

INTERVIEW

POLITICS & ELECTIONS

# When Revolutionary Moments Arise Again — and They Will — What Will We Do?



Protesters take part in a rally over a hike in energy prices in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on January 5, 2022. ABDUAZIZ MADYAROV

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The world is in a period of global unrest. Since the financial crisis of 2008, every region of the globe has experienced levels of mass protest unprecedented in recent history, from the Arab Spring in the Middle East and Black Lives Matter in the U.S., to the farmers' protests in India and the recent upheaval in Kazakhstan.

Yet decades of social movement struggle haven't produced a break from capitalist domination, and in most places they have failed to even accomplish the more modest aims of reform. Meanwhile, the

global climate crisis has added another layer of urgency to the task of social transformation.

What can past struggles teach us about the possibility of achieving a liberated world? In this interview with *Truthout*, Gareth Dale, co-editor of *Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal Age*, explains how his new volume attempts to answer this question by examining “revolts in the neoliberal era that ... give glimpses of radically transformative potential.”

**Gareth Dale:** A question that has exercised parts of the left is how will global capitalism meet its end: by destroying the conditions that enable complex social life or through radical social transformation? The latter is clearly preferable, however unlikely it currently appears. If we're ever to see socialist revolutions, they will arise from situations of dual power, in which institutions centered among workers and oppressed communities challenge the established structures of domination at every level, from workplaces and neighborhoods up to the nation state and globally. Such scenarios are rare, but their condition of possibility is the mass uprising. Even the revolts in the neoliberal era that we discuss

in this volume give glimpses of radically transformative potential. And when they're crushed or co-opted and contained, when the rehearsals become reversals, even then, some participants will have gained a concrete vision of revolutionary potential that points beyond the bourgeois framework. The chapters in this volume gather and analyze those visions. They study the detailed movement dynamics and strategies in each case, asking such questions as why the "whip of repression" could spark a rapid radicalization of protest, how reformist elements were able to clip the wings of mass insurgency, or how movements based around labor or around resistance to oppression, or the despoliation of nature, managed — or failed — to link up.

**What are some general lessons for social movement organizers in *Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal Age*? What was common among the struggles that won enduring reforms or carried the struggle, in a sense, as far as it could go?**

The most universal lesson is that mass upheavals are not timetabled; they take even the most starry-eyed activists by surprise. Another is that they've been more frequent in the neoliberal era than in any previous period of comparable duration.

As recently as 1989, on the bicentennial of the French Revolution, it was fashionable to commit revolution to the Museum of Historical Curiosities — but in that same year the East German masses arose, and many more revolutionary episodes were to follow. Since the volume was completed, mass revolts have occurred in Algeria, Belarus, Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Sudan, to mention only a few, and even as we speak, another is kicking off in Kazakhstan.

And yet, in the neoliberal era no uprisings have seriously fractured the framework of capitalist domination. The reasons for this are many; we discuss them in the volume. One major factor is the capacity of representative democracy to absorb and integrate radical movements. We should recall that the neoliberal age was also one that saw political systems across much of the world shift to liberal democracy.

Of the insurgencies featured in the book, many began in undemocratic conditions and dissipated when democracy was attained. Radical-democratic aspirations found themselves tamed, diverted and confined within the liberal-market transition. East Germany and Czechoslovakia (1989-90) and South Africa (1990-94) fit this pattern. However, as neoliberalism became globally

dominant, the tenor of insurgent episodes altered somewhat. The examples from this century discussed in the volume, including Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia and Egypt, all evolved in clear opposition to the neoliberal order.

The most radical of them occurred in a liberal democracy: Bolivia in 2000-03. There, during the “water war” and “gas war” centered on El Alto, workers and peasants united to wage a formidable struggle. Drawing on longstanding cultures of resistance, notably indigenous radicalism and also revolutionary Marxism, they created a network of insurgent power in the form of peasant assemblies and neighborhood councils. Their strength grew from the connections forged between the spontaneous popular risings and the more durable organizations. That combination is indispensable to any successful mass rising.

A final lesson: Our case studies all warn of the dangers of seeking ruling-class allies. In Egypt, to give a particularly blood-soaked example, the civic movement hooked up with the military in June 2013, in joint opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood government. The result of this error was counter-revolution and the violent repression of all opposition forces — whether secular or Islamic.

You wrote about the 1989 revolts in Central and Eastern Europe for this volume. One of the section's interesting claims is that the collapse of the Soviet Union wasn't solely due to economic decline, but also due to internal resistance from workers against the state. What is the importance of putting the working class back into this history?

The 1970s-1980s economic stagnation that resulted from the USSR's inability to adapt its state-capitalist structures to a globalizing world economy while maintaining its military spending and regional hegemony, was of fundamental importance. But we should note that earlier workers' revolts had constrained the room for maneuver of Moscow and its allied regimes. One such was the June 1953 uprising in East Germany. It was crushed by Soviet tanks but it also forced the East German regime to divert funds to welfare, slowing the pace of capital accumulation.

When mass insurgency reappeared in 1989, the bulk of the movement was working class, and at key moments industrial action was significant — notably the wildcat strikes of early October that played a key role in toppling the Berlin Wall. That this is ignored in most of the literature reflects a general trend. Mainstream accounts

of mass rebellions invariably downplay their working-class constituencies. Whether in Algeria, Belarus, Myanmar, or Sudan, or indeed Kazakhstan right now, street demonstrations took the headlines but strikes were critical to the rebellion's momentum. With their self-confidence and media contacts, middle-class individuals and organizations "grab the mic" and push their perspective to the fore.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge a reality: Since the early 1980s we haven't seen uprisings that center on the militant and independent activity of workers, and, relatedly, few mass movements have aspired to systemic social transformation. An example Sameh Naguib discusses in the volume is Egypt. There, industrial action was central to resistance in the years that preceded the revolution of 2011, and strikes played a critical role in deposing President Mubarak. But the industrial action in workplaces and the political protests in public spaces remained largely separate.

**Roughly over the last decade, the United States has seen mass uprisings in the form of Occupy Wall Street, teachers' strikes, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Repeatedly after these upsurges**

**much of the organized left focused on pushing forward its demands through presidential and midterm elections. What do the “revolutionary rehearsals” in this volume tell us about the fate of movements that made electoral victories their primary strategy?**

Needless to say, there are very good reasons to organize and campaign in the electoral arena. But when grassroots mobilization is suppressed on the grounds that it conflicts with electoral interests, this saps the popular energies in which, ultimately, all leftist success is rooted. The volume is littered with examples of electoralist strategies demobilizing radical-democratic movements. Claire Ceruti’s chapter on South Africa shows that mass mobilization was decisive in bringing apartheid to its knees, but as soon as the African National Congress (ANC) scented the whiff of elections it moved to stabilize bourgeois order and reined in the township and workplace agitation. The upshot: The nation’s (overwhelmingly white) ruling class maintained their villas and their other kleptocratic spoils, while the Black masses remained in penury.

In Zimbabwe, one of several African revolts discussed by Leo Zeilig, the trade union federation set up a political party that was initially



based among the poor, but when electoral objectives came to prevail, its social justice commitments withered and fell away. In Indonesia, the subject of Tom O'Lincoln's chapter, a spirited left arose within a mass revolt, but its dominant strategy envisaged emancipation as following two separate steps: first, democratization, and only later a struggle for socialism. In practice, this led them to trail behind the established bourgeois political forces.

U.S. politics is different in some respects to Zimbabwe or Indonesia, but the electoralist dynamic is essentially the same. Look for example at the electoralist demobilization of the Black Lives Matter rebellion. As antiracist protesters diverted their energies from public protests to the phone banks, the streets were claimed by Trumpist forces, leading ultimately to their own mini-uprising: the occupation of the Capitol building. If the electoralist left identifies too closely with America's plutocratically-managed democracy, it'll risk ceding initiative for future "revolutionary rehearsals" to the far right.

**Colin Barker and Neil Davidson, both of your co-editors of this volume, passed away in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Tell us a little bit about who they were and their legacy.**

The volume was Colin's brainchild. In a sense it's a sequel to his *Revolutionary Rehearsals* which appeared 35 years ago. He and Neil were inspiring figures on the socialist left in Britain. This was so in their activism — they were both immersed lifelong in campaigns, coalitions and revolutionary organizations, always with humanity and humor — and in their ideas. Each of them focused on central problems in Marxist theory, particularly states and revolution.

Neil's topics were nations and nationalism, then Scotland's bourgeois revolution, and “uneven and combined development” and finally bourgeois revolution in general. His major work, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, revived and clarified the concept of bourgeois revolution, by which he refers to state transformations that establish independent centers of capital accumulation.

Colin, meanwhile, was writing on state theory, and on the workers' uprising in Poland of 1980-81. Later, he brought social movement theory and Marxist theory into conversation, exploring the relationships between class struggle and social movements. He looked at the role of mass struggles in driving meaningful socialist change, and was very partial to the words of Marx on why revolution is indispensable to a socialist transition: "not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."

Revolution, in the sense of the sort of historical uprising narrated in the case study chapters and also in the deeper sense of fundamental societal transformation, provides the subject for Colin and Neil's valedictory essays that bookend the volume. In their different ways, both are assessing the long-term possibilities of system-transformative change, and exploring what revolutionary politics can mean in non-revolutionary times.

That global capitalism has entered a turbulent era is a safe bet today, with the probability of future pandemics, the certainty of

increasing climate chaos, and the tensions and likely clashes between the declining U.S. imperium and its challenger to the East. Neil's chapter discusses the relationship between such structural changes and the appearance of "revolutionary conjunctures" (such as arose in the late eighteenth century, the 1840s, 1917-23, 1943-48, and 1968-76), as well as the various senses of "the actuality of revolution." One of these senses, he writes, concerns revolutionary preparedness: "the understanding that all forms of mass self-activity can be preparations for some greater moment of social transformation, if they are treated as such." Although we can try to hasten the arrival of the next revolutionary conjuncture, it is not in our gift to initiate it. The key thing is to recognize the conjuncture, if and when it arrives, and to act accordingly.

*Note: [Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal Age](#) is published by Haymarket Books. Read an excerpt [here](#).*

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