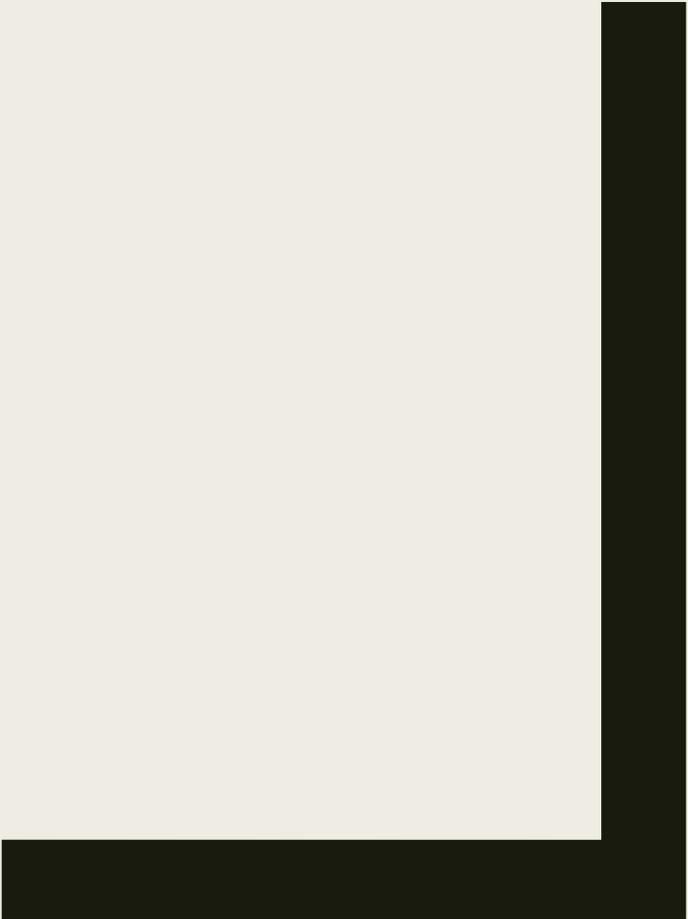


STRATEGY

A Marxist Approach

By Marc Brodine



A Marxist Approach to Strategy Does NOT

- Stop once ultimate goals are identified nor confuse ultimate goals with immediate tactics
- Confuse what we want or wish with a careful understanding of what actually is
- Seek to shoehorn reality into predetermined categories
- Confuse the concepts of stages of struggle with a mechanical understanding of process
- stop changing as reality shifts

Don't stop once ultimate goals are identified

- For example, in the environmental movement, some leftists correctly understand that capitalism itself is the main cause of environmental problems and the main obstacle to solving them
- They correctly understand that, in order to create permanent, lasting, fundamental solutions, capitalism must be replaced by socialism
- They correctly understand that to replace capitalism, a revolution is required, a fundamental transformation of our politics, economics, and culture
- *But then they stop*
- *They think that by correctly identifying ultimate goals, they have identified a strategy to achieve those goals*
- Hence, slogans such as “Revolution, Nothing Less” or “System Change not Climate Change” and claims that all reform measures are a waste of time
- **Ultimate goals are not a strategy** that takes into account where we are starting from

Development of strategy is a multi-task process, *which never stops*

- It never stops because the struggles and the balance of forces constantly change, so strategy has to change as well
 - *For example, the earth's climate is changing, which changes the material conditions of life, of production for human needs, of production of all kinds, of the economics which underlie politics*
 - *As people's understanding and mobilization around climate change issues grow and develop, that impacts economics, politics and culture in a great variety of ways, and worthwhile strategy must take those changes into account*

Elements of building a strategy

- Identifying **ultimate goals** is indeed part of the process, *just not the end point*
- Understanding **current reality** in depth is necessary
- A correct estimate of the political and economic **balance of forces** is the foundation
 - *Not only what the forces are but their levels of unity and division, their contradictions*
- An accurate and not idealistic view of the **people's struggles**, movements and organizations is essential
 - *For example, we need a third, people's party—that is not the same as having the forces necessary to create a successful, powerful third party based on the working class*
- A deep understanding of what forces are required to accomplish **fundamental change**
 - *No shortcut around the need to win a majority of the working class and build broad alliances, coalitions, and movements*
- Understanding the need to adjust and **fine-tune strategy as the balance of forces changes**

What a Strategy Needs to Do

- Identify the **main enemy and obstacles**, both immediate and long-term
- Identify the **main forces for change** and what is required to unify them
- Map out a **general path** from the current moment to ultimate goals
- Construct the **general framework** based not on abstract morality but on the main issues under contention and **how issues can be related and linked**
- Clarify what the **next stage of struggle** is and how we can become agents of conscious, transformative change?
- Acts as a **flexible guide** to the path of struggle, and helps keep in the forefront the most crucial issues and struggles
 - *For example, in the actual process of revolution, the main question is which class is in control of political power and initiative—and all other questions must be seen in relation to that main question*

In other words, in developing a strategy, we need to think dialectically

- See all struggles, movements, and issues as **processes in motion, with internal contradictions**
- Reject pressure to regard processes as **static and unchanging**
- Examine how things have changed up till now and for what those changes tell us about how to create change
- Understand that **all processes are linked** to many others—so while we must construct a strategy focused on U.S. political and economic realities, those realities are not disconnected from what is happening around the world

What does thinking dialectically mean in the context of strategy?

- Look for the **contradictions** which drive change
 - *For example, the contradiction between Trump “courting” construction union leaders, and his appointments to the Labor Department and support for national Right-to-Work legislation*
- Look for the **tipping points** between quantitative and qualitative change
 - *For example, getting 50% plus one of votes cast in U.S. winner-take-all elections*
- Look for **connections** to broader processes
 - *For example, the rising ultra-right, neo-fascist movements in Europe –how that is connected to the Trump phenomenon and what is driving this worldwide development*
- Look for the **history** of how a challenge developed
 - *For example, look at the role of the “mainstream” Republican leadership in encouraging and empowering the Tea Party—long before Trump’s candidacy and an element of why his candidacy happened and succeeded*

- a strategy doesn't test itself
 - *The test of a good strategy is whether it can operate as a successful guide to action*
- Good strategy requires the unity of theory and practice
 - *testing theory by working to apply it, measuring the results,*
 - *seeing where the contradictions are,*
- And then **adjusting the strategy** to match what has been learned

Without proposing a specific strategy, here are some points of necessity:

- The history of the U.S. can be seen in part as a continual set of struggles to **expand and protect democracy**, alongside efforts to thwart such progress
- **Racism has been central** to the construction of capitalism in the U.S., the central element of creating and maintaining division within the working class and progressive movements, and unity in the struggle against racism has been a powerful tool for change
- **Sexism is a crucial support for the system**, a source, like racism, of super-profits, a tool to divide movements, an obstacle to full unity—and women’s movements have been inspirational for many
- **The U.S. working class** has never been organized into officially radical-led unions, along the lines of many European unions, so building working class unity is a complex process different from anywhere else
- While **the working class is central** to creating fundamental economic change, the working class alone can’t do it—the working class needs to unite with broad sections of the people’s movements, needs to not only unify within itself but win a decisive majority of the people—nothing less will win
- The **two party system** is the central reality of how our political system functions, and we can’t wish that away

The Women's March January 20th demonstrated that

- Women's issues affect everybody, and cut across many ideological and cultural lines
- Without a struggle against sexism and misogyny, the unity we need can't be built
- Working for unity across gender lines and divisions is an essential part of the fight for full democracy, for the full participation of all in controlling and running society
- There is a mass hunger for resistance, a spontaneous response beyond what anyone expected
- Mass demonstrations can change the national conversation and mood

The airport demonstrations following Trump's exclusion order demonstrated

- That many understand the link between rights for immigrants and rights for all
- That people of many nationalities can be mobilized to actively fight oppression of a section of our people
- That militant and quick-responding resistance don't require smashing anything, yet can have a giant impact, and work alongside legal struggles
- That the resistance is nationwide, and while it is organized, there is also a spontaneous response to Trump's agenda and efforts to fight it
- That it is possible to actively resist, no matter what the Trump administration does

Some strategic challenges we can already see

- Some who oppose Trump focus on abstract moral issues (“is it moral to punch a Nazi in the face?”) while ignoring the needs of the movement to reach tens of millions
- Republicans in the states are trying to make protests illegal, or force protesters to pay for policing, or face charges for obstructing commerce, or make it legal to run over protesters!
- Already in motion, ultra-right efforts to demonize protesters, liberals, socialists, communists, and internationalists will escalate
- The ultra-right tries to paint demonstrators as unpatriotic. If there is a war or military confrontation (way too likely given Bannon’s ideology and Trump’s loose-cannon “negotiating”), this “unpatriotic” campaign will escalate
- For many new to protest, there will be a temptation to get quickly frustrated, with the potential to degenerate into pointless gestures of anger
- Anarchists will act as parasites on the main body of demonstrators, detracting from the main message of unity and popular non-violent resistance

Ultra-left challenges, for example Chris Hedges call to “make America ungovernable.”

- http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/make_america_ungovernable_20170205?utm_source=forward-story&utm_medium=email
- This call is based on a **moralistic apocalyptic vision** unconnected to real struggle—the mass demonstrations and resistance are damned with faint praise and derided as basically ineffective. Little is said about the need for a massive movement, and nothing about what it will actually take to build such a movement. Intentionally or not, it encourages gestures of resistance that may temporarily satisfy the moral imperative to resist, but that work against reaching, winning, and organizing the tens of millions who need to be reached.
- the **ultimate flaw** in this approach is it demonstrates no confidence that tens of millions can be reached or mobilized, so **Hedges is looking for another way out**. His analysis of the fascist potential of the Trump administration actions, while apocalyptic, is not too far off from my own worries about what they will attempt. But **there is no successful strategy for stopping fascism that doesn't reach for tens of millions**—“ungovernability” done by relatively small numbers will not work, so it is a dead end, no matter the motivations or sincerity of those proposing such strategy.

While we should reject calls for ineffective protest

- Hedges does call out anarchists for their reliance on counter-productive violence
- He quotes another who says that, while a general strike would be a real blow against fascism, that it “might” be premature!
- An article in Jacobin also notes that just calling for a general strike doesn’t make an effective or massive one happen: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/general-strike-donald-trump-womens-march-immigration-ban-ludlow-strike/>
- **Nonetheless, all strategic proposals that avoid, for whatever reason, the need to unite and mobilize tens of millions are counter-productive**

For example, there are

- Calls to make the center the main target of attack, and various proposals to make Democratic leadership the main enemy
- This almost exactly duplicates the mistake made by the German Communist Party in the early 1930s. Before Hitler's ascension to the full power of the state, Thaelemann (head of the German Party) was quoted as saying "After Hitler, us." Communists saw Social Democrats as the main obstacle to workers coming to revolution, and therefore saw attacking Social Democrats as the main task.
- The German Party did attack the fascists, did engage in many street battles ("punching Nazis"), but **didn't make its main task to unite all left and center forces** against the fascist danger. This was one of many experiences which led to Dimitrov's speech to the 7th Congress of the Communist International, which criticized the German Party for not working hard enough for left unity, for working class unity, and for underestimating the fascist danger.

There are plenty of justified criticisms of the center and of Democratic Party leadership

- We are not calling to mute such criticism
- Just that this not be the main focus
- And not detract from the **main need of the present moment**—building a sustained, organized mass multi-issue resistance movement

Strategy helps us choose the right questions

- For example, the right question is NOT “is it moral to punch a fascist in the face?”
- The right questions ARE “Does punching individual fascists in the face defeat fascism? If our main task is to build the broadest movement possible, the only force capable of defeating moves towards fascism, does punching individual fascists in the face help build that movement?”
- Communists in Germany engaged in many street battles—and that didn’t defeat the Nazis or create the mass unity necessary

Important to get the estimation of the balance of forces right

- The German Party in the early 1930s underestimated the danger of fascism. The Communist movement learned to be wary of the preliminary steps towards fascism, not to underestimate the danger—a correct lesson. However,
- Over-estimation leads to prematurely abandoning room for struggle, political space for protest and organized resistance
- Our own Party made *that* mistake (over-estimating the fascist danger) in the late 1940s/early 1950s

Learning from our own Party history

- It was not a simple or straightforward mistake:
 - *There were **real steps towards fascism** in the U.S. during the McCarthy period*
 - McCarren Act authorizing concentration camps for political prisoners, deportations of radicals, blacklisting in many fields including education, nationalizing the railroads to break a strike, among many others
 - *The Party waged **public and democratic struggles** for rights and against those steps*
 - Stockholm Peace Appeal, to save the Rosenbergs, Committees for the Protection of the Foreign Born resisted deportations, legal battles over the Smith Act case and “little” Smith act cases in many states, civil rights struggles including the Genocide petition, electoral campaigns for the Progressive Party, etc.
 - **Still, the Party made itself smaller, sent too much of its leadership underground, isolated itself from key allies**
 - **For example, in the National Negro Labor Council, the Party worked to disband *against the wishes* of other key members including Coleman Young**
 - **For example, disbanding the Labor Youth League with *only* 6,000 members**
 - **For example, deciding to reduce the size of the Party significantly**

When we organize **all our efforts for unity** around the **struggle to protect and extend democracy**,

- We connect our struggles with powerful and well-known struggles from our country's history—the fights for civil rights for African Americans, the struggle to gain the vote for women, campaigns to end the poll tax and literacy tests, various struggles against laws to outlaw protest and the rights to organization, freedom of assembly, and free speech
- We turn the myths about how perfectly democratic the U.S. is, which have never been true, into a weapon, a way for people to understand that to make the myth of democracy true, we must fight to make it true
- We protect **the right of all movements and people to protest**, to organize, to demonstrate, to engage in civic politics—and this helps prevent the marginalization of progressive and radical politics, organizations, and movements and connects them to fights for the real needs of the people

Strategy is

- A way to convince others to join us, because we have a realistic plan, one that makes sense of how their struggles are connected to the broad movement of history, democracy, and progress
- A test of our Marxist dialectical thinking and the unity of theory and practice
- A way to set priorities and avoid being pulled or driven off track
- Part of the struggle against ideological attacks and diversions
- A guide to action, not a blueprint

Strategy Matters

- Taking strategy seriously can avoid errors in estimating the balance of forces, avoid under- or over-estimating the danger of fascism, avoid either over-reliance on constitutional and political norms or not taking full advantage of the battle to protect constitutional and political norms
- Strategic errors can lead to errors in tactics in ways that matter to millions of people—focusing on punching Nazis rather than saving food stamps, for example
- Strategy keeps us focused on the mass resistance, on the need for unity

Another framework example

- We could get lost in the details of the electorate and how different slices of it voted and shifted, but that draws attention away from a larger framework we shouldn't lose sight of:
- A basic problem (of course, not the only one) is that the U.S. electorate has been relatively closely divided for over three decades
 - *All of the focus on what "threw" the election to Trump can be all true, BUT*
 - *If the U.S. electoral system more closely resembled the actual sentiments of the majority of the total population, all this messing around at the edges wouldn't matter*
 - *It is only that closeness that allows the ultra-right to game the system with voter suppression, massive infusions of money to ultra-right candidates, etc.*
- Changing this has to be part of our calculation, another reason to place the battle for full democracy, at the center of our strategy.

Some questions to think about this weekend

- What are the unique and essential contributions our Party can make—to strategy for the movements, to building broad unity and overcoming obstacles, to connecting issues and struggles, to keep the movements from going off track?
- How can we participate in the movements most effectively, while not neglecting to build our own organization?
- What divisions are there in the ruling class, and how can we take advantage of them?
- What is necessary to create a transformative unity, to place struggles on a higher plane—with a higher level of breadth, of militancy
- How can we best connect current struggles to our ultimate goal, socialism?