

## **Book Review:**

### **Dan Swinney's "Building the Bridge to the High Road" A New Manifesto on the Strategy and Tactics of Radical Democracy**

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Dan Swinney's *Building the Bridge to the High Road* has been characterized as a new left manifesto for the year 2000. It combines participatory democracy with a market socialist vision and an economic program of radical structural reform. Most important, the 87-page booklet makes a new breakthrough in helping today's left activists out of one of their most difficult problems: projecting a credible strategy and tactics for achieving a sustainable socialism as an outcome of campaigns for immediate reforms.

The term "high road" in the paper's title comes from a current widely used distinction made in progressive policy circles to describe alternative paths for businesses in meeting today's economic problems. The "low road" is where business emphasizes short-term profitability and competes with third world labor markets by lowering wages, gutting benefits, breaking unions and ignoring environmental concerns. The "high road" is where business emphasizes long-term sustainability by increasing skills and compensation, worker participation, and environmental safety.

The context for this strategic analysis is the visible emergence of the Low Road in our domestic and international economy in the late 1970s and the enormous destruction of our productive base and capacity. This has had an enormous ripple effect on all aspects of society and contributed to growing economic, environmental, social, and political instability despite the hollow claims about a "dream economy" in the US. This vacuum will be filled by either the left or the right-and the right is far ahead in building its economic, cultural, political and social base. Finally, we see the new growth of fascist elements in the fundamentalist religious right.

The left has no choice but to contend in this increasingly dangerous and destructive environment. And to contend requires a contemporary and sophisticated plan that its core addresses the ownership, control, management, and development of the productive capacity of society. A failure to contend is a policy of capitulation to the right. It is a form of passive defeatism on the part of the dominant section of the left, no matter how left-sounding and pure the justifying rhetoric sounds. It's time for a sharp break with this defeatist and passive tradition.

Swinney's organization, the Midwest Center for Labor Research, learned the importance and implications of this "low road-high road" distinction through 17 years of fighting plant closings and job loss in several of the country's "Rust Belt" cities and states. As a research center, MCLR has a well-respected reputation for providing invaluable information and analysis to unions, community coalitions and local government in their confrontations with low-road corporate greed. MCLR also combines its information with activism, and has often helped directly in the organizing efforts of its clients. Swinney's paper takes the form of a summary of that experience, and is rich in down-to-earth examples and practical lessons.

## **Strategy is developed in practice**

The first lesson is that strategy, while certainly concerned with theory, is a profoundly practical matter. The initial task of strategy is finding clear and concrete answers to the question, "Who are our friends, who are our enemies?" in order to win a projected goal. For some leftists, this doesn't require much thought. It has always been enough simply to name the capitalist class as the enemy, and then seek to rally the workers to a "class against class" strategy. Others have given the workers' movement a variety of regular allies--the Black civil rights movement, women, the Third World--but in such a mechanical fashion that the formula is always true, decade after decade, with little regard for changing conditions. Still others have gotten stuck or nervous on the matter of making distinctions among the capitalists. Either they avoid it entirely as a slippery slope to reformism; or they hang onto an outdated formula--such as the distinction made between bourgeois democracy and bourgeois fascism in the late 1930s--when current conditions are substantially different.

The High Road is a refreshing break from all these cul-de-sacs. With immediate social conflicts as its starting point, it seeks to draw new strategic lessons from recent practice. Since a good deal of MCLR's practice over the past two decades has been the fight for jobs, its lessons are particularly important to activists in urban areas hit hard by deindustrialization.

What MCLR learned first hand was that blue-collar job loss was a complex issue. Some jobs were exported to lower-wage areas abroad, while others were rendered obsolete by information technology. Still others were lost due to military cutbacks, environmental problems, failure to modernize or mismanagement. Some factories closed simply because the owner died and his or her heirs weren't interested in an inner-city business; other perfectly viable businesses were bought, stripped of their cash, and shut down by speculators.

One point stood out in this process that the left has often ignored: getting more jobs requires both more employers and better employers. Growing real jobs today also requires growing capitalists. There's no way around this unless we are to be satisfied with make-work "jobs" that create little or no value and are mainly excuses to hand out welfare or unemployment payments under another name. Some have argued that this distinction between real and make-work jobs doesn't really matter, since it's not the job of the left or the workers' movement to help capitalism run better. Until socialism arrives, our task is mainly redistributing wealth to get a bigger piece of the pie by militantly and massively opposing the status quo. Otherwise, we end up as allies of at least a section of capital and even become managers of enterprises in a market economy ourselves.

## **Getting Beyond Oppositionism & Redistributionism**

This is precisely the challenge that The High Road takes by the horns. Swinney argues that the real question is not whether to form an alliance with capitalists, but what forces do we bring to an alliance, which capitalists do we seek out and what kind of alliances do we need? The left's problems, he explains, are mainly due to its self-imposed "oppositionist" and "redistributionist" outlooks. Rather than simply being an opposition force, we need to project ourselves as a qualitatively better governing force that can take control of government or of industry level by level and sector by sector and run it in a democratic, sustainable fashion. Moreover, rather than simply redistributing wealth, we need to establish or manage enterprises and institutions capable of generating new wealth in a democratic, sustainable fashion.

"The question of who guides and controls the production of wealth is central to this strategy," says Swinney. "There must be fundamental change in the social relations of production and in those

responsible for the creation and control of wealth and developing our productive capacity. The strategy demands that the labor and community social movements transcend the politics of opposition and the limits of advocating only the redistribution of wealth. Instead they must take responsibility for the creation of wealth, the starting of companies and the creation of jobs, welcoming the responsibility for good management, productivity and efficiency as well as justice."

### **Strategy makes distinctions among adversaries**

The High Road starts by dividing the capitalist class into two main groups: the productive sector and the parasitic sector. Productive capital is mainly engaged in creating new wealth. It makes money by assembling the means to produce the goods and services needed for mass consumption, infrastructure and the reproduction of factories themselves. Parasitic capital is mainly engaged in speculation. It creates no new wealth, but makes money by moving profitable factories from high-wage areas to low-wage areas, speculating on the difference. Or it liquidates profitable businesses in one industry to reinvest in another with a higher short-term rate of return. Or, in its most pure form, it simply gambles in the global derivatives market, betting millions on whether a given currency is going to go up or down in the next hour.

Productive capital has many conflicts with speculative capital. Speculators can simply buy publicly held corporations and liquidate them. Speculators can also wreck entire industrial areas or sectors by liquidating or moving key anchor industries. Or they can degrade entire regions by forcing down corporate tax rates and the ability of government to renew infrastructures. The productive-speculative conflict, moreover, does not only exist between firms; it also can exist as two trends or two competing blocs of owners and managers within a firm. Nor is size the issue. Some large multinationals can be productive while others are parasitic.

By making this distinction primary, Swinney is directly criticizing the "anti-corporate" and "anti-monopoly" strategies of much of the left has held for some time. A large corporation can be a high road producer, while a small business can be a low-road runaway sweatshop. The critical point is to evaluate a firm by what it does and what path it is taking, rather than mere size or form of ownership.

Similar distinctions can be made among government bodies and among politicians. Almost all of these are tied to business interests of some sort. The critical point is finding out which are tied to high roaders and which to low roaders, and on that basis develop an appropriate strategy and set of tactics. "We recognize the positive aspects of the market and use them, just as we see and oppose the negative aspects," Swinney explains. "We reject the 'command' as well as the 'neo-liberal' or approaches to the economy and government. We are committed to economic democracy and an expanded level of public participation in all aspects of society, and in all aspects of the economy.

This is essential for the development of people, as well as the success of our initiatives. It must take place in the firm and community, as well as in government and civil society. The High Road strategy also requires adoption and development of the strategy in local, state and federal government. We must contend for the use of all the power of the state to take the High Road strategy of development."

In classical Marxism-Leninism, making use of these sorts of distinctions among capitalists has been referred to as deploying the "indirect reserves" or "indirect allies" of the working class. When China was occupied by Japan, for instance, the Chinese Communist Party made a distinction in the enemy camp between Japan, the main enemy, and the U.S., an indirect reserve, since the U.S. was also at war with Japan. The CCP, with some degree of success, worked to develop a temporary wartime

alliance with the U.S. and Chiang Kai-shek. In this period, the "direct allies" of China were the other national liberation movements, and the socialist and working-class movements around the world.

This leads to the question of the difference between strategic and tactical alliances. Generally speaking, strategic allies are those who share an interest in achieving the overall goal of the struggle, while tactical allies are forces who share an interest in winning a particular battle or campaign. Strategic alliances are thus generally long-term and close relationships, while tactical alliances are more limited in scope and duration.

### **High Road Strategy & Tactics: A Case in Point**

The High Road gives a number of examples of these alliances in the fight for jobs and democratic control of local economies. The Brach Candy campaign stands out as the clearest and most comprehensive. As Swinney describes it, Brach Candy, a major employer on Chicago's West Side, was in a management crisis after being purchased by a Swiss billionaire. Jobs were being lost by the thousands and the fear was that the plant would be broken up and the more profitable parts shipped abroad. African-American workers first raised their concerns through their churches and community organizations. These groups sought help from MCLR, which in turn helped bring in the Teamsters Local in the plant into the effort. This would be the core strategic alliance: the African-American community and the union. They mainly pressed Brach's owners to take the high road, but also made it clear that they would try to buy them out if they didn't.

Other Chicagoans were drawn into this alliance as well, including politicians representing the area, and small businesses dependent on Brach's existence for their customer base. All shared not only an interest in keeping Brach open, but also in job retention and the democratic development of the area. Then there were the forces associated with Brach itself. While the current owners were the main enemy, it was also clear that Brach's management had been in turmoil and divided. A good number had been dismissed. They were differentiated into low roaders and high roaders, with a grouping of the high roaders becoming supporters of the community forces and coming to play a key role in the campaign. These tactical alliances in high places emphasized that a Brach shutdown was simply bad for business and sought out others on that basis. But they were critical for another reason: they helped MCLR and the Brach Coalition put together a web of financial commitments that gave credibility to a potential offer to buy out the company. This managed to split the City Council, with one grouping going with the community and another with Mayor Daley, who opposed the Brach campaign on the grounds that capital's prerogatives shouldn't be challenged.

### **The Role of Worker Ownership**

MCLR's approach to worker ownership is strategically positive and tactically critical. It details all the tactical pitfalls from its involvement in a number of worker-ownership projects. Still, Swinney is clear on his basic orientation:

"We need to challenge the view that labor's interest in employee ownership is merely as a last resort in keeping the company open, or that it is only an opportunity for a few workers and managers to have a good job and a good investment. These reasons are important, but . . . if we do not develop a more aggressive stance toward these issues, we will miss an opportunity to give specific definition to the growing movement for greater democracy in our country (and around the world) . . . We need to affirm by example that ownership is more than a stock certificate or profit sharing. We need to take up the issue of democratic management with enthusiasm and commitment. We need to show how this makes companies more productive

and efficient. We need to demonstrate how companies become places that transform and develop employees in positive and dynamic ways. We must fight the deeply-held view that workers do not have the ability to manage complex enterprises, much less manage in a democratic way."

A related lesson of strategy implicit in *The High Road* is not putting yourself in a situation where you confront all your adversaries at once. The critical function is to mobilize all positive factors and narrow the target of attack. To paraphrase the CCP again, strategy involves "uniting the many to defeat the few" by developing the progressive forces, winning over the middle forces, isolating and dividing the diehard reactionaries, and "crushing our enemies one by one."

The Brach campaign was a success because of these alliances. The company made a number of concessions: a better contract for the union, a stop to job loss and relocation plans. This partially satisfied the interests of all the forces in the coalition, which also consolidated organizationally. The Brach campaign also raised other new issues. An important force to join the coalition, for instance, was the Chicago Archdiocese of the Catholic Church. Where did it fit in? Institutions like this bring an obvious moral and political force to mass campaigns. But *The High Road* also looks at them in fresh economic terms. On one hand, churches, foundations and other nonprofits are clearly part of the capitalist landscape: they have managers, employees, capital holdings and assets, and services to provide to members, clients and customers. On the other hand, as nonprofits, they don't have to pay dividends. They only have to meet their costs. Swinney places them in what he calls the "social economy." Others have named it the "third sector," as distinct from the private and public sectors.

So are the institutions of the social economy tactical allies or strategic allies? It's clear that its components are politically diverse. The Christian Coalition and its nexus of allied nonprofits are clearly on the right. Many others however, such as Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH, are on the left. Their political character is often determined by a complex mix of their initial charter and funders, their leadership and the input of their constituents. Swinney's key point is that there is nothing inherent in their structure that prevents them from surviving and even thriving in a democratic, market socialism. Thus, some components of the social economy are capable of being strategic as well as tactical allies.

### **Revolutionary Politics for Nonrevolutionary Times**

Answering just who comprises the progressive forces, the middle forces and so on depends on a rigorous assessment of time, place and circumstance. Are we in a revolutionary or nonrevolutionary situation? Is it wartime or peacetime? Are we in a developed or underdeveloped part of the world? *The High Road* tries to put all these questions in a new context: the working class is still a progressive force, but in the U.S. deindustrialization has shrunk the blue collar sector while expanding the underemployed, the prison population, service workers and high-tech workers. Globalization, by eroding the structure of economic privileges between the "Great Nations" and the Third World, has both deepened the racial divide and created conditions for a new worldwide labor solidarity. Speculative, parasitic capital is wreaking havoc everywhere; yet the political situation is mainly nonrevolutionary. True, there are several profound structural crises building up explosive forces, but the ruling classes still maintain the ability to rule in the old way.

The left is often naturally biased toward drawing on the lessons of revolutionary upheavals and victories. The writings on a successful revolution's major turning points and final showdown are often what get translated, circulated and absorbed first. The experiences of the longer, defensive and nonrevolutionary periods are played down or ignored. Lenin's *State and Revolution* and other

wartime writings are much more widely known than those on his parliamentary work or his battles with ultraleft liquidationists around 1910. Other important but relatively lesser known works would include Gramsci's prison writings, Bukharin's writings on the New Economic Period, Georgi Dimitrov on the antifascist front, Mao Zedong on the united front and even Andre Gorz 1960s work on structural reform.

In revolutionary times, strategic victories are mainly culminated by the seizure of power, the disintegration of the old government, and the consolidation of a new political and economic order. But what about nonrevolutionary periods, which, after all, take up more than 90 percent of history? Do we mainly subsist on the margins while waiting for the next apocalypse? Or do we fight with a strategy and tactics that prepare our forces to rule, that sustains us economically and develops our forces as a counter-hegemonic power? Do we define victory, not by whether we have won this or that demand, but by whether or not our forces have greater organization, strength and fighting capacity after the battle than they did before the battle began?

Swinney's High Road lists a number of organizations, enterprises and institutions that, albeit in embryonic form, already exist and can begin to serve as a sustainable base for a powerful challenge to the present order. Its importance is precisely because it is not a manifesto for a revolutionary offensive, but for nonrevolutionary conditions. It does not pretend to be the final word on the subject, but it does project some solid working hypotheses on how to gather forces and shape conditions for the radical upsurges of tomorrow.

*Building the Bridge to the High Road: Expanding Participation and Democracy in the Economy to Build Sustainable Communities is available in booklet form for \$10 from the Midwest Center for Labor Research, 3411 W Diversey, Suite 10, Chicago IL 60647. It can also be read on MCLR's "High Road" web site at [www.mclr.com](http://www.mclr.com).*