

## COMMENTARIES

## Socialism, Economics and the Left

By David Ruccio (<mailto:druccio@nd.edu>)

Last month, Alexander Beunder, the editor of **Socialist Economist** (<http://www.socialisteconomist.com/>), asked a handful of “expert economists from around the world” —including Johanna Bockman, Prabhat Patnaik, Andrew Kliman, and myself—two key questions concerning the problems and prospects for socialism, economics, and the Left in the world today. Beunder requested that we keep our answers to two hundred words.

**Our answers are now posted on-line, which can be read by clicking on the links below.** Here are mine:

### What economic obstacles is the Left facing in the 21st Century?

(<http://www.socialisteconomist.com/2018/09/whats-standing-in-way-of-socialism-four.html>)

The spectacular failures of capitalism in the United States have provided fertile ground for a renewed interest in socialism. These include the punishments meted out by the Second Great Depression, the lopsided nature of the current recovery, and a decades-old trend of obscene and still-rising inequality. In addition, the increasing indebtedness associated with higher education, the high cost and limited access to healthcare, and the growing precariousness of the workplace have left working-class Americans, especially young workers, with gnawing financial insecurity — and growing support for socialism. However, the U.S. Left currently faces two main economic obstacles: the decline in labor unions and an attempt to regulate capitalism. During the postwar Golden Age, union representation peaked at almost 35%. Now, it is down to 11.1% — and only 6.6% in the private sector. At least in part as a result, the Left has shifted its focus more to regulating capitalism, often by invoking a nostalgia for manufacturing and using the theoretical lens of Keynesian economics, and moving away from criticizing capitalism, especially its class dimensions (particularly the way the surplus is appropriated and distributed, as Marxists and other socialists understand them).

### How can the Left use economics as a tool in the 21st Century?

(<http://www.socialisteconomist.com/2018/09/whats-use-of-economics-for-left.html>)

Socialist economists can help identify the ways the current problems of American capitalism are not just a matter of economic “imperfections,” but deeply embedded in capitalism itself. Moreover, the Left has the opportunity to propose changes that benefit workers in the short term *and* empower the working-class to make additional changes over time. Socialist economists can play a key role in the ongoing debates within economic theory (regarding stagnant wages, growing inequality, the one-

sided nature of the recovery, and so on) and national politics (concerning universal healthcare, student debt, precarious jobs, and the like)—and to engage the rehabilitation of socialism as a legitimate position within American politics. For example, socialist economists can change the

debate about inequality and explain how it is a product not of a lack of skills, but of rising exploitation and the distribution of the growing surplus to the top 10 percent. Similarly, they can change the limits of the possible by showing how movement in the direction of universal healthcare can improve the lives of working-class Americans and, at the same time, create the space for other ways of organizing healthcare itself—by expanding worker cooperatives and other community-oriented ways of providing health services.

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