I felt conflicted when I first read Thom Workman’s argument about strategy for the contemporary Left. On one hand, I was impressed by and agree with many of the points he makes. He argues that a socialist political movement must be built independently of the New Democratic Party (NDP) or other political movements that accept as their framework the unalterable existence of capitalism and neoliberalism. He is frustrated with most people’s failure to connect the decline in their living standards, the degradation of social life, and the attacks on the rights of working people with the system itself. He rightly bemoans the quality of political discourse, and is committed to changing it. He is one of the few that acknowledge the weaknesses and failures of the radical Left, and calls for the creation of a new grassroots political culture that reinvents much of what it currently thinks and does. He calls for the creation of spaces to carry out that work.

On the other hand, Workman poses an alternative strategy that, for the most part, rejects participation in political, economic, and social struggles and instead looks to hold conversations, discussion, and debates disconnected from the kind of praxis necessary to build a socialist or anticapitalist Left. This strategy and the proposed spaces for discussion are both cut off from the kind of education and mobilization needed to build a base of radical politics within the working class—the very social base that needs to be engaged. These contradictory and problematic points undermine the value of Workman’s more constructive and thoughtful insights.

Workman begins by arguing that the Left should “quit politics.” By “politics,” he means both a particular kind of political engagement, which he calls “civics,” and, more problematically, political engagement itself. As many socialists I know do, he argues that identifying electoral politics as
the central focus of political engagement (commonly referred to as electoralism) is a dead end. He argues further that “Left electoralism” is a barrier to developing a radical political understanding. As a result, he calls on the Left to stop working for the New Democrats and Greens. All of this is fair enough, but he goes further by rejecting any participation in electoral politics and a whole series of political practices that he identifies as “civics.” By “civics,” he seems to mean not just choosing between Right-wing and middle-of-the-road electoral offerings, but also the fight for reforms in general. Although Workman writes that “[t]he suggestion that we withdraw from politics in the civic sense—voting, supporting contemporary electoral parties like the New Democrats or Greens, writing legislative members, and so forth—scarcely means withdrawing from political involvement,” the form of political involvement he advocates is narrow, problematic, and cut off from the political experiences that activists, and particularly working-class people, need to develop political learning.

Workman proposes a project for rethinking the Left that takes place in “enriching venues, like afternoon-long public lectures and weekend retreats, that permit discussions about the abuses of capitalism in a more sustained and thoughtful way.” There is no mention of how these discussions would link up with the various forms of non-electoralist politics that working people engage in, whether through (or in) their unions, workplaces, or communities, nor of the potential role of socialists and anticapitalists in supporting, analyzing, and then collectively summarizing their experiences in ways that contribute to the building of socialist movements and parties.

Instead, Workman’s vision of change looks a lot like the Platonic ideal of philosopher/decisionmakers pondering the nature of reality, basing their deliberations on objective truths that appear as shadows to the rest of the population. Every reference to these spaces for longer-term discussion—“venues more conducive to the rational interrogation of the world around us”; “venues of sustained reflection”; a “low-key culture of contemplation”; “the rational interrogation of capitalist society in low-key public venues”—reinforces their disconnectedness from lived reality.

Certainly working people and the Left activists who make up the core of the anticapitalist movement need spaces to do cadre building, theory
development, and collective education. But Workman’s model is one that workers will stay away from in droves. In fact, they do today: efforts to bridge the gap between working people and socialist and anticapitalist political projects are rarely successful unless there is a concrete relationship between these projects and the ongoing struggles and problems that concern working people. Three recent examples illustrate what happens when talk and struggle are connected, and when they are not.

In the build-up to the 1995 Ontario Days of Action, unions had to wage a series of political campaigns to convince their members that the Harris government’s neoliberal attacks against the poor, the unorganized, and people in the community hurt the interests of the entire working class and needed to be resisted. This educational work succeeded in winning over thousands of workers (many of whom had actually voted for the Conservatives) to work with social movement activists and engage in one-day political strikes against their employers. Even more, this experience opened up new potential for political learning as many activists began to question the reliance on electoralism and social democracy and got involved in the antiglobalization movement that had started building in the late 1990s.

When a number of socialists in and around the CAW organized educational activities with autoworker activists in the early 2000s relating socialist ideas and theory to ongoing struggles in their communities and workplaces, workers participated eagerly and brought in friends and coworkers. When the conveners were no longer able to regularly work closely with the activists or discuss local strategic challenges, people lost interest and drifted away. Similarly in our current experiences in the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly, working-class activists aren’t attracted to meetings or spaces where theoretical issues are discussed unless these can act as a guide to understanding the issues that concern them, such as austerity attacks by the state, fighting workplace closures, defending health care, or building alliances between unionized workers and the unemployed. All of these experiences demonstrate that political education works best when tied to the real experiences and interests of workers engaged in struggles.

The debates about the relationship between action and reflection and about the relationship between the working class and socialist politics are
Studies in Political Economy

not new for the Left. My own introduction to Canadian radical politics in Montreal of the early 1970s was steeped in these issues. Different wings of the then-fledgling Quebec Maoist movement debated how best to win over working-class people. One wing argued that we must take part in their struggles in communities, unions, and workplaces and develop a socialist orientation and larger understanding among workers. Another wing called that view “economist” and argued that we had to remain on the outside, talking only about larger principles (they were called “intellectualist” by the first group). I supported the first argument, which turned out to be much more successful in recruiting hundreds of working-class men and women into a revolutionary socialist movement. In the longer run, that movement ultimately dissolved, but its unique and impressive success in demonstrating how working-class people can be introduced to and won over to socialist ideas was critically important. Workman’s arguments reminded me of that latter point of view—something I haven’t really heard of in all of these past decades.

Although Workman refers to some of the challenges that working-class people face in this neoliberal era, there is little here about ways of understanding or engaging with the contradictory and complex set of views and experiences that shape working-class thinking and acting. Workers’ understandings of opinions about capitalism and neoliberalism, as well as themselves and their own potentials, have been shaped by a number of contradictory experiences. These include the lack of collective forms of resistance, the necessity of seeking individual forms of coping, and the sense that, while the system is no longer delivering the goods, there is no socialist pole of reference that could provide both a collective orientation for resistance and a larger explanation of alternatives. Understanding and grappling with these opinions and their structural underpinnings are a critical part of building a new movement, and they can’t be done in isolation from confronting the real world of ongoing political struggle. Working-class people learn (as do most adults) through a combination of experience, education, and interaction with others. Developing a project for building a base for socialist political understandings within the multilayered, segmented, and divided working class requires a willingness and capacity to create space where workers can organize, mobilize, and learn at the same time.
A counterfactual example of what I mean can be shown by looking at the recent workplace closure at the Electro-Motive Diesel/Caterpillar engine plant in London, Ontario. In January 2012, the employer demanded a 50 percent wage and benefit cut. When the union (CAW Local 27) refused the cuts, the employer locked out the workers and, a month later, closed the workplace, putting 450 workers out of work. In this instance, the plant might have been kept open by a workplace occupation and a massive political campaign that linked local collective resistance with both the general feeling of frustration, insecurity, and anger prevalent amongst working-class people in North America and a series of larger political demands. The latter might have included calls to refuse the strictures of free trade, to nationalize the facility, and to develop diesel engine production capacity. In such a strategy, the union would have had to combine political education with strategic leadership in the struggle. But the union was unable and unwilling to take this road. Instead, it took the line of least resistance, opting for a local campaign, and concentrated on fighting for decent severance and pensions for the fired workers. Without a group of socialist political activists working inside unions, the community, and the larger labour movement, arguing and organizing for an occupation and a political campaign, it did not happen. (Just like the other surges of working-class militancy cited above, such as the Ontario Days of Action, the lack of an engaged, rooted, and active socialist movement meant that the most exciting and ambitious forms of resistance couldn’t really be sustained or transformed into larger class projects.) A movement of socialists that eschewed this kind of activity, and instead convened in day-long meetings cut off from such engagement, would hardly have been able to bring a socialist analysis and orientation and therefore attract a cohort of workers.

Workman’s “The Left After Politics” is an interesting and creative contribution to the ongoing discussion about the future of the anticapitalist Left in Canada. The call to move beyond social democratic and market-oriented environmentalist politics is welcome and needed (especially with the siren song of the NDP’s potential to vie for federal power offering itself today). There is a crying need to create a political movement that identifies with a radical systemic critique and alternatives and that can root itself inside the
working class. It is all too rare to hear socialists call for engagement in such projects in cities and towns across this country. The emphasis on developing a different culture is also important.

But Marxist and socialist thinking and strategy is not created in abstract spaces. While Left strategy needs to be thought through, discussed, and debated in ways that involve ongoing critical reflection, this requires a combination of theory and practice—praxis. This is especially true in an era where we are still attempting to define what a socialist movement would look like and how it would address the huge gap between the real lives of working-class people and socialist ideas and organization. Praxis is clearly missing from Workman’s perspective, and following the recommendations articulated here provides no way to renew the Left as a vital component of working-class life and culture.

Notes

2. I have other concerns with the arguments raised here, but limit myself to the issue of theory and practice.