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40 Years Since the PATCO Strike: Lessons for Today

Forty years after the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike—and its terrible defeat, we look back at the dispute and assess prospects for US unions today. (*August 7, 2021*)

"Strike, Strike, Strike," went the chant that continued for several minutes before erupting into cheering and stomping feet. The noise coming from the hundreds of union activists in the ballroom of the Chicago airport hotel might have sounded like an eerie echo from the radical 1930s. Yet this was 1981, and the [workers](#) were not trucking Teamsters but air traffic controllers.

The members of Patco, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, were unlikely "militants"—it was even technically illegal for this type of public [employees to strike](#). Controllers had

white collar government jobs with pay far higher than many.

They were overwhelmingly white and male, and regarded themselves as middle class. They lived in the suburbs and most had come into this service having served in the military—usually in Vietnam.

But in successive union negotiations in the 1970s controllers found their status - slipping as recession started to grip. Their pay was going down as inflation rose. At the same time their stress levels were at an all-time high as the amount of air traffic increased.

All manner of petty injustices fed their indignation, from losing their right to free air travel, to the way supervisors freely chastised them. They were also forced to endure regular psychological tests.

Newly introduced technology only seemed to make matters worse. Alarms would constantly ring to warn of an impending collision even when none were likely but would fail to alert controllers to any real danger. And, there was the impact on workers' mental health. Any mistaken instruction could result in a mid-air crash with the loss of hundreds of lives.

Many workers were forced to retire early due to stress, but now the bosses were trying to take that right away.

Tensions had been building throughout the decade and by the late 1970s a small group of union militants made it their business to start organizing among them. A secretive [rank and file](#) group of younger controllers, who called themselves the Choirboys, began agitating for a strike.



Reagan condemning the Patco workers

Confident

Inspired by a wave of successful teachers' strikes, they were soon confident enough to call openly for a strike over pay.

If the union could convince 80 percent of the controllers to strike all air traffic in the US could be stopped, they said. This could mean that the union's demands for better pay, shorter hours and restored benefits could be won.

By the end of 1979 the Choirboys had raised the share of Patco members who said they'd respect a picket line to 69 percent, while 90 percent of those under 30 said they were willing to strike. In 1981, 95.3 percent of Patco members voted to reject the employers' new contract and in effect voted for strikes.

By 3 August they were on the picket line of an illegal strike, and defiant—something captured well in Joseph McCartin's book, *Collision Course*. In one passage he recalls the partner of a striker telling her children that, "Daddy may have to go to jail." If he did, they should not "be ashamed," she said. Instead they should "be very proud of him" because he was there for "a great cause."

The union was determined but so were the bosses. In the period running up to the strike the Federal Aviation Administration was preparing furiously.

- First, it struck an agreement with major airlines to drastically reduce the number of flights in the event of a strike.

- Second, it retrained all supervisors so that they could do air traffic control work if necessary.
- Third, it enlisted the military and got agreement for hundreds of air force controllers to work in civilian transport.
- Lastly, it planned for mass recruitment and training of new staff at breakneck speed.

The plan was so well regarded that the newly elected Republican president, [Ronald Reagan](#), made a speech from the White House. He declared it was illegal for air traffic controllers to strike.

If they didn't return to work within 48 hours, he went on, he'd order them all sacked.

Refused

The union held up well despite the threat, with as many as 90 percent of controllers out in some areas.

But the bosses' contingency plan was far more effective than the union had bargained for and planes continued to fly. All other unions should have backed the controllers after Reagan had made his ultimatum—everyone knew this threat tactic would spread. Had either the pilots' union or the International Association of Machinists, whose members maintained aircraft, refused to work during the strike Reagan would have been busted. But the leaders of both offered nothing more than warm words.

On 5 August, knowing that Patco was completely isolated, the president carried out his threat. The federal government began firing all 11,159 air traffic

controllers who had not already returned to work. In addition, he declared a lifetime ban on rehiring any of the strikers.

The controllers had been crushed, and most union leaders drew only the most pessimistic lessons from their failure. Instead of recognizing they should have backed the controllers', they said the defeat proved it was dangerous and pointless to strike.

The failure of the strike led to a "new era" of industrial relations where [union - leaders](#) believed that "cooperation" with the bosses was the way to maintain good jobs. In the years that followed wages and jobs went into freefall while the union leaders sat on their hands.

Workers Won't let the Labor Movement Die

There have recently been outbursts of workers' anger among older sections of the [union movement](#) in the US as well as newly organized groups.

Official figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show a significant increase in strikes in 2018 and 2019. As many as 485,000 workers were involved in major walkouts in 2018. The rise was driven by the "red state rebellion" teachers' strikes in West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma, which were followed by the [LA teachers strike](#) in January 2019, and [Chicago](#) in October.

They were among many white collar workers, who saw themselves as "middle class", but had been hammered by free

market reforms. As one union organizer, Noah Kartvelis, said, “They’ve realized that they’re exploited and that they have structural power.”

But 2018 also showed the potential for some of the lowest paid, most precarious workers to organize.

Almost 6,000 Marriott Hotel workers in eight cities across the US refused to go to work, after a strike spread from one Boston hotel. Many workers were making poverty wages. Their indefinite strike won higher wages and workplace rights from the multinational.

Blip or Premonition?

But were 2018 and 2019 just a blip in a long-term decline?

Despite a rash of small and isolated [walkouts and workers’ actions over Covid](#), in [schools](#), [healthcare](#), food preparation, and [elsewhere](#), the BLS figures show a decrease in the number of strikes from 2020 onwards. The number of strikes could actually be higher than measured as the BLS only counts strikes of more than 1,000 workers, and nearly 60 percent of all private sector workers are employed by companies with fewer than 1,000 employees.

[Labor Notes](#) found there were 28 strikes this April alone. This included the walkout of 800 nurses out in Worcester Massachusetts ignored in the BLS figures.

Of course, no matter how the strike figures are calculated, it’s nowhere near

the high points of the 1970s. And there have been setbacks.

A high-profile attempt to win union recognition at the [Amazon](#) warehouse in Alabama failed in April, with a large “No” vote. In order to defeat the drive the bosses had to resort to all manner of dirty tactics. Even the NLRB ruled the company used “objectionable pressure,” and “undermined the election’s integrity.” This election is not simply further evidence of the death of US organized labor. It sparked massive solidarity, and interest in unionization at other Amazon facilities.

Labor in a Pandemic

Extended strikes were difficult during the growth in unemployment related to the COVID recession in 2020.

In that period, economic inequality escalated massively. Today, while there are still more unemployed than before the pandemic, official unemployment levels are falling again, and many employers are complaining of a “labor shortage.” Of course, if employers increased pay and were pushed by workers to improve conditions, they would not have the trouble finding workers.

The “labor shortage” may provide the confidence, especially to low-paid workers, to risk fighting for more, and help spread and generalize the anger that flared up sporadically in 2020.

Volvo and Warrior Met

2021 began with the victory of the all out [strike of over 1,400 Teamsters at Hunt's Point market](#) in the Bronx.

The recent [strike at a Virginia Volvo truck factory](#) by nearly 2,900 UAW members showed workers could stand together against the bosses—and the need to - organize themselves independently from the union bureaucracy. Between May and July workers voted down three inadequate offers, despite their union scandalously calling for a yes vote.

Despite the strike being solid, the union told strikers to return to work before they even knew the terms of the deal. When they did discover what was on the table, they furiously voted it down. Despite a small wage increase, the contract included a large increase in health care costs and continued the hated two-tiered wage structure. The first two offers were voted down by 98% and 90%, but after union leadership continued repeating Volvo's scare tactics and calling for a retreat on the picket lines, the third vote was 60% no. Instead of the union responding and supporting the continued militancy of workers, five days later hourly workers narrowly voted, 1,147 to 1,130, for the six-year contract, and the strike unfortunately ended. Unionized salaried workers voted against the pact 45-40.

A similar climbdown was seen in the huge [UAW strike](#) against GM in 2019, where an end to the tier wage system was the most talked about demand on the

[picket line](#), but the union-pushed settlement left tiers in place. In both cases, a network of union reps and militant workers across the union and independent of leadership could have made a difference in continuing the strike, involving more workers in militant activity, and winning more.

In an inspiring show of determination, over 1,000 miners in UMWA have been on strike against Warrior Met in Brookwood, Alabama, since April—despite arrests by police and attacks by scabs in cars on the picket line, and very little coverage in the press. They are trying to win back major concessions the union gave during a 2015 bankruptcy of the Warrior Met coal mine. The company is now solvent, and owned by a group of moneyed hedge funds, but the bosses are breaking their promise and refusing to budge. Workers rightly voted down (by 1,006 to 45) an insulting \$1.50 an hour raise over five years from a CEO now making \$4 million a year. Workers' safety is also a major issue. A win by these miners would be an inspiration to all.

Socialists have a role in generalizing and organizing rank and file strength and confidence to resist the bosses, but also to pressure the union leaders into action and resist inadequate compromises. There are new battles on the horizon, and the thirst for action among the lowest paid continues to grow.



Adapted from
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Lessons of Hong Kong Resistance

It has been one year since the repressive Security Law was enacted in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong-based activist **Lam Chi Leung**, in an interview first published by the South Korean organization *Workers' Solidarity*, explains how the situation has changed. (July 11, 2021)

In the 12 months since the implementation of the [National Security Law](#) (NSL), things have been grim in Hong Kong. More than 10,000 people have been arrested for participating in the [anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill](#) (ELAB) movement of two years ago, and more than 2,500 have been prosecuted.

At the same time, some 100 people have been arrested for NSL offenses, including Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai, members of opposition groups, and demonstrators.

Many political and civil organizations from the opposition camp, including pro-democracy, religious, and service sector unions have announced that they are disbanding.

Apart from Apple Daily, which was forced to cease publication in late June, [Hong Kong](#)'s alternative media has also come under serious political pressure.

For example, the online website, Stand News has deleted all of its old articles.

Certain programs have been suspended, and some hosts have been replaced. Citizens have become cautious in posting online and voicing political slogans, fearing they may be detected by national security authorities.

The freedom of speech and press freedoms that Hong Kong residents have

enjoyed for the past 40 years are now seriously imperiled.

According to the NSL, not only actions but even speech that is considered separatist, subversive, or in collusion with foreign forces, can be criminally punished.



Umbrellas guard protesters from state surveillance at an anti-extradition bill protest in 2014 (Pic: Studio Incendo)

Subversion

The definitions of “separatism”, “subversion,” and “collusion with foreigners” are extremely vague.

In deliberately refusing to clarify just where exactly its political “red line” lies, the Beijing authorities are intimidating the citizens to facilitate government control.

Some pro-Beijing figures have already said that the NSL is not just of use in

attacking the opposition but should be the catalyst for a “political purge”.

This is in order to start a transformation of Hong Kong’s judicial, social, cultural, ideological and other spheres.

Moreover, the [Hong Kong government](#) is preparing to restart the legislative process for Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law.

It stipulates that the Hong Kong government should establish its own legislation to protect national security to strengthen its political control.

In 2003, a march of 500,000 city residents led to the shelving of similar Article 23 legislation.

The Apple Daily was launched in 1995. It is Hong Kong’s largest selling newspaper and one that supports the democratic opposition.

The founder has long supported mainstream pro-democracy groups such as the Democratic Party and has privately donated to such parties.

During the [2019 anti-ELAB campaign](#), he went to the US to meet politicians, telling them, “The people of Hong Kong stand with the US in fighting a war of values against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).”

It’s not hard to see that Apple Daily was a thorn in the side of the Beijing government.

Apple Daily’s political stance is one of opposition to [CCP authoritarianism](#) and criticism of the Hong Kong government. It is anti-communist, pro-American, and supportive of [free-market capitalism](#).

The socialist left opposes the forced suspension of any publication and defends its freedom of speech. Having said that, we cannot abandon our principles and support Apple Daily’s political line.

The majority of residents sympathize with Apple Daily. On 24 June, its last day of publication, one million copies were sold. Some residents went to the newspaper’s office to express support for its journalists.

This year’s June 4 rally to commemorate Tienanmen, and the July 1 pro-democracy march on the anniversary of the hand-back, were both banned.

Given the level of political pressure, it is hard to imagine large-scale demonstrations of public support for Apple Daily, but most residents oppose the government’s authoritarianism.

In early May, Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam announced that the government was exploring the possibility of passing a “Fake News Law”. It would deal with “misinformation, hate speech, and lies.”

This is intended to allow the government to further clamp down on news reporting and online discussion.

Existing legislation in Hong Kong already contains penalties for spreading false information, there is no need for a separate “Fake News Law.”

Both president Jo Biden and Donald Trump said that they oppose the repression in Hong Kong. But the US monopoly capital that they represent

remains inextricably linked to circles within the Chinese bureaucracy.

There is a long history of exchange between US law enforcement and the Hong Kong police.

Weapons and other riot control technology used by the Hong Kong police have been supplied by American companies for many years.

During the anti-ELAB movement, Trump at one point referred to the Hong Kong mass movement as a “riot”, adopting the same language as the Beijing government. We can anticipate that Biden will simply pay lip service to the issue.

In 2019-20 quite a lot of Hong Kongers looked to Trump, hoping that he would force the Beijing government to end its crackdown on the Hong Kong mass movement and stop the passage of the NSL.

Far right localists in Hong Kong encouraged this trend and cultivated unrealistic expectations of the US.

They glorified Trump’s right-wing populism and claimed that Black Lives Matter was a CCP conspiracy.

With Trump’s departure from office, these Hong Kongers have come to a point of desperation, unable to see a way forward.

For many years our position has been that in order to win democracy and autonomy for Hong Kong, we need the support of workers everywhere. A priority is to win the understanding and support of workers in the Chinese mainland.

To pin the future of Hong Kong’s democracy on America or other Western imperialist countries will only turn it into a geopolitical tool in the struggle between China and Western imperialism.

It will allow the CCP bureaucracy to demonize the [Hong Kong democracy movement](#) and successfully drive a wedge between the people of the - mainland and Hong Kong.

The only true alternative is to unite the people of the mainland and Hong Kong in a collective struggle for democracy and workers’ power across the whole of China.

Hong Kong has now experienced the failures of the [2014 Umbrella Movement](#) and the 2019 anti-ELAB campaign.

Crackdown

Coupled with today’s severe government crackdown, we are unlikely to see recent mass movements on the scale of these past two events.

To a large extent, the future of democracy in Hong Kong depends on whether there are economic crises in mainland China.

If the bureaucratic rule is not weakened, then Hong Kong is facing a grim period, one even more difficult than at present.

Hong Kong residents who are pro-democracy have not changed their stance, but some have lost their bearings, and some have chosen to emigrate.

Nevertheless, some too have begun to review the goals and strategies of past mass movements. The new generation is

willing to consider different opinions—including those of the socialist left—and weigh the experience of the “New Trade Union Movement”.

The experience of these past struggles would seem to support what the socialist left has been advocating.

First, we need the self-organization of the masses, not loose and irresponsible guerrilla actions.

Second, we need the self-organization of workers and direct action such as [strikes](#).

For this we need to combine the demands for political democracy with anti-capitalist demands.

Finally, we need to express solidarity with the struggles of workers in mainland China for their rights, to link the progressive forces of Hong Kong and mainland China.

Although Hong Kong’s socialist left has only limited influence, there was some positive development from 2009 to 2014.

Subsequently, because of the rise of far right localist ideology, the broad left fell into political confusion and was unable to intervene effectively.

Today, in the new political environment, the socialist left needs to work with the new generation of youth, to organize on the basis of the issues that most concern the public.

Only on this basis can it gradually strengthen its influence.



Online edition:

marx21us.org/2021/07/11/lessons-of-hong-kong-resistance/

What is Socialism?

As the horrors of the capitalist system are laid bare, more and more people are looking for an alternative. Today 41% of Americans (and a majority of young adults) have a positive view of “socialism,” but many others still have negative views based on the repressive regimes of the Soviet Union and elsewhere, and there are many different definitions of the word. What does the alternative to capitalism look like and how do we make it happen? **Chantal Sundaram** looks at different conceptions of socialism outlined in Hal Draper’s classic, *“The Two Souls of Socialism.”* (July 11, 2021)

Today the word “socialism” has a new lease on life. From AOC and the revival of the term “democratic socialism” in the US to the recent election in Chile of self-declared socialists and communists to a constituent assembly to rewrite a

constitution that was previously the work of neoliberal dictator Pinochet, the word is undeniably popular today.

The word “socialism” has in most eras filled people with hope. But during the Cold War there was a moment when it

filled many with dread. The “models” on offer were the Soviet Union, and at best, Cuba. These were states that started with popular uprisings but then took a very different turn.

And later, in the neoliberal era of the 90s, many left parties banished the word “socialism” from their constitution or party program, for reasons that had nothing to do with Stalinism. It was the pressure of elections: they thought the word unpopular, and even the notion of modest state control of the market was an embarrassment for those running to the middle.

But at the very same time there was an attempt to transform those stale traditional left electoral parties, or leave them entirely to form parties to the left: in Brazil, in Greece, in Germany, in Spain, in the UK, and more recently the defeated push by Jeremy Corbyn inside the UK Labour Party, the Leap and Courage coalition around the Canadian New Democratic Party (NDP), and *Quebec solidaire*. In the US, left alternatives to the Democrats and Republicans are small, and insignificant electorally. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), now a substantial socialist organization but not an electoral party, put a lot of their resources into backing left candidates running on the Democratic ballot line. This has met with some electoral success, and helped publicize an idea of “socialism,” but without independent working class organization. These are all parties or challenges within parties that

demonstrate the need for movements from below to be reflected in elections. In some cases they reflect an attempt to transform traditional electoral choices fundamentally in connection with movements from below. But then they come against bourgeois state, be it parliamentary or other.

To this day there is an attempt to rescue the word “socialism” from any kind of oppressive meaning and invest it with new relevance. And sometimes it has been without the word itself: the Occupy movement made the idea of “them” and “us” stick powerfully in the popular imagination with the notion of the 1%. The struggle to define what “socialism” means in the sense of not just what we are fighting against but what we are fighting for, emerges naturally in most movements for social change. But sometimes it still needs some reflection to clarify.

The Two Souls Of Socialism

In 1960, the American socialist activist Hal Draper wrote an article called “The Two Souls of Socialism” about the very different claims to the word “socialism.” Hal Draper was influential in the Berkeley free speech movement but also in a small revolutionary socialist organization active in the 60s that was trying to make sense for young people active in resistance movements of the limited choices on offer in the name of “socialism.”

He divided those choices in two basic camps: “socialism from above” and “socialism from below,” and argued they were divergent and ultimately competing. The distinction between “from above” and “from below” made sense at the time in terms of the way that both Stalinist parties and left electoral parties laid claim to that word without its full substance. It still does, as many try to figure out their relationship to the DSA, or in Canada (the NDP or Quebec solidaire), or other left electoral parties.

Draper’s pamphlet makes the case that no matter how different the two are, the Stalinist tradition and the electoral tradition of social democracy bear a central similarity: they deny the agency of the majority over the authority of the few. The main difference is history: Stalinism emerged from counter-revolution against a genuine attempt at socialism from below in Russia, and left electoral parties like the Labour Party in Britain, the Canadian NDP, or many European Socialist parties, took shape as a diversion of the workers’ movement exclusively towards the goal of winning elections.

Both equate socialism with the state, regardless of who controls that state – all its mechanics beyond the few elected positions, and whose interests it serves. The Stalinist state required violence, the election strategy requires redirection of energies and expectations towards elections rather than more radical social change. In the global south there were many places where Communist parties

reinvented themselves as social democratic parties, seeking to gain access to the existing state structures.

Many excellent working-class and student militants committed and continue to commit themselves to labor parties and Communist parties around the world, because of a genuine commitment to movements from below. And within and around those parties, the notion of power from below continues to be produced through movements like BLM and Land Back, and movements for democracy and workers’ rights from Palestine to Columbia to Indian farm workers to Chile: the dynamics of democratic movements for social change keep the option of socialism from below alive.

As Draper wrote: “the recurrence of revolutionary upheavals and social disturbances, defined precisely by the intrusion onto the historical stage of previous inactive masses and characteristic of periods when basic social change is on the agenda, is just as “normal” in history as the intervening periods of conservatism.”

Draper’s work helps put into context the limited choices available to those who seek social change, and celebrates the movements from below that constantly recur and pose the fundamental question of where real change comes from: “That struggle from below has never been stopped by the theories from above, and it has changed the world time and again.”

How do we not just change but transform?

Draper documents that many debates that occurred between socialists in the early twentieth century were about the end goal. A major debate within the socialist movement in Germany before WWI about whether or not the capitalist state could be reformed to serve the interests of workers devolved into a debate over whether or not workers' parties should support their own national state in an imperialist war. This was a turning point over the claim to the word "socialism," at least in Europe.

The "socialism from above" side won that debate, and it was a fundamental denial of the real Marxist tradition of workers power from below, which had been held by many members of socialist parties until that time. The attempt of this "from above" strategy during the Weimar Republic gave way to the victory of fascism in Germany. It was the result of both this turning away from socialism from below and the terrible influence of Stalinism in causing many socialist fighters to look up to states they believed were socialist to intervene instead of looking to their own power to stop the rise of fascism.

But every historical moment also produces many who look to socialism from below with uncompromising faith in the self activity of the working class. In Germany at this turning point, it was leaders like Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote:

The socialist system of society should only be, and can only be, an historical product, born out of the school of its own experiences, born in the course of its realization, as a result of the developments of living history...it is clear that socialism by its very nature cannot be decreed or introduced...the negative, the tearing down, can be decreed; the building up, the positive, cannot. New Territory. A thousand problems. Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways.

How can Socialism from Below win?

The question of socialism from below is not only about this turning point in Western history: it is global. It is about a goal, and being able to argue for it, but more fundamentally about how it can be won on a mass scale. Draper here echoes many fighters for the concept of socialism from below, from Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, but also Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers, and Indigenous Marxists like Howard Adams and many others.:

How does a people or a class become fit to rule in their own name? Only by fighting to do so. Only by waging their struggle against oppression – oppression by those who tell them they are unfit to

govern. Only by fighting for democratic power do they educate themselves and raise themselves up to the level of being able to wield that power. There has never been any other way for any class.

But the independence of those who have become fit to rule in their own name, collectively with each other, does depend on their ability to speak in their own name. Especially when they speak as a class that can liberate human society. The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky put it like this: “the workers’ movement from below is the steam that powers the piston of a genuine workers’ party with locomotive energy. A genuine workers’ party that brings together those who are generating power from below prevents the steam from dissipating and losing its power. It also does not redirect that power towards chasing elections for their own sake.

But the piston is a tool: a party from below may adopt strategies around elections to maximize the power of the masses, but never to put itself above the movement from below. The goal is the self-activity of the masses of the working people themselves. There are two “souls” of socialism, two roads that lead in fundamentally different directions. One entrenches the idea that an elite will set us free through the state, and the other opens us up to the idea that our own power can set us free. There are millions around the globe who set out thinking this is the same road, with the same goal, for the best of reasons.

Ultimately, revolutionary organization against capitalism and its state structures is essential. But the mass instinct for some kind of socialism from below that recurs shows the possibility for that ultimate faith in socialism from below to become reality.

“Since the beginning of society, there has been no end of theories “proving” that tyranny is inevitable and that freedom-in-democracy is impossible; there is no more convenient ideology for a ruling class and its intellectual flunkies. These are self-fulfilling predictions, since they remain true only as long as they are taken to be true. In the last analysis, the only way of proving them false is in the struggle itself. That struggle from below has never been stopped by the theories from above, and it has changed the world time and again. To choose any of the forms of Socialism-from-Above is to look back to the old world, to the “old crap.” To choose the road of Socialism-from-Below is to affirm the beginning of a new world.”

– Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism*



Online edition:

[marx21us.org/
2021/07/11/what-is-
socialism/](http://marx21us.org/2021/07/11/what-is-socialism/)

US Imperialism, Capitalism, and Cuban Protests

The current protests in Cuba have raised arguments. **Sophie Squire** analyzes the nature of Cuban state capitalism, the pressure from the US and today's revolt. (16 July 2021)

The streets of [Cuba](#) have, at the time of this article's writing, seen protests in recent weeks. Poverty and the impact of the Covid pandemic have prompted many to direct their anger towards the Cuban government.

Others have mobilized to defend it.

The history of Cuba provides us with [vital lessons](#). It shows the vicious nature of US intervention—and how it can be beaten back.

Cuba is an inspiring example of how people can fight against imperialism and for national liberation. But it is not a model of socialism.

Spain was the first imperialist power to seize the land now known as [Cuba](#) in the late 1400s. The indigenous population, the Ciboney Taino, who lived there were displaced and enslaved by the colonizers.

The US and Spain battled over [Cuba](#) throughout the 1800s until 1898 when Spain was forced to give up the island.

Cuba declared independence in 1902, but it remained under the effective control of the US through the Platt Amendment.

One clause of this amendment gave the US the now notorious Guantanamo torture base on the island.



Hundreds of protesters took the streets of Havana amidst a Covid-19 outbreak. (Pic: Elserbio00/Wikimedia)

From then on the US had a big role in running Cuba. It would effectively choose its presidents and send troops to smash any resistance.

This led to a period of political instability. Taking advantage of the situation, military officer [Fulgencio Batista](#) took power and became the country's president from 1940 to 1944.

Facing electoral defeat in 1952, [Batista](#) orchestrated a military coup and installed himself as a dictator, backed by the US.

Batista worked with the US, the mafia and sections of local capital to set up a corrupt regime that was playground for the rich and of horror for ordinary people.

By the end of the 1950s the city of Havana had 270 brothels.

Large sections of the working class, the peasantry and even some capitalists opposed Batista's rule.

He wrecked ordinary people's lives, but also held back the growth of a locally-owned business sector.

Without a social base, Batista relied on the police and the army to crush dissent. This alone was not enough to withstand the forces rallying against him.

In July 1953, a small group of revolutionaries came together from the more radical elements of the left wing populist [Ortodoxo Party](#). Led by Fidel Castro they attacked the Moncada army barracks.

Castro was imprisoned for the attack, and later went to Mexico.

On his return to Cuba, he formed the 26th of July Movement alongside his brother Raul and [Ernesto 'Che' Guevara](#).

Guevara and Castro were united in the belief armed [guerilla struggle](#) by revolutionaries could bring about social revolution. Workers' and peasants struggle was seen as useful, but not central.

Several groups led armed struggle against Batista forces throughout the rest of the 1950s.

The armed struggle was undoubtedly heroic. Between 1957 and 1958, up to 2,000 resistance fighters in urban areas lost their lives.

The repression against the rebels served to turn even more of the population against the dictatorship and to identify with the resistance.

Batista's support nosedived, with large sections of his army refusing to fight the rebels. By 1958 Batista's state had collapsed.

On New Year's Day 1959 Batista conceded his presidency and Castro declared the revolution victorious. Castro was made prime minister in February that year.

The revolution gave strength to millions battling imperialism across the world.

There was popular support for the rebels from the working class.

But workers' participation was not seen as a mechanism for transforming Cuban society.

A [general strike](#) was attempted in [1958](#), but it failed. The following year, in a show of what workers' struggle could achieve, carefully prepared strikes played a vital part in safeguarding the revolution.

The way the revolution was won set the groundwork for the kind of society that Cuba would become.

It was a society where a group at the top, decided what was best for the many. They wanted change for the masses, but they abandoned Marx's idea that emancipation of the working class had to be the act of the working class.

In the early years following the revolution Castro and the newly formed Communist Party knew reforms must be made to satisfy the masses.

Real improvements were made to healthcare and education and large sections of industry were taken into state hands.

But these reforms didn't just benefit workers, they were also made to push for quicker industrialization to keep Cuba's economy afloat.

The building up of Cuba's economy was considered essential especially after the US began an embargo on exports from the country following the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

This has had severe effects in a country heavily reliant on imports. Every socialist should demand that it goes.

For decades the US has terrorized Cuba, mounting invasions and sponsoring assassinations and terrorist attacks to destabilize the Cuban government.

One of the most notable attempts was the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.

CIA backed right-wing rebels attempted an attack on the island.

After this, the Cuban government declared their revolution to be socialist. Cuba allied with Russia. By trading sugar for fuel, the country was able to keep its economy alive.

The Cuban government looked increasingly to Russia as an example of how society could be organized.

The model of state capitalism that existed in Eastern Europe and China meant the means to accumulate was placed in the hands of the state and its bureaucracy, not private capitalists.

This allowed these countries to continue to compete with rival countries on the global market.

It was this model that Cuba took up, not just as a way to emulate their allies but also as a reaction to a stagnated economy.

Socialism could not be built in one country in Russia. It certainly could not survive in a country as small as Cuba.

To survive the Cuban government set optimistic economic goals.

But to achieve those goals, workers were pushed hard. The constant pursuit of growth led to misery for the masses.

And like other state capitalist countries, Cuban society was marked by repression and the crushing of dissent.

Workers' struggle was actively discouraged and land reforms were carried out without the input of peasants or farm workers.

Trade unions came under state control.

And what were claimed to be elements of grassroots democracy became methods of transmitting orders from the top.

The aftermath of the revolution was no festival of the oppressed.

LGBT+ people suffered brutal persecution including incarceration and expulsions of tens of thousands of gay men and lesbians starting in 1980.

The collapse of the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1991, led to food shortages in Cuba.

Yet the regime survived and began to look for another way to sustain its economy. They found the solution in gradually opening up to private businesses.

By the start of the 2000s, there were 405 joint ventures and partnership agreements with big businesses on the island, most being in the tourism industry.

In 2011, economic reforms were made allowing businesses to operate without government administration.

And in February of this year, Cuba's labor minister announced almost all the Cuban state would be opened up for business. This has not led to any improvement in the lives of ordinary people. But it has created new forms of class struggle.

At one moment it looked as if the US might shift its position.

Former president [Barack Obama](#) said he was moving to normalize relations with Cuba. But nothing fundamental [changed](#).

And his successor Donald Trump imposed 240 measures to make the sanctions even tougher.

All of these measures are still in place under Joe Biden. And of course, the protests this month are a reaction to food shortages caused, in part, by US sanctions that intend to starve Cuba.

But they are also a product of living in a society that, despite calling itself Communist, exploits its workers and has allowed a ruling class to form while many live in poverty.

We are always for Cuba against US imperialism. But crucially we are also for workers' self-activity, the right to protest and to organize, and the right to fight for genuine socialism against the government.



Online edition:
[socialistworker.co.uk](https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/52108/)
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Energy workers call for just transition

Brian Champ of the *International Socialists* in Canada reports on a survey of Canadian fossil fuel workers and what it would take to avoid the worst effects of capitalism's climate crisis. (August 3, 2021)



There is an image often presented of workers in fossil fuel extraction and processing industries as diehard supporters of these industries and the environmentally destructive methods they are paid to employ. The implication is that it's a waste of effort to try to convince these workers that our economy needs to shift away from fossil fuels, and that our only hope is for enlightened political and business leadership that can

solve the crisis and keep the economy afloat.

But we've been waiting for this leadership for 3 decades to go beyond talk to take real action and the wildfire smoke across the continent shows we can't wait anymore. Thankfully this image of high carbon industry workers is a myth.

A new poll of workers with jobs in fossil fuel extraction and processing industries in Canada puts it to rest. Commissioned by worker-led non-profit group [Iron & Earth](#) in May, the results showed that workers in these industries have a lot of concerns about the future and are open to a transition away from fossil fuel industries. 67% of those polled agreed that climate change needed to be addressed; 69% are interested (39% very interested) in transitioning to the "net-zero" economy; 88% are interested in training in technologies for it.

Workers in these industries do have very serious concerns: 94% for the current and future economic well-being of their children (52% very concerned); 77% about environmental protection and conservation (30% very concerned) and 68% about action on climate change (27% very concerned). These numbers reveal that there is a great deal of interest in a transition to green jobs.

Under capitalism, owners and managers control the workplace from hiring to firing and everything in between. When the boss hires a worker, it is primarily because their labor will generate profit for them. Profits from fossil fuel

extraction, processing and distribution form a key sector of capital accumulation in the economy. The portability of fossil fuels also provides greater flexibility and control to the boss compared to the fixed locality of zero-carbon energy production. There is a need for the government to intervene and provide a just transition plan, but a mass movement that includes fossil fuel workers will be needed to press for action.

Iron & Earth have launched a campaign proposing that the federal government invest \$110 billion in what they call the Prosperous Transition Plan, to train workers for the "net-zero" economy, assist business and industry in the transition, retrofit and repurpose infrastructure and support and strengthen the earth's ecosystems, carbon sinks and natural technologies. By building a campaign around this type of bold plan, it could concretize the key question of justice for workers whose livelihood currently relies on a carbon intensive industry but who want to transition to a green job.

Some elements of the Iron & Earth plan need to be challenged, such as including carbon capture and storage, biofuels and other elements as part of the "net-zero" economy, where sunk carbon is subtracted from carbon emissions to describe net carbon emitted. The problem is that "net-zero" allows governments and corporations to avoid reducing emissions in favor of carbon sink technological fixes that allow continued funding of the fossil fuel industry. This distraction

becomes even more problematic every day, as the massive wildfires burning across Turtle Island and elsewhere around the world are releasing huge amounts of carbon that make actually reducing fossil fuel carbon emissions even more urgent. But the attitudes of these workers this poll revealed shows that workers in high carbon emitting industries are open to a just transition away from these destructive industries and practices. Engaging these workers in discussions of how we can win a just transition through grassroots action from below linking Indigenous sovereignty struggles, the fight for good, green jobs and the climate justice movement is extremely important. Victories for Indigenous sovereignty struggles immediately poses the question of a just transition for workers affected. Building these links challenges the false dichotomies between jobs, Indigenous sovereignty and the environment and provides hope for a livable future.



Online edition:
socialist.ca/node/4402





Marx21 (Marxism for the 21st century) is an organization of revolutionary socialists across the United States. We stand by the following principles:

ANTI-CAPITALISM

We believe that workers create all the wealth under capitalism, which is a system run by a tiny, wealthy elite. A new society can only be constructed when we the workers collectively seize control of that wealth and plan production and distribution according to human need.

SOCIALISM FROM BELOW

We stand in the tradition of socialism from below: the idea that workers can only emancipate ourselves through our own struggles. We do not believe that current social democratic and labor governments around the world represent socialism, nor do we believe states that use the language of socialism (like the former Soviet Union, China, Venezuela, Cuba and elsewhere) offer a model for true liberation. Socialism cannot be handed down to us. We need a fundamentally different system in which we actively participate and democratically control.

ACTIVISM

We are activists and organizers. We do not stand aside from movements and activity in the streets, we strive to lead them. We read theory, debate ideas, and learn history in order to understand the world, and to argue for and implement strategies and tactics that give us the best chance of winning radical change. One function of our website/bulletin is to intervene in movements and demonstrate through our activity that the politics of revolutionary socialism is the only path to creating the world we know is possible.

REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM

We believe that only a revolutionary break with the current system can deliver us socialism. We believe in fighting for reforms, because they are both an essential part of improving people's lives and preparing our side to run society in our own interests. We believe in the need for a mass, working class, revolutionary party in order to lead a future successful socialist revolution.

OPPOSITION TO ALL FORMS OF OPPRESSION

The working class is multi-racial and multi-gendered. It benefits capitalism to oppress and divide us because capitalism's greatest enemy is

worker solidarity. We need a world free from racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and every kind of oppression. We fight against all these forms of oppression wherever they arise. The only way we can win true equality is with solidarity.

NON-SECTARIANISM

We are an outward-looking, non-sectarian organization that seeks to work together in movements and campaigns, and alongside the wider left. We believe in being honest about our political differences with other groups and having comradely disagreements, but we work with all forces that seek left wing change.

INTERNATIONALISM

Marx21 stands in the international socialist tradition and is connected with other like-minded socialist groups around the world in the International Socialist Tendency. We support the IST's politics, and we work alongside the organizations associated with the tendency, but we are an independent organization that makes its own decisions.

DEMOCRACY

We are a member organization where every voice matters. Any elected leadership bodies are accountable to and instantly recallable by the membership. We make decisions together in our local branches, caucuses, and national meetings. We are accountable to one another as a group.

WHAT MEMBERSHIP MEANS

- We agree with the principles outlined above.
- We attend Marx21 meetings and events as often as possible.
- We write for and share articles from the Marx21 website and sell the Marx21 bulletin where possible.
- We identify ourselves as Marx21 members in meetings and movements wherever possible and practical.
- We pay dues to support the organization's work (based on financial ability).
- **We welcome any non-members who are interested in our politics to attend our meetings and work alongside us.**