

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Big politics, big organising, and internationalism: How the left can win

Adam Klug and Emma Rees

In political campaigns in the UK, US, Canada and elsewhere we are seeing the importance of big politics – ideas radical enough to tackle the vast challenges we face – and big organising – building social movements and empowering volunteers to drive campaigns at scale. The left must work together across national borders to combat the threat of the far right. An internationalist approach to movement building brings new ideas, new techniques, new solidarities and a new sense of optimism when times are tough.

‘Reject austerity or face rejection by voters,’ Jeremy Corbyn advised European sister parties on a trip to the Netherlands in July.¹

Corbyn’s trip, with his bold and confident message, is one of numerous signals that the British left can, and must, play a leadership role in building a renewed and

expanded progressive internationalism. In order for the left to win, this new internationalism must stretch beyond policies and relationships between party leaders and states; it must also forge mutually supportive networks of solidarity amongst grassroots organisers and activists pushing for progressive change.

With social democratic parties across Europe in woeful decline, it is little wonder that so many are looking to the UK, where the Labour Party is bucking the trend. Whether seeking to understand the difference a bold, socialist manifesto can make, or learning from the innovative, volunteer-driven campaigns run by the Labour Party and Momentum, progressives across the globe are looking to the UK for inspiration, support and cooperation. Of course, nobody is suggesting that we have all the answers here; huge challenges loom ahead and we have much to learn from our peers across the world. But with its recent gains, the British Labour movement, from top to bottom, is well placed to foster stronger international networks of mutual solidarity and support. Since the 2017 General Election, there have been various welcome signals that a renewed internationalism is emerging at all levels of the Party and wider movement: from the Labour leadership and National Executive Committee (NEC), to the organisers and activists of the movement's grassroots.

This cannot happen soon enough. What Owen Jones dubs the 'Far-Right International' is also on the rise.² The 'Free Tommy' movement is becoming a growing threat on British streets and the emboldened hard right is on the ascendancy in the Tory Party. Steve Bannon, Trump's former advisor who praised Mussolini, is touring Europe and wealthy 'alt right' extremists in the US are looking to fund a British far right resurgence.³ All the while, Trump is the US president and openly racist parties are winning votes across Europe.

In this climate, internationalism cannot be some lofty ideal; it has to be a fundamental pillar of our collective strategy now. The left must work together within and across national borders to combat the threat of the far right. We must learn from – and support – left parties and movements across the globe in this struggle. And we must champion an internationalist politics that can take on the far right's racist and misogynistic nationalism. As Jones makes clear, 'Only a left that offers a genuine alternative – to hold powerful vested interests to account, rather than scapegoating migrants and Muslims – can hope to defeat this political poison'.⁴

Even Labour members and supporters who have been critical of Corbyn or Momentum in the past must recognise that it is the Labour Party under its current leadership that is bucking the trend across Europe. Similarly, Bernie Sanders, who represents a similar politics to Corbyn (both in political substance and their movement-based approaches), is consistently polling as the most popular politician in the USA, and the most likely person to beat Trump at the next election.⁵ All those who fear the rise of the far right should embrace 'movement-style' politics and a genuinely transformative political programme.

As two of the co-founders of Momentum, we both worked as National Organisers from the organisation's launch in October 2015 until after the 2017 General Election. In the year since, we have each spent time working with organisers and activists across Europe, North America and Africa, sharing our experiences from the UK context, and gaining first-hand insights into the dynamism and creativity propelling grassroots movements and campaigns across much of the globe. These experiences, both in the UK and abroad, have made two core principles abundantly clear. First, it's the policies, stupid. If we are going to win, the political offer has to be bold and transformational – 'offering solutions as big as the problems we face'.⁶ And second, the organising approach must also be 'big' – embracing movements and building systems to empower volunteers to drive the campaigns at scale.

This article will explore how these two core principles – 'big politics' and 'big organising' – are being expressed in different contexts across the globe. We highlight some promising examples of where mutually supportive, international cooperation is strengthening progressive causes and argue that only by sharing our experiences and learning from each other's struggles does the left have any chance of winning.

'Big politics'

'Big politics' is the call for a bold alternative vision of the future. This must start by recognising the very real pain and indignity that the status quo inflicts on vast swathes of the population. For many years, a general criticism has been lobbed at politicians that they're all the same. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, 'more than 1 in 4 children grow up in poverty in the UK'.⁷ Prior to Momentum, we both taught in different schools in parts of Birmingham with high levels of poverty and deprivation: children coming to school hungry, families stressed out and struggling to get by, support services slashed. For the many people living in such difficult circumstances, technical-sounding policy announcements tinkering at the edges of systemic problems aren't going to cut it. The solutions being offered must be as big as the problems they seek to address, or why should anyone believe that voting this way or that way is going to make any material difference to their life? This isn't just about 'talking left'. It's about socialist and social-democratic parties viewing their role as serving human need over profit and putting forward aspirational political programmes to rebalance wealth and power in the interests of the many. The way this is communicated is key, and it needn't conjure images of unsuccessful attempts in the past; it entails a positive, creative, inclusive vision of the future for generations to come.

The difference between the Labour Party's performance in 2015 and 2017 is a case in point. The 2015 manifesto which promised to 'cut a bit less' won just 30 per cent of the vote. Two years later, the 'For the Many, Not the Few' manifesto saw Labour increase its

vote share by the largest amount since World War Two.⁸ Building a million affordable new homes (50 per cent council property), tax rises only for the wealthiest 5 per cent, free higher education, and a national education service providing free, lifelong education for all were more than just sound policies in and of themselves; they were indicators of the alternative society we could live in under a Labour government.

Many activists and organisers across the world point to the UK Labour Party as an example of the change they wish to instigate in their own socialist and social democratic parties. Unfortunately, with a small number of exceptions, there are few party leaders who are showing any serious signs of changing their strategies. Take the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), as an example. Attending a fringe event organised by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the political foundation of the SPD in January 2018, Emma observed a widespread despair amongst the members. The Party was in the middle of internal debate about whether to back Angela Merkel's 'Grand Coalition' (GroKo) for the fourth time, despite the SPD's support having declined dramatically during the previous coalition years. In fact, it had obtained its worst result in the history of the Federal Republic the previous September.⁹ The main argument in favour of the GroKo, peddled largely by the party establishment, was that it was the SPD's responsibility to do what was in the 'national interest', which, they argued, meant bringing stability to Europe's largest economy by forming a government and saving the country the turmoil of another election. The counter arguments, which were largely advocated by the 'Jusos' (youth section) and the party's left, asserted that the SPD had lost its identity and needed to be in opposition to begin a process of soul searching and political renewal, citing the UK Labour Party as an example. Furthermore, they argued, if the SPD entered government, it would leave the racist, far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) as the main opposition in Parliament, awarding them a greater platform. Taking inspiration (and some practical training) from Momentum,¹⁰ the NoGroko Campaign is estimated to have signed up 20,000 new members before the deadline and dented the pro-Groko vote by approximately 10 per cent from 2013.¹¹

In the end, the membership voted to endorse the coalition. These are not easy decisions to make and undoubtedly many people were troubled by the quandary. But the SPD – and other declining social democratic parties – must be willing to question the status quo, and the arguments which have typically held sway. Is propping up Merkel's government really 'in the national interest' if it creates the conditions for the further demise of the SPD? Worryingly, trends suggest that it will be far-right parties across Europe that will benefit most from this continued crisis of political representation. As Mason articulates:

The neoliberal economic model, which social democracy sought to soften and humanise, no longer works. It is on a global life-support system consisting of \$12tn of central bank money ... Until the centre-left learns to break with the

logic of neoliberalism, and to construct an economic model that subordinates market forces to human needs, it will continue failing. The task is not to remedy or tweak the neoliberal economic model but replace it – just as fundamentally as Thatcher, Reagan and Berlusconi did in the economic counter-revolutions of the 80s and 90s.¹²

Parallel debates are happening across the Atlantic in Canada, where grassroots activists are calling on their political leaders to follow Sanders' and Corbyn's example and adopt a 'big politics' strategy. On the eve of the New Democratic Party's (NDP) federal convention in February 2018, 450 people gathered in Ottawa (with over 5000 joining by livestream), with a loud and clear message to the party's newly elected leader, Jagmeet Singh: radical politics are not a liability for the progressive left in Canada, but rather the path to power and victory.¹³ We both attended the gathering, along with Marsha de Cordova (Labour MP for Battersea and Shadow Minister for Disabled People) and Becky Bond (senior advisor to Bernie Sanders during his presidential campaign and co-author of *Rules for revolutionaries: How big organizing can change everything*). Similarly to the 'No Groko' activists in the German SPD, members of the NDP's grassroots pointed to the UK Labour Party's revival and enhanced electability since adopting a bold, transformative policy platform with Corbyn's leadership.

The event was co-hosted by The Leap¹⁴ and Courage.¹⁵ The Leap is an organisation co-founded by Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis amongst others, aiming to tackle the intersecting crises of our time: climate change, racism and inequality. Similarly to the 2017 Labour manifesto and Bernie Sanders' platform, The Leap reflects a 'big politics' approach, setting out a positive vision for an alternative society that could be within our reach. It is the product of a two-day gathering of Canada's Indigenous rights, social and food justice, environmental, faith-based and labour movements.¹⁶

The 'Courage to Leap' event ended in a Bernie Sanders-style 'barnstorm'. A barnstorm is a 'big organising' technique (which will be explored later in more depth) with the aim of getting as many people as possible to sign up to volunteer for a campaign to do impactful work. The barnstorm recruited hundreds of volunteers to kickstart Joel Harden's campaign to become the Member of Municipal Parliament (MMP) in Ottawa Centre. Months later, Harden unseated the Liberal incumbent with an energetic grassroots campaign of 1,200 volunteers, led by ACORN organiser, Jill O'Reilly.¹⁷ This is one example, localised as it may be, of how international support and shared learning can strengthen progressive causes and campaigns.

Harden is a supporter of The Leap and when questioned about his 'radical politics', he argued, 'when some people were accusing me personally of being radical, what I thought they were saying was reckless, that my ideas were reckless. And to be honest, what I find reckless is modest solutions to climate change, what I find

reckless is putting teachers in classrooms with 31 (junior and senior kindergarten) kids, and having teachers get hurt in the process'.¹⁸

A common criticism from the political establishment and so-called 'centrists' (who gets to define where the centre ground is?) is that we are currently living through a time of political extremes: on the one hand, there's the far right, on the other, the far left. Where are the sensible, grown-up politicians of the centre? We would argue that there's nothing extreme or divisive about seeking to find solutions to meet the scale of the problems we face, with the goals of ensuring that all people are able to live with dignity and that our societies function cohesively. This is rather different to the scapegoating, demonising and hate-fuelled politics of the far right which seeks to tap into fear and anxiety rather than hope, optimism and collaboration. Continuing to nullify and stagnate the political process whilst undermining the attempts of the progressive left to build a better future only makes it more likely that the far right will gain ground. The status quo isn't working for an ever increasing number of people; it's time to take stock, rethink and get behind something that will.

'Big organising'

In addition to the need for a big, bold political offer, the 'big organising' approach has proven itself to be a game-changer across the globe. In *Rules for revolutionaries* Becky Bond and Zack Exley tell the story of a breakthrough experiment conducted on the fringes of the Sanders presidential campaign. A technology-driven team empowered volunteers to build and manage the infrastructure to make 75 million calls, launch eight million text messages, and hold more than 100,000 public meetings.¹⁹ The fact that Sanders didn't win in 2016 does not diminish the sheer scale of the achievement nor the possibilities that this organising model presents for future campaigns.

The book sets out numerous 'rules' which challenge conventional campaign orthodoxy, but at its core, 'big organising' is about setting up systems which enable volunteers to participate at scale. It points to the hundreds of thousands of people who volunteered for Bernie Sanders as proof of the appetite for greater levels of participation in politics and argues that the role of the campaign staff should be about facilitating and enabling that participation, rather than controlling or directing small teams of volunteers in specific localities. It postulates that campaigns should build up leadership capacity amongst volunteers, enabling them to do a range of meaningful work to drive the campaign.²⁰

There are parallels with the organising approaches that have been pioneered by Momentum, Corbyn's leadership campaigns and, increasingly, the Labour Party

itself. During the 2017 General Election, 100,000 individual users visited Momentum's marginals map, mynearestmarginal.com, to find out where to go canvassing. The map was built by volunteer web developers, and teams of volunteers across the country kept it up to date with relevant canvassing information throughout the General Election campaign. This is a 'big' or 'distributed' organising platform because it is a system which allows huge volumes of people to participate in a campaign in a meaningful way (in this instance, to go canvassing in key marginals) by distributing knowledge or resources across a network.

The cooperation amongst grassroots organisers and activists of the Sanders and Corbyn movements has been ongoing since the campaign to re-elect Corbyn in the summer of 2016. Based on the barnstorm model, Adam and a team of organisers hosted 'Campaign Call Outs' across the country which brought people together, trained them up to use the 'Call For Corbyn' phone canvassing app and encouraged volunteers to host 'pop up phone parties' in their own homes. This app was developed by a team of volunteers from the Momentum Bristol group, which further showcases how much can be achieved with a volunteer-led approach.

In the 2017 General Election, a team of volunteer organisers from the Sanders campaign played an instrumental role in the digital and training strategies of Momentum. They helped to develop the flagship 'persuasive conversation' model, and Momentum then hosted 'Bernie Sanders Training Sessions' in every major metropolitan area and key marginal during the election.²¹ At the start of the campaign, when Labour was trailing considerably in the polls, this international support gave activists an extra boost and made them feel part of a much bigger struggle.

Earlier this year, we both spent time in the USA, and saw first-hand how 'big organising' is being applied in different contexts. For example, Real Justice PAC is a campaign to elect reform-minded prosecutors at a county or municipal level. The campaign was co-founded by writer and activist Shaun King, along with Becky Bond, and it asserts that:

District attorneys are among the most powerful local elected officials in the US. These officials have broad discretion to either reinforce or reform structural racism within our criminal justice system. The Real Justice PAC works to elect reform-minded prosecutors at the county and municipal level who are committed to using the powers of their office to fight structural racism and defend our communities from abuse by state power.²²

The campaign has successfully elected four prosecutors since launching in early 2018. This is a powerful example of how the principles and tactics of a national, presidential campaign can be utilised to build power in communities, address the crisis of representation (in terms of race in this case, but also potentially in terms of class, gender, sexuality, etc.) and link up with wider social movements (in this instance, Black Lives Matter and campaigns for criminal justice reform).

Hilary Wainwright, writing in *Jacobin*, suggests that ‘Corbyn’s “new politics” is about political representatives using the platform of the state to empower popular forces’.²³ The same could certainly be applied to Real Justice’s innovative campaign. There are many interesting lessons to be learned here in a UK context, particularly as we potentially face another four years before a General Election.

National Nurses United (NNU), the largest nursing association in the USA, is also pioneering the winning combination of ‘big politics’ and ‘big organising’. Last year, the NNU started using a ‘big organising’ model of volunteer mobilisation for their Medicare for All campaign (which would grant universal free access to healthcare). The campaign started in California, but having successfully got a bill (SB 562) passed by the state senate, they have recently taken it to a national stage. In an exciting development, the NNU have adapted Momentum’s ‘persuasive canvassing’ training. Hundreds of volunteers have been trained up and this is set to rapidly expand, with a view to supporting volunteers to advocate for Medicare for All at state and/or federal level. Anecdotally, organisers working on the campaign report that the volunteers who are trained up are motivated to hear how these techniques worked for the Labour Party’s fightback in 2017.

The momentum for Medicare for All is building in Congress too, after years on the political fringes, with over 60 Democrats (approximately one third) forming a Medicare for All Caucus in the House. As Thompson explains, ‘Medicare for All became a divisive issue during the 2016 presidential primary race between Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders, who has long advocated for the program, and Hillary Clinton, who dismissed it as too expensive and said it was politically “never, ever” going to happen’.²⁴

Bonnie Castillo, the Executive Director of the NNU, is keen to link up the struggle for free universal healthcare with international movements. On the anniversary of the NHS, she wrote, ‘in a decade of austerity, and top down reorganization (enabling private firms to take over running various aspects of the NHS), as the system is stretched to a breaking point, America’s nurses have a message for the working people of the UK: We stand in solidarity with you.’²⁵ Castillo, along with a delegation of the NNU, is due to attend this year’s Labour Party Conference and The World Transformed festival, so it is likely that there will be further developments in the international coordination of these movements.

A further inspiring demonstration of ‘big politics’ and ‘big organising’ in action is the recent victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The 28-year-old overcame the odds to unseat 10-term incumbent, Joe Crowley, as the Democratic candidate in New York, using the Labour-inspired slogan ‘for the many’. Stone and Gong argue that, ‘like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, Ocasio-Cortez’s rhetoric focused on issues of inequality, corporate control of politics, equal rights for all, policies like Medicare for All, tuition-free college, and a federal jobs guarantee. Moreover, she used her campaign to invite ordinary people into a movement, raising their “conscious[ness]

of this vast potential power”. This could be called the Sanders playbook, and her campaign might have done it even better than Sanders’s did’.²⁶

Whether it is a local campaign like that of Ocasio-Cortez, a national campaign like the UK General Election, or issue-based organising like Medicare for All, the parallels are clear. In each example, a big, bold alternative vision for the future is on offer, and a movement-based, volunteer-led organising model is nurtured.

We have noticed a tendency by some to think it is possible to depoliticise a movement-based, ‘big organising’ approach. This reflects a mistaken belief in a magic bullet solution – if only we focus more on social media or introduce a digital tool to get people active, young people will miraculously start voting for us, we’ll get more members and active canvassers – and so on. But these ‘big organising’ approaches require masses of people to be prepared to give up their time for free. There is no reason to believe that people will be mobilised at scale by socialist or social democratic parties who are offering a different shade of the status quo. People won’t put in the time and effort if they are not inspired by the vision on offer.

Volunteers need to believe in the worthiness of what they’re doing and sense the importance of the role they are playing in it. If people are being asked to do something small which will only have an incremental impact, the majority of people will not see that this is a worthwhile use of their time. On the other hand, being asked to join in an ongoing, people-powered campaign to tackle the structural issues deeply damaging our society, with the hope of transforming things on a systemic basis has proved to be far more effective at bringing new people into the political process – people who then become committed activists.

In the UK

The UK Labour movement, from top to bottom, is well-placed, given its gains at the last election, to facilitate building networks of international support and solidarity.

Labour’s ruling NEC is showing promising signs of taking up this mantle. The NEC is reviewing Labour’s international relationships, with a view to broadening the parties and movements Labour engages with. Currently, Labour interacts with parties through its membership of the Party of European Socialists (PES), and globally through its observer status of Socialist International (SI) and the Progressive Alliance (PA). However, it seems that the NEC recognise that while these relationships will remain important, an updated, twenty-first century view is needed too, not least because when the UK is due to leave the European Union in March 2019, its membership of the PES will need to be renegotiated. Labour’s General Election performance, along with its growing membership and relationship with Momentum and wider movements, has led many parties beyond the sister

party structure to seek support and cooperation. Labour stands to benefit greatly from expanding these relationships too, not just to stay ahead of the curve in organising and campaigning, but also in the event of a Labour government seeking to implement a transformative programme for the many.

While these moves from the party leadership are welcome, they alone won't be enough. The cases described above of grassroots cooperation are just a few examples of a bigger trend, and we must nurture the solidarities and networks emerging between left social movements and campaigns across national borders. It is really down to all of us to embed internationalism at the core of our activism. The internet and social media make it easier than ever before to share our experiences and to learn from others. Furthermore, this year's The World Transformed festival, running alongside Labour Party Conference in Liverpool, is set to have its greatest international focus yet. There are due to be speakers and participants from over 20 different countries (and counting), along with lots of sessions designated for skill-sharing, training and international network building.

We are living in a time of great uncertainty and upheaval. The challenges we face – climate change, racism, inequality – will never be solved within one country. To be in with a fighting chance, we must work together, share our stories and learn from each other.

Adam Klug and **Emma Rees** are co-founders and former National Organisers of Momentum and Associates of The Social Practice.

Notes

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