

## Steve Williams: Name it & Claim it

The story is getting painfully old. Local governments and corporations starve working class communities— normally also communities of color— for generations. Then, as if channeling Christopher Columbus, they announce that they have discovered that the neighborhood has been neglected for decades and that developers will build market-rate housing, trendy shopping and some massive sports complex in an effort to turn the neighborhood around.

That part is old; exploiters always take advantage of misery. But what pushes this story into the realm of the painful is that time and time again the affected community is split. On one side, people in the community righteously denounce the developer's plans on the basis that luxury condominiums, vanilla lattes and dog parks will do nothing to address the needs of the community; and that working class people of color will inevitably be displaced to make way for richer, whiter urban pioneers. On the other side, some folks in the community support the project— not because they don't fear the neighborhood being gentrified, but because they don't see any other way. To deal with sky-rocketing joblessness, environmental contamination, police violence and the lack of infrastructure like quality schools, public transportation and grocery stores, some people decide reluctantly to make a deal with the devil.

The breaking point for me came after a heated hearing at City Hall. A young African American man who had testified that he desperately wanted a job that would allow him to raise his family in the City that he grew up in came up to me and asked, "All of what you're saying seems on point, so what's your alternative?"

That question has haunted me for months now. This brother was trying to figure out what was going to be in his and his community's best interest. If he joined in opposing this project, then what? I was silenced because I didn't know. Besides the prospect of some important immediate benefits, I couldn't name a tangible alternative that he could hang his hopes on in the long-term.

As someone who's been in the first group many times— fighting against projects which have shredded the fabric of working class communities while offering paltry crumbs in the form of a handful of construction jobs and affordable housing units, I've come to the conclusion that we need to develop a concrete alternative.

On the most practical level, if I'm going to ask someone to ignore the false promises of the devil and to commit to a struggle that in the long-run will be in his, his family's and his community's best interests, then there needs to be a blueprint of what winning would mean in the short-term *and* in the long-term that goes beyond rhetoric and slogans. Although organizers across the country are developing some innovative short-term answers, we are weak in naming the elements of victory would look like because not having an alternative is undercutting our ability to attract those people who should be on our side.

Now is the time for a blueprint. Despite the fact that the ruling class is still trying to breathe life back into an imperialist system that continues to sputter through a historic crisis, the system has yet to be challenge. Capitalism has struggled to find new arenas from which to extract necessary levels of profit for more than thirty years. While they went without real profits, the captains of capital cobbled together a rickety casino economy that allowed them to postpone the inevitable realities of the crisis, but when the chickens came home to roost with the bursting of the housing bubble in late 2007, capitalism's weaknesses were laid bare for all to see. In the ensuing months, as millions of people lost their jobs, their homes and their livelihoods, and capitalism exposed its vulnerabilities, the Left has not been able to challenge a system based on exploitation, speculation and environmental devastation.

Much of the Left's discourse about the crisis of capitalism has been rooted in a dangerous misconception that crisis will inevitably bring about capitalism's demise. This is simply not how a global economic system falls. While it's true that crisis is an inherent part of capitalism, crisis only makes capitalism vulnerable. Ultimately, capitalism will only fall when it is challenged by the force of millions of people who are willing to fight for a viable alternative.

As organizers and activists, we have seen that capitalism is not now, has not been and will never be good for poor and working people, but too often organizers and community workers, we don't think of ourselves as the Left. We tend to bury ourselves in the demands of our organizing campaigns and spend little time understanding the dynamics of the capitalist political economy. As much as the current crisis is a crisis of capitalism, we need to connect with the intellectuals and party activists who have analyzed capitalism because we need to name our alternative.

For this reason, I propose that we take up the challenge of developing a blueprint of 21st Century Socialism. This would mean that intellectuals and party activists will take up this project, along with people who don't currently think of themselves as the Left— organizers, workers and community members. Developing a clear

vision would enable us to grow in size and influence so that we can finally seize the crisis that is before us.

## **Sticks and Stones...**

I understand that proposing to launch a collective process of developing a framework for 21st Century Socialism at the time of so many pressing needs may push many well-intended and progressive-minded people to think, “Even if we need an alternative to capitalism, isn’t it premature to think about that now? And why call it socialism? I mean, socialism carries too much baggage. After all, wasn’t socialism proven to be a failure?”

If anything, crafting a vision of 21st Century Socialism is past due, but as they say: Better late than never. It is true that as the crisis and the assault of the Right pick up, the demands of the on-the-ground struggles will become even more urgent, but this is *exactly* the time that we must be guided by a long-term vision of victory. Without it, we risk the danger of bolstering the system that has its foot on our collective necks rather than undermining it.

To be honest, there’s a part of me that doesn’t care what we call this vision for an alternative political economy. As Howard Zinn once said about socialism, “There are people fearful of the word, all along the political spectrum. What is important, I think, is not the word, but a determination to hold up before a troubled public those ideas that are both bold and inviting.” Although I’m open to using different words if that makes sense down the road, it is important for us to face our fears that Zinn refers to, and I choose to use the term ‘socialism.’ I make this choice not because of any romantic glorification to the word. I believe that the Left should be talking loudly and proudly about socialism because doing so will move us forward in some important ways.

First, using the word ‘socialism’ pushes us to come to terms with the totality of socialism’s historical legacy— both the successes and the failures. For the past twenty years, the Right’s political and economic leaders— from Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to George Bush and Milton Friedman— have all pranced around the world stage crowing about socialism’s downfall. While it’s true that many of the socialist experiments of the 20th century did make some important errors, the Right has overstated those failings and has completely ignored the successes. Meanwhile, the Left has done a sorry job of sorting through what was and what was not an error. The reality is that the socialist experiments that took place in the 20th century were each distinct. Socialism in the Soviet Union was different than socialism in Vietnam which was different than socialism in Nicaragua. Based on that diversity of experience, any attempt to generalize the

errors and the oversights is bound to be topical at best. But briefly, some common— although not necessarily universal— failings of previous socialist experiments included the failure to transition from defending itself against counter-revolutionary attacks after victory to guaranteeing the democratic rights for all; an excessively bureaucratic approach to economic planning; an overly nationalistic approach to economic development; and an over-reliance on the consumption of fossil fuels to grow the economic base. Drawing out the varied failings of different socialist experiments in more detail is an important contribution to the development of the Left which needs to be done, just as is proclaiming the successes of those experiments because, contrary to the distortions of the Right, many of those experiments achieved phenomenal successes in the face of unimaginable odds— natural disasters, counter-revolutionary sabotage and foreign assault from imperialist powers. We must be prepared to talk about triumphs like the PAIGC's practice of democratic participation in Guinea Bissau and Cuba's eradication of illiteracy. As we talk about an alternative to capitalism, we must come to grips with a sober and balanced assessment of the successes as well as the failures of previous socialist experiments.

The second reason I use 'socialism' is because it allows organizers and activists in the United States to be in dialogue with other organizers and activists, allowing us to draw inspiration and to push our thinking about what's possible. Because of the long, sordid and violent history of red-baiting in the United States, there are legitimate questions as to whether or not socialism will ever be a term that the Left in the United States will ever be able to use popularly. But before we take on the task of promoting an alternative vision, we have to define it because you can't popularize something that you don't know. Given that our task right now is to define this alternative, it's a disservice to shrink away from using 'socialism' because using it allows us to be in communication with some of the most grounded and innovative Left organizers and activists from around the globe and throughout history. Socialism is the term used in Cuba, in Venezuela, in the Philippines, in South Africa. It's the term that Maurice Bishop, Celia Sanchez, Chris Hani and Emma Goldman all used. And it's the word that Evo Morales uses today. If we want to be in dialogue with these comrades, then we need to be able to understand and use the terminology that they have used and continue to use.

Next, I use the term of 'socialism' for tactical reasons. Left organizers and thinkers too often employ an ostrich strategy when it comes to talking about political economy— if we don't use the S-word, then maybe we'll escape being branded socialists. This is a losing strategy. The Right will call anything socialist in an attempt to discredit it. Just look at what the Tea Party's attacks on Barack Obama and his attempt to reform the health care industry. Without even a

serious attempt to wrestle power away from the insurance corporations, Obama was branded a socialist—which to the Right and to much of the U.S. population simply meant something bad. If we're serious about challenging capitalism and building an alternative, we're eventually going to be accused of being socialists whether we call that alternative 'socialism', 'solidarity economy' or 'apple sauce', so we'd better be prepared to talk coherently about previous experiments to bring democracy to the realm of the economy. Sticking our heads in the sand will do nothing to defend our work, the people or the planet. In fact, this type of cowardice will just give more credence to those that have tried so feverishly to discredit socialism.

Finally, I use the S-word because it is my experience that people are hungry to grapple with what's next. Doing political education trainings with members of grassroots organizations in San Francisco and across the country, people are never surprised about how scandalous capitalism is, and they always want to talk about what our alternative would be.

In the end, I use the term '21st Century Socialism' because it references past experiments and innovations but is not trapped by them. I believe that by placing our socialist movement in time this term gives us the space to acknowledge the contributions of past generations of women, men, transgendered people and young people who have taken up the task of establishing genuine democracy in society's political, economic and cultural realms without confining ourselves to the errors and failings of past experiments.

## **Standing on Principle**

Regardless of what we call our post-capitalist alternative, it is easy to see how having a clear blueprint can benefit the building of a strong and diversified movement. All we have to do is to look at the building of the Right in this country. While the Left was still on the move in the late 1960s and the 1970s, a section of the Right took its time to develop a coherent and alternative vision of how the economy and politics might function. This vision which emerged from the University of Chicago School of Economics came to be called neoliberalism or the Washington Consensus.<sup>[1]</sup> At first, many of the ideas such as cutting taxes, privatizing national industries, slashing public services seemed crazy. But by developing campaigns and producing literature and telling stories that reiterated these principles, the Right was able to bring together social conservatives with economic libertarians with imperialist hawks. Eventually, this vision became the unchallenged logic of political debate for conservatives and liberals in Congress, statehouses and city councils all over the country.

Clearly, the objectives and the conditions facing the Left are different, but the lesson remains just as important— movements achieve coherence only when their scattered and autonomous parts are united around a common and clear vision.

I offer these ten principles which I would see as core to all of the strong efforts to cultivate a strong challenge and alternative to neoliberal capitalism, and I offer them not as a finished product, but as a conversation-starter. Socialism of the 21st Century:

***Acknowledges that Wealth is Created by the People and the Planet*** —

Where does wealth come from? This isn't a riddle; how we answer this question has very real implications. Capitalist political economy that wealth is created by the ingenuity of bosses. Workers and Mother Earth are merely bit players who get whatever crumbs the bosses decide to make available. Although this answer is repulsive, organizers and activists in the United States too often build our demands from this logic. We resign ourselves to the prospect of some new mega-mall if the developer will promise a few jobs for people in our community because we actually accept the notion that the developer needs to make a profit. We can't imagine demanding free housing and full employment because we don't have a story of where else wealth comes from. Socialism for the 21st Century builds on Karl Marx's insight that wealth actually comes from working people and the planet. Based on this understanding, 21st Century Socialism paces the way for a new understanding of how a society's economy can function.

***Assumes and Promotes Inter-connectedness*** — The underlying philosophical outlook of 21st Century Socialism is rooted in symbiosis, the recognition that everyone and everything is connected to everyone and everything else. In contrast to capitalism's ideological bedrock which suggested that everyone and everything and every atom is distinct from everything else and solely responsible for its own well-being, 21st Century Socialism assumes and promotes the reality that everything is interconnected and inter-dependent throughout space and time. People are connected to Mother Earth and to other species. People are connected to one another, just like history connects generations through time. This recognition facilitates cooperation instead of competition; solidarity instead of survival of the fittest; and recognition of differential impact instead of "get away with what you can" egotism. This philosophical outlook then establishes the basis for developing a new consciousness for people and re-shaping what is thought of as human nature.

***Revolves around the Rights of Mother Earth*** — As indigenous peoples movements and Evo Morales have proclaimed, Mother Earth has rights. Socialism of the 21st acknowledges that humankind is merely one part of



a vast and delicate eco-system which has supported the flourishing of millions of plants and animals for generations— and could continue to do so for generations more if we stop acting like this is a disposable planet. The industrial model of capitalism and socialism of the 20th century has thrown us in a collision course with ecological catastrophe. It is increasingly clear that the coming years will bring more and more unnatural disasters. There is no getting around that, but if we hope to avoid hurtling past the point of no return, then we must put the demands of the planet above those of the economy. Unlike capitalism's scorch-and-burn-and-flee-to-Mars approach to industrial production, 21st Century Socialism respects the rights of Mother Earth and will limit its extraction, consumption and disposal so as to allow the planet to continue to support life of all types.

***Empowers Civil Society and an Active Government*** — There are many functions in society that government is uniquely situated to play. Who is better positioned to ensure that the food that we purchase is safe? Who else would maintain society's bridges and sewer systems? 21st Century Socialism will, at least for a transitional period, empower a large and active government to play the role of ensuring the collective well-being and development of society. This would be a gigantic departure from the capitalist government whose only purpose is to make the world safe for capitalism. As is outlined in the principle of Popular Participation, this active government would be re-designed and structured to serve the people with their full and active participation.

***Puts Control over the Economy in the Democratic Hands of the People*** — The productive capacity of the economy is mind-boggling. But under capitalism, that capacity is controlled by an elite clique who exploit the sweat and labor of working people and the riches of Mother Earth to engorge themselves, causing bone-crushing poverty for millions. In the end, this extreme disparity between rich and poor creates a volatile situation which is good for no one. Humanity's great productive capacity should be used to unleash the untold potential of all of humanity and of future generations, and the only way to guarantee this is by putting the power directly in the hands of the people. This is why 21st Century Socialism will put the control of the economy and all natural resources in the hands of the people. Under 21st Century Socialism, society's productive capacity would be used to create immense cultural, spiritual and materials prosperity to be enjoyed by all for generations to come.

***Guarantees Popular Participation*** — The institutions and systems of society should ensure that every person has the right to and must facilitate people's participation in all of the decisions that affect their lives. There is more to democracy than bourgeois democracy's quadrennial electoral farce. 21st Century Socialism cultivates people's participation in the large and small

decisions that take place in their work, home, community lives. While distinct roles and hierarchies would likely exist in different experiments of 21st Century Socialism, all structures would facilitate people playing different roles at different times so as to maximize the level to which people identify and feel invested in the new society. From participatory budgeting to workers' councils to needs-based planning of economic activity to balanced job complexes, 21st Century Socialism would guarantee and encourage participation by all sectors of civil society.

***Offers Prosperity through Redistribution, Not Growth*** — Capitalism promised to increase standards of living and to eliminate poverty by growing the economy exponentially. These were false promises— both because the ruling elite never managed to share the resources necessary to eliminate poverty, but also because it is impossible for the world's productive and consumptive capacity to grow without end. Mother Earth has limits. While industrial capitalism did not respect those limits, 21st Century Socialism will not center on growth. The size of the global economy will be strictly determined by the carrying capacity of the planet. Shared prosperity and equality will be achieved through redistribution of wealth. Inevitably, this will mean that some will live less grandiosely so that others can live.

***Plans Economic Activity and Recalls the Chaos of the Market*** — Economic activity under capitalism centers around the chaos of the market. Stuff is produced not because people need it, but because something thinks that they can make a profit by having it made. The result? Luxury condominiums sit vacant while families sleep on the streets. Hundreds of millions are spent to innovate new forms of cosmetic surgery while poor people die for lack of medical attention. And tons of commodities are manufactured and then quickly dumped into landfills which poison Mother Earth. Economic activity under 21st Century Socialism will be steered by a process of participatory planning.

***Respects Human Rights, Self-Determination & Communal Rights*** — Socialism of the 21st Century will look different in different places. The unique historical and cultural conditions of a particular people will inform their expression of this new vision of society. 21st Century Socialism respects and fosters this and all types of diversity as long as those expressions do not infringe upon the safety and liberty of others. 21st Century Socialism, as the Zapatistas have said, will be “a world where many worlds fit.”

***Confronts Past Oppression*** — Capitalism and imperialism developed along with and on the backs of white supremacy, patriarchy and other forms of structural oppression. Socialism of the 21st Century recognizes this and cuts against the structural oppression of women and people of color which continues to be such a fundamental characteristic of capitalist economy. As one example,



the work of reproducing individuals, families, communities, society and the environment— work that is now often labeled as “women’s work”— will be respected as a central part of the economy and will be rewarded as such. Socialism for the 21st Century takes conscious action to establish an environment in which racial and gender justice can flourish.

Individually and collectively, these principles put us in position to broaden and strengthen our movement. Too often, we’re get caught up in a debate about whether one particular demand is an advance or a selling out of our people’s interests. Naming a shared vision based on individual principles frees different sections of the movement to experiment with different tactics. Rather than making us smaller and more marginalized, these principles open us up to develop wnew and unexpected alliances with forces who may be willing to support one principle but not the other.

How these principles take shape as functioning 21st Century socialist political economies will ultimately grow out of practice and will evolve over time. However, that doesn’t mean that we can’t or shouldn’t use these principles now to create a blueprint. Even though 21st Century Socialism isn’t on the table now (especially within the United States), in the dialectical process of politics, visions such as this can stretch what people see as possible and put a militant edge on our actions. As that happens, what’s seen as politically realistic shifts, and everyday people take ownership of these ideas and deepen them— which, in turn makes the experiments more tangible and real.

Together, principles such as these have the potential of creating echo between the disparate organizing campaigns taking place across the country as was the case the South African Freedom Charter during the struggle against apartheid. Students, workers, women, community members all saw their distinct struggles joined in common cause. This linking together various struggles is especially important because it’s unlikely that we will succeed in establishing global socialism in the next decade. What is likely is that individual communities and nations will begin experimenting with more local, regional and even national versions of 21st Century Socialism. There will not be one model that is taken from one context and imposed on another. Different communities are likely to experiment and find innovations based on their particular conditions. However, these campaigns and experiments cannot succeed if they are isolated from one another. There must be a set of principles that inform and join together the campaigns and experiments so that each effort can contribute to a process that is greater than itself.

## **Blueprint for Victory**

The current crisis of capitalism, which because it is so inextricably tied to the ecological crisis and the crisis of the U.S. empire, is far from over despite the utopian proclamations of Wall Street and numerous ruling class economists. The fact that the crisis will continue for some time creates important opportunities for the Left to begin (and, in some cases, continue) laying the building blocks for 21st Century Socialism.

There are important building blocks for us to take advantage of that have already been laid: workers' co-ops, community gardens, community land trusts, local currencies and time dollars. All of these experiments could be vital and vibrant parts of a powerful movement to challenge the dominance of capitalism, but alone, they do not represent a fundamental threat to capitalism. They are too easily assimilated into capitalism's logic as progressive window dressing. The Left must understand and eventually be able to talk to people about how these projects are incompatible with capitalism and together are central features of a new, more desirable and more sustainable economic system.

Ultimately, our talk of socialism must be about how a truly democratic and participatory system of political economy opens up the possibility for individuals, communities and Mother Earth to realize our enormous potential and to thrive. We have to break away from the notion of socialism as a shopping spree. We're fighting for more than free stuff— free housing, free education, free health care and free transportation. We are fighting for those things because having universal access to the basic necessities and collective ownership of society's wealth allows for all of us to relate to one another and to the planet in a profoundly different and transformative way, in a way that is utterly impossible under the tyranny and wickedness of capitalism.

As the capitalist system continues to leave more and more people unemployed, homeless and fearful of the future, there are two very distinct possibilities that Rosa Luxemburg warned of— we can move towards socialism or barbarism. Recently, the Right has exploited people's fear and this country's deep-rooted racism, and they manipulated it to mobilize thousands of people in the Tea Party protests. The question for us is: what are we gonna do about it? I say that it is time for the Left to come out of its defensive posture and develop a real alternative that can challenge capitalism.

Ultimately, as the Left develops clarity about 21st Century Socialism, then we will have to map a course to lead us from here to there. This paper does not deal with strategy or analyze the balance of forces needed to carry out a winning program. That is because all strategy begins with vision. I, for one, look forward to crafting a winning strategy to make these principles real.

If we step up to this challenge of defining our blueprint of victory, we will be walking in honorable footsteps. The Left in the United States has a rich history of being relevant and electrifying in the lives of working people. Anarchists organized industrial workers to win the eight-hour day in the late 1890s. Communists organized sharecropper unions throughout the South in the 1920s and 1930s. Puerto Rican revolutionaries organized survival projects to meet their communities' needs that the government had so long neglected. We can get back to that point of relevance, but we need a compelling vision because as the great African revolutionary, Amílcar Cabral once said, "The people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward..." Now is the time. The system that has terrorized so many peoples for so long is in crisis. People are pissed and hungry for bold action. It's time for a vision that gives our actions a clear sense of purpose. No more squandering opportunities. It's time for the Left to name our alternative so that we can claim victory.

[1] The Washington Consensus is a term that was first developed by ruling class economist John Williamson to describe the similar policies being advocated by both the Democratic and Republican parties outlining how nations should develop their economies. Williamson summarized the Washington Consensus as a package of the following ten principles: 1) Fiscal discipline; 2) Re-direct public expenditure; 3) Tax reform; 4) Financial liberalization; 5) Adopt a single, competitive exchange rate; 6) Trade liberalization; 7) Eliminate barriers to foreign direct investment; 8) Privatize state-owned enterprises; 9) De-regulate market entry and competition; and 10) Ensure secure property rights. See John Williamson, editor, *Latin American Adjustment: How Much has Happened*, 1990.

*Steve Williams is the founder and Co-Director of POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), a San Francisco-based membership organization of low-income and working class African Americans and immigrant Latina women fighting for racial, gender and economic justice. Before beginning to work with POWER, Steve cut his teeth as an organizer with the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness and the Philadelphia Union of the Homeless. In addition to his organizing work with POWER, Steve has been active in various efforts to re-build and strengthen the Left in the United States. In 2005 with three of his POWER co-workers, Steve authored **Towards Land, Work and Power: Charting a Path of Resistance to U.S.-led Imperialism**, a political economy and strategy primer for conscious organizers.*