

Where does the march end?

Base-building and mass action as discrete moments in a singular process

by Tim Horras
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In the past several months, there has been active discussion of a set of ideas loosely grouped under the heading of “base-building.” While the present article makes no attempt to offer a comprehensive treatment of the subject matter, nor to clear up the many sincere misunderstandings, it has become even more pressing to dispel misconceptions about the theory and practice of base-building.

Does base-building oppose mass action or protest? Do proponents of base-building argue that the left should focus solely on local action, and ignore national or international issues? How does base-building organizing relate to questions of community self-defense?

Riding the high tide, preparing in the low ebb

Prioritizing base-building and supporting organic grassroots upsurge and social movements are not antithetical, and in fact buttress and support one another.

A base-building perspective does not see large mobilizations as “not really revolutionary” or unimportant. We do not contrast huge marches and rallies as surface level or shallow mobilizing versus the deep organizing among a constituency, although such a perspective does exist, for instance in the writings of labor organizer Jane McAlevey and others, and the critique is well worth engaging.

However, unlike many on the left, we see large mobilizations as the *result* of cultivating a constituency who can turn out, *and*, perhaps more importantly, while base-building and organizing efforts build up our power, we argue that large mobilizations tend to *expend* energy and effort, spending down resources rather than building them up.

Large mobilizations, when successful, have a dynamic which activates the periphery of a social movement while exhausting and even burning out the activist core, the latter of whom have been working hard to prepare for the event and need to decompress after a big outing... at precisely the moment that new people need to be onboarded! This dynamic can be overcome, but it’s rarely talked about, much less are we presented with solutions to these structural problems.

The practical tasks of base-building – door-knocking, one-on-one conversations, serving the immediate needs of the masses, fighting

the power of local oppressors alongside them – all of these offer activity to pull in new activists who have come into the movement during a period of mass movement, and provide them capacity-expanding organizing to engage in during times when, for whatever reason, people are not in the streets.

In this way, base-building is counterposed not to participating in and/or planning marches and rallies, but rather base-building should be correctly counterposed to the strategy of *only* organizing rallies and protests or using mass action as the primary or sole tactic, instead of engaging in a *diversity* of tactics which maps onto the ebbs and flows of the class struggle.

working class life has a million and one facets

A case study in tactical rigidity

Let’s take as one example the antiwar movement of the 2000s. The antiwar movement was probably the largest social movement in the USA in the days immediately following the global justice movement. Hundreds of thousands marched together against the invasions of Afghanistan and, later, in mass opposition to the war against Iraq.

The organized left was without a doubt a major player in these struggles, with various socialist organizations ensconced in leading roles within large antiwar coalitions. Dozens of mass demonstrations were called and answered, and marches on Washington, DC were supplemented by large local demonstrations in cities around the country.

In a period of mass struggle such as the antiwar movement of the 2000s, it was inevitable that thousands, perhaps tens of thousands from within the mass movement would come to identify as radicals, as socialists or communists, and would join socialist organizations that were playing leading roles in resisting war and imperialism.

But we then need to ask ourselves: what became of these thousands or tens of thousands of activists radicalized by their participation in the antiwar movement? Where are they today? Why wasn’t the existing socialist left able

to *retain* these large numbers of newly radicalizing activists?

Now, certainly political fortunes account for some element of this. The mainstream antiwar strategy of electing Democrats to Congress, culminating in the ascension of Barack Obama as the standard bearer of the antiwar wing of the Democratic Party, as well as the advent of the 2008 financial crisis, certainly played important roles. Many socialist groups engaged in heroic organizing efforts to stop what in retrospect was a catastrophic military occupation, even after public attention to the issue declined.

But the left also shouldn’t let ourselves completely off the hook, placing all the blame for our subsequent weaknesses solely at the hands of objective forces beyond our control. Our political methods and our strategic choices also played an important role.

Many veteran activists began to notice that the antiwar movement was starting to peter out rapidly in 2008 and afterward. At that time, the strategy of the socialist left, who had invested so much effort into the antiwar movement, was generally one of two lines: 1) that we needed to work harder to press for mass mobilization against the current of the overall lull in activity, a sort of “optimism of the will” approach, 2) that we needed to find the next grassroots upsurge, outside of the antiwar movement, and latch onto that. Sadly, in retrospect, neither of these strategies allowed the socialist left to absorb and incorporate the massive layer of new activists who’d cut their teeth in the antiwar movement.

Now, imagine if instead of following the “protest even harder!” or “find the next big thing!” approaches, we had recognized the situation and the limitations of the current moment, and urged the radicalized militant elements to infuse themselves into the life of working class and oppressed communities.

What if this newly radicalized layer had thrown itself into the struggles of working people in our own communities, working alongside our neighbors and coworkers to fight against bosses, landlords, local developers, police and corrupt politicians?

I would argue that if we had successfully managed a turn toward base-building during the waning days of the antiwar movement, the socialist left would be significantly larger, stronger, and more deeply rooted than we were before.



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While there were notable exceptions, overall this is not what happened, and as a whole the movement ended up right back at square one.

Tactics that live and breathe: Taking our cues from objective conditions

Being involved in “rooted” organizing work during a moment of mass movement doesn’t tie us down; successful organizing expands the capacity of our organizations as they learn and grow.

Mass movement moments create intense emotional energy derived from masses of people standing and marching together, interfacing with one another and recognizing their own power. Mass action has the ability to recharge us as we inevitably face the daily grind of organizing, and the excitement of participating in really big political questions helps give us perspective which would otherwise be lacking in parochial day-to-day struggles of the working class against oppression and exploitation.

On the other hand, from an emotional energy perspective, trying to make mass demonstrations happen when nobody wants to come out is demoralizing and can especially burnout new activists. Tactics must be shaped by careful investigation of mass sentiments.

There are even times when the local and the “big picture” merge to create flashpoints deeply entwined with one another: in Ferguson, Missouri or Standing Rock. In these instances, local grievances synchronized with nationwide political issues to set off a perfect storm. It needs to be emphasized that these rebellions sprang from *deep social roots*—it was in no small part the depth and density of pre-existing social networks in these locations which allowed them to rapidly cohere and self-organize in response to events, and to generate interest from a national

and even international audience.

In order to make the best use of our limited time and energy, the socialist left needs to improve our ability to recognize the difference between popular grassroots movements and the sort of ambulance-chasing after single issues which appears to have features of popular movements, but is ultimately distinct and leads the movement toward a reformist dead-end.

Ultimately, the left must learn to better differentiate between organic expressions of popular protest and carefully stage-managed campaigns concocted by liberal NGOs. This is especially tricky in that sometimes in the early stages of a popular movement, jumpstarting this activity can seem mechanical and inorganic. All we can hope to do in these situations is to aim

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for a good grasp of strategy, and to improve individually and collectively as we succeed and fail.

For better or worse, there is no substitute for a correct assessment of a given political moment, campaign, or tactic. Our movement will live or die on the acumen or political judgment of our organizations’ cadre and leadership, and the depth and breadth of democratic discussions in our organizations and in our movement.

As a final note, our trend unconditionally endorses the right to self-defense by the working class and oppressed communities. One of the central historical reference points for a socialist base-building project in the USA is the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. While we are not of the opinion we need to naively seek to recreate these and similar formations from a different time, we do think that their model, which incorporated elements of armed self-defense and service to the people, is an essential component of socialist organizing in our day and age.

A movement as wide and deep as the working class itself

There are a million tactics we can use to weave socialism into the fabric of working class life, because working class life has a million and one facets. We can organize working class sports leagues, self-defense classes, provide after-school tutoring to youth, host block parties, formal dances, poetry slams, paint murals, set up worker cooperatives, engage in research and investigative reporting, organize tenants unions, copwatch, neighborhood meetings, union caucuses, provide legal support for community members, fight wage theft, and more. And of course, we can and should march and rally, when tactically appropriate.

A correct understanding of socialist strategy would admit the need to incorporate both deep organizing as well as supporting spontaneous rebellions from below. To build the power of the socialist movement, and to achieve our political aim of total emancipation, socialists must find ways to fuse the interests and actions of the activist milieu with the most potent layers of the working class. To accomplish this merger, we must encourage a diversity of tactics as broad and variegated as the working class itself. 🇺🇸