

Book reviews

An urgent discussion

**The Question of Strategy,
Socialist Register 2013**

It's rare to find a weekend when there isn't a conference convened to co-ordinate some element of the struggle against the coalition's austerity programme or to launch another specific anti-cuts campaign. Activists' diaries are filled with meetings, rallies, demos, pickets and marches. And just when the scale of resistance activity may appear to recede, it springs back into dramatic life again, often around a new issue or in a new form.

The emergence of the disability movement and the direct action campaigns by DPAC and Black Triangle against Atos, chaining wheelchairs together to block city centres, and the unions' cleaners' charter campaign, setting up soup kitchens outside the offices of low pay employers, are just further recent inspirational examples.

For the anti-capitalist left, however, all this activity must have a purpose beyond simple oppositionism.

When the economic crisis hit five years ago, the traditional, organised left initially concentrated on analysing and explaining its causes and likely consequences. Its lumbering mechanisms and sectarian divisions meant that very soon it was overtaken by new social movements like Occupy and UK Uncut.

This focus on activism or movementism, combined with a deep scepticism of past vanguardist or social

democratic organisational strategies, has meant there has been little if any serious discussion about a long term political anti-capitalist strategy. The horizontalism of the new social movements is a welcome challenge to stultifying hierarchies but also brings with it the potential for stifling long term strategic discussion and decision making.

The time for strategy has now urgently come. This year's *Socialist Register* specifically addresses 'The Question of Strategy' by surveying the lessons to be learnt by the left from the experience of the struggles across Europe, Latin America and South Africa.

Positively, the *SR* editors point out that the crisis and the emergence of the social movements have put both capitalism

anti-capitalist alternative to neoliberal austerity programmes. Increasingly the left is being forced to accept that to rise to this challenge it needs to build a new infrastructure, based upon new forms and principles of organising and mobilising.

There are plenty of examples in *SR* 2013 of what to avoid. Steve Hellman charts the catastrophic tactical mistakes and organisational failings of the Italian Communist Party, once the largest such party in western Europe. And Christoph Spehr demonstrates through the history of the German left that the time for vanguardist parties has passed.

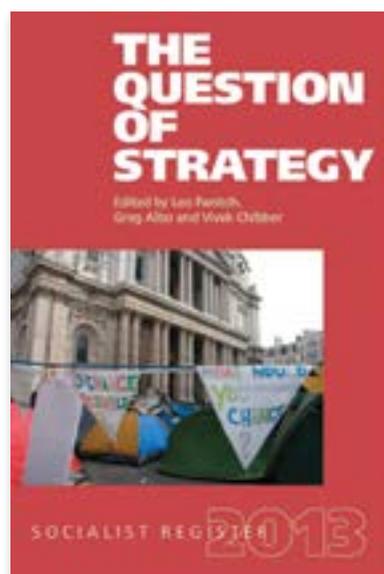
It is also hard to read the description by John S Saul of the capitulation to capitalism by the ANC and what he calls the jettisoning of the dreams of a socialist future for South Africa. Even here, though, he reports on South Africa becoming a world leader in grassroots protest.

Syriza in Greece has been the most successful in mobilising popular and electoral support for an anti-capitalist alternative. It is described by Michalis Spourdalakis as a 'mass connectivity party' in contrast to the old conception of a mass party. The difference, he explains, is that while a mass party sought to unite all within it to support the leadership's challenge for or management of state power, the mass connectivity party seeks to connect diverse movements into a stable federation to develop political capacities as much as changing state policies.

The challenge Syriza has set itself is to build upon the experience of the social movements while moving beyond their indifference to party organisation. Johanna Brenner and Nancy Holmstrom suggest that vital lessons can be learnt from the commitment of socialist-feminist theory and practice to organisational structures that are non-hierarchical, democratic and more inclusive.

The electoral dominance of the Labour Party in UK politics, and the repeated failed attempts to launch an electoral alternative to its left, mean that questions of electoral politics are even more complex here. But that should not prevent those of us on the anti-capitalist left from coming together to discuss political strategy, especially if Labour returns to power and seeks to implement its own austerity programme. If and when that happens, it will have been worth reading *SR* 2013 beforehand.

John McDonnell MP



and class back on the political agenda. The slogan 'We are the 99 per cent' profoundly inserted the language of class back into public debate and, as Greg Albo demonstrates, a number of core positions have come to the fore as a distinctive socialist contribution on how to exit from the economic crisis. They include a default and the restructuring of debt, nationalisation and democratic control of the banks, ending the cuts and the adoption of a green economic transition.

Nevertheless, although capitalism remains in economic crisis, so far it is politically secure. In Europe in particular, no political force has emerged that has been successful in maintaining a consistent challenge and securing political office to provide a serious