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ALEX CALLINICOS

**Can We Change the World
Without Taking Power**



Alex Callinicos

John Holloway & Alex Callinicos

Can we change the world without taking power?

A debate between John Holloway and Alex Callinicos

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John Holloway:

I don't know the answer. Perhaps we can change the world without taking power. Perhaps we cannot. The starting point – for all of us, I think – is uncertainty, not knowing, a common search for a way forward. Because it becomes more and more clear that capitalism is a catastrophe for humanity. A radical change in the organisation of society, that is, revolution, is more urgent than ever. And this revolution can only be world revolution if it is to be effective.

But it is unlikely that world revolution can be achieved in one single blow. This means that the only way in which we can conceive of revolution is as interstitial revolution, as a revolution that takes place in the interstices of capitalism, a revolution that

occupies spaces in the world while capitalism still exists. The question is how we conceive of these interstices, whether we think of them as states or in other ways.

In thinking about this, we have to start from where we are, from the many rebellions and insubordinations that have brought us to Porto Alegre. The world is full of such rebellions, of people saying NO to capitalism: NO, we shall not live our lives according to the dictates of capitalism, we shall do what we consider necessary or desirable and not what capital tells us to do. Sometimes we just see capitalism as an all-encompassing system of domination and forget that such rebellions exist everywhere. At times they are so small that even those involved do not perceive them as refusals, but often they are collective projects searching for an alternative way forward and sometimes they are as big as the Lacandon Jungle or the Argentinazo of three years ago or the revolt in Bolivia just over a year ago. All of these insubordinations are characterised by a drive towards self-determination, an impulse that says, ‘No, you will not tell us what to do, we shall decide for ourselves what we must do.’

These refusals can be seen as fissures, as cracks in the system of capitalist domination. Capitalism is not (in the first place) an economic system, but a system of command. Capitalists, through money, command us, telling us what to do. To refuse to obey is to break the command of capital. The question for us, then, is how do we multiply and expand these refusals, these cracks in the texture of domination?

There are two ways of thinking about this.

The first says that these movements, these many insubordinations, lack maturity and effectiveness unless they are focused, unless they are channelled towards a goal. For them to be effective, they must be channelled towards the conquest of state power – either through elections or through the overthrowing of the existing state and the establishment of a

new, revolutionary state. The organisational form for channelling all these insubordinations towards that aim is the party.

The question of taking state power is not so much a question of future intentions as of present organisation. How should we organise ourselves in the present? Should we join a party, an organisational form that focuses our discontent on the winning of state power? Or should we organise in some other way?

The second way of thinking about the expansion and multiplication of insubordinations is to say, 'No, they should not be all harnessed together in the form of a party, they should flourish freely, go whatever way the struggle takes them.' This does not mean that there should be no coordination, but it should be a much looser coordination. Above all, the principal point of reference is not the state but the society that we want to create.

The principal argument against the first conception is that it leads us in the wrong direction. The state is not a thing, it is not a neutral object: it is a form of social relations, a form of organisation, a way of doing things which has been developed over several centuries for the purpose of maintaining or developing the rule of capital. If we focus our struggles on the state, or if we take the state as our principal point of reference, we have to understand that the state pulls us in a certain direction. Above all, it seeks to impose upon us a separation of our struggles from society, to convert our struggle into a struggle on behalf of, in the name of. It separates leaders from the masses, the representatives from the represented; it draws us into a different way of talking, a different way of thinking. It pulls us into a process of reconciliation with reality, and that reality is the reality of capitalism, a form of social organisation that is based on exploitation and injustice, on killing and destruction. It also draws us into a spatial definition of how we do things, a spatial definition which makes a clear distinction between the state's territory and the world outside, and a clear distinction between citizens and foreigners. It draws us into a spatial definition of

struggle that has no hope of matching the global movement of capital.

There is one key concept in the history of the state-centred left, and that concept is betrayal. Time and time again the leaders have betrayed the movement, and not necessarily because they are bad people, but just because the state as a form of organisation separates the leaders from the movement and draws them into a process of reconciliation with capital. Betrayal is already given in the state as an organisational form.

Can we resist this? Yes, of course we can, and it is something that happens all the time. We can refuse to let the state identify leaders or permanent representatives of the movement, we can refuse to let delegates negotiate in secret with the representatives of the state. But this means understanding that our forms of organisation are very different from those of the state, that there is no symmetry between them. The state is an organisation on behalf of, what we want is the organisation of self-determination, a form of organisation that allows us to articulate what we want, what we decide, what we consider necessary or desirable. What we want, in other words, is a form of organisation that does not have the state as its principal point of reference.

The argument against taking the state as the principal point of reference is clear, but what of the other concept? The state-oriented argument can be seen as a pivoted conception of the development of struggle. Struggle is conceived as having a central pivot, the taking of state power. First we concentrate all our efforts on winning the state, we organise for that, then, once we have achieved that, we can think of other forms of organisation, we can think of revolutionising society. First we move in one direction, in order to be able to move in another: the problem is that the dynamic acquired during the first phase is difficult or impossible to dismantle in the second phase.

The other concept focuses directly on the sort of society we want to create, without passing through the state. There is no pivot: organisation is directly prefigurative, directly linked to the social relations we want to create. Where the first concept sees the radical transformation of society as taking place after the seizure of power, the second insists that it must begin now. Revolution not when the time is right but revolution here and now.

This prefiguration, this revolution here-and-now is above all the drive to self-determination. Self-determination cannot exist in a capitalist society. What can and does exist is the drive towards social self-determination: the moving against alien determination, determination by others. Such a moving against determination by others is necessarily experimental, but three things are clear:

- a. The drive towards self-determination is necessarily a drive against allowing others to decide on our behalf. It is therefore a movement against representative democracy and for the creation of some form of direct democracy.
- b. The drive towards self-determination is incompatible with the state, which is a form of organisation which decides on our behalf and thereby excludes us.
- c. The drive towards self-determination makes no sense unless it includes as its central point the self-determination of our work, our activity. It is necessarily directed against the capitalist organisation of work. We are talking, therefore, not just of democracy but of communism, not just of rebellion but of revolution.

For me, it is this second conception of revolution that we have to concentrate on. The fact that we reject the state-centred conception doesn't obviously mean that the non-state-centred

conception does not have its problems. I see three principal problems, none of which is an argument for reverting to the idea of taking state power:

The first issue is how to deal with state repression. I do not think the answer is to arm ourselves so that we can defeat the state in open confrontation: we would be unlikely to win, and anyway it would involve reproducing precisely the authoritarian social relations we are fighting against. Nor do I think that the answer is to take control of the state so that we can control the army and the police forces: the use of the army and police on behalf of the people obviously comes into conflict with the struggles of those who do not want anyone to act on their behalf. This leaves us with trying to find other ways of dissuading the state from exercising violence against us: this may have to involve some degree of armed resistance (as in the case of the Zapatistas), but must surely rely above all on the strength of the integration of the rebellion into the community.

The second issue is whether we can develop alternative doings (alternative productive activity) within capitalism, and to what extent we can create an alternative social nexus between activities, other than value. There are many experiments that point in the direction of some sort of solution (the *fábricas recuperadas*, factories reopened by the workers, in Argentina, for example) and the possibilities will obviously depend on the scale of the movement itself, but this remains a major problem. How do we think of a social determination of production and distribution that moves from the bottom up (from the interstitial revolts) rather than from a central planning body?

The third issue is the organisation of social self-determination. How do we organise a system of direct democracy on a scale that goes beyond the local level in a complex society? The classic answer is the idea of councils linked by a council of councils to which the councils send instantly recallable delegates. This seems basically correct, but it is clear that even in small groups the operation of democracy is always

problematic, so that the only way in which direct democracy can be conceived is as a constant process of experimentation and self-education.

Can we change the world without taking power? The only way to find out is to do it.

Alex Callinicos:

Whatever our differences, John and I stand for changing the world through a process of self-emancipation, where there aren't leaders who tell people what to do but rather people who collectively liberate themselves. I admire the honesty, clarity and consistency of John's work, which is evident in his presentation today. But I also have to be honest and say that I find the ideal of changing the world without taking power ultimately self-refuting.

I agree with John about uncertainty. There are lots of things we cannot know. But one thing I am certain about. That is that it is impossible to change the world without addressing and solving the question of political power.

I absolutely sympathise with one of the impulses behind the slogan 'Change the world without taking power'. Among a lot of the traditions on the left worldwide there has been what has been called 'socialism from above'. Whether it is a Communist party with Stalinist traditions or a social democratic party like the Workers Party in Brazil today, it involves the idea that the party changes things for you and everyone else remains passive.

The political tradition I stand in is a very different one. It is that of socialism from below summed up in Marx's definition of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class. Socialism is about the oppressed and exploited of the world effectively liberating themselves.

My fundamental difference with John is that I believe this process of self-emancipation requires us to confront and

overthrow the existing state and replacing it with a radically different form of state power.

John invites us essentially to turn our backs on the state. He says that we should carry out what he calls an 'interstitial' revolution. It's been summed up by other thinkers sharing the same ideas as John as life despite capitalism. We should all try and cultivate our autonomous gardens despite the horrors of capitalism.

The trouble is that the state won't leave us alone and that is because capitalism itself, the system that different states sustain, won't leave us alone. Capitalism today is invading the gardens of the world to carve them up and turn them into branches of agribusiness or suburban speculation and won't leave us alone.

We cannot ignore the state, because the state is the most concentrated single form of capitalist power. This means strategically we have to be against the state, to pursue the revolution against the state.

Does this mean we ignore the existing state and do not ever put demands on the capitalist state? No. The existing capitalist states try to legitimise themselves to win the consent of those they oppress and exploit. This means that if we organise effectively, we can force reforms out of capitalism. Also, if we ignore the state, that means we will be indifferent to struggles over privatisation. For example, at the minute George Bush wants to privatise the pensions system in the US. Do we say we don't care about that because the social security system in the US is organised by the state? I think, no.

Finally, many workers these days are employed by the state. Part of the process of privatisation means those employees of private companies replace these workers. Often that means the service to the public is worse and the conditions and wages of those employed by those companies get worse.

But if we are not indifferent to the state, that does not mean we can rely on it. In the long run capitalism and the state which

seeks to sustain it will seek to take back any reforms it concedes temporarily. That is what they are seeking to do at the present time.

Moreover, as John has highlighted, the state is a hierarchical organisation which organises violence to keep the mass of society subordinated.

This means we cannot simply try to seize the existing state. If we seize the existing state, in the end, at the worst we will get Stalin, at best we will get someone like Lula or Mbeki in South Africa who comes out of a mass movement which seeks to change the world but ends up administering things for capitalism.

What's the alternative then? It is to build up a movement that is powerful and focused enough to break the existing forms of state power and institute radically different and radically democratic forms of state power. In other words, there has to be a revolution which is not a party taking state power by seizing the existing state, but the oppressed and exploited – above all workers – who break the existing state and in the process of doing so create radically new and democratic forms of power in order to manage society for themselves.

This alternative is not just a fantasy that I've spun out of my head. If we look at the history of the working class movement over the last 150 years, again and again workers have created new ways of organising in order to wage mass struggles effectively. These have been much more democratic, much more subject to the control of the workers themselves. In order to wage their struggles, they have created delegate structures that break down the hierarchy that John talks about. And in doing so they have created new forms of political power, even if they don't know it.

There are many examples: the soviets in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 are the most famous examples; there were the workers' and soldiers' councils that were formed

in the German Revolution of 1918–20; right up to the *cordones* that were formed in Chile in 1972–73 at the height of the struggles under the Popular Unity government of Allende. There are many other examples of mass popular organisation that represent a new sort of political power.

The important thing about these forms of organisation, whatever the intentions that led to their formation, is that they have the capacity to challenge and break the existing state and institute new forms of power.

We are not saying, as John was suggesting, ‘Wait for the revolution.’ But any struggles that begin to build towards self-organisation are pointing the way towards the way a future non-capitalist, socialist, society can be organised. The problem is that for any movement towards self-organisation to succeed in breaking the power of capital, there has to be a moment of concentration and centralisation. You can’t deal with the concentrated power of capital – the state and the multinational corporations – without the movements themselves becoming focused to confront the power of those corporations directly.

John will say, ‘When you talk about centralisation and concentration, you are returning to the old ways of organising, you are beginning to organise in a way that reproduces the centralised and hierarchical structures of the existing state.’

I agree it isn’t easy. John was very honest and talked about the difficulties with his strategic conception, and I agree there are difficulties with the approach I am defending. Combining centralisation with self-organisation is not easy. But without a degree of centralisation we will be defeated.

If we simply have fragmented and decentralised and localised activity, all cultivating our autonomous gardens, capital can isolate us and destroy or incorporate us piece by piece. And we cannot address problems like climate change unless we have the capacity to coordinate and, to a degree, to centralise for global change. We cannot reduce CO₂ emissions to the necessary level

without global coordination. We will not achieve the world we want to see if we simply rely on the fragment and the local.

This is related to the question of parties. John is critical of the party as a form of organisation. He says it reproduces the hierarchical structures of the existing state. But if we look at our movement, there are parties within the movement – that is, there are ideologically organised currents which have in their different ways a total strategic view of the transformation of society. In that sense of party, John and the people who think like him are as much a party within the different movements as are the Workers Party and the PSOL in Brazil [1], or the Socialist Workers Party in Britain.

My ideal in this respect is the one articulated by the great Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci. He talked about the dialectical interaction between the moment of centralisation represented by the parties and the self-organised impulse from the movement which is the fundamental driving force of revolution.

To sum up: First of all we cannot avoid the question of the state and political power. It is a delusion to believe we can avoid it. The critical question is who takes power and how. If it is simply a question of a party taking control of the existing state by whatever means, then it is absolutely true that will be a change that simply reproduces the existing relations of domination. But the conception of a self-organised working class seizing power to institute new forms of political organisation and state organisation along with all the other oppressed and exploited groups changes the question.

Revolution then becomes a process of self-emancipation which starts here and now, in the way we organise resistance to capitalism, and culminates when we create a self-organised society, and capitalism and all the oppression associated with it becomes simply a bad memory.

Discussion

First contributor from the floor:

I agree mainly with John's idea. This discussion is not new. The same discussion happened in the 19th century. The people who believed we should focus on taking power in the state won the debate, and they created movements in that direction. Stalin was one result, Lula another. Once the state becomes the focus of the fight we cannot avoid the change becoming just a mirror of the state. The revolution was not really a revolution for the people.

Second contributor:

We haven't looked so far at Venezuela in this debate. There both sides of the question are being developed. They are looking at the state while making the internal transformation from below, beginning with the new constitution which embodies decentralisation and participation. Economically they are undertaking development, with agrarian reform, ending landlordism and redistributing land to the peasantry. Educationally they are ending illiteracy for 3 million people. By participatory democracy and social inclusion they are trying to bring about the self-emancipation talked about here. Venezuela represents a new and quite different way of resolving the questions we are discussing here. It is achieving levels of self-organisation that mean it is no longer dependent on the world system. It is five years since the IMF and World Bank determined what happened there.

Third contributor:

All over the world we have people creating progressive parties based on a mishmash of neo-Keynesian policies, reform, reinstating regulation and so on. If we advocate revolution here and now, simultaneously with an attempt to replace the state by the anti-state, we have to think about what the alternative is

going to be. Capitalism is the indefinite accumulation of capital until the point where you have the obscenity of money in the hands of so few that it really amounts to mass destruction. We should add to the Chávez revolution the ideas put out by **Z magazine** that look back to Marx's idea of a federation of producers and turn it into a federation of producers and consumers.

Fourth contributor:

I want to ask two questions. One, what is the significance of the concept of fissure or crack which John uses? The second is whether there is not some concept of power other than that of state power.

Fifth contributor (Chris Nineham, SWP):

There is a sense in which this debate has been false. John made a very good critique of the tradition which says a small number of people should take power for everyone else. It is a critique of social democracy, of a whole tradition of trying to operate from above through getting a few individuals into the state. That is a failed strategy. Those people always get drawn into the system. They get bullied, bought off or simply compromise with capitalism.

But that is not an argument against the Marxist tradition of revolutionary politics which says that the capitalist society is our enemy. We have to get rid of the capitalist state and create a society that is based on a completely different, radically grassroots structure.

John's solution is effectively to say that we just ignore the state. The question of how we challenge state power has to be central to everything we discuss, since state power is so visibly shaping the world around us today.

One reason we cannot avoid confronting the state is that the state tries to divide us, it tries to separate off each struggle from every other, women from men, gays from straights, whites from blacks, and make us think of ourselves in the smallest possible way. We have to have an argument in the movement that unity is strength – and that argument has to be organised. Learning to act together and discussing it consciously is essential if we are to develop a strategy to take on the power of the state.

Sixth contributor:

I would really like to know how John's theory of changing the world would apply to Iraq or Palestine, where people are being attacked daily and their lives turned into misery by the state. They cannot ignore the state. They have to fight it directly, head on.

My relatives live in Iran. I live in Britain. If the British state attacks Iran, do I simply ignore it?

Seventh contributor (from South Korea):

We can change the world by taking power or by not taking power. The difference is one of time. Taking power will be quicker. We should not be afraid to take power, because we are the ones who will change the world.

John Holloway:

A lot of people did not want to talk about revolution a few years ago. But today lots of people want to. Alex and myself are in agreement on this.

Secondly, someone said this is a false debate. But Alex and I were not saying the same thing. We have different perspectives. We have different conceptions of the state. For me it is a specific, capitalist form of social relations which excludes us,

Alex talks about a workers' state and the possibility of a radical democratisation of the state. According to my conception that is absolutely absurd, since the state has a form of organisation that excludes us.

To talk about a radical movement, a soviet movement for instance, culminating in the creation of a new state, is nonsense because a really democratic organisation, a council organisation goes in one direction while the state is a form of organisation that goes in the opposite direction. To talk about a working class state introduces confusion that conceals the most horrific process of repression and violence that we have seen several times in the 20th century.

The questioner who spoke of us turning our backs on the state – I am not saying we should ignore the state. It would be lovely if we could. In a way that is what the Zapatistas are doing now. They are turning their backs on the state. But that is not something that most of us can do. I am an employee of the state. It is not about pretending the state does not exist. It is about understanding the state as a specific form of social relations which pushes us in certain directions, and trying to think about how we can struggle against those forms of social relations and push in a different direction, so that our relation is in and beyond and against the state. It would be lovely if we could pretend that the state does not exist. Unfortunately we can't. But we certainly don't have to fall into the state as a central reference point in terms of logic or of power or space.

The question of Venezuela is very important for all the Latin Americans here. I liked the way the question was presented. It was not as it is sometimes put in terms of 'Venezuela shows we must take power.' It was in terms of Venezuela shows there has to be a combination of the two approaches – the state-oriented approach and the non-state-oriented approach. This is what characterises the World Social Forum, this combination, a cooperation, between these two different approaches. But in that we have to see there is always a tension, a contradiction,

between on the one hand saying, 'We ourselves shall decide how society will develop' and on the other hand saying, 'The state will decide for you or show you how to decide for yourselves.' It will be very important to see how that tension plays itself out in Venezuela.

On the question of fissures. We often feel helpless because capitalism weighs so heavily on us. But when we say No we start off with an appreciation of our own strength. When we rebel we are in fact tearing a little hole in capitalism. It is very contradictory. By rebelling we are already saying no to the command of capital. We are creating temporary spaces. Within that crack, that fissure, it is important that we fight for other social relations that don't point towards the state, but that they point towards the sort of society we want to create. At the core of these fissures is the drive to self-determination. And then it is a question of working out what does this mean, and how to be organised for self-determination. It means being against and beyond the society that exists. Of expanding the fissures, how to push these fissures forward structurally.

The people who say we should take control of the state are also talking about cracks. There is no choice but to start with interstices. The question is how we think of them, because the state is not the whole world. There are 200 states. If you seize control of one, it is still only a crack in capitalism. It is a question of how we think about those cracks, those fissures. And if we start off from ourselves, why on earth should we adopt capitalist, bourgeois forms for developing our struggle? Why should we accept the template of the concept of the state?

It is impossible to focus on the state without having a special definition of struggle. It means struggling within the space of the state, whereas at the World Social Forum we are in rebellion against that space. The space defines a concept of space and time.

Alex Callinicos:

John said we have a transhistorical conception of the state which separates the state off from capitalist relations of production. So let me say clearly that the state under which we live is an irredeemably capitalist state. I don't want to be part of a movement whose aim is to take control of the existing capitalist state.

Nevertheless, this is not the only state that has existed in history. There have been many different forms of state in the history of class society. What they have all had in common is organised and institutionalised class violence, the violence of an exploiting minority over an exploited majority.

The question we are addressing now is, 'Can the working class as it organises itself collectively and socially to resist exploitation by capital turn this situation round?' In other words, can the working class create its own form of organised class violence, distinctively working class in the way it is organised but which makes the struggle against exploitation by capital more effective and also helps the working class build a new society? As John knows, the answer to that question in the classic tradition of Marxism, in the writing of Marx and Lenin, is yes. There is the idea of a workers' state, of workers' power, which is a temporary transitional form through which the working class organises itself to get rid of capitalism and as part of the same process democratically organises itself to create a new form of society.

I used the L word, I mentioned Lenin, and of course John will say this question was tried and proved to be definitely wrong during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and particularly with the Stalinist aftermath.

One of the contributions referred to the great debate between Marx and Bakunin at the time of the First International in the late 19th century. He said that the experience of Stalinism proved

that Bakunin's anti-state position had been proved to be right. But how did that happen? If the idea is that state thinking was deep in Marx or Lenin's head and that led to stalinism, it is simply wrong. Marx said we need a revolution against the state in his critique of Bakunin. It was an idea Lenin enthusiastically took up during the 1917 revolution.

So how did it happen? John talked about fissures. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was a fissure. It tore a great hole in the capitalist system, the biggest fissure so far in world history. But just to break a hole in capitalism, even a hole as big as Russia, was not enough. There was a simple reason. The power of capital is global and it can concentrate its forces massively to destroy any fissure that threatens it. That is what they have been trying to do with Chávez in Venezuela. Whatever the problem is with his politics and so on, the US and its allies have been trying to break the experiment taking place in Venezuela because it threatens to open up a fissure.

The power of capital is so great that usually they can close the fissures. Usually they do so by overthrowing the revolutionary process and destroying its leaders and activists. There are many examples of that. In the Russian case there was a particularly horrible way in which capital won, by creating such pressures as to cause the revolutionary regime to transform itself into a barbarous replica of the global system. The reason that happened was not that Marx liked the state, but that there was not a powerful enough global movement to break the power of capital globally. That doesn't have to be our fate. We are already in the process collectively of creating the greatest global movement against capitalism in world history. But we won't do that if we think that simply creating holes, fissures, in the existing system is enough to destroy it.

Further discussion

Eighth contributor (South Korean woman):

If you say we can change the world without taking power, you are saying that the capitalist power that exists right now is acceptable. Holloway says that the state excludes us. But the state oppresses us at every level. Even our sexuality is oppressed by the state. I come from South Korea where we have a history of military dictatorship and they have crushed a beautiful resistance. It is not that the state excludes us but that at every level it oppresses us.

Alex is not saying we have to go into the state and use the power of the capitalist state. He is saying we have to create new forms of power where the working class will form an organisation capable of overthrowing the capitalist state.

Ninth contributor:

Karl Marx said the state was the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, and that is exactly what it is. Its laws and its procedures protect profit at the expense of ordinary people and its won't give up those things lightly. That is why we have to deal with the question of state power.

Tenth contributor (Chris Harman, SWP):

John Holloway said that the position which revolutionary socialists put forward means that we focus activity on the state. This is not true. Most of our activity consists in being involved in struggles of one sort or another – struggles against repression, struggles for women's liberation, struggles against racism, struggles over wages, above all at the moment the struggle against the horrific war waged against Iraq. But what we know from the experience of our movements is that every time those struggles reach a certain stage you come up against bodies of armed men – and these days mainly armed men and some armed women. And this is the core of the state. John, you use the word state in a wider sense – sometimes we all use it in a wider sense

– but the key sector we are concerned with is these bodies of armed men.

You can then have two approaches. You can pretend that you can control them or ignore them. There is the approach of the social democrats. John says we have the same approach as Lula. We don't. Lula believes he controls the Brazilian state. In reality the Brazilian state and Brazilian capitalism control Lula. The hierarchies of armed forces officers, the generals, are the same as were there under the military dictatorship. All that is different is a different president and a different parliament.

The other approach is to say that you can ignore the state, leave it to later. That is all right until it starts breaking up your picket line or waging war. Every struggle reaches a moment where the question of force becomes decisive.

Gramsci made the point in his distinction between a war of position, a slow struggle to unify people, to fight back, to get some resistance. That is what we are involved in most of the time. But at some point you have to wage a war of manoeuvre. You have to move forward to challenge the state. And if you don't do that, Latin America is full of histories of what happens. In 1964 the military coup in Brazil, in 1973 the coup in Uruguay, in 1973 in Chile, in 1976 in Argentina. On each occasion people said, 'We don't need to challenge the state, just build the movements from below with the parliamentarians and we will win.' On each occasion the state hit back.

And I say to the comrades who talk about Venezuela, unfortunately, the state in Venezuela is still essentially the same state as before. The country has transformed itself massively in the last six years. It is much more hopeful than six years ago. But the state remains the same. Many of the old officers are still there, the civil service works in the same way, the same hierarchies remain. And so at some point in Venezuela the point will come where either people will begin to form workers' and

soldiers' councils to challenge that state or the state will crush them.

John Holloway's real misunderstanding of Marxism is not to understand that the central point of Marxism is that from below we can create new structures, structures that have to be democratic, have to be based on mass self-emancipation, self-activity, but have to be centralised and have at some decisive point to disarm the ruling class before they kill us.

Eleventh contributor:

I want to use the experience of Argentina since the Argentinazo of 2001 to underline the points made by Alex. We had the biggest movement of the unemployed anywhere in the world in recent years. Factories were occupied and taken over by workers. They demonstrated that you did not need a capitalist class to keep production going. In the districts of the capital popular assemblies were extremely radical. In hundreds of places people got together and discussed and determined how they would act and what political direction they would take. And in the first few weeks after the Argentinazo several governments were overthrown. There was a brutal process in which many comrades died. It was an example of how we can develop our movements.

But what Argentina showed, brutally, was how the state still existed. We have all these examples of important and very radical organisations. But not only did the state exclude and marginalise us, it turned on us, it repressed us, it drove down our wages and repressed our movement. Today there are 30 political prisoners in Argentina and thousands more who are due for trial at some point soon, and we have in power a government under Kirchner which is not particularly different to Lula.

The state showed how real its existence was. On the other hand we had a huge popular mobilisation, created radical movements involving very large numbers of people which

nevertheless had this weakness, which is they did not address the question of state power. So today we still have a capitalist government despite the movement's existence and its combativity, It's not enough for workers to develop a social movement, although its existence is indispensable. We also need a perspective of taking on the question of political power. Otherwise the state will show its existence with attacks on us.

Note

1. The new left wing party formed by those expelled from the Workers Party. People who organise such a current can say they are not a party, but it is a form of self-deception. Recognising the role parties can play in the movements can lead to a more honest and open articulation of different strategies and visions for change. Parties can contribute to the development of a movement that is both self-organised and sufficiently coherent to take on the task of social transformation, of revolution.

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