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## *Robinson Can Still Do the Socialist Thing at Current Affairs*



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Most of the full-time and part-time staff at Current Affairs have been fired, they said on Twitter ([8/18/21](#)), in large part because its founder and lead editor, Nathan J. Robinson, fought their attempt to bring a more democratic governance structure to the socialist magazine—or, as Vice ([8/18/21](#)) quipped, fired “for doing socialism.”

Online commentators have dumped a fair amount of ridicule onto Robinson, because he had previously lambasted liberals for their flakiness on worker organizing (Current Affairs, [9/9/19](#)). And Substackwriter Glenn Greenwald, a libertarian who has bashed media unions (Intercept, [10/11/20](#)), showed Robinson some boss-class solidarity by painting the revolting workers as a restless mob (Twitter, [8/18/21](#)). But it’s no laughing matter. Robinson must reverse course by hiring back the staff, and coming to some sort of agreement on how the estimable magazine should be restructured.

When Robinson, a former New Orleans public defender, founded the magazine in 2015, it was largely seen as a refreshing departure from the often stale design of socialist publishing. Much of far-left print journalism is either tied to the minimalist black-and-white newsprint days of yore, or based so much in academia that it leans heavily on text without much anchor in real art. Current Affairs, with its base in New Orleans, sought to bring a flamboyant color that represented its home city. It was, at first glance, a welcome intervention into socialist journalism.

But the editorial product was often clunky. Its first days were marred with reactionary contrarianism, such as a piece ([12/27/16](#)) that prefaced support for a left-wing professor under attack from right-wing activists with personal insults about his character and sense of humor. Robinson is himself a writer who could use an editor to trim his own prose – his investigation ([9/29/18](#)) into allegations that Brett Kavanaugh lied in his Supreme Court confirmation hearing was damning, but really could have been about half as long. And while the magazine has hosted debates with luminaries of the left like Noam Chomsky ([6/24/19](#)), it feels like it has missed opportunities to do something on-the-ground and new; shouldn’t a socialist publication based in the South be covering the regional movements the New York City– and Washington, DC–based media often overlook?

Despite that, it seemed like in the last year or two the publication might have finally found its stride, giving talented writers like Lyta Gold and Vanessa Bee platforms to explore political subjects with a literary style other left journals often lack. And Robinson, himself, was making waves as a radical commentator. FAIR has written in support of Robinson, calling for his reinstatement ([2/18/21](#)) after he was fired as a columnist at the Guardian

for making a joke about US support for Israel, noting that his ouster illustrated the newspaper's drift to the right ([2/22/21](#)).

#### Hard blow to credibility

This latest affair takes all the wind out of his sails. Even if the publication survives with new staffers loyal to Robinson, the publication will have a hard time maintaining credibility as a socialist publication aimed at readers who value workers' rights and equality. In a lengthy Facebook ([8/18/21](#)) post, Robinson said that he "screwed up badly" and that he "went about this in a horrible way" when he tried to re-exert control over the outlet after subscription numbers began to sag. But, while saying that he gave up ownership of the outlet and said that being editor for him was "not about money," he admitted to resisting staff ownership because he wanted the publication to be a "not for profit institution that does not belong to particular people."

This last line is part of the key problem for Robinson. Socialist enterprises are by definition owned and controlled either directly by its workers or the state. Socialist enterprise is about sharing workplace power — run-of-the-mill non-profit NGOs don't necessarily do that, as they can also have top-down power structures that are beholden to strong executives as well as the influence of big donors. So it would make perfect sense that the writers and editors of a socialist publication would want to go beyond writing socialist content and actually create a new kind of structure for a publication. Why wouldn't they look to something like Spain's Mondragón Corporation (New York Times, [12/29/20](#)) or New York's Drivers Cooperative (Fast Company, [7/15/21](#))?

And what the staff were pushing for is hardly novel. Many left-leaning publications, like the Nation and Jacobin, are unionized, which both empowers the staff and ensures that the outlets live up to their own values.

And worker co-ops in the industry aren't unheard of either. The law and justice publication the Appeal shut down and relaunched as a staff-run publication (Nieman Lab, [6/30/21](#)). After unionized journalists fled the sports site Deadspin after its parent company restrained their editorial independence ([FAIR.org](#), [11/8/19](#)), many of them went on to start a staff-run outlet called Defector (New York Times, [7/28/20](#)).

Whatever flaws the publication might have had in the past, Current Affairs is young and has potential. It would be a waste to let it die off now. Robinson should see that the publication is more than just his editorial toy. He should come back to the table with staff, and reform the publication to live up to its values of worker democracy.

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