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## Class War Yet?

By Fred Nagel  
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Are we ready for class war yet? Or ready at least to fight back in a war that the very wealthy started in earnest over 30 years ago?

Now is certainly the time when millions of American citizens are infuriated about their ever diminishing economic prospects. Even during Obama's eight years, the 1% got almost two-thirds of the nation's income growth. Occupy said it well, and so did Bernie Sanders. The working class understood, and voted for someone who they thought might finally break the neoliberal system. In effect, millions of US workers felt they had no choice since Hillary represented all the evils of corporate control and elite thievery.

The two dominant parties, however, have represented the same monied interests for a long time. Despite an arrogant and petulant adolescent now at the helm, supposedly attacking the status quo, the billionaires will still call the shots. Except for broad rollback of social gains, the oligarchy will run on quite nicely.

Separating people up into competing races, ethnicities, sexual identities and genders has long been an effective way for the elites to weaken and divide groups demanding economic justice. Trump has shown himself to be a master at redirecting economic frustration towards Mexicans, Blacks, immigrants, women, etc. The real change in his administration will be the overt rather than covert nature of this hostility towards anyone vulnerable enough to be scapegoated.

Do we put up the barricades now to protect decades of civil and social advancement? And can we fight a class war while we also protect the human rights of all those who have been disadvantaged in the past and are being targeted anew?

It might be better to look at how economic deprivation creates an environment that is conducive to racism, bigotry, homophobia and misogyny. Studies of human behavior reveals what should be obvious, that scarcity of resources fosters aggression. The greater the poverty and hardship of a society, the more vulnerable it is to demagogues preaching hate. Perhaps the yawning gap between the super rich and millions of impoverished Americans made a Trump candidacy almost inevitable. A significant reduction of the disparity between rich and poor could well produce a society much more tolerant of differences.

How did the left in our country lose sight of the campaign for economic justice that was so effective during the 1930's, and might have led to all the other progressive changes we so desperately seek in our society? Perhaps US progressive movements didn't just forget, but were deliberately crippled by the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950's, a part of the McCarthy Era that is rarely looked at. Not only were labor unions stripped of their leftist leaders, but so were nascent civil rights organizations. Unions and civil rights groups were frightened into giving up on basic economic reform for all citizens in order to protect their own jobs and status. Civil rights icon Thurgood Marshall met secretly with a senior aide to J Edgar Hoover and discussed the "communists" who he thought were trying to take over the N.A.A.C.P. It would be a decade before the Civil Rights Movement returned to a focus on economic justice for all. The nation's unions have never returned, and have spent the last several decades in an ever accelerating decline.

Martin Luther King as well as several other black leaders eventually returned to the conclusion that promoting economic fairness for all was the most effective method to break down racial barriers. MLK's Riverside Church speech, "Beyond Vietnam," still resonates with righteous anger at a society where the rich wage war abroad for "the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments," while the poor suffer from the "glaring contrast of poverty and wealth."

MLK was murdered the following year after speaking at a sanitation workers' strike. He was also organizing the "Poor People's Campaign," a mass event that was to put an even greater emphasis on economic fairness. Malcolm X and Fred Hampton also came to embrace economic justice as the way to achieve permanent change in America. All three Black leaders were assassinated soon after they had called for a workers' movement that united all races, ethnicities, religions and sexes into a common demand for economic justice and an end to the rule of the imperialist, wealthy elite. The suspected role of the state in their murders remains a festering wound to our body politic.

The way forward for progressives today, however, is becoming increasingly clear. A new book by George Lakey, co-founder of Earth Quaker Action Group, describes how such egalitarian societies have been formed in other developed countries. His book, "Viking Economics: How the Scandinavians Got It Right and How We Can, Too" traces the mostly peaceful revolutions of the

1920's and 1930's in several Nordic countries, and how much further they went than our own New Deal.

In Norway, for example, workers formed a new “oppositional” party, separate from the existing ones controlled by the oligarchs. The new party established its own newspapers as well since the oligarchs owned the media too. There were strikes and mass actions, but ultimately the workers’ party won by running on a platform that emphasized jobs for all, as well as universal healthcare, free education and pensions for retired workers, all paid for by significant tax increases on the very wealthy. There were no “poverty programs,” vulnerable to cutting by the oligarchy. Basic economic rights were established for each and every citizen, and it became the basis for the culture of the entire society, as well as the source of Nordic pride.

In a recent interview I did with George Lakey, he explained how Norwegian workers came to understand their plight. The majority of the people realized that they had been living in a “pretend democracy.” Even though they had a parliament, free elections and choice of their MP's, “it was the economic elite that made the main decisions and directed the economy.”

The effect of educating the workers led to a necessary “polarization” of public opinion. The workers “finally understood that there was an economic elite running things and that it opposed what the people wanted, getting rid of poverty. But poverty is just fine for the elite; they are doing great. So we need to polarize, we need to understand that this is a we versus they situation.”

In the US, the elites try to foster the racist, sexist and xenophobic fears that enable them to trample on economic fairness. The rich oligarchs must be viewed simply as the enemy because they are using their immense wealth to destroy our democracy. It is time for a real oppositional party, worker run, that pursues what MLK was attempting to build, and what some more enlightened societies achieved long ago.