

# **Ideas for the Struggle**

**Marta Harnecker**

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**Cover design:** Kerry Klinner, [www.megacitydesign.com](http://www.megacitydesign.com).

First published in Spanish 2004; second revised & updated edition 2016.

Resistance Books edition 2016; translated by Federico Fuentes.

ISBN 978-1-876646-75-2

Published by Resistance Books, [resistancebooks.com](http://resistancebooks.com)

# 1. Mass Uprisings or Revolutions? The Role of the Political Instrument

1. The recent and not so recent popular uprisings that rocked numerous countries across the world have clearly demonstrated that **the initiative of the people, in and of itself, is not enough to defeat ruling regimes.**
2. Impoverished urban and rural sectors, lacking a well-defined plan, have risen up, seized highways, towns and neighbourhoods, ransacked stores and stormed parliaments, but despite being able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people, **neither their size nor their combativeness have been enough to move from mass uprisings to revolution.** They have overthrown presidents, but they have not been able to conquer power and initiate a process of deep social transformations.

## About this pamphlet

The following text is made up of 12 articles that were first published in Venezuela in 2004 and that were slightly modified in 2016. They were written without a predetermined order in mind and I have preferred to maintain this order to facilitate discussion with my earlier readers. I recommend starting from the topic that most interests you and then reading the rest of the text. As it is impossible to develop all facets of an idea in two pages, only by reading the whole text will readers be able to fully understand each individual article.

*Marta Harnecker*  
*August 2016*

3. On the other hand, the history of triumphant revolutions clearly demonstrates what can be achieved **when a political instrument exists that is capable of raising an alternative national program to unify the struggles of diverse social actors behind a common goal**; that helps to cohere them and elaborates a path forward for these actors based on an analysis of the existent balance of forces. Only in this manner can actions be carried out at the right place and the right time, always seeking out the weakest link in the enemy's chain.
4. This political instrument is like **a piston in a locomotive** that takes compressed steam from the boiler and, at the decisive moment, converts it into a powerful force. Of course, as Leon Trotsky said, it is not the piston or the boiler, but the steam which drives the process forward.
5. In order for political action to be effective, so that protests, resistance and struggles are genuinely able to change things, to convert **mass uprisings into revolutions, a political instrument capable of overcoming the dispersion and fragmentation of the exploited and the oppressed is required**: one that can create spaces to bring together those who, in spite of their differences, have a common enemy; that is able to strengthen existing struggles and promote others by orientating their actions according to a thorough analysis of the political situation; that can act as an instrument for cohering the many expressions of resistance and struggle.
6. We are aware that there are a number of apprehensions towards such ideas. There are many who are not even willing to discuss them. Such positions are adopted because they associate this idea with the anti-democratic, authoritarian, bureaucratic and manipulative political practices that have characterised many left-wing parties.
7. I believe **it is fundamental for us to overcome this subjective barrier and understand that when we refer to a political instrument, we are not thinking about any political instrument**; we are dealing with a political instrument adjusted to the new times, an instrument that we must build together.
8. However, in order to create or refashion this new political instrument, **the left has to change its political culture and its vision of politics**. This cannot be reduced to institutional political disputes for control over parliament or local governments; to approving laws or winning elections. In this conception of politics, the popular

sectors and their struggles are completely ignored. Neither can politics be limited to the art of what is possible.

9. For the left, politics must be the art of making possible the impossible. And we are not talking here about a voluntarist declaration. **We are talking about understanding politics as the art of constructing a social and political force capable of changing the correlation of force in favor of the popular movement, to make possible in the future what today appears impossible.**
10. We have to think of politics as the art of constructing forces. We have to overcome the old and deeply-rooted mistake of trying to build a political force without building a social force.
11. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of revolutionary phase-mongering among our militants; too much radicalism in their statements. **I am convinced that the only way to radicalise a given situation is through the construction of forces.** Those whose words are filled with demands for radicalisation must answer the following question: What are you doing to construct the political and social force necessary to push the process forward?
12. **But this construction of forces** cannot occur spontaneously; only popular uprisings happen spontaneously. **It requires a political instrument that is capable of consciously building the required forces.**
13. And I envisage this political instrument as an organisation capable of raising a national project that can unify and act as a compass for all those sectors that oppose neoliberalism. As an organisation that is orientated towards the rest of society, that respects the autonomy of the social movements instead of manipulating them. And one whose militants and leaders are true popular pedagogues, capable of stimulating the knowledge that exists within the people — derived from their cultural traditions, as well as acquired in their daily struggles for survival — through the fusion of this knowledge with the most all-encompassing knowledge that the political organisation can offer. An orientating and cohering instrument at the service of the social movements.

## 2. Convince, Not Impose

1. Popular movements and, more generally, the different social protagonists engaged in the struggle against neoliberal globalisation both at the international and national levels, reject — with good reason — attitudes that aim to impose hegemony or control on movements. They do not accept the steamroller policy that some political and social organisations tended to use that, taking advantage of their position of strength and monopolising political positions, attempts to manipulate the movement. They **do not accept the authoritarian imposition of a leadership from above; they do not accept attempts made to lead movements by simply giving orders**, no matter how correct they are.
2. Such attitudes, instead of bringing forces together, have the opposite effect. On the one hand, they create discontent in the other organisations; they feel manipulated and obligated to accept decisions in which they have had no participation; and on the other hand, it reduces the number of potential allies, given that an organisation that assumes such positions is incapable of representing the real interests of all sectors of the population and often provokes mistrust and skepticism among them.
3. But **fighting against positions that seek to impose hegemony does not mean renouncing the fight to win hegemony**, which is nothing else but attempting to win over, to persuade others of the correctness of our criteria and the validity of our proposals.
4. **Winning hegemony does not require having many people in the beginning.** There are a number of examples in history that demonstrate how, in a revolutionary situation, a small group with clear ideas, one that correctly analyses the balance of forces in dispute, that elaborates a correct strategy and tactic, and that is armed with great passion and the determination to put their ideas into practice can, within a short timeframe, become a movement that mobilises

hundreds of thousands of people.

5. It is more important to put forward a political project that reflects the population's most deeply felt aspirations, and thus win their minds and hearts, than to create a powerful party with a large number of militants. **What matters is ensuring that its politics succeed in winning the support of the masses and consensus in the majority of society.**
6. **Some parties** boast about the large numbers of militants they have, **but in reality they only lead their members.** The key is not whether the party is large or small; what matters is that the people identify with its proposals.
7. **Instead of imposing and manipulating, it is necessary to convince and unite all those who feel attracted to our project.** And you can only unite people if others are respected, if you are willing to share responsibilities with other forces.
8. Today, important sectors of the left have come to understand that their hegemony is greater when they succeed in drawing more people behind their proposals, even if they may not do so under their party's banner. We have to abandon the old-fashioned and mistaken practice of demanding intellectual property rights against organisations that dare to hoist our banner.
9. If an important number of grassroots leaders are won over to these ideas, it is fair to assume that their social base will more likely also be influenced by these ideas. It is also important to win over distinguished national personalities to the project, because they are public opinion makers and will be effective instruments for promoting proposals and winning over new supporters.
10. We believe that a good way to measure the level of hegemony obtained by an organisation is **to examine the number of natural leaders and personalities that have taken up its ideas**, and in general, the number of people who identify with them.
11. The level of hegemony obtained by a political organisation cannot be measured by the number of political positions they have won. What is fundamental is that those who occupy leading positions in diverse movements and organisations **take up as their own and implement the proposals elaborated by the organisation, despite**

**not belonging to it.**

12. A political organisation that genuinely does not seek to impose hegemony **should be able to propose the best people for different positions**, regardless of whether they are party members, independents or members of other parties. The credibility among the people of a political organisation will depend a great deal on the figures that it puts forward.
13. Of course this is easier said than done. Frequently, when an organisation is strong, it tends to underestimate the contribution that other organisations may have to offer and tends to impose its ideas. It is easier to do this than to take the risk and rise to the challenge of winning people over. The more political positions obtained, the more careful we have to be of not succumbing to the desire of imposing hegemony or control.
14. Moreover, as life follows its own course, new problems arise, and with them new challenges, the concept of hegemony should be a dynamic one. **Hegemony cannot be consolidated once and for all.** Maintaining it requires a process of permanently re-winning it.





### 3. To Be At the Service of Popular Movements, Not Replace Them

1. We have previously stated that politics is the art of constructing a social and political force capable of changing the balance of forces in order to make possible tomorrow that which today appears to be impossible. But to be able to construct a social force political organisations **must demonstrate a great respect for grassroots movements, and contribute to their autonomous development, leaving behind all attempts at manipulation.** They must take as their starting point the fact that they are not the only ones with ideas and proposals; on the contrary, grassroots movements have much to offer us, because through their daily struggles they have also learned things, discovered new paths, found solutions and invented methods which can be of great value.
2. Political organisations have to get rid of the idea that they are the only ones capable of generating creative, new, revolutionary and transformative ideas. Their role therefore is not only to echo the demands of the social movements, but also to gather ideas and concepts from these movements to enrich their own conceptual arsenal.
3. Political and social leaders **should leave behind pre-established schemas. They have to struggle to eliminate all verticalism that stifles the initiative of the people.** The role of a leader must be one of contributing with ideas and experiences in order to help nurture and strengthen the movement, and not replace the masses.
4. Their role is to push the mass movement forward, or perhaps more than push, facilitate the conditions necessary for the movement to unleash its capacity to confront those that exploit and oppress them. But **helping to push forward is only possible if we fight shoulder to shoulder in local, regional, national and international struggles.**

5. The relationship of political organisations with grassroots movements should therefore be a two-way street: from the political organisation to the social movement and from the social movement to the political organisation. Unfortunately, the tendency continues to be only in the former direction.
6. It is important **to learn to listen** and to engage in dialogue with the people; it is necessary to listen carefully **to the solutions proposed by the people themselves** to defend their conquests or struggle for their demands and, with all the information collected, we must be capable of correctly diagnosing their mood and synthesise that which could unite them and generate political action, at the same time as tackling any pessimistic and defeatist ideas they may hold.
7. Wherever possible, **we must involve the grassroots in the decision-making process**, that is to say we have to open up new spaces for people's participation. **But people's participation is not something that can be decreed from above.** Only by taking the genuine motivations of the people as our starting point, only if one helps them to understand the need to carry out certain task by themselves, and only by winning over their hearts and minds, will they be willing to fully commit themselves to the actions proposed.
8. This is the only way to ensure that efforts made to help orient the movement are not felt as orders coming from outside the movement, and to help create an organisational process capable of involving, if not all, then at least an important part of the people in the struggle and, starting from there, win over little by little the more backward and pessimistic sectors. When these latter sectors understand that, as Che Guevara said, the aims we are fighting for are **not only necessary but possible**, they too will choose to join the struggle.
9. When the people realise that their own ideas and initiatives are being put into practice, **they will see themselves as the protagonists of change, and their capacity to struggle will increase enormously.**
10. Taking all that has been said above into consideration, it is clear that the type of political cadres we need **are not cadres with a military mentality** — today, it is not about leading an army, which is not to say that at some critical conjunctures this may and should be the case. **Nor** do we need cadres that are **demagogic populists** — **because it is not about leading a flock of sheep.** Political cadres should

fundamentally be **popular pedagogues, capable of fostering the ideas and initiative that emerge from within the grassroots movement.**

11. Unfortunately, many of the current leaders have been educated in the school of leading the people by issuing orders, and that is not something that can be changed overnight. Therefore, I do not want to create an impression of excessive optimism here. Achieving a correct relationship between the leaders and the grassroots is still a long way off.



Fidel Castro and Malcolm X, Harlem, New York, 1960

## 4. Should We Reject Bureaucratic Centralism & Simply Use Consensus?

1. For a long time, left-wing parties operated along authoritarian lines. The usual practice was that of **bureaucratic centralism**, influenced by the practice of Soviet socialism. **Most decisions regarding principles, tasks, initiatives, and the course of political action to take were restricted to the party elite, without the participation or debate of the membership** who were limited to following orders that they never got to discuss and in many cases did not understand. For most people, these practices are every day becoming increasingly more intolerable.
2. But in challenging bureaucratic centralisation, it is important to avoid falling into the excesses of ultra-democracy, which results in more time being used for discussion than action since **everything, even the most minor points, are the subject of rigorous debates that frequently impede any concrete action.**
3. In criticising bureaucratic centralisation, the recent tendency has been to reject all forms of centralised leadership.
4. There is a lot of talk about organising groups at all levels of society, and that these groups must apply a strict internal democracy, ideas that we obviously share. What we do not agree with is the idea that no effort needs to be put into organically linking them up. **In defending democracy, flexibility and the desire to fight on many different fronts, what ends up being rejected is efforts to determine strategic priorities and attempts to unify actions.**
5. For some, the one and only acceptable method is **consensus**. They argue that by utilising consensus they are seeking to not impose decisions but instead interpret

the will of all. But the consensus method, which seeks the agreement of all and appears to be a more democratic method, can in practice be something that is profoundly anti-democratic, because **it grants the power of veto to a minority** to such an extreme that a single person can block the implementation of an agreement that may be supported by an overwhelming majority.

6. Moreover, the complexity of problems, the size of the organisations, and the political timing that compels us to make quick decisions at specific conjunctures make it almost impossible to use the consensus method on many occasions.
7. I believe that **there cannot be political efficacy without a unified leadership** that determines the course of action to follow at different moments in the struggle. This also requires that a broad ranging discussion occur, where everyone can raise their opinions and where, in the end, positions are adopted and everyone respects them.
8. For the sake of a unified course of action, lower levels of the organisation should respect the decisions made by the higher bodies, and those who have ended up in the minority should accept whatever course of action emerges triumphant, carrying out the task together with all the other members.
9. This combination of (a) a **democratic debate at different levels of the organisation** and (b) a **single centralised leadership based on whatever agreements are arrived at by consensus or by majority vote** is called “democratic centralism”.
10. It is a dialectical combination: in complicated political periods, of revolutionary fervor or war, there is no other alternative than to lean towards centralisation; in periods of calm, when the rhythm of events is slower, the democratic character should be emphasised.
11. Personally, I do not see how one can conceive of successful political action **if unified action is not achieved around key issues**. I do not see any other alternative to democratic centralism for achieving this, if consensus cannot be reached.
12. Only a correct combination of centralism and democracy can ensure that agreements are effective, because **having engaged in the discussion and the decision-making process, one feels more committed to carry out the decisions**.

13. And this commitment will then translate, in practice, into a growing sense of responsibility, dedication to work, aptitude for problem-solving, as well as courage to express opinions, to criticise defects and exercise control over the higher bodies of the organisations.
14. An insufficient democratic life impedes the unleashing of the creative initiative of all activists, with its subsequent negative impact on their participation.
15. When applying democratic centralism **we must avoid attempts to use narrow majorities to try and crush the minority**. The more mature social and political movements believe that it is pointless imposing a decision adopted by a narrow majority. They believe that if the large majority of activists are not convinced of the course of action to take, it is better to hold off until the activists are won over politically and become convinced themselves that such action is correct. This will help us avoid the disastrous internal divisions that have plagued movements and left parties, and avoid the possibility of making big mistakes.



## 5. Minorities Can Be Right

1. Democratic centralism implies not only the subordination of the minority to the majority, but also **the respect of the majority towards the minority**.
2. Minorities should not be crushed or marginalised; they should be respected. Nor should the minority be required to completely subordinate itself to the majority. The minority must **carry out the tasks proposed by the majority** at each concrete political conjunction, but they **should not have to renounce their political, theoretical and ideological convictions**. On the contrary, it is the minority's duty to continue fighting to defend their ideas until the others are convinced or they themselves become convinced of the other's ideas.
3. Why should the minority continue defending its viewpoint and not simply submit to the position of the majority? Because **the minority may be right**; its analysis of reality might be more accurate because it read the present correlation of forces more correctly, or understood more accurately the true motivations of specific social forces. That is why those who hold minority views at a specific moment should not only have the right, but actually have the duty, to defend their positions, to fight to convince the maximum number of activists of those positions through a healthy internal debate.
4. We refer to a **"healthy debate"** because we have to start by recognising that we never possess the whole truth. Those who do not share our ideas can be correct. Also, we should not personalise the discussion. Instead of trying to prove who is right we should collectively try to work out **what** is right. The best leaders are those who promote a process that enables the collective to determine what is right.
5. Moreover, **if the majority is convinced that their propositions are correct, then they have nothing to fear in debating ideas**. On the contrary, they should encourage it and try to convince the minority. If the majority fears a confrontation of positions,

it is probably a sign of political weakness.

6. Is this not the case if we look at some of the left parties and social movements in Latin America? **How many splits could have been avoided if the minority view had been respected?** Instead, on many occasions, the entire weight of the bureaucratic apparatus has been used to crush them, leaving them with no choice but to split.
7. Sometimes minorities are accused of being divisive for the simple reason that they want their ideas to be respected and be given space to debate them. Could it be that the true splitters are those who provoke division by leaving the minority with no other option than to split if they hope to continue their struggle against positions they believe to be wrong?
8. The topic of majorities and minorities also relates to **the disjunction or non-correspondence between representatives and the rank and file**. This phenomenon may occur for different reasons, including: the organic incapacity of those who represent the real majority to achieve better representation in the mass organisations; the bureaucratic maneuvers and dishonest methods of a formal majority to keep itself in positions of power; the rapid change in political consciousness of those who elected these representatives due to developments in the revolutionary process. When such a shift in consciousness takes place, those who only days before truly represented the majority, may now no longer do so because the people have matured, they now see that others who had proposed to represent them in a different way were right after all. Under such circumstance, any majority now only constitutes a formal majority. If new elections were to be held, new people would be elected.
9. The new culture of the left should also be reflected in a **different approach towards the composition of leadership bodies in political organisations**. For a long time it was believed that if a certain tendency or sector of the party won the internal elections by a majority, all leadership positions would be filled by cadres from that tendency. In a certain sense, the prevailing idea was that the more homogenous the leadership, the easier it would be to lead the organisation. Today different criteria tend to prevail: **a leadership that better reflects the internal balance of forces seems to work better, as it helps to get all party members, and not only those of the majority current, feeling more involved in the implementation of**



**tasks proposed by the leadership.**

10. But a plural leadership, along the lines that we are proposing, can only be effective if **the organisation has a truly democratic culture**, because if that is not the case, then such an approach will produce a wave of unrest and render the organisation ungovernable.
11. Moreover, a real democratisation of the political organisation demands more effective participation by party members in the election of their leaders: they should be elected according to their ideological and political positions rather than personal issues. That is why it is important that the different positions up for election are well known among the party membership via internal publications. It is also very important to ensure a more democratic formulation of candidatures and safeguard the secret vote.
12. Finally, it is essential to understand that an internal democratic culture practiced by the political organisation, a level of internal tolerance, an ability to act in a united way even if there are disagreements, offer the social movements a positive example which they can then try to imitate.



## 6. The Need to Unite the Political Left & the Social Left

1. **The rejection by a majority of the people of the globalisation model imposed on our continent intensifies each day given its inability to solve the most pressing problems of our people.** Neoliberal policies implemented by large transnational financial capital, which is backed by a large military and media power, and whose hegemonic headquarters can be found in the United States, have not only been unable to resolve these problems but, on the contrary, have dramatically increased misery and social exclusion, while concentrating wealth in increasingly fewer hands.
2. Among those who have suffered most as a result of the economic consequences of neoliberalism are the traditional sectors of the urban and rural working classes. But its disastrous effects have also affected many other social sectors, such as the poor and marginalised, impoverished middle-class sectors, the constellation of small and medium-sized businesses, the informal sector, medium and small-scale rural producers, the majority of professionals, the legions of unemployed, workers in cooperatives, pensioners, the subordinate cadres of the police and the army (junior officers). Moreover, we should not only keep in mind those who are affected economically, but also all those who are discriminated against and oppressed by the system: women, youth, children, the elderly, indigenous peoples, blacks, certain religious creeds, homosexuals, etc.
3. **Neoliberalism impoverishes the great majority of the population** of our countries; impoverished in the socioeconomic sense and **also in the subjective sense**.
4. Some of these sectors have transformed themselves into powerful movements. Among those are women's, indigenous and consumer rights movements, and movements that fight for human rights and in defense of the environment.

5. **These movements differ in many ways from the classical labor movement.** Their platforms have a strong issues-based focus and they stretch across classes and generations. Their forms of organising are less hierarchical and rely more on networks than those of the past, while their concrete forms of actions vary quite a lot.
6. **New social actors** have also appeared. What is surprising, for example, is the capacity to mobilise that has manifested itself among **youth, fundamentally organised through electronic means** (internet, mobile phones, etc.), with the object of rejecting actually existing globalisation, resisting the application of neoliberal measures, promoting very powerful mobilisations against war and military occupation, and spreading the experiences of revolutionary struggle, thereby **breaking down the information blockade** that had been imposed on left and progressive ideas.
7. This growing rejection is being expressed through diverse and alternative practices of resistance and struggle.
8. **The consolidation of left parties, fronts or political processes in opposition to neoliberalism is undeniable** in various countries. In others, **powerful social movements have arisen** and transformed themselves into major political actors, becoming important oppositional forces that occupy the frontlines of the fight against neoliberal globalisation.
9. **However**, despite the depth of the crisis that the neoliberal model has provoked in those countries where it is still in place, the breadth and variety of affected sectors that encompass the majority of the population, the multiplicity of demands that have emerged from society and which continue to remain unmet — all of which have produced a highly favorable situation for the creation of a very broad anti-neoliberal social bloc with enormous social force — **the majority of these growing expressions of resistance and struggle are still far from truly representing a real threat to the system.**
10. I believe that one of the reasons that helps explain this situation is that parallel to these **favorable objective conditions** for the construction of a broad alternative social bloc against neoliberalism, there are very complicated subjective conditions which have to do with a profound problem: the dispersion of the left.

11. And that is why I believe that for an effective struggle against neoliberalism, it is strategically important to articulate the different left sectors, **understanding the left** to mean all those forces that stand up against the capitalist system and its profit-driven logic, and who fight for an alternative society based on humanism and solidarity, built upon the interests of the working classes.
12. **Therefore, the left cannot simply be reduced to that which belongs to left parties or political organisations; it also includes social actors and movements.** Very often these are more dynamic and combative than the former, but do not belong to or reject belonging to any political party or organisation. Among the former are those who prefer to accumulate forces by using institutions to aid transformation, while others reject that option.
13. To simplify, I have decided to refer to the first group as the **political left** and the second group as the **social left**, even though I recognise that this conceptual separation is not always so clearly defined in practice. In fact, the more developed social movements tend to acquire socio-political dimensions.
14. To sum up, I believe that only by uniting the militant efforts of the most diverse expressions of the left will we be able to fully carry out the task of building the broad anti-neoliberal social bloc that we need to help elect progressive candidates and, from there, advance in the direction of being an alternative to capitalism. **The strategic task therefore is to articulate the political and social left so that, from this starting point, we can bring the growing and disperse social opposition together into a single colossal column.**

## 7. Reasons for Popular Scepticism Towards Politics & Politicians

1. I have said that in order to wage an effective struggle against neoliberalism we must articulate all those who are suffering its consequences, and that to achieve this objective we must start with the left itself, which in our countries tends to be very dispersed. But, **there are many obstacles that impede this task**. The first step to overcoming them is to be aware of them and be prepared to face them.
2. One of these obstacles is the **growing popular skepticism towards politics and politicians**.
3. This has to do, among other things, with the great **constraints that exist today in our democratic systems**, which are very different from those that existed prior to the military dictatorships.
4. These low-intensity, controlled, restricted, limited or monitored democratic regimes drastically limit the effective capacity for action of democratically-elected authorities. **The most important decisions are made by unelected institutions** which therefore are not subject to changes produced by electoral results; such is the case with national security councils, central banks, institutions for economic advice, supreme courts, ombudsmen, constitutional tribunals, media, etc.
5. Groups of professionals, and not politicians, are responsible for making decisions, or as a minimum have a decisive influence over the decisions made. The apparent neutrality and depoliticisation of these entities conceals the new way in which the dominant class does politics. **Their decisions are adopted outside the framework**

**of parties.** We are dealing with controlled democracies, where the controllers themselves are not subject to any democratic mechanism.

6. Moreover, **instruments for manufacturing consensus** such as the media — which are monopolised by the ruling classes — **have been dramatically improved**, and condition to a great extent the way in which people perceive reality. This explains why it is that the most conservative parties, which defend the interests of a tiny minority of the population, have been able to quantitatively transform themselves into mass parties, and why the social bases that support their candidates, at least in Latin America, were the poorest social sectors in the urban peripheries and countryside. Happily this situation has changed in the last decades.
7. Other elements that explain this growing popular skepticism include, on the one hand, **the unscrupulous appropriation of the language and discourse of the left by the right wing**: words such as reforms, structural changes, concern for poverty, transition, etc., along with a questioning of the idea of the market as the solution to all problems and support for a regulatory role for the state, today form part of its everyday discourse. On the other hand, there is the quite frequent adoption by some left parties of political practices that hardly differ from the habitual practices of traditional parties.
8. We must bear in mind that people are increasingly rejecting clientalist, non-transparent and corrupt party practices carried out by those who reach out to the people only at election time; that waste energy in internecine fighting between factions and petty ambitions; where decisions are made at the top by party elites without a genuine consultation with the ranks; and where personal leadership outranks collective leadership. People are increasingly rejecting messages that remain as mere words and are never translated into action.
9. Ordinary people are fed up with the traditional political system and want renewal, they want positive change, they want new approaches to doing politics, they want clean politics, they want transparency and participation, and they want to regain confidence in politics.
10. This distrust of politics and politicians — which also permeates the social left — is growing daily, but **is not as serious a problem for the right as it is the left**. The right wing can operate perfectly well without political parties, as it demonstrated

during periods of dictatorship, but the left cannot do without a political instrument, be it a party, a political front or some other formula.

11. Another obstacle to the unity of the left — following the defeat of Soviet socialism and the crises of welfare state promoted by European social democracies and Latin American developmental populism — was that it has had great difficulties in elaborating a rigorous and credible alternative to capitalism that takes into account the new global reality.
12. Capitalism has revealed its **great capacity to re-invent itself** and utilise the new technological revolution for its own ends: fragmenting the working class, limiting its negotiating power, and creating panic over unemployment. Meanwhile, on many occasions, the left has remained anchored in the past. There is **an excess of diagnosis and an absence of remedy**. We often tend to navigate without a political compass.
13. Most of the obstacles outlined above, that disrupt attempts to unite all of the left, are due to realities imposed on us from outside, but there also exists obstacles that come from within.
14. On the one hand, during the last decades the political left has had many difficulties in working with the social movements and winning over new social forces. On the other hand, there has been a tendency within the social left to dismiss parties and magnify their own roles in the struggle against neoliberal globalisation, an attitude that has not helped in overcoming the dispersion of the left. Our next article will focus on these issues.

## 8. The Left Should Avoid Allowing the Right to Set Its Agenda for Struggle

1. In the previous article, I stated that a large section of the political left has found it **very difficult to work with social movements** and develop ties with the new social forces in recent decades. This has been due to several factors.
2. While the right wing has demonstrated great political initiative, the **left tends to be on the defensive**. While the former uses its control of state institutions and the mass media, as well as its economic influence, to impose its new model that is subservient to financial capital and monopolies, and has precipitated privatisations, labor deregulation and all the other aspects of the neoliberal economic program to increase social fragmentation and foment anti-partyism, **the political left** — on the other hand — has almost exclusively limited its work **to the use of the existing institutional**ity, subordinating itself to the **rules of the game imposed by the enemy**, hardly ever taking it by surprise. The level of absurdity is such that the calendar of struggle of the left is set by the right.
3. How often have we heard the left, after discovering that its electoral results were not what it was expecting, complain about the adverse conditions it had to face during an election campaign? Yet the very same left seldom denounces the rules of the game imposed on it, nor does it propose electoral reforms during its electoral campaigns. On the contrary, what tends to occur is that — instead of carrying out an educational, **pedagogical campaign** that serves to increase the organisation and awareness of the people — the left uses the same techniques that the ruling classes uses to sell its candidates and seek votes.
4. On the other hand, the current rules of the game imposed by the dominant classes



hinder the unity of the left and **foment personality-based politics**. In some countries, the left is forced to work to support its own party instead of a broader front, because if it does not, its party tends to disappear from the political sphere.

5. This means that when electoral defeats occur, the frustration, tiredness and debts incurred during the campaign are compounded by the fact that the electoral effort does not translate into political growth, leaving a bitter sense of having wasted time. The situation would be very different if campaigns were conceived from a pedagogical point of view, where **election campaigns are used to deepen awareness and popular organisation**. Then, even if the electoral results are not the most favorable, the time and effort invested in the campaign are not wasted.
6. It is not surprising that some argue that the **cult of the institution** has been the Trojan horse that the ruling system has been able to introduce into the fortress of the revolutionary left, thus attacking the left from inside.
7. The work of activists is progressively delegated to people who hold public and administrative positions. Majority effort **stops being directed towards collective action and are redirected towards parliamentary action or building a media presence**.
8. Militant action tends to be reduced to activities on election day, putting-up posters and other such trivial public acts.
9. And, even worse, **party financing** is increasingly relying on the participation of party cadres in state institutions: parliament, local government, election boards, etc., with all that this entails in terms of dependency and undue pressure.
10. The political activity of the left cannot be reduced to the conquest of institutions; it must be directed towards changing those institutions in order to be able to transform reality. A new correlation of forces must be created so that the necessary changes can be implemented. We have to understand that **we cannot build a political force without building a social force**.
11. At the same time, we must also avoid “partyising” all initiatives and the social movements we relate to; on the contrary, effort must be made to **articulate their practices into a single political project**.

12. Additionally, the political left has had a hard time adjusting to the new realities. On many occasions it has remained firmly locked into rigid conceptual frameworks that prevent it from appreciating the potentiality of the new social forces, instead exclusively focusing efforts on forces that have traditionally mobilised, such as trade unions, but that today are much weaker due to a variety of factors.
13. Lastly, one of the greatest difficulties for the political left in terms of working with the social left has been the viewpoint that sees **social movements as conveyor belts for the party**. The leadership of the movement, positions in leadership bodies, the platform of struggle, everything is decided by party leaders and the line of march is imposed to the social movements, thereby not allowing them to participate in the process of deciding upon the matters that directly affect them.
14. Summing up, in order for the political left to develop strong bonds with the social left, the political left must **renew itself ideologically, change its political culture and work methods**, and incorporate into its arsenal the innovative forms of struggle and resistance utilised by the social left.



## 9. Respect Differences & Be Flexible in Regards to Activism

1. There continues to be a **difficulty within the left to deal with differences**. In the past, the tendency of political organisations, especially parties that declared they were parties of the working class, was always towards homogenising the social base within which they carried out political work. If this attitude was once understandable due to the past identity and homogeneity of the working class, today it is anachronistic when confronted with a working class that is quite differentiated, and with the emergence of a diversity of new social forces. Today, we increasingly have to deal with a **unity based on diversity**, on respect for ethnic and cultural differences, for gender and for the sense of belonging of specific collectives.
2. It is necessary to try channeling commitments to activism by **starting with the actual potential of each sector, and even of each person**, that is willing to commit themselves to the struggle, without seeking to homogenise these actors. It is important to have a special sensibility towards finding all those points of agreement that can allow for the emergence of a **common platform of struggle**.
3. This respect for differences should also reflect itself in our discourse. We must break from the old style of attempting to take a uniform message to people with very different interests. **We cannot think of them as an amorphous mass**; what exists are individuals, men and women who live in different places, who do different things and who are under different ideological influences. **Our message has to adopt flexible forms in order to be able to reach these real men and women**.
4. When all our speeches and messages are cut from the same cloth and are transmitted in the same manner and with the same words, pronounced in the same tone and through the same megaphone, and when the years go by and the

posters and slogans don't change, **our words lose their value**. They can no longer win the imaginations of anyone.

5. **We have to individualise the message, but without losing sight of the common goals.**
6. I believe this issue can help shed light on the issue of the crisis of activism. Furthermore, everyone knows that over the last few years, a **fairly generalised crisis of activism has occurred**, not only among left parties but also in the social movements and grassroots communities influenced by liberation theology. This is something that can be explained by the changes that the world has suffered. Nevertheless, in many of our countries, together with this crisis of activism, we have witnessed a **parallel increase in the influence of the left in society, and an increase of progressive sentiments** among popular sectors.
7. This leads us to the conclusion that one of the factors present in the origins of this crisis of activism is the type of **demands placed upon people in order for them to be able to involve themselves in organised political activity**. We have to examine whether the left has been able to open up avenues for activism and help nurture that growing progressive sentiment in society, because not all people have the same activist vocation nor do they all feel inclined to be active on a permanent level. This fluctuates a lot depending on the political climate of the day. **To ignore this, and demand a uniform level of activism, is self-limiting and weakens the political organisation.**
8. For example, there are those who are willing to be active over a specific issue: health, education, culture, and not within a local branch in their workplace or community. There are others who only feel the need to be active at certain conjunctures (elections, etc.) but are not willing to do so all year round, even though during key moments of the political struggle you can always count on them to be there, and in their daily lives they are promoting the left's project and values.
9. **To try to pigeonhole people who are willing to be active into a single norm** which is the same for everyone, based on 24-hours-a-day/seven-days-a-week level of activism, **means excluding all these potential activists.**
10. We have to create a type of organisation that can house the widest range of

militants, allowing for diverse levels of membership. **Organic structures have to abandon their rigidity and become more flexible** in order to make the most of the different levels of activist commitment, without establishing a hierarchy between these different levels.

11. To facilitate the different levels of activism, it is necessary to adapt the structures and grassroots units of the organisation to suit the character of the surroundings in which their political activities are carried out.



Left-wing British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn addresses mass meeting.

## 10. A Strategy for Building the Unity of the Left

1. I have previously referred to the necessity of building unity among all left forces and actors in order to be able to cohere a broad anti-neoliberal bloc around them. Nevertheless, **I do not think that this objective can be achieved in a voluntarist manner**, creating coordinating bodies from above that end up being a simple sum of acronyms.
2. **I believe that this unity can emerge through concrete struggles for common objectives.** That is why I think that we can help create better conditions for this unity if we put into practice a new strategy of anti-capitalist struggle.
3. I am talking about a strategy that takes into consideration the important social, political, economic and cultural transformations that have occurred across the world in the last period. One that understands that the new forms of capitalist domination go far beyond the economic and state sphere, have infiltrated into all the interstices of society — fundamentally through the mass media which has indiscriminately invaded the homes of all social sectors, and in doing so changed the conditions of struggle.
4. Today, more than ever, we have to confront not only the bourgeoisie's apparatuses of political coercion but also the **mechanisms and institutions present in civil society that generate a broad acceptance of the capitalist social order.** The capitalist elites tend to achieve a significant hegemony over important popular sectors, a real cultural leadership over society; they have the capacity to ideologically subordinate the popular sectors, even those who are exploited by them. As Chomsky says, propaganda is to bourgeois democracy what the truncheon is to the totalitarian state.
5. In those Latin American countries where the government is in hands of the

conservative classes, our challenge is to elaborate a revolutionary strategy within the conditions of a bourgeois democracy that enjoys a level of acceptance by an important part of the popular sectors which allows it to maintain itself without having to recur to repression; what's more, we have to take as our starting point the recognition that large parts of popular sectors accept as good coin the capitalist leadership of the process.

6. For this reason, **simple propaganda about an alternative society is not enough.** The greater complexity that domination has assumed, the presence of important para-state factors that produce and reproduce the existing popular fragmentation and that attempt to delegitimise the thought and project of the left in the eyes of the public, means that **we must demonstrate that we practice what we preach.**
7. To do so, we must develop a process of **popular construction opposed to capitalism in the territories and spaces won by the left, that seeks to break with the profit logic and the relations this imposes and tries to instill solidarity-based humanist logics.**
8. We must promote struggles that are not limited to simple economic demands—although these need to be included — but that advance in the development of a more global, social project that encourages authentic levels of power from the grassroots.
9. What we are dealing with is the construction of experiences in popular democracy that are tangibly superior to bourgeois democracy. For example, the elaboration of a project for a humanist and solidarity-based city in a local government, promoting a diversity of spaces for participation that allow local residents to transform themselves into active members of their community. Or the construction of a community of rural settlements where peasants can establish diverse forms of collaboration among themselves, not only in agricultural production, but in the industrialisation and commercialisation of their products, in the education of their children and the formation of their cadre, according to a model that foreshadows the new society. Or the building of a student federation that defends the democratic participation of students in the running of a university committed to society. Or the construction of a trade union confederation that puts an end to bureaucratic leadership separated from the grassroots, that defends a social-political unionism, that overcomes simple economism, and that proposes

as its objective an active insertion in the struggle for social transformation.

10. A strategy of this type can enormously facilitate the cohering of all the sectors of the left, both those that are members of parties as well as social movement activists, because it involves a different type of call to action. In order to be active, one does not necessarily have to become a member of a party, a mass organisation, a movement; one can become an activist simply by participating in putting into practice the project of an alternative model.
11. More than just a propagandised utopia that is sterilely introduced into the minds of men and women in a passive manner as enlightened education without any practice in concrete construction, we are dealing with the construction of popular democratic reference points that, **given they reflect different practices, tend to attract new sectors.**
12. Moreover, it is only through these practices that many people begin to understand why it is that to expand their humanist and solidarity-based projects it is necessary to put an end to the capitalist system that, with its profit logic, raises enormous hurdles to any type of alternative model.
13. It is therefore an urgent priority to put an end to the “tactics” of shortcuts, of conjuncturalism, and thread together a practice centered on the promotion of democratic struggles from the grassroots; in the local construction of forms of power and popular democracy that allow us to define the meaning and timing of electoral and other forms of struggle. Otherwise, these practices will not overcome the long string of immediatism that we have encountered over the past years.
14. But it is also **urgent that we overcome grassrootism, localism, apoliticism, corporatism, all of which limit the struggle of the popular sectors to trade union horizons or economic struggles.**



# 11. Popular Consultations: Spaces That Allow for the Convergence of Different Forces

1. I have previously argued the case for the need to create a large social bloc against neoliberalism that can unite all those affected by the system. To achieve this, it is fundamental that we create **spaces that allow for the convergence of specific anti-neoliberal struggles where**, while safeguarding the specific characteristics of each political or social actor, **common tasks can be taken up that help strengthening the struggle.**
2. In this respect, I think that **popular consultations or plebiscites** can be very interesting spaces. These can allow us **to mobilise behind a single concrete task** of convincing—by undertaking door-to-door popular education — a large number of people and youth who are beginning to awaken to politics, who want to contribute to a better world, who very often do not know how to do it, and **who are not willing to be active in the traditional way, because many of them reject politics and politicians.**
3. Moreover, this concrete door-to-door work **leads to having to directly relate to impoverished popular sectors and their arduous living conditions.** Many can be radicalised by coming into contact with so much poverty.
4. A recent example of this was the referendum held in Uruguay on December 8, 2003, to decide whether to repeal or ratify a law supporting the partnership of the state oil company ANCAP — that has held a monopoly over oil since its foundation in 1931— with foreign private capital. The new company was to be managed and run by the foreign partner.

5. The vote to reject the privatisation of the state oil company won by a wide margin (62.02% of the vote), and by a bigger percentage than was foreseen in the polls leading up to the vote (50.2%).
6. The law had been approved in 2002. Having proven that irregularities were committed by the new managers of ANCAP, the left-wing political coalition, Frente Amplio (Broad Front), and allied social and union organisations decided to promote a campaign to collect signatures in support of a referendum against the law. Around 700,000 signatures were required.
7. In the midst of the petition campaign, the financial crisis of mid-2002 occurred: the value of the dollar doubled within days, some people lost their life savings, many bank accounts were frozen, there were massive company closures and unemployment surpassed the historic high of 13%, rising to 20%, something unbearable for a country like Uruguay. Social discontent increased. The possibility of **turning the popular consultation into a symbolic act of rejection of the government's policies** allowed the campaign to grow, gain strength and motivate people.
8. Even though the mass media was totally hostile and tried to ignore the existence of the initiative, the house-to-house campaign to collect signatures across the country was more powerful than the media blockade. **The strong point of the campaign, once again, was the work done in the grassroots, shoulder-to-shoulder, talking with people in their homes and using modest local radio stations that supported the cause.**
9. The initial weight of the campaign was shouldered more by the social organisations than the political instrument [party], which was somewhat hampered by its initial hesitations. But when the Frente Amplio joined the campaign, it once again demonstrated its clarity in the debates and the great potential of neighbourhood, trade unionist and propagandistic activism.
10. The initiative was supported by all the tendencies in the PIT-CNT union confederation, the FUCVAM (Unitary Federation of Mutual Aid Cooperatives) — which carried out an important mass mobilisation across the whole country — and the student movement (FEUU), also joined the campaign, although with little force.

11. The right wing took the initiative to start with (in relation to the referendum). It was able to cover the walls of Montevideo with slogans attacking Tabaré Vasquez, then FA presidential candidate, and in support of the law. Within weeks, thousands of walls were recovered and the right disappeared off the streets.
12. From that moment on (August-September 2003) fractures began to appear in the traditional parties: the Partido Nacional (National Party) mayor from Paysandú (a large city and former industrial center on the border with Argentina, today in ruins) declared himself in support of abolishing the law. The same occurred with many local leaders from outside the capital and some mid-level national leaders.
13. Another example, if we focus on recent ones, is the consultation over the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) held in Argentina in November 2003, where more than two million votes were cast. It was organised by the Autoconvocatoria NO al ALCA (Self-initiated No to FTAA), a diverse and large space that brought together a growing number of movements and trade unions, professionals, women, farmers, environmentalists, religious and human rights groups, political parties, and neighbourhood, cooperative and business organisations.
14. **Even when some of these consultations lacked legal backing, they still had an important political effect.** Proof of this was the declaration made by Argentina's then head of cabinet, Alberto Fernández, who stated that the result of the consultation should be taken into consideration by the government at the time of making a decision concerning the FTAA.
15. On the other hand, this experience **allowed thousands of activists from different backgrounds to work together** in carrying out the popular consultation. Participation within this large and diverse space is what **enabled the proposal to reach different popular sectors that are usually separated from each other, both geographically and socially.**

## 12. Do Not Confuse Desires With Reality

1. Unfortunately, there tends to be a lot of subjectivism in our analysis of the political situation. What tends to occur is that leaders, driven by their revolutionary passion, **tend to confuse desires with reality**. On the one hand, an objective evaluation of the situation is not carried out, the enemy tends to be underestimated and, on the other hand, one's own potential is overestimated.
2. Moreover, leaders tend to **confuse the mood of the most radical activists with the mood of the grassroots popular sectors**. There exists a tendency in more than a few political leaderships to make generalisations about the mood of the people based simply on their own personal experiences, whether it is in the region they are in or the social sector they are active in, or based on the perception of those around them, who are always the most radicalised sectors.
3. **Those that work with the most radicalised sectors will have a different vision of the country compared to those that carry out their political activities among the least political sectors**. Revolutionary cadre who work in a militant popular neighbourhood will not have the same vision of the country as those that are active in middle-class sectors.
4. The same thing occurs in countries where both war zones and legal political spaces co-exist. The guerrillas who are engaged in real confrontations with the enemy, and who have been able to win control of certain zones thanks to their military victories, tend to believe that the revolutionary process is more advanced than activists who work in legal political spaces in the large urban centers, where the ideological power and military control of the regime is still very large.
5. The only guarantee for not committing these errors is assuring that leaders are

capable of **evaluating the situation not on the basis of their mood, but rather by taking as their starting point the mood of the bulk of the people**, the mood of the enemy and the international reality. Once this evaluation is carried out, it is necessary to come up with proposals that allow us to take advantage of the situation as a whole.

6. It would seem to be a truism to say that **it is important for leaders to learn to listen**. We believe that this is fundamental. Nevertheless, what tends to occur is that some leaders are so impregnated by preconceived ideas regarding the current state of affairs, of how things are, of what can be done and what cannot be done, that **in their contact with intermediary leaders and the grassroots, they tend more towards transmitting their vision of things than informing themselves about the actual mood of the people**.
7. What can therefore occur is that, when one has to make an analysis of the situation, errors are made, not so much due to the lack of information, but because, despite information having been transmitted correctly and in a timely manner by grassroots activists, the leadership has not assimilated it.
8. But it is also important that grassroots activists and middle leadership layers be objective in providing information. Sometimes they can misinform rather than inform by providing, for example, inflated numbers for certain mobilisations or actions.
9. **The tendency to delude oneself, to falsify data regarding mobilisations, meetings, strikes, the weight of each organisation, is quite common in politics**. For instance, saying that thousands were mobilised when it was really only hundreds.
10. **This triumphalist focus is the product of the mistaken idea that we are always right, that we are always the best, that everything we do ends up in positive results for us**.
11. It is not only in regards to numbers where self-delusion exists; it also occurs when evaluating actions that have been proposed. If the goal was to win a certain amount of representation in parliament but this was not achieved, recognition is not given to the fact that the number of votes received was below the expectations that had been created; instead, there is always an attempt to find a way to present the event

as a triumph, for example, stating that the number of votes increased compared to the previous election. If a national strike is proposed, but only a partial strike is achieved, this is not recognised as a defeat; rather the success of the strike is talked up because more workers did not go to work compared to previous actions of this type, etc.

12. If leaders do not listen — something that requires a large dose of revolutionary modesty — and, at the same time, they receive falsified information, then proposals are made which — taking false premises as their starting point — are not adjusted to the real possibilities of the forces on the ground. As such, **battles that are planned out can lead to significant defeats because they are not based on the real correlation of forces.**

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**NOTE:** You can find a complete bibliography of all of Marta Harnecker’s works in Spanish, including a short summary of the topics addressed in each one and where they have been published, on Rebelión. Link <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=87882&titular=rebelión-amplía-la-recopilación-de-las-obras-completas-de-martaharnecker-con-la-inclusión-de>

**Ideas for the Struggle was originally written in Venezuela in 2004. But the lessons it draws and the points it makes have it organise its members?**

**Marta Harnecker (1937-2019) was a Chilean sociologist, political scientist, journalist and activist. She visited Australia and addressed various meetings in 2016.**

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