

# Join the French resistance!

The Panama papers and Nuit debout... resist the right and take on the Tories



The Panama papers show us that the ruling class in every nation - from North Korea to Russia to Iceland to Britain - live in a different world to the rest of us. They tell us that there aren't enough resources for everyone to have a decent life. That we have to turn on the disabled, the unemployed, the elderly or refugees and fight over the remains of an ever diminishing welfare state.

What do they do when we give over what little we have? They take that money and use it to save the same self-serving banking system that hides their wealth from us, expecting us to accept the privatisation of our NHS, the transformation of our schools into for-profit academies, and the closure of our local libraries.

This is the logic of capitalism - that the poor should be made to suffer while the rich profit. Their wealth exists outside of our democratic control and it will require more than the passing of new laws in order to create a world rooted in justice and equality.

Labour under Jeremy Corbyn is making the right sounds by calling for greater transparency over MPs tax affairs, but we also need to make sure that those in power are squeezed for every penny they have taken from us. That wealth has the potential to transform our society; creating a debt

free higher education sector open to everyone, a healthy and well-funded NHS, and to reclaim the housing system by building or buying housing for every council across the UK.

We can't wait for the next general election to hold the powerful to account. Protesters in Iceland stood their ground against their Prime Minister until he resigned over his own tax affairs, and right now in France the Nuit debout movement is occupying city streets and squares across the country to resist attacks on workers' rights. So many of us are suffering under this government, but so many of us feel the urge to fight back. Let's go with that urge and turn our city streets and workplaces into carnivals of resistance.

The only lasting solution to the administration of inequality that the Mossack Fonseca leak brings to light is the organisation of the economy by shared democratic control. This is the radically egalitarian vision of a socialist society governed from below by all of the working people of the world. This is the only way we can fight against the dangers of climate change and war that are threatening all of humanity. We have to create a society where everyone, regardless of race, religion, and gender identity or sexuality has equal access to deciding how we run the world.

## Nuit debout

'Rising up in the Night'

Imagine thousands of people occupying Trafalgar Square, every night, for days on end, to discuss how to resist austerity and raising radical issues. Imagine this occupation spreads to every town and city in Britain in just a few days. Well, this is what has happened in France over the last 12 days. A new round of mass protests is shaking France under the slogan "Nuit Debout" (Up All Night). The nightly demonstrations, follow a million strong Trade Union demonstration against the government's plan to rewrite France's labour laws. Polls show 70% oppose the Governments reforms.

This change in the political climate comes after a period when momentum was with the right. The left and unions have been on the defensive in recent years as the Socialist Party government, led by President François Hollande, has adopted neoliberal policies. The fascist Front National recently won more than 27 percent of the vote in regional elections.

Millions are rejecting the logic of neoliberal capitalism and, as austerity continues, explosions of protest from below can bring governments to their knees.

# Socialism from below

“Throughout the history of socialist movements and ideas, the fundamental divide is between socialism-from-above and socialism-from-below”

So argues Hal Draper’s 1966 pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism*. In it, he distinguishes two different broad trends in the socialist movement. Socialism from above had dominated the 20th century, in the form of Stalinist communism in Russia and the East and social democracy in the West. Both of these, despite their apparent differences, shared a belief that socialism could be handed down by the right kind of government, without the active participation of those who live under it.

But what does this mean today, in the 21st century? The Soviet Union is no more and social democracy has abandoned the idea of socialism as any sort of goal. The most that historic social democratic parties offer now is a managed capitalism. Moreover, it might be argued that the ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ distinction seems increasingly unable to capture the complexities of contemporary politics – social movements from below in Spain, Greece, Scotland, and Corbynism in England, feed directly into political parties that promise reforms ‘from above’. What’s the point, in these circumstances, of banging on about socialism from below?

Well there are three contexts in which it is still possible and valuable to talk about socialism from below as a way of doing politics, rather than a set of hard and fast principles. It won’t give you all the answers in any situation, but it can help to guide actions. It also helps identify what its opposite is.



*The recent protests in France show how self-organisation from below and mass democracy can directly challenge the state*

Politics ‘from above’ is how we are encouraged to think of politics. It is politics primarily understood as the administration and management of people – well-meaning management perhaps, but still management. It is part of how we are encouraged to think of our social world – as something so complex it can only be understood and managed by a set of experts. Because of this, it is a default, it is easy. By contrast, socialism from below is difficult. It is a cluster of problems and challenges, which stem from the belief that if socialism is to be anything, if it is to be a world worth living in, it has to be the product of the collective struggles of large numbers. This is so much harder than politics as usual.

## Democracy

The first arena where socialism from below matters is the question of democracy. There has been a way of talking about socialism as being concerned first and foremost with material comfort and a more equal distribution of wealth and resources. With democracy as an optional extra, a ‘good thing’, but not strictly part of the picture. Socialism from below rejects this, and re-asserts democracy as an integral part of socialism. If your goal is just material comfort, or a better distribution of resources, you don’t need mass participation. You don’t need to involve, engage and mobilise a movement. Or rather, you do, but only temporarily, only in order to back up demands and policies, put pressure on those in power. If, on the other hand, your goal is a society in which the overwhelming majority are capable of participating in the running of society, you have to be concerned with empowering them to do so, and this empowerment requires democracy.

Democracy is thus not merely a vital part of the goal of socialism, it is also a vital part of the means of getting there. Socialism from below means being concerned with those forms of activity and organisation that empower people, which allow them to develop the confidence, ideas and skills which might allow them to actively participate in the democratic management of society. If social



*Thousands pack the streets and squares of French towns every night to discuss how to defeat austerity*

movements and political organisations give no space for participants to even glimpse what democratic self-organisation might involve, they are unlikely to contribute to building a democratic socialism.

### The state

The second dimension is the state. In Draper's account, one characteristic feature of socialism from above is a naïve approach to the state, a belief that if only the state can be captured, state power can be wielded to achieve socialism. It is probably this approach that has done most to devalue the idea of socialism in peoples' minds. Many believe this focus on the state has led to betrayals or tyranny, and instead we should avoid it, hold it at arm's length and build independent spaces in capitalism's 'gaps'.

Socialism from below implies a different approach. It argues that the institutions of the state are structured in a way that denies popular control. Alongside the 'democratic' pieces of the state – where those exist – are a series of top-down bodies, the police, army, courts, civil service etc., that limit the space for democracy. These are a block on the possibility of extending democratic control in society. These institutions must be removed and replaced. We must build our own, democratically controlled, institutions to perform the few positive functions of modern states.

But if socialism from below does not believe that the state can be used to deliver socialism, nor does it believe it can be ignored. Firstly, when it comes to organisations like the police and the army, you can ignore these institutions as much as you like, but

they will not ignore you. Rather, any movements that challenge the existing order will be brought into conflict with these forces, and needs to be able to organise to defeat them.

Secondly, socialists must be prepared to support and participate in movements that make demands upon existing states – demands for reforms and improvements in people's lives. Not because we believe that these reforms will add up to socialism. But because it is through these movements that people are brought into collective action; they develop confidence, organisation and experiences that allow them to see the possibility of organising society differently.

### Leadership

Finally, we need to talk about leadership, not just the formal leadership of organisations, but a whole set of relationships within movements and organisations, in which some people 'lead' and attempt to get others to 'follow'. Again, it is worth saying that it is difficult in the same way that the alternative is easy. A socialism from above leader knows best, tells people what to do, gives out the orders. A socialism from below leader is motivated by a desire to empower others, and ultimately make themselves irrelevant.

An important question here is the dynamic between 'mobilising' and 'empowering' people. Mobilising people to take action is a vital part of any 'leadership' and it is just as vital to socialism from above as socialism from below. No mass movement can come into existence if people are not motivated and brought into action. But what best mobilises people in the short term may not be the best for empowering them in the long term. People can be sparked into action by all sorts of methods, but not all of these help empower them to become agents of their own emancipation.

If socialism from below is to mean anything today, it is as a guiding thread that needs to run through our political practice, one that reminds us to ask whether and how what we do empowers people to become agents of their own emancipation. To achieve this truly would be 'doing politics differently'. The devil, as ever, is in the detail; but no one said it was going to be easy.



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# Solidarity with all migrants and refugees

Organising in solidarity with refugees and migrants could not be more important. Anti-migrant and anti-refugee rhetoric has been amongst the Tories' most useful tools for maintaining the narrative of austerity.

Migrants and refugees are presented as a burden; the Tories can suggest that their hands are tied, and their so-called 'solutions' to Britain's problems – aggressive attacks on welfare, the NHS, domestic violence services, childcare programmes and education – are totally unavoidable. Migrants are made an economic scapegoat but whenever there's a country the government want to bomb, or a nuclear weapons system to buy, they spare no expense.

In reality, the forces that drive austerity do so for ideological and self-interested reasons. Since the global economic crash in 2008, inequality has soared in the UK, and leading politicians and media moguls have been amongst the 1% of those to benefit from the wave of austerity policies – before stashing their cash in off-shore tax havens to make sure they hold onto their gains.

Anti-migrant sentiments rely upon waves of racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia in our society, leading people to turn the blame for the cuts onto scapegoats, instead of those who hold the real responsibility for Britain's inequality and suffering: wealthy elites who have financial interests in continued privatisation and austerity. The truly disempowered people in and around Europe today are not politicians, struggling to make 'hard choices'; they are refugees and migrants who are stuck in horrendous conditions in makeshift camps at Europe



*The Jungle refugee camp in Calais, recently cleared by the French government, is a stark reminder of the inhumanity of borders*

and Britain's borders, stripped of their rights and dignity by governments who see them as an inconvenience and a threat to their own power and not as people with the right to life and respect. The truly disempowered people are deportees, sent back to UK-created war zones because it is politically expedient for our leaders to appear 'tough on migration'.

This is why a fight against the Tories must also be a fight for refugee and migrant rights and freedoms, and vice versa. The struggle against borders is also a struggle of our common humanity against the dehumanisation created by capitalism.

London2Calais is a group working with refugees and migrants, combining humanitarian aid and support in the 'Jungle' camp in Calais with political organising in the UK. Keep up with them by following their Facebook feed, Twitter or emailing them at [londoncalaisconvoy@gmail.com](mailto:londoncalaisconvoy@gmail.com).

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**rs21 are a group of revolutionary socialists** - we believe that the heart of capitalism is conflict between two classes: the vast majority who create the wealth, and a tiny minority who profit from it. Attempts to reform capitalism have failed: the only solution is to replace it with a truly democratic and socialist society

**The working class is the central force for change** - We believe that the working class is the central force that can destroy capitalism and build a socialist society.

**We fight all oppression** - and are committed to building a movement where the fight against oppression on the basis of race, gender, sexuality or disability. We believe this fight is at the heart of the struggle for socialism.

**We are internationalists** - Capitalism seeks to divide us along lines of race, ethnicity, nationality and religion. We reject such divisions: we stand in solidarity with working people worldwide.

'To find out more, or get in touch with us, use the contact details below or e-mail: [revolutionarysocialism21@gmail.com](mailto:revolutionarysocialism21@gmail.com) – there's a world to win.'