas" brings together the leaders of every country of the Americas and the Caribbean, with the exception of Cuba, which is excluded from the Organization of American States.

Just days before the summit, which was held from April 17-19 in Trinidad and Tobago, both Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced changes to some of the U.S. anti-Cuba policies,

including lifting travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans and lifting restrictions on remittances to the island. The economic blockade of Cuba remains in place, as does the restriction on travel for all other American citizens.

In some ways, it was these small gestures on the part of the Obama administration that created the climate for the Summit, at which leader after leader spoke of a "new era" of partnership between the United States and countries it has interfered in militarily and economically for more than 200 years.

Obama's speech to the Summit was certainly no exception. He spoke of the "promise of a new prosperity and personal security and the protection of liberty and justice for all the people of our hemisphere. That's the future that we can build

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back burner and work for “achievable” reforms of the capitalist system instead.

There are a number of flaws in this logic, not the least of which is the illusion that the current situation is more or less permanent. This reflects a poor understanding of the revolutionary process. If one considers only the present state of affairs, then of course revolution is impossible. Revolution is always an impossibility, not only in Canada, but in any country, except during those infrequent periods in which conditions converge to make it a possibility, when the capitalist system is in crisis, the working people will no longer accept the status quo, the state is incapable of responding effectively to mass struggles and, most importantly, there is a revolutionary organization with the skill and experience to lead a successful revolution.

It also reflects a poor grasp of history. Revolutions break out when there is no longer a possibility of achieving reforms. In order for reforms within the capitalist system to be a possibility two conditions must exist. First, the capitalists must be in a position to accept a reduction in their profits, which is possible only during periods of reduced inter-monopoly competition. Such a period existed during the post-war period when much of the world’s productive capacity had been destroyed by the war. Those capitalists who came out on the winning side enjoyed a virtual monopoly and realized super-profits, so they could afford to share a portion of those profits without fear of being taken over by their competitors.

However, that situation, alone, is not enough. There must also be a very good reason to compel the capitalists to make such “sacrifices”. During the post-war period, such a reason did exist, namely the existence of a socialist alternative and the constant fear of the capitalists that, if they did not make concessions to the workers, the workers may opt to overthrow them and establish socialism.

If both those conditions exist, then there is a possibility for reforms within the capitalist system. However, if one or the other condition does not exist, reform becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible. So, the question that must be addressed is whether or not there is a possibility for reform of the system in Canada today.

The post-war boom in North America ended in the mid-1970s, by which time the capitalists of Europe and Japan had recovered from the devastation of the war and were once again competing head-to-head with the North American capitalists. The average rate of capitalist profit declined steadily for the next 10 to 15 years until neo-liberalism had fully replaced Keynesian policies in the advanced capitalist countries. Then the average rate of profit increased sharply on the basis of the impoverishment of the vast majority of the world’s population. In 2007 the rate of profit leveled off and again began to decline, throwing the entire capitalist world into the deepest crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Some of the largest capitalist enterprises have fallen over the past year. So, it is reasonably safe to say that the capitalists are no longer in a mood to make concessions to working people. Far from it, they are using their control of the state to extract huge concessions from the working class, as the autoworkers can attest.

Is there a danger of revolution just over the horizon which could scare the capitalists into making concessions, or at least to force them to moderate their attacks on the working class? Once again the answer is “No”. Neither does an alternate social system exist as a viable threat to the capitalist system, nor are revolutionary movements breaking out on a scale to threaten the control of the capitalists in one or more countries. In fact, the final collapse of the Soviet Bloc coincided with the adoption of neo-liberalism on a world scale.

Therefore, the only rational conclusion is that there is no possibility of reform within the capitalist system in Canada today. Therefore, postponing the organization of revolutionary institutions in order to concentrate on “achievable” short-term reforms is nothing short of delusional. Furthermore, it is counter-productive. First, it diverts scarce resources from the most important task of re-establishing revolutionary organizations capable of leading the inevitable future struggles of the people. Second, the threat of revolution is the only condition which is actually within the control of the working class and progressive forces. So, even if “Plan A” is to force the capitalists to make concessions without revolutionary

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Tenth Annual United May Day Banquet Held in Winnipeg

A capacity crowd of over 200 people attended the tenth annual United May Day Banquet held in Winnipeg on May 3, 2009 in the beautiful Crystal Ballroom of the historic Hotel Fort Garry. The evening's MC welcomed everyone to the event, pointing out that it was workers who built the hotel, labored in it and created the meal, so it was only fitting that workers should also enjoy beautiful surroundings and the wonderful food.

Following the dinner, a program of discussion was organized. Over 20 individuals, representing virtually every current of the Left in Winnipeg, were invited to speak for two minutes each on one of three topics:

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together, but only if we move forward with a new sense of partnership.”

He specifically addressed the bloody and violent role the U.S. has played in the region, suggesting it was part of an era that has come to an end. “To move forward,” he said, “we cannot let ourselves be prisoners of past disagreements. I'm grateful that President Ortega did not blame me for things that happened when I was three months old. Too often, an opportunity to build a fresh partnership of the Americas has been undermined by stale debates. And we've heard all these arguments before, these debates that would have us make a false choice between rigid, state-run economies or unbridled and unregulated capitalism; between blame for right-wing paramilitaries or left-wing insurgents; between sticking to inflexible policies with regard to Cuba or denying the full human rights that are owed to the Cuban people.”

“I didn't come here to debate the past – I came here to deal with the future. I believe ... that we must learn from history, but we can't be trapped by it. As neighbours, we have a responsibility to each other and to our citizens. And by working together, we can take important steps forward to advance prosperity and security and liberty. That is the 21st century agenda that we come together to enact. That's the new direction that we can pursue.”

Reform or revolution?; Does the Left need a new revolutionary organization?; or, What the hell is wrong with the Left? Speakers approached the questions with a combination of humour and seriousness that had the participants both laughing and pondering the burning questions of the day.

The evening wrapped up with musical performances by a number of very talented musicians. The general consensus was that the program struck a good balance between politics and entertainment and that everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

The reality, of course, is that Obama is no more an anti-imperialist than was George W. Bush, or Clinton before him, or any of the U.S. presidents who have viewed the Americas as theirs for the taking rather than sovereign states charting their own path for the future.

The only things that have changed are the sophistication of Obama's imperialist agenda – one which promotes intervention by the U.S. to bring about security and social justice – and the economic crisis which has made the U.S. incredibly vulnerable. The Americas represent two crucial assets to American capital right now – a source of cheap raw materials and a vast, low-cost labour force, both of which are literally in its back yard. As if to remove any shadow of doubt, Obama spoke at length about the need for expanded trade and the harmonization of economic and energy policies between the largest countries of the Americas – Mexico, Canada, the U.S., Brazil, Argentina and Chile.

Obama also delivered the standard American message on Cuba, stating that the country wasn't democratic and demanding concessions from Cuba in return for loosening the embargo. He also suggested his new Cuba policy was mainly based on the failure of the past 50 years of American attempts to overthrow the Cuban Revolution.

“I've already changed a Cuba policy that I believe has failed to advance liberty or opportunity for the

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change, it is not possible without actively pursuing “Plan B”, which is the organization of revolutionary struggles.

Many people who consider themselves socialists or communists appear to believe that revolutionary struggles break out spontaneously. They seem to think that once conditions deteriorate to a certain point the working class will spontaneously rise up to overthrow capitalism. However, many examples could be given to prove that this is not the case. No matter how bad conditions are at the present, there is always the possibility that they could get worse and there is always a hope that they might get better. So,

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Cuban people,” he said. “Over the past two years, I’ve indicated, and I repeat today, that I’m prepared to have my administration engage with the Cuban government on a wide range of issues – from drugs, migration, and economic issues, to human rights, free speech, and democratic reform. Now, let me be clear, I’m not interested in talking just for the sake of talking. But I do believe that we can move U.S.-Cuban relations in a new direction.

And we are committed to shaping that future through engagement that is strong and sustained, that is meaningful, that is successful, and that is based on mutual respect and equality.”

Ricardo Alarcón, President of Cuba’s National Assembly, speaking at a conference at Queen’s University in Kingston on May 7, responded to Obama’s comments on Cuba: “President Obama tried to make the most of certain decisions regarding Cuba that he had announced already before initiating his trip. Essentially he eliminated the cruel restrictions that George W. Bush had imposed on Cuban-Americans’ travel and remittances to the island, turning the clock back, on this matter, to the situation existing in May 2004, a time that, according to his own calculations, was a thousand years back. It is rather ironic that the same person that insisted on forgetting history and on just looking forward towards a future of diffused and vague promises tried to make much ado about something signifying nothing more than a partial return to the past. Partial because he didn’t return other American citizens certain rights on those

unless a viable alternative exists for oppressed people to rally around, they are not going to risk everything on revolution. This means that the key task facing the progressive and revolutionary forces in Canada is build the revolutionary alternative. This is not a matter of education and proselytizing. It is, first and foremost, the establishment of those organizations and institutions needed to lead the working class and people in the building of a better world. With such organizations and institutions revolution becomes a possibility once the various other conditions develop; without them revolution will remain an impossibility and a distant dream no matter how favourable those other conditions may become.

matters than they have had, some of them, even during the first years of W. Bush.”

The only note of discord at the summit came at the end, when Trinidad & Tobago President Patrick Manning expressed the vision of every leader present, with the exception of Harper and Obama, for Cuba’s participation in the next Summit.

“There was a clear consensus that the reintegration of Cuba in the inter-American relations is an essential step toward the building of a more cohesive and integrated Americas. ... The Government of Trinidad and Tobago looks forward to the day when Cuba is fully embraced into the folds of the inter-American family.”

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