

# ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES?

## S O C I A L I S T R E G I S T E R 1 9 9 6

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## PREFACE

The ideological and material sweep encompassed by the proud capitalist assertion, 'There Is No Alternative', has been the clearest marker in our time of the contemporary crisis of socialism. How to take full measure of the power of 'TINA' (which really means treating seriously what it tells us about global capitalist economic, political and cultural power in the late 20th century) while at the same time not succumbing to the 'end of history' claim implicit within it (which means not becoming complicit with the extension of the present conjuncture into the foreseeable future) is the central political challenge of our time.

The acuteness of this challenge is compounded by the extent to which so many of those who are critical of neo-liberalism nevertheless have come to accept that any immediate alternatives to it have to be accommodated to the dynamics of the global capitalist order. Yet the material evidence continues to pile up of the growing incompatibility between such limited alternatives and real advances toward substantive democracy and social justice. In our historical context, thinking beyond TINA, rather than reconciling ourselves to it, means thinking in terms of creating the space that presently does not exist for new socialist alternatives. It means, in the wake of the failures of Communism and Social Democratic gradualism as the main 20th century expressions of socialist politics, not confining ourselves to the 'end of history' notion that socialist politics was once and for all defined within their historical ambit. It means learning from and transcending their severe limitations. But it first of all means reestablishing the relevance of a politics which would seek to put a notion of democratic and egalitarian alternatives to today's capitalism back on the political agenda, and actively building towards developing popular and institutional capacities to engage in struggles directed at achieving those goals. As Edward Thompson once put it: 'The art of the possible can only be restrained from engrossing the whole universe if the impossible can find ways of breaking back into politics, again and again.'

In posing the sober question 'Are There Alternatives?' as its theme, this 32nd issue of The Socialist Register seeks to take up this challenge. It does so not by canvassing the many new 'models' of (market, participatory or other) socialism which have been advanced in recent years (this will be the focus of a later volume), but by looking at alternatives that arise out of the present conjuncture. We begin in Britain where the almost two decade long sweep of Conservative rule - inaugurated by Mrs. Thatcher's stem proclamation of 'There Is No Alternative' - seems to have finally run its course. Colin **Leys'** detailed and acute investigation of Tony Blair's '**modernisation**' of the Labour Party, through an elite centralism which has suppressed the anti-capitalist ethos of the party, reveals how Labour now runs the risk 'of achieving office - though not real power - on the basis of "realistically" accepting the market just as its ultimate unacceptability, as the motor and arbiter of social life, is once again clear.'

We follow with Patrick Bond and Mzwanele **Mayekiso's** sobering account of the 'engagement' with neo-liberalism that characterises South Africa's democratic transition under Mandela. This account is made all the more poignant by the authors' setting of it in a remarkably wide-ranging survey of similar constraints and disappointments encountered elsewhere around the globe. But their essay also powerfully demonstrates that South Africa's own 'most compelling lessons for the international left' lies in the 'building and maintaining [of] a class conscious civil-society in oppressed communities' as the base for a 'people-centred development'.

The search for a 'progressive competitive' strategy of engagement with neo-liberal globalisation has in fact become the leitmotif of contemporary social democracy, and it is a sad but telling sign of the limits of this approach that the emulation of Japanese productivism has displaced that of Swedish corporatism as a model. Paul Burkett and Martin **Hart-Landsberg's** demonstration of the empirical weakness and strategic confusion entailed in the attempt to use Japan as a progressive model concentrates on such usages on the American left, but their critique can readily be applied to such positive usage of Japan made elsewhere (for instance, in Britain, by Will **Hutton's** recent best-selling book, *The State We're In*). The Australian Labor Governments since 1983 have been the longest standing practitioners of the progressive competitiveness strategy, as well as highly influential exponents of this strategy internationally. John Wiseman's careful analysis of the Australian experience, building directly on the critique of progressive competitiveness offered in earlier volumes of the Socialist Register, is an especially useful contribution for demonstrating its severe limitations as a model for the left.

For all its insistent 'realism', such a strategy is not only ethically questionable from a socialist perspective, it is also in fact unrealistic. Jim Crotty and Gerald Epstein, in an important contribution to the development

of practical alternative strategies amidst globalisation, demonstrate that the power of financial capital today is such that only a set of policies to control the international flow of money can provide the leverage to enhance the structural power of labour and secure full employment and greater income and wealth equality. Surveying the role of capital controls in the post-war era and identifying the types of controls that are practicable today, they reveal that the real impediments to their implementation are not technical but political. Enhancing the structural power of labour will also urgently require addressing, as Anna Pollert contends, the rise of 'non-standard' and 'poor' work as well as contemporary management strategies for **disempowering** trade unions. Focusing particularly on the form this has taken in the public service sector in Britain, she also offers an insightful account of various unions' attempts to confront this situation; and she demonstrates the vital importance of increasing the power of women in unions, defending broad-based bargaining and developing new forms of democratic participation in order effectively to change union cultures towards prioritizing organising the unorganised.

There is considerable irony in the fact that alongside the antirevolutionary slogan of TINA, fin de siècle capitalist culture is, at the same time, as Reg Whitaker notes, 'awash with prophecies of revolution . . . through the miraculous agency of that deus ex **machina**, technology.' Whitaker offers a stunning critique of the 'cybernavts' of the 'information revolution'. The networked computer may be constitutive of a new form of capitalism, he contends, a crucial element in a 'surveillance society' organized for competitive success. But if 'real change is to come about, it will have to be because people make it happen, by learning to use the new technologies against their owners . . .', and that will have to be accomplished by real communities, not virtual ones. Picking up the theme of the 'surveillance society', Peter Gill shows that the success of Thatcherism in appropriating popular fears amidst capitalist restructuring was used to reinforce the security apparatuses of the state in the post-Cold War era. Gill issues a strong challenge - and useful guidance - to a Labour Party, traditionally timid in this area, to undertake a programme of reform 'by asserting democratic control over domestic security apparatuses whose autonomy has been deployed on behalf of predominantly right wing causes.'

A refreshingly original example of how to broaden thinking about alternatives out of the events that define the present conjuncture is offered by Varda Burstyn. Linking the O.J. **Simpson** trial to the cultural practices that make sports figures 'gods in the popular pantheon', she shows the complicity of sport in the violent actions of such athletes as well as the broader role of mass sport as a central institution for 'the regeneration of anti-social and, by direct extension, anti-socialist values in contemporary

society.' Renewing hope in the possibility of socialist alternatives at the end of a century of 'atrocious human cruelty', Norman Geras reminds us, must also mean confronting seriously the **limits** to the perfectibility of human society. Taking up Ralph Miliband's confrontation with this very question in *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, Geras challenges traditional socialist assumptions in arriving at the conclusion that the threat of evil must be accepted as a 'permanent human possibility.' He concludes that human progress must be understood not as some linear advance to a utopian end-point, but as an ongoing struggle which involves 'setting limits around the more harmful and menacing types of human potentiality.'

We return in our final essays to the difficult questions posed in the opening essays of the volume regarding how to fashion appropriate political vehicles for advancing this ongoing struggle for socialist alternatives. Such vehicles will have to be capable of doing more than making 'progressive competitiveness' temporarily electorally viable; yet they must still be capable of connecting with the majority of people, convincing them of the relevance of radical socialist ideas and engaging them in an open-ended process of defining, and building the political capacity to achieve, socialist alternatives. Carlos **Vilas's** comprehensive survey of the Latin American left reveals a widespread acceptance among parties and intellectuals of a conventional form of electoralism that rules out such a creative search for alternatives. At the same time, the impact of Chiapas on the left in Mexico, he argues, brings into clear focus the equally widespread tension between social movements and party political strategies in the context of a 'destructuring of the working classes and a new plurality of social actors'. Revealing by no means dissimilar tensions, albeit in the very different context of the immediate political situation in Britain, Barry Winter and Hilary Wainwright engage in a spirited and enlightening debate (taking off from last year's *Socialist Register*) on the advisability of still working within the Labour Party, as opposed to finally 'moving on'. Their exchange raises crucial issues concerning how to assess the appropriateness of current conditions for building new socialist parties.

Among our contributors, Colin **Leys**, for many years Professor of Political at Queen's University in Canada, is now researching and writing in London. Patrick Bond recently moved from the faculty of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore to the National Institute for Economic Policy in Johannesburg; and Mzwanele Mayekiso is the International Representative of the South African National Civic Organization while at the Pratt Institute in New York studying urban planning. Paul Burkett and Martin Hart-Landsberg both teach economics, the former at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, the latter at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon; and John **Wiseman** teaches in the Department of Social Work at the Royal Melbourne Institute

of Technology. James Crotty and Gerald Epstein both are in the Economics Department of the University of Massachusetts at **Amherst**; and Anna **Pollert** is in the Industrial Relations Research Unit at the University of **Warwick**. Reg Whitaker is Professor of Political Science at York University, Toronto; and Peter Gill is Reader in Politics and Security at Liverpool John Moors University. Varda Burstyn is an independent writer and consultant who lives in Toronto. Norman Geras is Professor of Government at Manchester University; and Carlos **Vilas** is in the Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Humanidades of the Universidad **Nacional Autonoma** de Mexico. Barry Winter, former Secretary of Independent Labour Publications (successor to the Independent Labour Party), teaches at Leeds Metropolitan University and the Open University; and Hilary Wainwright is the editor of Red Pepper magazine and Research Fellow at Manchester University's Centre for International Labour Studies.

This issue is the first produced under The Socialist Register's new editorial structure. Two groups of contributing editors have been established, centered in Toronto and Manchester, who are committed not just to sustaining the role the Register has played for over three decades as an international locus of independent socialist thinking, debate and inquiry through its annual volume of essays, but to playing an active part, through the Register, in stimulating a new generation of intellectuals internationally to engage themselves in developing and advancing the ideas, analyses and strategies necessary to the project of renewing socialism at the turn of the millenium. In furthering the Register's commitment to this end, corresponding editors in diverse location will work with the Manchester and Toronto collectives; and in the course of the past year, George Ross (Brandeis University, Boston), **Elmar** Altvater (Free University, Berlin), Michalis Spourdakis (University of Athens) and Gerard **Greenfield** (Asia Monitor Research Center, Hong Kong) have joined us in that capacity.

In this context it is perhaps more necessary than ever to renew a long-standing Register tradition and remind our readers that neither our contributors nor the editors necessarily agree with with everything that appears in the following pages. That said, I want to thank all our contributors and editors for the work they put into this volume; and this especially applies to Paul Cammack, coordinator of the Manchester collective, for his creative planning of future volumes as well as for his hard work on this one. We have worked hard to finally put the Register, beginning with this volume, on a schedule that will see to its publication near the beginning of each calendar year. Thanks also to Mike **Gonzalez** for his translation of Carlos **Vilas's** essay. For the very helpful role that Martin Eve and Julie Millard of Merlin Press have played in making this possible, and for their

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overall support and dedication in The Socialist Register's transition from the late Ralph Miliband's primary stewardship, I am particularly grateful.

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**L.P.**

The Socialist Register has established a 'listserv', or electronic mail discussion forum, to facilitate the exchange of ideas between readers, contributors, and the editorial board. Submission of reasoned critique, rejoinders, and other commentary are welcome from all who subscribe to this forum, with each contribution distributed to the whole membership. (The membership list itself will not be distributed.) To join the listserv, send a message containing your name and e-mail address to:  
**socialist-register@yorku.ca**