

COALITION-BUILDING: THE CRITICAL CHALLENGE FACING THE LEFT

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Despite the tremendous efforts that have gone into organizing against capitalist exploitation for more than a century, progress seems to have stalled. Currently trends towards fascism, however defined, are on the rise. The political demands of this moment are urgent and the consequences of failure would be catastrophic. What can we say about how to build the coalitions needed to successfully push back against the rise of right-wing extremists? What have we learned from past efforts to build a deeply democratic socialist society and from the many theoretical analyses explaining why workers of the world have failed to transform society? The way forward depends on finding answers to these questions.

Building strong coalitions can be seen as the fundamental problem that now faces the left.

This brief article looks at where cooperation among left progressives is now, and suggests some steps that can be taken toward building coalitions that can move us past today's largely defensive strategizing and towards transformative change. A strong left coalition would bring widespread popular support for political candidates with progressive platforms and could move us gradually towards the emergence of a third (progressive) party.

In the US today, there are few coalitions that bring together organizations from the major movements (labor, environmental, racial justice, feminist, LGBTI etc.), although there is networking and collaboration, as occurred in support of the Build Back Better bill. Progressive politicians who speak out against corporate domination of the economy and the corporate pursuit of profit at the expense of people and planet cannot expect much support from the Democratic Party or from corporate-funded entities. Nor do they get much financial support from wealthy business people or from liberal, tax-exempt nonprofits, who worry about losing the donations they receive from their corporate sponsors. Still, Bernie Sanders did rather well. And how did Trump get elected? Why don't politicians with political platforms that would lead to clear improvement in people's lives do better than politicians who rely on fear-mongering and vague promises to "make America great again"?

I agree with Chantal Mouffe that a major reason this does not happen- a major problem of the left - is that left liberals have underestimated the importance of affect in the creation of the political identity needed for unified political action.

While an understanding of the intricacies of late capitalism is critical to developing strategies for transformative political change, it is just as essential to have an accurate understanding of human nature and human interactions. In addition, of course, there is a need for leaders who have the qualities necessary to activate these understandings. Gramsci, the Frankfurt School scholars, and others have integrated a post-Freudian understanding of human psychology and political ideology into their analyses of how change agents can transform society. Their insights have been incorporated into recent work on intersectional oppressions and the transition to a post-capitalist society. The challenges of organizing the working class and its allies across differences in circumstances and in understandings are, in effect, the challenges faced in building coalitions.

Building coalitions that unify movement organizations

Political coalitions are built at very different levels and for very different purposes. Leadership of parliaments in Europe often depends on coalitions formed by political parties while, under very different circumstances, coalitions in small towns are often formed in pursuit of a limited goal such as stopping a corporation from locating an unwanted project in their area. The literature on such coalitions is suggestive of the issues faced by all coalitions.

In this article, I look at building coalitions in the US among organizations with broad grassroots support, especially organizations working for racial justice, labor, women, the environment and the LGBTI community. Currently, while such organizations may unite occasionally in support of a bill, there is no on-going coalition that provides the strong national support that could enable bills such as the PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize) to make it through Congress or that could elect significant numbers of left populist candidates to Congress (or the Presidency).

Chantal Mouffe, in *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution (2021)*, argues that the growth and consolidation of left populism is today's political imperative. Europe has seen left populist parties do well in general elections in recent years - Syriza in Greece, La France Insoumise, and Podemos in Spain, for example, have risen to become major parties, and the Labour Party in the UK under Corbyn did well on a left populist platform in 2015.

The US may not have the same potential for the rise of a left populist party, but many left populist candidates have been elected to state and local office, and a strong growth of left populism here would offer a much-needed counter to today's right-wing extremism. At the moment, however, cooperation among movement organizations is generally limited to

loose networking. Networking, of course, does precede coalition-building, but it is time for the next step.

Current networking among progressive groups

I surveyed the websites of several organizations enjoying broad popular support, including the AFL-CIO, Our Revolution (associated with supporters of Bernie Sanders), the Movement for Black Lives (which includes Black Lives Matter), the Sierra Club, Feminist Majority, Greenpeace, 350.org, GLAAD (originally Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), and others (Hill 2022). These were largely not 501c3's (which often depend on corporate sponsors and would lose their tax exempt status if they engage in too much political activity). I also looked at some political manifestos and agendas.

Based on this cursory exploration and my own experiences with many organizations, I note that today's movement groups, no matter how committed and progressive, focus on a few issues they have chosen and seldom mention coalition work as a priority. In addition, I did not see one manifesto or other document that addressed the key concerns of each of the five major movements (labor, feminist, racial justice, LGBTQ+ , environmental) except in vague terms scattered throughout their websites. Movement organizations may share the same values, but their agendas, although radical in some areas, are distinctly different. The theoretical underpinnings, be they sophisticated and well-thought-out or more pragmatic and traditional, differ as well.

As noted above, even important bills like the PRO Act have not received much active support across organizations. [The PRO Act would remove roadblocks to union organizing and greatly increase employees' collective voice at work.] This and other important bills are under-reported in the news, and support from progressive groups is scattered at best. Groups that do support a bill often mention it on their website in a way that is well-hidden: e.g. the visitor must first click on "issues", then choose an issue, then choose a sub-topic, then read a paragraph in which the bill may or may not be mentioned.

And, significantly, I could not find any website that provided a list of important bills in Congress this year that had the strong backing of at least one of the five movements I focused on (labor, women, racial justice, the environment and the LGBTI community). Yet, besides the the PRO Act, there are or were bills aimed at protecting women's right to choose, police reform, the transgender bill of rights and ending greenhouse gas emissions. A united focus by a left coalition on a few bills would usefully counter the common feeling of being 'overwhelmed'. Relatedly, I spoke with several members of organizations that support the Pro Act, and not too surprisingly found that most of them had not heard of it. Even the leader I spoke with, when asked, did not know what the stand of their organization was.

This could change. Most activist groups have education and outreach as part of their mission. It is strategically wise that they extend their outreach to other progressive groups. Some concrete

suggestions about how this could be done are given in concluding remarks. But first let's consider the motives for working collaboratively and why creating united efforts across organizations is difficult.

Shared goals: deeper democracy and a healthy planet

Mouffe (2022) looks towards movement organizations with radical projects as the organizations that could unite in coalition towards progressive and then transformative change. She argues that it is possible to build unity on the basis of a shared commitment to deeper democracy and the survival of the planet. A radical project is one that cannot successfully be completed under the current capitalist system - a transformed hegemony is a requisite. Deep democracy includes the democratizing of the economy.

Not all movement organizations recognize that their goal, e.g. of justice and equality, cannot be achieved under capitalism. Or they limit their goals to ones that can be achieved within the current system, although the values underlying their goals may demand more. However, after years of struggle and setbacks, experienced leadership will recognize the advantage to be gained by having a political party in power that is not dominated by the wealthy, one that is more representative of the interests of the general population and accountable to them. This untapped support for deeper democracy can lead to the recognition that the hegemony associated with today's capitalist society is oppressive and must be challenged.

The shared desire for deeper democracy - for a transformed polity that recognizes and supports the validity of their demands - is one requisite to the creation of a shared political identity. A successful coalition must also excite a passionate response and inspire trust and commitment. Gawerc (2021) explores the central role of trust and commitment in coalition work and examines what has been learned about how they can be achieved.

Based on her review of the literature, she identifies five processes and practices that have been found to be imperative to cultivating solidarity across difference and inequality. They are (Gawerc p. 1): “ (1) uniting around shared principles while engaging difference; (2) acknowledging and managing inequalities; (3) making space for each other; (4) attention to managing conflicts; and (5) actions that confirm the shared commitments and negotiated identity.”

Overcoming difference and inequalities

A shared political identity is the critical glue holding a coalition together. A successful coalition must be able to handle the misunderstanding arising from differences before they cause serious division. The work of understanding and respecting difference has several aspects.

Differences in circumstances within and among organizations include differences in race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, income, and other factors. Differences in understandings of the world

also vary widely within and between groups. Building coalitions, then, requires adapting to differences, but also remediating the inequalities that disadvantage some organizations within the emerging coalition.

Education and consciousness-raising are part of building understanding of the values, practices and perspectives of each group. Leaders as well as members of each group should know the basics of racism, patriarchy, other forms of discrimination, imperialism, the role and place of the military, climate change, and the environment. Coalition members should be willing to respect and respond to criticisms made by other members. There should be processes in place so that such disagreements can be worked through with mutual respect. Understanding needs to continually grow over time, as Yates (2018), Matthaei (2017), and others discuss. Without this, internal divisions are likely in coalitions and success will be limited accordingly.

Respecting differences implies a need for inclusive, democratic processes

Inclusivity, transparency and accountability build unity and enable progress. In this regard, I address two points:

** Majority rule not sufficient; consensus not always feasible.*

Majority rule is not inherently equitable and democratic. Human rights and the rights of the earth are not determined by majority vote. Reliance on decision-making by majority vote puts minorities at a disadvantage. For these and other reasons, there has been great interest in consensus-building, but that too has its limitations. Workshops and informal meetings that encourage brainstorming to address an issue have proven to be fruitful in crafting successful proposals and resolving issues faced by a group. The MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program provides some best practices for building consensus or at least for building consensus on a process to be used when approaching an issue (see their website, <https://publicdisputes.mit.edu/bestpractices>).

However, glaring differences among coalition members in resources, both in monetary value and in human capacities, require more direct effort at remediation. Insights from true interests theory are illuminating and give indication of how this can be done:

** Implications of the theory of true interests.*

Identifying a group's best interest with respect to a proposed policy is often not straightforward; it involves defining well-being and determining a policy's impact on that well-being. The theory of true interests clarifies the points to be considered. The self-organization of the group in question is needed. Without some organized cohesion, a group cannot discuss its true interests with respect to any given proposal. Hamilton (1999) points out that: 1 - An assessment of a group's well-being from different positions is required, using both internal and external valuations. This same process should be followed in assessing the impact of a proposed policy. It may be the case that the needs of a group have been unaddressed for years, as happens with worker safety. Workers often lack channels for meeting and discussing their needs together. 2 - When a power imbalance exists, as at the workplace, greater democratization of relevant

decision-making processes offers a partial remedy. 3 - Public conversations can better enable a group to identify, refine and decide upon their interests. The media has a role to play in seeking out and presenting the standpoints of all groups impacted by a proposal. 4 - In addition, I would note that research may be needed to determine the costs and benefits to different groups impacted by a proposed policy. The funding of research projects addressing the impact of policies on under-funded groups in a coalition, then, helps to advance equity and justice. Similarly, research is required in the crafting of policies to address the priorities of these groups. The perspectives of the disadvantaged should be reflected in the choice of researchers. The capability approach to well-being associated with Amartya Sen (e.g. 1999) is consistent with a true interests approach.

**Priorities not determined a priori*

Some on the left interpret the Marxist emphasis on the working class as implying that work-related demands should have priority when agendas are set. However, a democratic coalition process respects its members - their self-identification and their concerns. The coalition's jointly-decided process will likely set priorities that align with the political moment. Those self-organized in a grassroots coalition will work to improve the lives of ordinary people; in the long-run, this left populist movement may indeed lead to a changed hegemony and eventually the overthrow of capitalism.

Concluding Remarks

Coalitions bring together a variety of organizations. Coalitions impact the self-identities, institutions, and knowledge creation of each member organization. A coalition, then, can be understood as a social innovation that creates new relationships. Skill in building relationships, then, is absolutely critical to a coalition's success. This aspect of social change has not been adequately incorporated into economic analyses of the processes leading to a transformed society.

Preventing and addressing divisions is a major challenge coalitions face. One important and hopeful observation countering the all-too-frequent negativity regarding the possibility of unity is the fact that differences in perspectives are not intractable. Understandings continually evolve as a result of both shared experiences and of discussions and debates that shape opinions. Debate and compromise are in fact basic to the creation of the shared political identity needed to unite and solidify coalitions. Mutual respect and shared goals may be just the starting point in working together. The actions of each organization are also critical.

The strength and unity of a coalition, in fact, depend more on the values each organization embodies, than on the values it may profess. Trust and commitment, vital to long-term cooperation, must be consciously sought by all member organizations. Trust is built through actual practices of members. Actions that show commitment to shared values and the shared agenda cement the relationships that are the foundation of coalitions.

At the same time, the success of a strong coalition, once formed, is limited by a number of factors: the number of members, the strength of their commitment, the resources they command, the difficulty of the obstacles faced and the clarity/accuracy of the ideas that guide them as circumstances change. But know that connection and cooperation among progressive organizations is sorely needed if we are to move towards deeper democracy, regenerative economies and more caring societies. We need coalitions that can bring clarity and courage to the struggle to create a post-capitalist society in which all can thrive.

Appendix 1: A possible starting agenda for a national coalition

The shared interest in deeper democracy and a healthy planet can bring organizations together. But each movement organization has its own priorities. Accordingly, a transformative agenda will emerge organically from a collective designed to be inclusive, democratic and accountable. One possibility would be that the coalition initially agree to back a bill or resolution currently before Congress that has the strong support of one of the five major movements. So, to open discussion, the five bills could be: the PRO Act (if this is the bill put forward by labor organizations), the Transgender Bill of Rights (if this is the bill put forward by LGBTI organizations), the Women’s Health Protection Act (if this is the bill put forward by women’s organizations), the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (or other bill put forward by racial justice organizations), the Earth Act to Stop Climate Pollution by 2030 (if selected by environmental organizations).

There is an abundance of literature on setting priorities within groups. See:

<https://www.top-network.org/set-priorities-collaboratively> Initial organizers will provide only the starting point for collaboration, not action agendas. Safeguarding values and processes that are agreed upon by all members, along with on-going self-assessment, may be the best that can be done to ensure inclusivity, transparency and accountability over time. The principles and processes guiding a group shouldn’t be set in stone, but should be continually examined and revised through careful and deliberate processes provided in founding documents. See criticisms of the World Social Forum on this:

<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1441768/FULLTEXT01.pdf> p. 38

Demands for policies that increase the voice and power of working people and disadvantaged groups are of particular importance. Support for unions, for example, and protection of voting rights and voter initiatives enables pushback against right-wing trends.

Appendix 2. Suggestions for building stronger networks across the left

What is to be done? Relatively few organizations now place priority on networking across the five major movements of labor, women, racial justice, environment and LGBTI.

Here is one suggestion: Having names and contact information for each of these five is step one. This information is essential for responding to events like the killing of George Floyd. There are several factors to be considered when choosing which organizations to network with. How long

has the organization been in existence? How broad is its support? What is its activist record? Is it dependent on corporate support or big money?

Even 501c3 organizations can network. Although they are limited in the political work they can do, they can urge their members to vote; to be informed voters; to find out more about legislation that will affect them. They can provide links to summaries of important bills that have the strong backing of progressive movement groups. The nonprofit need not even take a position on the legislation—it can simply urge members to educate themselves about it.

And it is incumbent on every progressive organization to understand the basics of how inequalities have been institutionalized. This requires study of racism, sexism, and other biases that are behind much exploitation and suffering. The educational effort within organizations requires more than simply having members listen to a few talks, or having token representatives from different disadvantaged minorities included at meetings. The different forms of oppression are systemic, and an understanding of this requires both in-depth study and on-going involvement. This understanding will do much to ensure that each disadvantaged group has adequate voice when decisions are made.

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Hill, Marianne. 2022. *Building a Solidarity Society*, 198-202. New York: Palgrave.

Matthaei, Julie. 2017. From inequality to solidarity. In *Imperiled Economies 2018*, ed. URPE Reader Collective, 147-158. Boston: Economic Affairs Bureau.

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Yates, Michael. 2018. *Can the Working Class Change the World?* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Some relevant websites:

<https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/build-back-better-support-and-opposition-a-running-list/>

<https://participedia.net/method/174>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-97863-7>

Additional thoughts:

Tverskoi: The dynamics of cooperation, inequality and power. ..Don't let powerful bend the rules.

Hill - Most people have a deep yearning to be part of an expansive, caring community, but we are divided by racism, sexism and other ideologies that treat some people as "other". But there are ways to build unity and people have always managed to find them, even 100 and 200 years ago. Today's barriers to unity may be different, but this only means that new ways of overcoming them must be found. The growth of left populism in Britain, the US and elsewhere is proof that creative thinkers have found ways to connect and unite.

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