

Middlesex Municipal and Cooperative Ownership Alliance

A Socialist Project for Middlesex County, Massachusetts

Location

Middlesex County consists in fifty-four cities and towns west and north of Boston, Massachusetts. The largest county in New England, Middlesex extends from the former industrial city of Lowell (home of the famous Bread and Roses textile strike of 1912) in the north, to the city of Cambridge (home of Harvard University) in the south. Its population numbers a little over one-and-a-half million.

General theoretical framework:

Since the invention of the word “socialism” around 1830, socialists have rejected the basic principles of the capitalist economy and the culture that has grown around it. These principles include the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of solidarity, of competition for jobs, status, money, and power over cooperative activity, and of profit-making as an end in itself over the satisfaction of human needs. Socialists have been guided by the opposite principles of solidarity, cooperation, and the satisfaction of needs as the main purpose of economic activity. The most important instruments they have proposed for realizing these alternative principles are social ownership of the means of livelihood (natural resources and productive enterprises), and democratic planning of the direction of investment and the nature and organization of work.

In terms of this conception, socialism is already partially realized in the United States in multiple forms of public and other cooperative property as well as public budgeting and planning on national, state, and local levels. Worker owned cooperatives, consumer co-ops, cooperative housing, credit unions, municipally owned utilities, public libraries, schools, community colleges, parks, post offices, and community access cable networks as well as municipal, regional, and national planning boards, and so on are islands of socialism in a sea of capitalism. To a lesser extent, the same is true of such semi-socialized enterprises as community farms, food pantries, senior centers, youth centers, nonprofit workshops and artisan guilds, and free clinics. From a socialist perspective, cooperatively and municipally owned enterprises and semi-socialized ones

are necessary, not only to create jobs and meet otherwise unmet needs, but to serve as the institutional underpinnings of a culture of cooperation, solidarity, democratic decision-making, and free development of all members of society. But even though we already have a “mixed economy,” the capitalist sector - including multinational corporations, giant banks, and other major financial institutions - is overwhelmingly dominant. The task of socialists is to expand the socially owned, democratically managed sector until it becomes dominant. Whether or not such a development can occur gradually, or instead requires revolutionary leaps and breaks, is a question that can only be answered as the project unfolds in the thick of actual events.

Socially owned property is important for several reasons:

- 1) Even in the context of the capitalist market, it includes non-market aims and standards of evaluation. For example, worker owned co-ops are concerned about preserving jobs, staying in the communities where they are located, safe and healthy working conditions, etc. and not just making a profit.
- 2) Socially owned property is generally, if not always wholly, withdrawn from the domain of private capitalist investment, and so restricts the extent of social resources exploitable by capital.
- 3) It is open, and sometimes favorable, to deliberative democratic decision-making.
- 4) It establishes spaces in which new forms of cooperative work and decision-making can develop.
- 5) It offers the possibility of moving beyond liberal individualism without burying individuals in anonymous collectives. It can advance the development of individuals’ talents, skills, knowledge, health, and self-esteem on the basis of cooperative social relations in which people act for one another and not merely with one another. In so doing, it can generate concrete forms of social solidarity and develop the ethical norms and evaluative standards that foster them.

Indicative planning is important because:

- 1) It can counteract the “negative externalities” of market exchange (environmental decline, destruction of intact communities, etc.).
- 2) It is at least open to the possibility of deliberative democratic decision-making.
- 3) It can help remedy racial and gender disparities in ownership and employment.
- 4) It can coordinate ways of satisfying needs, interests, etc. consciously, rather than leaving that to the outcome of market exchange that privileges satisfaction of the desires and interests of those with money.
- 5) It can begin the process of socializing the major investment decisions that are at

the core of the power of capitalist firms.

None of these positive attributes of indicative planning (as contrasted with directive planning in centralized command economies) are automatic, because planning can and often is conducted in the interests of private capital or state bureaucracies. So there are bound to be battles over the shape and direction of planning as long as capital remains a significant, let alone dominant, sector of the economy, and state bureaucracies presents themselves as the principal alternative to the power of private money. Even assuming that socialists win these battles, there will still be disagreements over the direction and pace of planning that will need to be resolved by means of democratic discussion, debate, and the decision of the majority. Although indicative planning - which uses subsidies, grants, tax policy, and government contracts to achieve its goals - is suited to mixed economies with substantial markets, this does not preclude the eventual development of forms of democratic planning that replace market exchange with direct allocation. But that would depend upon the results of carefully conducted experiments in such a direction.

Political campaigns:

In general, campaigns on behalf of socially owned property and democratic planning must be political as well as economic in nature. In both cases (social property and planning), the financial support and appropriately restructured institutional mechanisms of local, state, and national governments and planning boards are indispensable. In addition, political campaigns demand that community members educate themselves, organize, and mobilize, thereby expanding the base of popular support for an increasingly socialized economy.

Traces of past movements:

Most already existing forms of social property and planning are traces of past movements, especially the labor and civil rights movements, that need to be revitalized under contemporary circumstances. People now tend to think of these trace institutions and related programs only as means of providing services to individual consumers. Instead, we need to cultivate the knowledge and modes of behavior appropriate to them as social creations and cooperative resources. This includes knowledge of their history, but also development of the forms of community involvement that would enable people to see public libraries, schools, credit unions, land trusts, municipally owned electric companies, parks, and so on as their own property. It also includes attempts to push the bureaucracies that often run these institutions to develop public outreach and volunteer

programs and community advisory boards with real decision-making power.

Adversarial and non-adversarial possibilities:

Campaigns to expand the sector of socially owned property are not necessarily adversarial, at least in their early phases. Local governments run by both parties have a general interest in economic development, unless, of course, it threatens corporate donors. Regarding co-ops, there are entire communities that have been abandoned by industrial capital where co-op development can occur without opposition (for example, the Evergreen community in Cleveland), at least until it grows so substantially that it threatens the interests of powerful corporations. But we are a long way from that point. This also does not mean that we can dispense with the need for militant struggles. We can't anticipate what the future will bring, especially given the political, economic, and environmental crises that are sure to come. And we shouldn't underestimate the willingness of wealthy elites, their corporations, and their political advocates to do everything in their considerable power to prevent the development and expansion of social ownership and democratic planning. However, as long as they have any chance at success, nonviolent strategies are obviously prudent as well as desirable, especially since the pacification of violent social conflict is a precondition for developing a culture of cooperation and solidarity.

Necessity of Regional, National, and Global Structures

Socialism cannot be stabilized on the municipal level alone because socialized municipalities will remain vulnerable to large scale economic and political forces, including the crisis tendencies of the global market. Municipal projects are necessary starting points of socialist activism, but must be sustained by supportive structures on the regional, national, and global levels. The development of such structures poses unique political and economic tasks, such as the development of national political parties advocating public ownership and planning as well as redistribution of resources from the privately owned to the socialized sector. And it would require the negotiation of global economic agreements and institutions devoted to protecting the environment as well as worker and consumer rights, redistributing financial and material resources from affluent to poor countries, regulating and taxing global financial transactions, and so on. The point remains, however, that municipal projects are indispensable for three reasons: 1) since they are closest to the grassroots of society, they are capable of building a base of popular support for regional, national, and global projects as well as municipal ones; 2) they are in a position to demonstrate the feasibility of socialized enterprises and planning through experimentation, feedback, and correction on the local

level; and 3) they can begin to develop the norms and behavioral patterns necessary to a culture of cooperation and solidarity.

Structure of the Alliance

Middlesex Municipal and Cooperative Ownership Alliance consists in three groups linked in a common project to advance multiple forms of solidarity and cooperation based on socially owned enterprises and democratic planning.

- 1) Research and Political Action Committee. Purpose: To engage in research and organizing to protect and expand the socially owned sectors of the Middlesex economy, and the forms of deliberative democratic decision-making necessary to sustain them. It should place an emphasis on involving rank-and-file workers and the unemployed, social activist groups, civil rights organizations, women's organizations, and labor unions. Electoral work should also be undertaken by this committee, perhaps in alliance with Our Revolution, especially since Bernie Sanders has introduced a bill in the Senate to create a bank to finance worker-owned co-ops. There is also a similar bill in the House. In addition, electing representatives to local government committed to various forms of municipal ownership and co-op support of course improves our chances of succeeding in these areas.
- 2) Socialist Ideas, Strategies, and Experimentation Committee. Purpose: To explore, discuss, and debate ideas and strategies for socialist transformation, to collect information on socialist projects around the world, and to document and assess the results of Alliance campaigns and projects with an eye to modification or reformulation.
- 3) Art, Publication, and Lectures Committee: Purpose: To organize public lectures and discussions by members of the Alliance as well as invited speakers; to publish, electronically and in hard copy, materials for organizing Alliance campaigns and projects as well as assessments of their results; and to sponsor art exhibitions, plays, films, and so on related to the work of the Alliance.

We should link the three groups, and others that may develop, loosely in a network structure. One possibility: an elected committee would act as a secretariat for the three groups with the purpose of facilitating and coordinating their work, but without power to make independent programmatic or policy decisions. The three groups would make their own decisions by majority vote within the parameters established by a founding document. Conflict between groups would be settled by an annual membership meeting or special meetings called for that purpose. There would be, say, five coordinating committee members, three proposed by the three groups (one per group) and ratified by the attendees of the annual meeting as well as two at-large members elected from

candidates at the same meeting. Of course, such developments can occur only when the organizational structure seems ready to solidify, i.e., to move beyond the organizing committee stage. The key here, though, is to minimize concentration of power at a center where people might be tempted to struggle for control.

A New Culture

Like any organizing or educational project with a community emphasis, our work will be successful only to the extent that we are willing to develop roots in our own towns and cities. This means attending at least some meetings of school boards, city councils and boards of selectmen, planning meetings for development projects, meetings of church-based and other social justice committees, and so on. Just as importantly, it demands that activists participate in town days, local festivals, food pantries, youth organizations, cultural meetings, and other expressions of the concrete life of municipalities.

Socialism is more than a political or economic project. It is a form of life, a culture, a way of relating to one's own projects and those of others as mutually enabling rather than as stakes in zero-sum competitive struggles. Thus socialism involves the development of new norms and standards of evaluation, not as abstract ideas, but as lived, cooperative patterns of interaction. These norms and standards must be intelligible and relevant to actually existing communities. Otherwise there would be no reason for people to adopt them. Since they are partially consonant with mainstream forms of cooperative interaction (e.g., social service work by churches, civic organizations, labor unions, women's groups, and other organizations), there is already some basis upon which a socialist culture can build. But this culture demands a movement beyond one-directional charitable activities to reciprocal interactions in which individuals advance their own projects by advancing the complementary projects of others. Otherwise, self-esteem and social recognition would develop only on the side of the charitable givers, while the receivers would be denied their chance for recognition and self-esteem by making their own contribution to the common good.

Although even large scale anonymous societies are capable of functioning as communities provided they are guided by shared norms and goals, there must be some more fundamental level where they "bottom out" in the form of actual face-to-face communities. This is the level municipal work is able to address. On the scale of a national state or even an international federation of states, socialism is best conceived as having as an organic, cell-like structure. It would exist as a community of communities, inspired by the idea of cooperative work, leisure, and other kinds of

engagement, and realized by reciprocal interactions that advance the free development of everyone.