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SOCIALISM, WORKING CLASS SELF-EMANCIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC FORMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

In July 2024, five members of the environmental protest group Just Stop Oil (JSO) were given sentences of between four and five years in prison for planning a peaceful protest to disrupt the M25 motorway around London. These sentences, which are under appeal at the time of writing, are thought to be the longest ever given for non-violent protest in Britain.[1] The sentences were widely condemned as draconian, with the UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, Michel Forst, describing them as "punitive and repressive" and warning that the case represented a dangerous ruling that would likely deter people across Britain from protesting on any number of issues.[2] While significant in its own right, JSO case also crystallises a number of crucially important issues concerning rights, democracy and social change. Climate activism, in its various forms, is one of the central sites of activity for social change today. Given the pressing nature of the unfolding climate catastrophe, many people have turned to forms of non-violent protest and direct action, in a desperate effort to provoke action. Invariably, they have been met, in Britain and elsewhere, with aggressive policing, opprobrium from mainstream media and politicians, and a raft of new anti-protest laws.

It was under one such law, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 (PCSCA), that the JSO activists were convicted and given their lengthy sentences. The PCSCA created several new protest related offences, as well as expanding the scope of existing police powers under the Public Order Act 1986.[3] It was followed by the Public Order Act 2023, which added even further police powers and protest related offences to the statute book. Taken together these legislative changes, and the wider rhetorical assault on climate, anti-war, and anti-capitalist protesters, constitute a fundamental assault on the right to protest in Britain.[4] But, the British experience is not exceptional, instead it reflects part of a global trend, in the context of persistent capitalist crises, of states the world over opting to repress and police opposition to the crises of the system, rather

[1] Damien Gayle, 'Five Just Stop Oil Activists Receive Record Sentences for Planning to Block M25' *The Guardian* 18 July 2024.
[2] Damien Gayle, Helena Horton and Ben Quinn, "'Not Acceptable in a Democracy": UN Expert Condemns Lengthy Just Stop Oil Sentences" T*he Guardian* 19 July 2024.
[3] For a discussion of the PCSCA and its likely negative impact on the right to protest see: Richard Martin, 'The Protest Provisions of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill: A "modest reset of the scales"?' (2021) *Criminal Law Review* 1008; and European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, *The United Kingdom's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill: Analysis of Compliance with International Human Rights Standards* (21 April 2021)
[4] The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called for the Public Order Act 2023 to be repealed, warning that it would likely have a chilling effect on civic freedoms in Britain: Volker Türk, 'The Public Order Act Will Have a Chilling Effect on Your Civic Freedoms – It Must Be Repealed' *The Independent* 28 May 2023.

than attempt to meaningfully address the root causes of these crises.[5] The conviction and sentencing of the JSO protesters, then, raises a set of questions about the nature of the contemporary global order, building resistance and alternatives to the crisis ridden system of neoliberal imperialist capitalism, and the role of democratic forms such as rights.

While there is, with much justification, scepticism, sometimes bordering on nihilism, to rights and democratic forms from different sections of the broad left, this chapter will argue that defending, expanding and moving beyond these democratic forms is essential to any movement which seeks fundamental change today. The chapter begins with a discussion of the attitude of Marx, Engels and leading figures of classical Marxism to the question of democratic forms. What becomes apparent is that while classical Marxists had no illusions in bourgeois rights and other democratic forms, they nonetheless saw them as essential weapons in the struggles of the working class. The next section of the chapter moves the focus to the principle of working class self-emancipation to make two related arguments: (i) this principle was central to Marx's entire theoretical and political project and should be central to contemporary efforts to mobilise Marxism, and (ii) the principle of working class self-emancipation has important implications for how we think through democratic forms today. In section three a sketch is offered of the contemporary global order, to ground and contextualise the discussion of how we should approach democratic forms today. This section emphasises two tendencies, growing inequality and rising authoritarianism, as central to understanding the coordinates of struggle in the world today.

The final substantial section draws from all the foregoing to argue that in the context of neoliberal decline and authoritarianism, democratic forms must play a central role in building movements for fundamental social change. This is not based on some naive commitment to abstract right, or the presumed priority of legal or formal institutional mechanisms for struggle. Instead, the assertion, expansion and transgressive re-crafting of these inherited democratic forms is crucial to facilitate both working class self-emancipation in the twenty-first century, and to frame a political project that critiques and points beyond neoliberal hegemony.

II. MARXISM AND DEMOCRATIC FORMS

For opponents and critics of Marxism and revolutionary socialism, it is a given that these traditions are hostile and inimical to the democratic forms (rights, liberties, institutions and so on) associated

[5] See Alastair Roberts, The End of Protest: How Free-Market Capitalism Learned to Control Dissent (Cornell University Press 2013); Lesley Wood, *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing* (Pluto Press 2014); and Rossella Selmini and Anna Di Ronco, 'The Criminalisation of Dissent and Protest' (2023) 52 *Crime and Justice* 197.

with the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[6] While it is true that the relationship of movements for radical social change and the extant democratic forms of capitalist societies has long been the subject of some debate. It is also the case that for many socialists it has been axiomatic that their project, both the goal of socialism and the struggle to attain it, must be fundamentally democratic.[7] This section explores that aspect of the Marxist and socialist tradition. Not to produce some writ from the dead for or against democratic forms, but instead to understand how these forms were understood by revolutionaries, and the role of working class movements in advancing and expanding these forms.

It has long been assumed without much ado, that Marx was opposed to human rights and bourgeois democracy. This conclusion is usually reached with partial, decontextualised quotes from *On the Jewish Question*, or the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and some vague gesturing towards the crimes of authoritarian regimes which purported to be Marxist, socialist or communist. The reality is very different. As Igor Shoikhedbrod has recently shown, a close reading of Marx's work demonstrates that while he was a radical critic of liberalism and certain liberal rights, his main objective was to show the inherent "contradictions and limitations of rights in capitalist society", but he nonetheless saw "these rights as preconditions for communist society".[8]

Indeed, Marx's argument in *On the Jewish Question* is, in the first instance, a defence of the equal rights of Jews within Europe, and the core theoretical insight of his argument is that while the rights associated with the bourgeois revolutions are a huge step forward for human freedom they simply do not, and cannot, go far enough. This is because these rights are hitched to the system of capitalist property relations, a system which necessarily and invariably produces hierarchy, exploitation, oppression and inequality, thus negating the promise of freedom contained in these rights.[9] Marx draws the important distinction between formal freedom and substantive freedom, and concludes that rights under capitalism can only ever deliver the former.[10] This is progress, he argues, but for true freedom and liberation we must go beyond the mere formality of bourgeois rights and the substantive inequality of capitalist property relations. Taken along with his consistent defence of free speech, fair elections and more, Marx, far from being against rights and democratic

[6] Steven Lukes, 'Can a Marxist Believe in Human Rights?' (1981) 4 *Praxis International* 334; Leszek Kolakowsk, 'Marxism and Human Rights' (1983) 112 *Daedalus* 81; and L.J. Macfarlane, 'Marxist Theory and Human Rights' (1982) 17 *Government and Opposition* 414.
[7] Norman Geras, 'Democracy and the Ends of Marxism' (1994) I/203 *New Left Review* 92, 92.
[8] Igor Shoikhedbrod, *Revisiting Marx's Critique of Liberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) 55.
[9] Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 3* (Lawrence & Wishart 1987) 146.
[10] ibid 149-155.

forms, was committed to the defence of the limited gains they represented, while also, always, pointing for the need to go beyond them. As Hal Draper puts it, for Marx "the fight for democratic forms … was a leading edge of the socialist effort; not its be-all and end-all but an integral part of it all".[11]

Marx's long time intellectual and political collaborator Frederick Engels followed a similar line to Marx on these matters, but for present purposes, he also made some significant points about the value of democratic forms within capitalism for socialist and working class movements. In his 1865 article entitled *The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party*, Engels addressed directly the importance of bourgeois rights for the working class, notwithstanding the limitations and contradictions of those rights. From the outset Engels notes that "despite [their] bourgeois character", the rights to freedom of the press, free association and assembly and universal suffrage were rights "without which the workers can never win their emancipation".[12] Engels notes the hypocrisy and cowardice of the newly ascendent bourgeois, but notes also that in their struggles against the decaying feudal order, they cannot win their own rights without "at the same time putting weapons into the hands of the proletariat".[13] As distinct from the old feudal order, the bourgeois "must proclaim human rights … freedom and self-government", and, following Marx, Engels notes that while these forms may often ring hollow, with their adoption,

> the proletariat will thereby … acquire all the weapons it needs for its ultimate victory. With freedom of the press and the right of assembly and association it will win universal suffrage, and with universal, direct suffrage, in conjunction with the above tools of agitation, it will win everything else.[14]

While we may, with the benefit of experience, say that Engels optimism in the efficacy of universal suffrage and associated democratic forms to allow the working class and socialist movements to "win everything else" was misplaced. His argument nonetheless shows the importance that he, and many in the classical Marxist tradition, placed on these democratic forms.

It should also be noted that while Engels was, arguably, overly optimistic in some respects, he was not at all starry-eyed. He noted that, as had already happened, the bourgeois would align with the forces of feudal reaction to defend property against the demands of the working class. But even

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[11] Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: Volume 1* (Monthly Review Press 1977) 282.
[12] Frederick Engels, 'The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 20* (Lawrence & Wishart 1985) 37, 69.
[13] ibid 77.
[14] ibid.

allowing for this, Engels argued that it was still incumbent on the working class to defend the democratic forms and freedoms associated with the bourgeoisie. As Engels put it,

> Even if the worst came to the worst and the bourgeoisie was to scurry under the skirts of reaction for fear of the workers … even then the workers' party would have no choice but, notwithstanding the bourgeoisie, to continue its campaign for bourgeois freedom, freedom of the press and rights of assembly and association which the bourgeoisie had betrayed. *Without these freedoms it will be unable to move freely itself; in this struggle it is fighting to establish the environment necessary for its existence, for the air it needs to breathe.*[15]

This shows two clear points. One, the resolute commitment of Engels (and we can add Marx) to the defence of bourgeois freedoms, notwithstanding their innate limitations. Secondly, it shows that this is not a commitment grounded in moralism or some abstract concept of right, but in the recognition of the importance of these democratic forms within capitalist societies, to allow the working class to build the movements necessary to break with capitalism and move to a higher stage of freedom.

The views expressed by Engels were, for the most part, the common sense of the working class and socialist movement through the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There were exceptions, to be sure, usually in the form of what Draper calls "self-styled radicals",[16] who rejected bourgeois democracy and rights. The dominant trend, however, was to see the importance of these inherited democratic forms, alongside the need to push beyond them. Rosa Luxemburg, for example, referred to freedom of the press and the right to assembly as "sacred rights",[17] which constituted the "most important guarantees of a healthy public life and of the political activity of the labouring masses".[18] Like Engels, Luxemburg's commitment to rights is not born of some moral commitment to abstract right, but firmly rooted in the importance of these democratic forms for working class self-activity. Interestingly, Norman Geras notes that when Luxemburg spoke of rights and other democratic forms, she did not speak of them as merely part of the liberal heritage but took it "for granted that they are indigenous to revolutionary socialism, she invokes them just like that. Such was the world she inhabited".[19]

James Connolly, a contemporary of Luxemburg, provides another illustration of the commitment

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[15] ibid 79 [emphasis added].
[16] Draper (n 11) 284.
[17] Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in the German Social Democracy' in Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder Press 1970) 257, 298.
[18] Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution' in Waters (n 17) 365, 389.
[19] Geras (n 7) 98.

that revolutionaries had to the defence of rights and other democratic forms in the early twentieth century. Connolly was very much enmeshed in revolutionary struggle and was not at all naive about rights and the law. In 1899 Connolly noted that all the "pretended political freedom and rights of citizenship" in the British Constitution, were "ever at the mercy of the governing class of England", who had no respect for these rights and would be quick to suppress them through the police and military force.[20] Notwithstanding this, Connolly recognised the significance of the rights to free speech, assembly and fair elections, and viewed them as important victories won by the working class (a point we return to below). In this light, Connolly argued that experience had taught "the working class to guard what rights it has whilst reaching out to win greater rights for the future".[21] Writing in 1914, in the teeth of World War One, Connolly noted that one major consequence of the war was that the working class had lost "in a great measure, in Britain at least, all those hard won rights of combination and freedom of action, the possession of which was the foundation upon which they hoped to build the greater freedom of the future".[22] The emphasis here, echoing Marx, Engels, Luxemburg and others, is on the importance of rights, in particular, as necessary to the attainment of the wider goals of the socialist and working class movements.

The foregoing speaks to the understanding of rights and democratic forms within much of the classical Marxist and revolutionary socialist tradition. An understanding which highlighted the inherent limitation of bourgeois rights and democratic forms within the context of capitalist property relations but nonetheless expressed a commitment to the defence of these forms, while also pointing to the need to go beyond them. Alongside this theoretical perspective, it is important to also note the concrete, material contribution of working class and revolutionary movements to the advance and shaping of key rights and democratic forms. As Geras notes, socialists were routinely "involved in, sometimes at the forefront of, movements for the defence and extension" of liberal rights and liberties.[23] Going even further, E.P. Thompson argued that,

> Our society today – our democratic liberties and our social services – is in great part the product of [the struggle between labour and capital], and of the adjustments to it on the part of capitalist interests. If campaigners can meet in Trafalgar Square today, it is because of the great struggles for freedom of speech and assembly waged by radical and socialist working men in the 1880's and 1890's.[24]

[20] James Connolly, 'Our Mad Rulers' in Nevin (ed.), *James Connolly Political Writings 1893-1916* (SIPTU 2011) 156, 157.
[21] James Connolly, 'Labour Mans the Breach' in Nevin (n 19) 488, 488.
[22] James Connolly, 'A War for Civilisation' in Nevin (n 19) 571, 571.
[23] Geras (n 7) 92.
[24] E.P. Thompson, 'Commitment in Politics' (1959) 6 *Universities & Left Review* 50, 54.

Michael Löwy makes a similar point, arguing that "democratic rights—freedom of expression and organization, universal suffrage, political pluralism—are not 'bourgeois institutions' but hard-won conquests of the labour movement".[25]

This is an important point, because while it is common to set up socialism and Marxism as the antithesis of bourgeois rights and democratic forms, the history is much more complex. As Geras noted of Luxemburg, she and many others in the Marxist and revolutionary socialist tradition spoke of rights and democratic forms as indigenous to their tradition, because the working class and socialists had been central in struggles to advance these rights. This can be seen in Michael Foot's magisterial work on the origins of universal suffrage, where he shows that it was the working classes and broader masses who won and defined the right to vote over centuries of protracted struggle.[26] The same can be said for, among others, the rights to free speech and protest.[27] On the latter, Engels wrote in 1872 about how the Gladstone government imposed restrictions on protests in public parks around London, and in doing so "destroyed with one stroke of the pen one of the most precious rights of London's working people". But, Engels happily relates, in response to this decree the working class of London organised massive protests "in defiance of the government's decree". The regulation was made unenforceable by the mass civil disobedience of the working class and was quietly allowed to lapse.[28] This episode, and there are many more besides, drives home Draper's point that "it is the constant threat from below the ensures the recognition of democratic rights in practice".[29]

The classic liberal or bourgeois rights and democratic forms which we have inherited are, therefore, not purely liberal or bourgeois. Instead, history shows that they were decisively shaped by the struggles of the working class and socialist movements. The importance of this point is drawn out by Ambalavaner Sivanandan, writing during the ascendancy of neoliberalism, in a passage that merits quotation at length. Sivanandan noted that,

> the freedoms won in [the] great period of industrial working-class struggle are being threatened. The emancipation of Capital from Labour has left a moral vacuum at the heart of post-industrial society, which is itself material. The 'universalist' bourgeois values which Bill Warren wrote about – 'equality, justice, generosity, independence of spirit and mind, the

[25] Michael Löwy, *On Changing the World* (Haymarket 2013) ix.
[26] Paul Foot, *The Vote* (Viking 2005).
[27] Stammers shows that working class and socialist struggles in the nineteenth century were central in advancing human rights: Neil Stammers, *Human Rights and Social Movements* (Pluto Press 2009) 70-101.
[28] Frederick Engels, 'Meeting in Hyde Park' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 23* (Lawrence & Wishart 1985) 294, 294-295.
[29] Draper (n 11) 309.

> spirit of inquiry and adventure, opposition to cruelty' – and which sprang precisely from the creative tension between Capital and Labour are endangered by Capital's emancipation. The Factory Acts which took children out of work and women from the mines and gave them the light of day, the Education Acts that opened their minds out to other worlds and the world, the Public Health Acts which stopped the spread of disease and plagues – all came out of the tension, the hostility, between Capital and Labour … Freedom of speech, of assembly, the right to withhold one's labour, universal suffrage, sprang not from bourgeois benefice but from working-class struggle. All the gains of the period of industrial capitalism were the creative outcome of social contradictions – the heart of dialectical materialism.[30]

The dynamic tension produced by the conflict between labour and capital played a crucial role in shaping rights and democratic forms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was in this context that Marxists and socialists adopted the position of defending and advancing these rights, while always seeking to go beyond them. It was in this context that such rights and democratic forms were, in certain contexts, revolutionary, radical and transgressive.

That context, of course, has passed. As Sivanandan intimated, the triumph of capital over labour, what is referred to now as the ascendancy of neoliberalism, reflected a qualitative shift in the relationship of capital to labour. In this context, the dynamic tension which made rights tangible, significant or important to movements for radical change has been replaced by an era in which the language of human rights has become ubiquitous while the systemic denial of rights has become entrenched.[31] Where universal suffrage has been undermined by the entrenchment of modern forms of public opinion management and democratic decay. Without in anyway painting the past of rights and democratic forms in purely rosy colours, this shift in context has transformed the nature of rights and the relationship of movements for radical change to them. Rather than being transgressive weapons in the hands of the working class, rights and the broader democratic forms are entrenched in an industry of NGOs and think thanks.

The entire purpose of rights, now, seems to be to act as a metric for the calibration of their own violation. The attitude of earlier generations of revolutionaries, instructive as it may be, cannot simply be embraced or reproduced in this changed context. Instead, the question arises on new terrain, how, considering the lessons of the past, should movements for radical social change, and in particular revolutionary socialists, engage with our inherited democratic forms in an era of authoritarianism, crisis and moribund democracy. To begin to essay an answer to this question the next section turns to the principle of working class self-emancipation, a principle that is integral to

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[30] A. Sivanandan, 'All That Melts Into Air is Solid: The Hokum of New Times' (1989) 31(3) *Race & Class* 1, 23-24.
[31] Tony Evans, *The Politics of Human Rights* (2nd edn, Pluto 2005) 6.

Marx's work, and to the best elements of the revolutionary socialist tradition. This principle, it will be argued, provides a crucial orientation to inform our approach to the question of rights and democratic forms today.

III. WORKING CLASS SELF-EMANCIPATION

The core of Marx's political and theoretical project was to understand capitalist society, in order to change it. More importantly, Marx anticipated and sought a revolutionary break with the capitalist mode of production, with its attendant barbarism and degradation, and the development of a higher form of society. From his early years as a radical philosopher and political journalist, through to his later years as the critic *par excellence* of capitalism, Marx stressed that the working class must, and would, be the motor force of this historical transformation. Marx, breaking with the elitism of earlier socialisms, centred the self-activity of the working class in his understanding of socialism and revolutionary change.

On the significance of this orientation, Draper notes that "against all varieties of socialism and reform which looked on the masses in the accusative case ('we will emancipate them') Marx developed the principle of the self-emancipation of the working class".[32] This approach, this focus on the centrality of working class self-activity and self-emancipation, is, as Geras notes, "central, not incidental" to Marx's entire political and theoretical project.[33] Expanding on this, Dan Swain argues that the principle of working class self-emancipation shapes Marx's,

> conception of what is wrong with capitalism, his notions of freedom and domination. It influences his conception of both the form and content of any alternative to capitalism, and how much it is possible to say about it. Moreover, it influences his sense of himself as an activist and politically engaged critical theorist, and of the role of other activists and theorists.[34]

It follows that in trying to think through how those committed to fundamental social change today should engage with the extant democratic forms of capitalist societies, it is appropriate that the principle of working class self-emancipation should occupy a central place in our analysis. Indeed, the argument here is that the principle of working class self-emancipation provides an essential element for thinking through how we mobilise the Marxist and revolutionary socialist tradition today.

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[32] Draper (n 11) 216.
[33] Norman Geras, 'Marxism and Proletarian Self-Emancipation' (1973) 6 *Radical Philosophy* 20, 20.
[34] Dan Swain, *None So Fit to Break the Chains: Marx's Ethics of Self-Emancipation* (Brill 2019) 1.

The classic formulation of the principle can be found in the *Rules of the First International* (which Marx wrote), which state that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves".[35] Ted Stolze argues that this formulation translates into the understanding that emancipation "is not a gift bestowed from on high; it is instead the fruit of the concerted and intergenerational efforts of millions of ordinary human beings to achieve a society worthy of their collective struggle".[36] Stolze argues, further, that a commitment to this principle was the "defining feature of Marx's mature politics",[37] but, as Swain indicates above, Marx's commitment to the principle goes back much further than that.

In his Preface to the 1888 English edition of the *Communist Manifesto* Engels wrote that the principle of working class self-emancipation had long since been his and Marx's guiding principle, that it had been their "notion, from the very beginning" that working class self-emancipation was a defining feature of their analysis.[38] Indeed, as early as 1844 Marx, in his critique of Arnold Rouge, identified the working-class not as the passive, and pitiable, objects of history, waiting for a benevolent (middle or upper class) subject to lead them to freedom. Instead, Marx centred the self-activity and development of the working class as the only meaningful basis for bringing about the social movement and transformation necessary to begin to break with capitalism.[39]

Marx's engagement with this idea continued through his critique of the Young Hegelians, in *The Holy Family* and his *Theses on Feuerbach* (which we return to below), and by 1847 "the idea of self-emancipation merged in Marx's thinking with the view of the class struggle as the crux" of socialist politics.[40] From Marx, and Engels, the importance of working class self-emancipation was carried over into the First and Second Internationals and can "be found in virtually all the political writers of classical Marxism".[41] It can be seen clearly, for example, in the work of Luxemburg, who stressed, time and again, that socialism "will not be and cannot be inaugurated by decrees; it cannot be established by any government, however admirably socialistic. Socialism must be created by the masses, must be made by every proletarian".[42] In a similar vein Luxemburg's contemporary, James

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[35] Karl Marx, 'Provisional Rules of the Association' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 20* (Lawrence & Wishart 1985) 14, 14.
[36] Ted Stolze, *Becoming Marxist: Studies in Philosophy, Struggle and Endurance* (Brill 2019) 275.
[37] ibid 270
[38] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin 2002) 202.
[39] Draper (n 11) 219-221.
[40] Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: Volume 2* (Monthly Review Press 1978) 150.
[41] Geras (n 7) 95.
[42] Rosa Luxemburg, 'Speech to the Founding Convention of the German Communist Party' in Waters (n 17) 400, 419.

Connolly, summed up the same core principle, although writing specifically about the issue of women's liberation, with the aphorism that "there are none so fit to break the chains as those who bear them".[43]

Another important idea in Marx's work which complements the principle of self-emancipation is the idea of revolutionary praxis. Returning to the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx notes in the third thesis that while the basic materialist insight that people are products of their circumstances was sound, it neglected the central fact that it is people who change their circumstances, and in the process change themselves. This "coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can", Marx argued, "be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionising practice".[44] Central to this third thesis was the rejection of the benighted leader (i.e. John Owen) leading the working class to their emancipation, with this top-down model replaced by the transformative self-activity, praxis, of the working class.

The third thesis is particularly relevant and important to the principle of working class self-emancipation, because it "breaks the circle which cuts men off from the possibility of self-transformation and, doing so, liberates them from the need for liberators".[45] This is important because, as Marx stressed numerous times, the consolidation of capitalism "develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws … the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance".[46] Because capitalism, in myriad ways, inculcates in those who are exploited most and suffer most under its operation this sense that "there is no alternative", a prolonged period of struggle, education and self-transformation is needed to empower people to break with this system and imagine an alternative to it.

This latter point was acknowledged and spelled out by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, where they noted that,

> Both for the production on a mass scale of … communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because

[43] James Connolly, *The Re-Conquest of Ireland* [1915] (Foreign Languages Press 2021) 60.
[44] Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 5* (Lawrence & Wishart 1985) 3.
[45] Geras (n 33) 21.
[46] Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (Penguin 1990) 899.

> the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.[47]

This protracted, dialectical, process of the working classes changing their own ideas and aspirations through struggles for immediate, concrete demands, is essential for the working class to emancipate itself. As Swain notes, if "society is to be transformed, it must be on the basis of a process of self-transformation, in which people change themselves as they change the world".[48] The emphasis that Marx, Engels and others place on the need for this sort of transformation reflects a clear eyed understanding about how the ideologies of individualism, fatalism and so forth infuse the broad masses of people who labour under capitalism.

Working class self-activity, or revolutionary practice, is central to building alternatives to the alienating, degrading order produced by capitalist relations of production. As E.P. Thompson put it,

> For working people above all, the road to human fulfilment in capitalist society has been bound up, in one way or another, with political organisation. It is through conscious action against exploitation and class oppression that they have ceased to be victims of their environment, and have achieved the dignity of actors in the making of their own history.[49]

This idea of the working class becoming "actors in the making of their own history", is also stressed by Michael Lebowitz. Drawing both on recent political experiences, in Venezuela and Bolivia in particular, and on a close reading of Marx's work, Lebowitz argues that "Marx's concept of revolutionary practice: the simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change … is the basis for the recognition … of the importance of protagonism in the development of human capacity".[50]

Lebowitz' argument usefully brings us to a point where we can weave together the various strands of the principle of working class self-emancipation. In brief, the argument runs as follows: the core of Marxism and revolutionary socialism is the principle of working class self-emancipation; working class self-emancipation requires revolutionary practice, the simultaneous transformation of circumstance and the self; this process of practice builds and enhances the capacities of people;

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[47] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The German Ideology' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 5* (Lawrence & Wishart 1985) 19, 52-53.
[48] Swain (n 34) 45.
[49] Thompson (n 23) 53.
[50] Michael Lebowitz, *Between Capitalism and Community* (Monthly Review Press 2020) 163.

so that they, in turn, can cease to be the victims of circumstance, and instead become actors meaningfully engaged in processes to break with capitalism, and build a higher form of society centred on the fulfilment of human needs and the realisation of human capacities.

With this as a starting point, a number of other important points necessarily follow. As Lebowitz argues, once we recognise "the centrality of revolutionary practice, we understand that organizational forms matter … You need, in short, to create spaces that allow people to take steps through which they transform themselves".[51] In this regard, Marta Harnecker, who was also heavily involved in the recent revolutionary movements in Venezuela, Bolivia and elsewhere, stresses the need for a "political instrument" to provide the space and support for this self-activity. As Harnecker put it,

> Finally, we have the most important task, because without it we will never be able to build socialism. What is needed is a political instrument that encourages popular protagonism in the most varied social and political milieus … one that puts itself at the service of that participation so that it is the people themselves who build the new society … Only thus will we be true to the thesis that revolutionary practice is essential for workers' emancipation and that of the popular movement in general. It is through practice that full human development is reached, this being the most important goal we are aiming for.[52]

Echoing this, Lebowitz argues that "encouraging the development of the capacities of the working class is the most important task of the political instrument".[53] The pursuit of working class self-emancipation, then, requires organisations and spaces where the working classes can develop their capacities, build their confidence, and transform themselves in the process of striving to transform society.

This view of the importance of protagonism is an important extension, or rather application, of Marx's principle of working class self-emancipation in the twenty-first century. The focus on building organisations to develop working class capacities chimes with Swain's observation that "Marx did not just believe that the good society was one in which people were emancipated, and thus capable of realising their human powers freely. He also believed that this society itself must be the product of self-directed emancipatory activity".[54] In terms of how this relates to the broader issue of rights and democratic forms, Stolze argues that,

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[51] ibid 165.
[52] Marta Harnecker, *A World to Build* (Monthly Review Press 2015) 179.
[53] Lebowitz (n 50) 171.
[54] Swain (n 34) 2.

> Here is a key point, then: as a movement of the oppressed takes shape, to the greatest feasible extent the oppressed must be able to deliberate among themselves regarding their own interests and objectives in lessening or eliminating the oppression they experience.[55]

Elaborating on this, Geras notes that consistent commitment to the pursuit of working class self-emancipation would require "what would today generally be called liberal norms of political life", although Geras notes that for Luxemburg and others, democratic decision making and respect for basic liberties and rights was not just part of the liberal tradition, rather it was an intrinsic part of the revolutionary socialist tradition.[56]

The value of these forms — formal democratic equality, regular elections, due process and the rights and liberties associated with free political activity — lies, going back to Engel's, in providing the working class and socialist movements with "the environment necessary for its existence, for the air it needs to breathe", without which "it will be unable to move freely itself".[57] In the context of a commitment to social change rooted in the self-emancipation of the working class, democratic forms provide crucial space for the formation and development of political organisations that can develop the capacities of the working class. It also provides the scope for the mobilisation of movements for change, the connecting of the various strands of disparate protest and campaigning into collective communities of struggle. In the absence of this space, it is not feasible to begin to build a meaningful alternative to the extant social order.

Engel's may have been overly optimistic about the ultimate consequence of entrenching these democratic forms, but he was right to stress their importance in the ongoing struggles and development of the working class. On this latter point, Ellen Meiksins Wood argued that,

> One must go beyond the function of juridical and political freedom and equality in sustaining capitalist relations of production and the position of the dominant class, and take account of the value liberal democratic political forms have had for subordinate classes, indeed, the degree to which these political and legal forms are the legacy of historic struggles by subordinate classes.[58]

Following on from this, Wood concluded that any "socialist strategy ignores at its peril", the central

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[55] Stolze (n 36) 280.
[56] Geras (n 7) 98.
[57] Engels (n 12) 78.
[58] Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'C.B. Macpherson: Liberalism, and the Task of Socialist Political Theory' (1978) *Socialist Register* 215, 230.

role of these democratic forms.[59] Far from ignoring the importance of these forms, the argument advanced here is that a transformative politics centred on the principle of working class self-emancipation can provide a vantage point from which we engage with these democratic forms. A perspective which does not surrender to liberal mythologising but still recognises the role and importance of democratic forms in struggles to build the new society in the shell of the old.

IV. THE TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

Reflecting on the apparent contradiction between revolutionary socialism and democratic forms, Draper argued that the point is not to try to resolve the issue in the abstract, but rather "to grasp the social dynamics of the situation under which the apparent contradiction between the two is resolved".[60] Or, in other words, to consider how the question of democratic forms should be approached in concrete circumstances. In this regard, an understanding of the broad political economy of the contemporary global order is crucial to begin to elaborate an argument on the relationship between movements for fundamental social change and democratic forms. The term "polycrisis" has gained some traction recently to describe the increasingly apparent overlapping crises of spiralling inequality, climate breakdown, rising "populism", economic stagnation, authoritarianism and war. But this term obscures more than it reveals, for in truth what we are confronted with is the deepening structural crisis of capitalism.[61]

In this regard, the various morbid symptoms enumerated in the polycrisis thesis are very much present, but they all have their shared root cause in the systemic crisis of capitalism which began to unfold in the 1970s. As Samir Amin, writing in 2019, aptly put it, the present conjuncture is one in which the "system of generalized monopoly capitalism, 'globalized' (imperialist) and financialized, is imploding right before our eyes".[62] The system, Amin argued, is structurally incapable of resolving "its growing internal contradictions" and as such is "condemned to pursue its mad rush" into deepening crisis.[63] Amin described this dispensation as the "autumn of capitalism". However, and of particular relevance for present purposes, Amin noted that this autumn of capitalism "does not coincide with a 'springtime of the peoples'".[64] To put it slightly differently, the present global order is marked by a deep, structural crisis of capitalism, but at

[59] ibid.
[60] Draper (n 11) 283.
[61] Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'Polycrisis or Crisis of Capitalist Social Reproduction' (2023) 2 *Global Social Challenges Journal* 203.
[62] Samir Amin, 'The New Imperialist Structure' (2019) 71(3) *Monthly Review* 32, 37.
[63] ibid.
[64] ibid 38.

present there is no working class or revolutionary alternative to the spiralling crisis.

Two of the defining characteristics of the structural crisis of capitalism are accelerating and deepening inequality and a generalised shift towards authoritarianism. Climate breakdown and war, of course, are crucially important and are also rooted in the dynamics of capital accumulation and crisis, but for the purposes of the present discussion, the focus here is on the issues of inequality and authoritarianism. With the onset of the structural crisis of capitalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the central responses of capital was to undo the post-war compromise with labour. This inaugurated the era of neoliberal retrenchment, which began with the US backed overthrow of Allende in Chile, followed by the elections of Reagan and Thatcher, the defeat of the miners in Britain, and the steady slide into the present. A central aspect of the neoliberal assault on the post-war compromise was weakening organised labour, undermining workers' pay and conditions and decimating public services through privatisation and commodification. This is the extended period, which Sivanandan noted above, in which capital emancipated itself from labour.[65]

Over the last fifty years, as forms of neoliberalisation have been entrenched, modified and resisted, one of the most striking characteristics has been the immense growth in income inequality and the concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people. In the most comprehensive study of global inequality to date, the 2022 *World Inequality Report*, Thomas Piketty and his colleagues tracked this trend, noting that "[income] and wealth inequalities have been on the rise nearly everywhere since the 1980s, following a series of deregulation and liberalization programs which took different forms in different countries".[66] They note also that global wealth inequalities are even starker than income inequalities, with half the global population possessing just 2% of total wealth, while the richest 10% own 76% of all wealth.[67] They conclude their analysis of the data by noting that global "inequalities seem to be as great today as they were at the peak of Western imperialism in the early 20th century".[68]

In a recent report Oxfam International noted that not only is income and wealth inequality increasing, but that it is doing so at an accelerating pace. They found that in 2024 the total wealth of billionaires increased by $2 trillion, with billionaire wealth growing three times faster in 2024

[65] See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (OUP 2005); and Neil Davidson, 'Crisis Neoliberalism and Regimes of Permanent Exception' (2017) 43 *Critical Sociology* 615.
[66] Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *The World Inequality Report 2022* (World Inequality Lab 2022) 11.
[67] ibid 10.
[68] ibid 12.

than it had in 2023.[69] The report also notes that this concentration of wealth is linked to growing levels of inequality both between and within countries. Thus, the falling living standards, collapsing public services, and general push toward penury experienced by most people in the world, is the flip side of the billionaire's rising tide. The Oxfam report also notes, worryingly, that while "the numbers are grim, the reality is probably worse", because national data on inequality, particularly in the Global South, is outdated.[70] The era of neoliberal ascendancy and consolidation is marked, then, by "unprecedented social polarisation worldwide", by "savage inequalities … [that] impose untold hardships on billions of people who face daily struggles for survival and uncertain futures".[71] It should be stressed that the inequality which characterises the contemporary global order is not some aberration, but rather marks the very success of the neoliberal counter-revolution launched in the 1970s. As David Harvey argues,

> Masked by a lot of rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatisation, the free market and free trade, [neoliberalism] legitimised draconian policies designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power. This project has been successful, judging by the incredible centralisation of wealth and power observable in all those countries that took the neoliberal road.[72]

The immiseration, inequality and uncertainty produced by the extant global order are central facets that fuel the rise of so called "populisms", and right wing reaction.[73] But they can only do this because of the second salient feature that defines the contemporary global order - the generalised shift towards authoritarianism.

From its inception, on the margins of political and theoretical respectability, neoliberalism has been antagonistic to democracy. In 1939 Friedrich Hayek, one of the founding fathers of neoliberalism, argued for economic policy to be removed from democratic decision making. As Hayek put it, "democracy will work only if we do not overload it and if the majorities do not abuse their power", Hayek argued further that if "the restriction of the power and scope of government", was the price to be paid for a functioning (neo)liberal order, then it was a price worth paying.[74] When the theory of neoliberalism was mobilised in the 1970s to facilitate a ruling class assault on

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[69] Oxfam International, *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Unearned Wealth of Colonialism* (Oxfam 2025).
[70] ibid 20-21.
[71] William I. Robinson and Yousef K. Baker, 'Savage Inequalities: Capitalist Crises and Surplus Humanity' (2019) 9(3) *International Critical Thought* 376, 377.
[72] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (OUP 2011) 10.
[73] Davidson (n 65) 625-631; and Brian Elliott, *The Roots of Populism: Neoliberalism and Working-Class Lives* (Manchester University Press 2021).
[74] Friedrich Hayek, 'The Economic Conditions of Interstate Federalism' (1939) 5 *New Commonwealth Quarterly* 131.

the working class and the post-war compromise, this anti-democratic element remained central. As Harvey notes,

> Neoliberal theorists are … profoundly suspicious of democracy. Governance by majority rule is seen as a potential threat to individual rights and constitutional liberties. Democracy is viewed as a luxury, only possible under conditions of relative affluence coupled with a strong middle-class presence to guarantee political stability. Neoliberals therefore tend to favour governance by experts and elites. A strong preference exists for government by executive order and by judicial decision rather than democratic and parliamentary decision-making. Neoliberals prefer to insulate key institutions, such as the central bank, from democratic pressures.[75]

Throughout the various episodes and phases of neoliberalisation, this anti-democratic strain has remained constant. From the transferring of interest rate setting powers to central banks, to the European Union's entire legal apparatus, the era of neoliberalism has seen the institutional locking in of what Roberto Unger calls "the dictatorship of no alternatives".[76]

As neoliberalism has consolidated as a global hegemonic ideology and practice, the institutional locking-in of anti-democratic processes has induced a broader decline in the quality of the democratic life of states. As Peter Mair noted, the neoliberal era witnessed "a wide-ranging attempt to define democracy in a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty — at the extreme, the projection of a kind of democracy without the demos at its centre".[77] In response to the hollowing out of democratic institutions and forms, Mair notes that we have seen a steady withdrawal of electorates from formal, democratic politics. In other words, as people increasingly come to see they have no real choice in the electoral field, they choose not to choose. In response to this, and the broader anti-democratic and depoliticising tendency of neoliberalism, a caste of professional politicians and political parties have also withdrawn from the people, and become more firmly ensconced as state managers of the status quo.[78] This hollowing out of democracy, coupled with the defeat of the working class, has meant that decision making has become far less concerned with issues of legitimacy, and more focused on maintaining a favourable business climate and credit rating. This, in part, is how the profound failure of neoliberalism evidenced by the financial crisis that began in 2008 was turned, by parties of all political stripes, into a public finance crisis, requiring devastating austerity to address it.

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[75] Harvey (n 65) 66.
[76] Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Left Alternative* (Verso 2005) 1.
[77] Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void* (Verso 2013) 9.
[78] ibid 18.

As popular movements emerged to oppose this austerity, and the general crisis of the neoliberal system, states the world over invariably turned to repression to police opposition to the system and its crises. Unable to countenance policy alternatives that might, in any way, upset the gods of finance and ruling economic elites, the political managers of capitalists states turned to repression to counter the protests and opposition that inevitably flow from the crises induced by the system itself. Linking this directly to the issue of growing inequality, Robinson and Baker note that, "escalating inequalities and the inability of global capitalism to assure the survival of billions of people throw states into crises of legitimacy and push the system towards more openly repressive means of social control and domination that exacerbate political and social conflict".[79] This, as Harvey notes, is entirely in keeping with neoliberal orthodoxy, for, notwithstanding the utopian rhetoric about individual freedom and a small state, under regimes of neoliberalism the "coercive arm of the state is augmented to protect corporate interests and, if necessary, to repress dissent".[80]

From the crisis of 2008, the global picture has consistently worsened. Growing inequality, exacerbated by austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israel's Western-backed genocide in Gaza, and the increasing urgency of climate breakdown, have all seen growing protest movements around the world.[81] These growing protests have, in turn, seen increasing state repression. Britain provides a specific example, with its raft of new anti-protest laws adding to the already extensive powers the police had to limit protest. This is coupled with a rhetoric, from the state and mainstream media, which paints climate protestors or anti-war protestors as dangerous subversives. The same sort of tactic is applied to workers who organise to defend their collective interests, with the previous Conservative government provoking a conflict with transport unions, to justify the introduction of draconian anti-trade union legislation. As the structural crisis of capitalism deepens and nascent forms of opposition to it emerge, the anti-democratic element inherent in neoliberalism, moves a step further into open authoritarianism. On this point Issa Shivji notes that when "the chips are down and the system is in deep crisis or facing a formidable political opposition of the working people, all pretence of at democracy is set aside".[82]

The contemporary global order is fundamentally marked by the ascendancy of neoliberalism and waves of neoliberalisation since the 1970s onwards. Among the deleterious consequences of the

[79] Robinson and Baker (n 71) 377.
[80] Harvey (n 65) 77.
[81] OECD, *Perspectives on Global Development 2021: From Protest to Progress?* (OECD Publishing 2021).
[82] Issa Shivji, 'Samir Amin on Democracy and Fascism' (2020) 9(1) *Agrarian South Journal of Political Economy* 12, 21.

neoliberal era, and there are many, growing inequality, precariousness and immiseration and deepening authoritarianism are two of the most salient. They have given rise to what Neil Davidson calls regimes of permanent exception, "involving both pre-emptive repression and diversionary scapegoating of groups ranging from people with disabilities to the entire Muslim population".[83] The context, then, in which we must discuss the attitude of socialists, Marxists and others to democratic forms is one of deepening social crisis and moribund democracy. A simmering context in which the living standards of the world's working class deteriorates steadily, while the wealth of a tiny few grows exponentially. And where attempts to address the pressing crises produced by the extant system are met either with the enervating inertia of hollowed out democratic institutions, or outright repression. In the next section we bring together the various strands of the argument set out so far, to essay an answer as to how we should approach democratic forms today.

V. THE BATTLE FOR DEMOCRACY

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels argued that the "first step" in building a revolutionary movement that could challenge and transcend capitalism was for the working class to "win the battle" for democracy.[84] As noted above, for Marx, Engels and most of the leading figures of classical Marxism, a central part of and weapon in this battle would be the democratic forms associated with capitalism. However, a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then and now. The contemporary era of neoliberal capitalist imperialism has shown that it can make peace with at least formal commitments to rights and democracy and indeed has crafted a specific conception of rights which bolsters and legitimates the extant order. This, among other things, has fuelled scepticism and hostility towards the democratic forms that are associated with capitalism and the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This scepticism is captured well in Radhika Desai's observation that we "can only conclude that democracy and human rights are not so much substantive realities of capitalist societies as they are weapons in the ideological armoury of their class oppression and imperialism".[85] While there is much merit in Desai's analysis, and while it is undoubtedly the case that the language of human rights and democracy have been used for ruling class, neoliberal and imperialist purposes for centuries - they have never just been that.

[83] Davidson (n 65) 625.
[84] Marx and Engels (n 38) 243.
[85] Radhika Desai, 'The Imperialism of Democracy and Human Rights vs the Democracy and Human Rights of Imperialism' (2022) 12 *International Critical Thought* 169, 177.

As shown above, there have always been subaltern or counter-hegemonic perspectives and struggles which have pushed back against dominant accounts of rights and democracy, and in doing so have shaped and re-shaped these concepts over time. At least, they have done so when they had the capacity to do so. Going back to Sivanandan's point above, it was in an era of relative working class strength, when there was dynamic, open antagonism between labour and capital, that the working classes were able to exact and define some of these key rights. The advent of neoliberalism began, everywhere, with direct and extensive attacks on the rights of workers - principally because it was the organised working class that forced capital into the post-war compromise that neoliberals and economic elites wanted to break with. But also, because, whatever the variety of capitalism, the fundamental structural antagonism within the system is between labour and capital. With a series of victories over organised labour, national and international working classes were cowed. This, in turn, has facilitated and produced the major upward transfer of income and wealth from the global working class to a tiny number of super wealthy capitalists.

Over the course of the last fifty years, there have been sporadic, and in some cases significant, fight backs, but broadly speaking the old institutions of the working class, trade unions and mass, revolutionary parties, have been eroded. As too have many of the wider social and community organisations that sustained working class struggles in the past. We have reached a point, then, where the extant system is in a prolonged, structural crisis, the political managers can only respond to the symptoms of this crisis with more of the same in terms of broadly neoliberal policy, and repression, and the capacity of the working class to provide a counterbalance or alternative to this is greatly diminished. In this context the battle for democracy, to rebuild working class capabilities and institutional power, comes centre stage. As Harvey notes, "it is the profoundly anti-democratic nature of neoliberalism backed … authoritarianism … that should surely be the main focus of political struggle".[86] To this we might add that while Harvey is right, the struggle against the unequal, undemocratic and authoritarian order wrought by neoliberalism, must be centred on the self-activity of the working class. To resist the authoritarian decline of neoliberal capitalism, working class self-emancipation must come centre stage.

For the working class, in different places and in different ways, to begin to build the capacities and institutional frameworks to contest the dictatorship of no alternatives, it will require, in Engel's words, air to breathe. In the context of deepening crisis and authoritarianism, defending and expanding the rights of freedom of association and protest, free speech, privacy and due process,

[86] Harvey (n 65) 205.

will be crucial to facilitate the emergence of new movements and organisations. As Shoikhedbrod argues,

> A contemporary Marxist approach … should reclaim the protections associated with the rule of law and constitutionalism, not least because these protections secure a minimal level of freedom and provide a forum for contesting neoliberal policies at a time when wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and democratic sovereignty is being undermined by the unprecedented power of transnational capital.[87]

Defending and crucially expanding the meaning and content of these rights and democratic forms is also, in present circumstances, a transgressive position. As Michael Yates has argued, in the context of neoliberal decline and authoritarianism, "all crusades to make freedom, substantive equality, and real democracy a reality are, by definition, radically anti-capitalist".[88]

On this latter point, Harvey makes a similar argument, arguing that while the neoliberal articulation of rights and democracy fosters a legitimate and understandable scepticism about these concepts and forms, it would be unfortunate "to abandon the field of rights to neoliberal hegemony".[89] Instead, Harvey argues that if "class restoration entails the imposition of a distinctive set of rights, then resistance to that imposition entails struggle for entirely different rights".[90] Elaborating on this, Harvey argues that,

> analysis shows that certain dominant social processes throw up and rest upon certain conceptions of justice and of rights. To challenge those particular rights is to challenge the social process in which they inhere. Conversely, it proves impossible to wean society away from some dominant social process (such as that of capital accumulation through market exchange) to another (such as political democracy and collective action) without simultaneously shifting allegiance from one dominant conception of rights and of justice to another. The difficulty with all idealist specifications of rights and of justice is that they hide this connection. Only when they come to earth in relation to some social process do they find social meaning.[91]

With respect to democracy, Marta Harnecker makes a similar argument, noting that one of the key tasks of the left is to "foster authentic degrees of popular power and democracy that are tangibly superior to bourgeois democracy. We have to fight for a new type of democracy from below, for those below".[92]

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[87] Shoikhedbrod (n 8) 198.
[88] Michael D. Yates, *Can the Working Class Change the World?* (Monthly Review Press 2018) 56.
[89] Harvey (n 65) 179.
[90] ibid 180.
[91] ibid 180.
[92] Marta Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left* (Zed Books 2007) 34.

In the context of building and developing working class organisations and institutions to combat the extant social order it will be crucial to assert and go beyond the democratic forms associated with capitalism. This is so for two reasons: (i) because, as Marxists, socialists and working class radicals in the past knew full well, such forms can be important weapons in the class struggle, and in providing space to develop working class capacities; and (ii) because asserting a radical, transgressive conception of both rights and democracy is one way of articulating and rallying support for movements that oppose the extant order. Asserting expansive and transgressive conceptions of the right to protest, and to wider democratic participation, challenges the depoliticising, anti-democratic drive of neoliberalism. It provides a context for the protagonism which will be central to build sustainable movements to transform the status quo. Likewise, asserting a richer conception of democracy, one which restores and expands the social content of it, fundamentally challenges, both ideologically and practically, the low-intensity democracy that prevails today.

Just as the neoliberal era was inaugurated with the attack on workers and workers' rights, it is only a revitalised, protagonistic working class that can mount a serious challenge to the crisis ridden capitalist order, whether of the neoliberal or emergent fascistic kind. Rebuilding working class confidence, capacities and power is crucial to building this challenge. As Lebowitz notes, "in the absence of a working class that has developed its capacity, dignity, and strength through its protagonism and practice, the immediate response of workers to crises is to accept the necessity for the reproduction of capitalism".[93] Fifty years of neoliberalisation has invested Thatcher's war cry that "There is No Alternative" with a ring of indisputable truth, and, as Yates notes, a hegemonic "ideology predisposed to take the system as given and unchangeable creates a powerful barrier to radical change".[94] As such the prospects of working class self-emancipation in the present context, of the working class winning the battle for democracy, will require a long process of organisation, education, and struggle. This process will be inconceivable without the defence and extension of the democratic forms inherited from earlier generations.

VI. CONCLUSION

The case of the JSO protestors who were handed draconian prison sentences under new, repressive anti-protest laws in mid-2024 is a signal lesson for all of us committed to fundamental social

[93] Lebowitz (n 50) 171.
[94] Yates (n 88) 61.

change, in whatever form. The scientific evidence is incontrovertible that we are rapidly hurtling towards irreparable climate breakdown, which will have devastating consequences for the biosphere and billions of people around the world. The veracity of the science on this issue has been acknowledged for some time, and yet world leaders continuously fail to do anything of substance to address this most central of issues. The core reason for this, is that climate breakdown is rooted in the incessant drive for short-term profit that drives the neoliberal capitalist system. The political managers of the states of the world, particularly the core imperialist states of the West, cannot countenance any policy options that would pose a meaningful threat to this incessant accumulation, and to the interests of the economic elites that benefit from it, and so they do nothing - or, at least, nothing of substance. Unable to address the root cause of a pressing and crucial social problem, they instead have opted, across the board, to adopt a position of repressing opposition to the symptoms of the crisis. It is in this web of authoritarian neoliberal decline that the JSO and other climate protesters have been caught.

But it does not stop with climate protestors. The spiralling inequality that also marks the contemporary era, and the concomitant collapse in the living standards of working class people the world over, are also rooted in the system of incessant, short-term profit seeking. Indeed, as several authors have noted, the entire impetus of the neoliberal counter-revolution of the 1970s and 80s was, precisely, to restore the power and wealth of economic elites, at the expense of the working class. In this regard, at least, neoliberalism has been a resounding success. So, when working class people now try to organise, in the workplace or the community, to resist the stagnation of real wages, and the gutting of the social wage produced by the privatisation and defunding of public services, the political managers of the system respond by scapegoating migrants, disabled people, or benefit "scroungers", and by repressively policing trade unions and anti-austerity movements. The same can be said of the increasing march to war and industrial murder that is part of the contemporary crisis of capitalism. The most striking example is that while Israel prosecuted its genocide in Gaza from October 2023 to January 2025, killing tens of thousands of Palestinians with the complete support of the West, these same Western states, again unable to address root causes, opted to aggressively police and repress protesters against genocide and for peace.

This latter example is the starkest. In some ways climate breakdown can still appear to many as an abstraction, something not quite real. Likewise, because of the uneven impact of deindustrialisation, casualisation and austerity, coupled with the ethic of atomised individualism

inculcated by neoliberalism, the collapsing living standards and rising inequality that mark the contemporary era can seem somewhat abstract or ephemeral too. But with the Israeli genocide in Gaza people were, thanks to modern social media, exposed daily to a brutal remorseless genocide of primarily women and children. When people, in their hundreds of thousands, took to the streets to call for an end to this slaughter, the increasingly authoritarian state managers of neoliberal capitalism responded by seeking to denigrate and mischaracterise the protestors, and by repressing anti-war and pro-Palestine protests. All these instances, and there are many more that could be added, show that in the present context, building any opposition to the brutality of the extant global order will require a defence of the rights to protest and free speech. More than this, the current moment will require the shield of these democratic forms to allow movements and institutions to develop, but will also require a re-conceptualised, radical conception of these forms to act as a sword for a working class offensive against the death march of authoritarian imperialist neoliberalism.