# Resisting barbarism: Contours of the global rebellion

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The last twelve months were defined by the dramatic return of sustained and militant protests. Around the world, workers and students poured onto the streets demanding fundamental social change. “Much of the world at this moment is a laboratory searching for the cure for capitalism, and the social scientists running the experiments are in the streets”[[1]](#endnote-2) wrote veteran US socialist Dan La Botz. Jack Shenker writing in the *Guardian* identified the youth leading these revolts as “the children of the financial crisis – a generation that has come of age during the strange and febrile years after the collapse of a broken economic and political orthodoxy, and before its replacement has emerged”.[[2]](#endnote-3)

The causes of the rebellion have been widely discussed by a press corps disturbed by their insurrectionary verve. The *New York Times* has suddenly rediscovered the existence of workers and the poor, describing the protests as “a louder-than-usual howl against elites in countries where democracy is a source of disappointment, corruption is seen as brazen, and a tiny political class lives large while the younger generation struggles to get by”.[[3]](#endnote-4)

The revival of revolt should come as no surprise. The post-GFC era has seen the intensification of class war through low pay, high rates of youth unemployment, unaffordable housing and education and an ostentatiously wide gap between rich and poor. These factors combine to produce a generation pessimistic about their future and angry about their present.

The mass strikes that shook France at the end of 2019 are typical. Emmanuel Macron was elected as a centrist saviour – neither left nor right but modern. In reality his presidency sought to reboot the French economy through savage attacks on workers and their organisations, most recently with proposed cuts to pensions. Under pressure from the rank and file, unions have called a number of major general strikes, which have been strengthened by more localised but ongoing actions by railway workers, petrol workers, teachers and others. Actions continued throughout Christmas holidays, as activists refused to give Macron the present of social peace. At the time of writing, the strikes had been running for 29 days straight, the longest period of continuous strike action since 1968. The determination of the Yellow Vest protesters prepared the ground for this breakthrough, normalising widespread and militant opposition to Macron. These crucial events are a reminder that the West will not remain immune to the social eruptions being seen in Santiago, Baghdad and Hong Kong. By bringing the global revolt to the imperial centre, French strikers have made it possible to imagine the defeat of neoliberalism at the core of the capitalist system.

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For those looking, the first signs of the coming storm were visible late in 2018. Following weeks of militant protests by the Yellow Vests in France, Algeria and Sudan exploded with revolutionary fervour. North Africa thrummed to the beat of rebellion as protesters packed squares, brought down tyrants in quick succession, and once again began to dream of a democratic and socially just society. The Sudanese movement was particularly notable, led as it was by the Sudanese Professionals Association. This organisation echoed the long traditions of working class politics in that country, and gave the movement much needed backbone in both an organisational and political sense. After months of recurring street protests and strikes, an uneasy compromise was negotiated with the military. Many rightly criticised the final deal as too much of a concession to the old regime. Yet as Gilbert Achcar argues in this journal, the ongoing strength of the SPA and broader mobilisations mean that, as in Tunisia post-2011, the space remains open for further struggles.

Just as these negotiations were coming to a close, news began to trickle in of sizeable protests in Hong Kong. Having long established itself as an investment hub linking the Chinese bourgeoisie with the giants of global capital, its reputation was that of a corporate paradise. Back in 2014, the Umbrella Movement had presented a very different view of the city-state; a place of enormous inequality, growing attacks on already limited democratic freedoms, and a population determined to resist encroaching dictatorship. Those protests were repressed and their leaders imprisoned, but the same issues brought demonstrators back to the streets in unprecedented numbers in 2019, triggered this time by the proposed extradition law. It was impossible to ignore the movement after 1 July, when thousands of activists stormed the Legislative Council complex and trashed the pseudo-parliament. Intriguingly, the aftermath of this aggressive action saw little in the way of denunciations, and popular support for the movement remained high. This was demonstrated on 18 August, when an estimated two million people flooded the streets.

This pattern held through the year. There have been ebbs and flows in the mobilisations, yet the mass of people still view protesters favourably. Even the front line fighters, who engage in serious street fighting with police on a daily basis, are viewed fondly. To the distant observer reliant on the mainstream media, it seemed that the dramatic battles around the occupied universities could be one step too far, isolating the militants and giving the state *carte blanche* to brutally repress them. Yet the experience showed once again, that when the cause is just, people will accept and even celebrate violent struggle.

The occupation of the Polytechnic, which should find a place among the most heroic of all time, confirms this prognosis. Daily dispatches from *Red Flag* editor Ben Hillier described the defiant mood:

“If we burn, you burn with us.” For days, hundreds of young women and men raced frantically to barricade every entrance and exit. In the canteen they stockpiled noodles, biscuits, muesli bars, and bottles of water. Along with their supporters, they took over the retail shops and turned them into 24-hour communal kitchens. They set up medical stations with boxes and boxes of supplies. They collected for distribution hundreds of gas masks, goggles, fresh clothes, towels and soap. They armed themselves with bins full of broken paving bricks and garden stones, baseball bats, hammers and metal bars pilfered from railings along the roadsides. And they built an arsenal of Molotov cocktails, gas bombs, flour bombs and dye bombs. By Saturday afternoon, there were hundreds of petrol bombs to feed the front lines – and for the next 36 hours, a group of about 30 young people worked tirelessly to keep production going as the war raged around them.[[4]](#endnote-5)

The people of Hong Kong responded with mass solidarity to growing police attacks on the university, with thousands thronging to public spaces across the region to divide police forces and assist the besieged activists to make an escape. This experience, one of many, reflects the findings of research into popular attitudes. Polling done by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in October found that 59 percent agreed that “when large-scale protests cannot force the government to respond, it is understandable that protesters would take radical actions”.[[5]](#endnote-6) An impressive 49 percent rated their trust of the police at 0 on a scale of 0–10, while less than 10 percent blamed protesters for the escalating violence.[[6]](#endnote-7) All of this was shown, yet again, in big wins for pro-democracy candidates in the elections to the district council elections.

Aside from the movement’s unashamed militancy and widespread popularity, its other remarkable feature has been its longevity. Protesters have so far faced down violent assaults by gangsters linked to pro-Beijing politicians, intense police repression and the constant threat of military intervention by China. The latter was signalled early on, when Beijing sent dozens of troop-carrying trucks to neighbouring Shenzhen province. Coming soon after the anniversary of the Tiananmen uprising, activists had every reason to take this not-so-subtle warning seriously. Yet they have persisted, winning their first demand, the withdrawal of the extradition bill, and popularising the demand for universal suffrage in electing the legislature and chief executive.[[7]](#endnote-8) The enormous rally on New Year’s Day, chanting “resist tyranny: join a union”, will surely have sent shivers down the spine of tyrants in Beijing. There is no sign that the movement is exhausting itself.

While Hong Kong successfully captured the world’s attention, it could be read as an anomaly. But mass protests in Puerto Rico, Catalunya, Ecuador, Chile, Haiti, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and others made the pattern clearer.

The return of revolutionary struggle to the Middle East and North Africa is perhaps the most inspiring aspect of the new wave of revolt. After the devastation wreaked on the Syrian people for daring to challenge tyranny, it seemed likely that decades would have to pass before a new outbreak of struggle. Not so. Moved by events in Sudan and Algeria, activists in Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon have had the courage to throw themselves at the mercy of history once again. Protesters in Iraq deserve special mention. It is breathtaking to think of the determination required to continually protest in a country so ravaged by local and international elites, where hundreds have been killed by a government prepared to use machine guns on unarmed civilians. It is also highly significant that the protests against the Iranian-backed, sectarian Shi’ite government started in the predominantly Shi’ite south. That this kind of anti-sectarian uprising could then overflow into Iran is momentous. It is an example of the terrible cynicism that has distorted large parts of the left that some have failed to recognise the uprising in Iran as part of the global rebellion against neoliberalism. The reality is that these embryonic developments, along with the protests in traditional Shi’ite areas in southern Lebanon and Baalbek, offer the possibility of constructing a new identity for Shi’ite activism, free from the counter-revolutionary influence of the ayatollahs.

The movements in Latin America, particularly in Chile, have been noteworthy for the relatively strong influence of the left. For some time, the crisis of reformist governments across the continent seemed to be creating the conditions for an inevitable expansion of the hard right, symbolised by the victory of Bolsonaro in Brazil. Yet the underlying social and economic polarisation continues to find expression on the left as well as right, meaning the right has faced considerable resistance.

The radicalism and breadth of protests in the last year have led some to describe it as a Latin American Spring. In Ecuador, an attempt to increase the cost of fuel was repulsed following militant demonstrations, while protests in Haiti and Honduras have spent months demanding the fall of their US-backed presidents. An attempted coup in Bolivia was met with a spontaneous uprising of overwhelmingly Indigenous workers and peasants, though Movement for Socialism (MAS) has subsequently agreed to wind it up and allow the coup leader to remain in power in exchange for a new election. Protests in Puerto Rico brought down a government, and a general strike in Colombia evolved into a broader rebellion against the right wing regime. Until now, Argentina has been pacified by the prospect of the incoming populist Peronist government. Yet the severe economic crisis engulfing the country, the neoliberal nature of the new administration and the relative strength of the revolutionary left means that struggle is likely. Much of this was prefigured by the welcome resurgence of women’s organising in recent years, with huge protests and strikes on International Women’s Day demanding abortion rights and an end to sexual violence among other things.

If the situation in Latin America deserves more attention, Chile demands it. Numerous protests have shaken Piñera’s grip on power and the regime’s links to Pinochet’s neoliberal dictatorship have been exposed. These include a constitution from the Pinochet era that has barely been altered and a willingness to deploy the military to repress protesters. Piñera embodies much of this continuity; his elder brother served as a key minister under Pinochet, and Piñera is on the record as opposing Pinochet’s 1998 arrest. The mass movement in opposition to this vicious government has combined mass street demonstrations with working class actions shaped by existing – though much weakened – left traditions. Strikes by sections of the working class have been important, and have helped make the Chilean protests the most political and explicitly left wing of the revolts. This is reflected in the fact that the demand for a constituent assembly, which for its all its faults is a slogan of the left, has captured the imagination of millions. It is too early to tell whether the constitutional process initiated by Piñera will be sufficient to appease the movement, but it will leave an impact regardless.

As with any such wave of rebellion, there are both universal and locally specific dynamics to the struggles. Economic inequality is an obvious common factor. Another is the central role played by women. A Chilean feminist collective’s artistic denunciation of Piñera’s regime has been replicated in mass actions around the world. There have been strong mobilisations of women in Hong Kong, Sudan, France and Lebanon, with women leading protests as well as fighting police and reactionary thugs on the streets.

The fight to defend and extend democracy is another common factor in these struggles, just as it was back in 2011. Catalunya rose up after the supreme court handed down harsh sentences to politicians for the “crime” of organising a referendum. This flagrant act of suppression and the struggle it triggered shares some similarities with the protests in Hong Kong and to a lesser extent Scotland, being largely framed around democratic rights and freedoms. Protests in Sudan, Algeria, Egypt and Hong Kong also have had democratic aspirations at their core. As Lenin explained in 1903, “without political freedom, all forms of worker representation will remain pitiful frauds; the proletariat will remain as before in prison, without the light, air and space needed to conduct the struggle for its full liberation”.[[8]](#endnote-9)

The issues of democracy and inequality are fundamentally interrelated. In an article discussing the success of pro-democracy candidates in Hong Kong elections, the *South China Morning Post* explained that “inaction in land and housing production, plus the widening wealth gap, sowed the seeds of separatism and disaffection towards mainland China among young people, with growing doubts about their future in a rising China”.[[9]](#endnote-10) Many who have reported on Hong Kong insist on emphasising the democratic component, yet it is unlikely that broad support for the movement would be so high in a less dramatically unequal society.[[10]](#endnote-11) These connections can also be found in Scotland and to a lesser extent Catalunya. In both cases independence is associated with a more progressive and inclusive welfare state.

Further, it is not just in dictatorships or struggles for self-determination that the question of democracy has emerged. Slogans for real democracy have been raised even in countries that already possess formal bourgeois parliaments, and where protests began with more strictly economic demands. The slogan from the M15 movement in the Spanish state, “All of them must go!”, has spontaneously arisen in country after country, finding its most direct translation in Lebanon with the chant “All of them means all of them”. Importantly, these grievances cannot be accommodated by a simple shuffling of the personalities in power. We have already noted the demands of protesters in Chile to abolish the Pinochet-era constitution. In Lebanon, hostility to the sectarian system introduced by the French and strengthened by the 1990 Taif accords is palpable, and similar sentiments are expressed across the globe, from Paris to Baghdad. This line of attack on the system isn’t surprising, given the decades of bipartisan, or multipartisan in the case of Lebanon, neoliberal policies. In the absence of a substantial organised radical left, this fusion of economic and political demands via explosive and uncontrolled movements seems to be the new pattern of social struggle in the post-GFC era.

## Challenges and opportunities

It would be naive not to see the many challenges that these new movements will face. Most have taken place in countries in the global South, and have faced a global ruling class more cynical than in 2011. Then, the media thronged to cover the heroic activists, with *Time* magazine awarding “the protester” person of the year. Media organisations sought to make a name for themselves by reporting with exhilarating immediacy from the Arab street, led by the newly launched Al Jazeera English. That coverage helped spread the rebellion from the Middle East to Europe and North America, in the form of the movement of the squares, and then Occupy. This time the corporate media have been far less inclined to provide revolutionary activists with a platform. Hong Kong is a partial exception, where activists have been battling it out with Xi Jinping’s thugs. Still, the activists there have not enjoyed the unambiguous support of a Western ruling class, who now fear the democratic impulses of the masses far more than their geopolitical rivals. Their struggle is not front page news, nor has there been any meaningful assistance offered.

On a related point, protesters this time around have faced states more immediately ready to resort to repression. This is most vividly illustrated by the violence of the coup and anti-coup actions in Latin America, but also in the massacres seen in Iraq and Iran. Accompanying the preparedness to use force has been an unwillingness to make meaningful concessions. Even in Chile and Hong Kong, the sites of the most sustained struggles, little has been achieved in policy terms. In the heartland of supposedly advanced capitalism, the French police have used brutal tactics against unarmed protesters and strikers. In an extraordinary break with tradition, the bourgeois media have at times been forced to admit that “violence is sometimes the answer”, aptly denouncing double standards of mainstream reporting:

Calling for protesters to always remain nonviolent winds up normalizing further state violence as an acceptable response when protesters hit back. Even if protesters only resort to violence after attacks by security forces, it is painted as “both sides” being violent in “clashes”, despite inequalities in firepower or protesters condemning violence within their ranks. The burden is placed on protesters to sacrifice themselves in the name of nonviolence, rather than putting the onus on better-armed and trained security forces to maintain their own nonviolent discipline. When even security forces in liberal democracies such as France use disproportionate violence against protesters, it is crucial not to deflect responsibility from state actors, who are usually more organized and far more militarily powerful than protesters.[[11]](#endnote-12)

Yet should the protests continue, they will face more sophisticated methods of counter-revolution. The betrayal of the Sudanese revolution by the Forces for Freedom and Change, and the vacillations of the bureaucratic leadership of the SPA, were an early taste of how immense radicalism can be led down a blind alley. A similar danger presents itself in Chile, where the Communist Party and the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) are desperately attempting to engineer a parliamentary solution to the social crisis. The government’s decision to initiate months of wrangling around a constitutional referendum is an obvious trap. In Lebanon and Iraq sectarianism is entrenched in a host of institutions, not to mention social and geographical realities, and will not easily be overcome despite promising early signs. Elsewhere, imperial interventions, be they military or fiscal, make genuine social transformation difficult and provide ready excuses for hesitant reformers. In all these ways and more, history has repeatedly shown that spontaneous uprisings are not enough to overcome the many trenches and fortresses protecting the power of capital. Faced with an immovable state, a previously unstoppable movement can easily flip from supposedly leaderless autonomism into bureaucratic electoralism, as per Podemos.[[12]](#endnote-13) The absence of a sizeable revolutionary left inevitably puts a political ceiling on the development and horizons of even the most heroic struggles.

The other limit of the struggles relates to their class character. While the majority of those mobilised are members of the urban working class understood in the Marxist sense, they are not mobilised as such. Rather, they act as individual citizens: as democrats, feminists, environmental activists, and so on. These kinds of popular movements can pressure governments in crucial ways, and provide rich experiences and much needed skills for those who participate. But in a time of widespread economic stagnation and instability, they are not enough to force the ruling class to implement substantial reforms. Without the unique leverage created by stopping the flow of profits at the point of production, protesters risk exhaustion, governmental repression or some combination of the two. This makes the strikes in France immensely significant, not only for their geopolitical location but their methods of combat. If the rank and file union groups can continue to organise independently of the moribund bureaucracy, if the strikes continue to grow through the summer, and if they can win wider support from students and others, there is a good chance that the movement could decisively defeat Macron for the first time. These are, of course, substantial ifs. But in such a scenario, the demonstrated effectiveness of working class power could inspire copycat actions around the world, as per the occupation of public squares in 2011.

Despite these many challenges, the experience of Hong Kong and to an even greater extent, Chile, offers real hope. Successive generations of activism in both countries have led to more radical and sustained protests than elsewhere. Chile has now seen three cycles of protests, each more radical than the last. Protests started among school students in 2006, before spreading to universities in 2012. In the latest round of strikes and protests, radicals trained by previous struggles have taken a leading role, including in strategic sectors such as the dock workers of Valparaiso. Yet Chile also shows how sustained periods of struggle can revitalise reformist forces – former student leader Camila Vallejo has helped rebuild the credibility of the Communist Party, while many of the leading cadres of the Broad Front were mask-wearing autonomists just a few years earlier.

Studying these rich experiences is vitally important. This is doubly the case for those with the misfortune of living in the English-speaking world, which suffers from historically weak levels of class struggle and a left that is for the most part trapped in the orbit of electoral celebrities. With the return of mass movements globally, it is useful to recall Lenin’s backhanded defence of electoral work:

The Bolsheviks regard direct struggle of the masses…as the highest form of the [socialist] movement, and parliamentary activity without the direct action of the masses as the lowest form of the movement.[[13]](#endnote-14)

This is a particularly important argument to emphasise given Jeremy Corbyn’s substantial defeat in the 2019 UK elections. There is much to unpack and critique from this experience: the two most obvious issues being the endless series of concessions he made to moderates in the party and the failure of the Labour left to organise and support class or social struggle.Yet these weaknesses are the product of Labour’s strategy – Corbyn’s as much as Tony Blair’s – of prioritising the electoral victory of a broad-church party. Any organisation that contains figures such as Tom Watson and Margaret Hodge will not and cannot bring about any kind of radical transformation. Certainly not in the absence of substantial struggle. Corbyn’s commitment to the unity of the Labour party led him to backflip on Britain’s Trident nuclear program, on freedom of movement, on Palestinian liberation, self-determination for Scotland and more. Despite this bitter defeat, and notwithstanding the fact that many on the Labour left continue to focus on internal party affairs, the key factor shaping British politics in coming years will be whether unions and the left can generate grassroots resistance to the coming onslaught. With climate change, anti-migrant racism, economic inequality and the various national questions looming as issues, there is no shortage of openings to organise.

## Climate crisis, climate rebellion

The issue of climate change has thus far proved to be the major flashpoint for political resistance in the global north. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report last year gave humanity twelve years to avoid catastrophic climate damage. The prospect of a time limit has raised the stakes in climate organising. Yet, as Hannah Holleman points out in her useful research on the Dust Bowl crisis of the 1930s, warnings about climate destruction have been seen and ignored before.[[14]](#endnote-15) What was decisive in this case was the decision made by a young woman from Sweden, Greta Thunberg, to skip class every Friday until something was done to address the coming climate disaster.

Led by Thunberg, the climate strikes have provided a focal point around which a broad coalition of high school activists and their supporters have coalesced. Thunberg herself is rightly revered for her incisive speeches that sheet home the blame for planetary destruction to the insatiable greed of a global elite. These arguments, and the movement that she has mobilised in her wake, have noticeably transformed the politics of the issue. While not explicitly rejecting ethical consumption, the new movement centres the need for a total social rebellion against the complicity and complacency of governments and corporations. The choice of the word strike is significant, and offers opportunities for class-based collaboration that have been realised in some places.

The likelihood that we may have already crossed a number of irreversible planetary boundaries that will now trigger runaway climate change is sobering, to say the least. Yet as Sarah Garnham writes in her survey of the state of the climate movement, this is no reason to give up. There is still much to fight for, both in limiting the scale of planetary destruction and in ameliorating the social impact of the enormous changes that are already guaranteed. A number of other articles in this edition attempt to engage seriously with arguments and issues raised by the new movement. Da Silva presents important research regarding the centrality of coal to the Australian economy, and draws out the revolutionary political implications. Garnham assesses the politics of the global climate movement and makes a cohesive argument for a mass, militant, anti-capitalist perspective. In the midst of a multi-faceted climate movement that shows no sign of slowing, these arguments will be more important than ever.

## Economic fragility

The poor state of the economy has returned as a political issue. As has been well documented by Marxist economists such as Michael Roberts and Joseph Choonara, the recovery that followed the global economic crisis of 2007-8 has been uneven and shallow. In many countries wages have stagnated or continued their decline, even as rates of unemployment reach new lows. Mainstream commentators have been surprised by this practical refutation of one of the core assumptions of bourgeois economic theory. Yet low rates of unionisation and strike action mean that workers continue to be vulnerable to ruling class attacks, even as their objective capacity for struggle has improved. This state of affairs is itself partially a function of the historically weak state of the radical and revolutionary left.

As Tom Bramble suggests later in this journal, the point of Marxist economics is not to predict precisely the moment at which the economy will crash. Rather it is to explore the tensions and contradictions which make capitalist crisis inevitable, which in turn shape political developments. That we are on the cusp of some kind of recession seems likely. Unlike the previous crisis, it seems that the trouble will begin in what are sometimes called emerging markets. A number of important countries in this category have experienced slow or negative growth at various points in the last twelve months, including Turkey, Mexico, Argentina, South Africa, Russia and Brazil. India’s GDP growth declined rapidly in 2019, while China continues to grow but at the lowest rates seen in decades.

A new crisis would have huge implications. From a strictly economic perspective, the aftermath of the GFC saw central banks engage in significant monetary stimulus, in the form of quantitative easing and low (and sometimes negative) interest rates. This worked to stave off total collapse, but the inability to phase out this stimulus means that the same tools will not be available next time around.[[15]](#endnote-16) While some hope for a new era of pro-working class stimulus measures, the current preference still seems to be for intensified attacks on workers via increasingly anti-democratic state institutions. As monetary policy has undeniably failed to end the crisis, there has been a growing openness towards Keynesian fiscal policies. It is important to see that this in no way reflects a left or welfarist turn among economic managers. Thus far, stimulus spending has overwhelmingly taken the form of subsidies and handouts to capital, with no sign of an uptick in investment in programs and services relied on by workers. Macron’s massive pension cuts are typical; the decades-long attack on the welfare state continues.

The global imperial order has seen real changes in the past decade. China’s remarkable rise now poses a threat to the United States’ position as the sole global hegemon, though this possibility remains decades in the future. The recent trade skirmishes between the two countries have sent jitters through the global economy, and portend greater tensions yet to come. Similarly, growing US support for right wing attacks on centre-left governments in Latin America reflects at least in part a desire to undermine their close ties with the Chinese regime. At a bare minimum, a new economic crisis would encourage a new round of protectionism and beggar-thy-neighbour policies. Even without such a crisis, it is hard to see the situation unfolding without a dramatic escalation of tensions and possibly open conflict. The abrupt rise in anti-Chinese discourse in American and Australian politics is concerning, as is the total lack of any opposition from any political leaders, including from those like Bernie Sanders and Richard di Natale, who are generally perceived as on the left. Tensions with Iran also continue to escalate. Though both nations have more interest in diplomatic sparring than all-out war, the risk of a serious military conflict has grown substantially in the wake of criminal US airstrikes on important Iranian targets.

These turbulent economic and geopolitical dynamics have fundamentally transformed the political landscape. We have seen how most of the semi-revolutionary uprisings of 2019 are the consequence of a decade of economic hardship: a new crash would mean further bitterness and new rounds of rebellion. Of less importance, though still portentous, has been the fracturing of a series of parties of the neoliberal centre, who have struggled to maintain their grip on a disaffected body politic. This has been manifested somewhat on the left, but more decisively on the right. In their cartoonish supervillainy, figures such as Bolsonaro, Trump and Johnson have appealed to an enraged middle class desperate to preserve its traditional privileges and reference points. Their impact on their respective countries is likely to last more than one electoral cycle. Across Europe the extreme right are on the march, most clearly on the eastern fringes of the continent, but now spreading elsewhere. In Italy, it is hard to see how the country will avoid a far right *Lega* government in the near future. In the Spanish state the far right is resurgent, having overtaken Podemos as the third-largest group in the national parliament. In Germany, the centre-right is now debating the possibility of forming a coalition government with the *Alternative für Deutschland*, which would put fascists in positions of power in that country for the first time since 1945. Though this rise is by no means irreversible, there is a clear and profoundly dangerous pattern. The necessity of building anti-fascist movements has never been clearer, and Italy’s “sardines” movement proves that it is possible.

## Turmoil on the left

The situation facing the revolutionary left is thus a complex one. Explosive mass struggles exist alongside an extreme right that seems daily more confident. Joyful movements of millions fighting to save the world break out one day, the reality of accelerating environmental devastation confronts us the next.

In this otherwise dynamic situation, the ongoing weakness of revolutionary organisations remains a frustrating constraint. The collapse of the International Socialist Organization in the US, the bitter split in the Committee for a Workers’ International, and the more general stagnation of revolutionary forces both reflect and exacerbate this situation. This is not the place for a systematic accounting of these developments, although decades of low levels of class struggle in the advanced capitalist world is clearly a major factor.

In contrast to the difficulties of the revolutionary left, neo-reformist currents have grown in size and confidence. Reflecting this has been the return of Karl Kautsky to the centre of theoretical discussions on the left in recent years. Kautsky was an advocate of social democracy at a time when gradual, eternal growth seemed inevitable, when war seemed impossible, and the expansion of democratic rights seemed irresistible. World War One proved him disastrously wrong on every count, and his undying belief in the German constitution later paved the way for Hitler. The failed political perspectives of this tradition have nothing to offer a modern left. Indeed, in the face of the multiple crises discussed earlier, the inadequacies of fatalistic and gradualist social-democratic perspectives should be more obvious than ever. To put it bluntly: only a fool or a knave would bet on decades of cumulative reform in a world of falling profits and rising oceans.

Despite these difficulties, there has rarely been a time where the necessity of revolutionary socialist politics and organisation has been more evident. Marxism comes into its own in times of contradiction and conflict; a unique tool that can help orient the left to act in a world pregnant with crises and possibilities. In this context, we are pleased to publish an interview with Isabelle Garo that makes a clear philosophical defence of Marxism in opposition to theories of populism and horizontalism. If we return to La Botz’s evocative description of the global revolts as mass social experiments, there is absolutely no need to start this research from scratch. The past can offer insights and opportunities for strategic reflection. Yet without a sizeable and interventionist revolutionary left, these lessons are buried, and struggles for social transformation proceed in a blind and unconscious way. Combined with the parlous state of the world economy, this makes even small victories harder to come by. Sandra Bloodworth’s reflection on the French Popular Front and Nick Everett’s examination of the Jesse Jackson campaign are thus best read as attempts to draw from the rich history of the workers’ movement to make sharp interventions into contemporary politics.

Hopefully Australian readers will excuse the overwhelmingly international focus of this editorial. Until recently, politics in Australia was as desolate as the charred remains of our precious forests, animals and homes. But even before the fires, forests in Queensland were being cleared at a rate of 1,500 football fields per day, mostly for beef production and other agribusiness.[[16]](#endnote-17) In the face of broad public desire for climate action, the major parties have doubled down on their commitment to coal and extractive industries more broadly. Those who resist our slide into Armageddon are faced with new bipartisan laws that clamp down on the right to protest, particularly against fossil fuels. Anthony Albanese, formally of the Labor Left, has shifted the party further to the right, justifying his cynical support for the fossil fuel industry as a defence of the rights of mining workers. The unions remain weak, and rather than initiate new organising drives officials have prioritised campaigning for Labor and merging their meagre forces to create new bureaucratic monstrosities. Worse, following the failure of the Change the Rules campaign, they have plumbed shocking new depths. When faced with Morrison’s vicious anti-union agenda, union leaders chose to collaborate with far right politicians rather than mobilising their members and supporters. Meanwhile the hapless Greens remain committed to the carbon tax and, at least for now, have been totally unable to make the most of a newfound environmental consciousness among broad layers of the population.[[17]](#endnote-18)

The size and vigour of the climate strikes, which mobilised hundreds of thousands on 20 September 2019, has been a healthy antidote to the malaise of official politics. Together with the respectable turnout to disruptive actions organised by Extinction Rebellion and the Blockade IMARC coalition, there has been a substantial uptick in organising around this issue. This movement stands out for its capacity to rebuild an activist and socialist culture on campuses, in trade unions, and across society.

This climate activism has taken on a new urgency following the unprecedented bushfires that have ravaged the country for months. The situation has been transformed by the scale of the horror. Amidst the devastation and the endless smog, the left has a responsibility to reach out and offer a political explanation and lead. It is already widely understood that these fires are a product of government policy: they are a product of the myriad changes produced by global warming that successive governments have done nothing to avoid; but also that they reflect the systematic and criminal underfunding of firefighting and land management services produced by decades of neoliberalism.

The Morrison government, trapped by its complete loyalty to the fossil fuel industries, has been completely incapable of responding to the rising anger produced by the catastrophic fires. Each of the prime minister’s actions has only drawn more attention to his failure to comprehend the extent of the crisis and his callous indifference to the escalating human, social and environmental costs. Large demonstrations called by Uni Students for Climate Justice, including a 40,000 strong rally in Sydney in December, are a testament to the depth of anger in the broader community, as are the numerous and glorious scenes of people in affected areas sending righteous abuse his way. Morrison’s belated decision to pay volunteer firefighters a pittance for their heroic efforts is a totally inadequate policy response, but indicates the government is feeling the heat.

It is terrifying to think that the fires will last all summer. Yet so too will the crisis they have provoked, an opportunity for the climate movement to sheet home the blame for this tragedy to the climate criminals in parliament and in the capitalist class more broadly. Even when the fires ease, the disgracefully low compensation program, which offers an insulting $1,000 per adult to those who have lost their homes, will become a new target of public anger, as will the failure to invest in firefighting services. Caught unprepared by these mounting challenges, the Liberal government is highly vulnerable, just months after winning a shock election. The task is now to build a movement capable of laying the basis to destroy them and the destructive forces they represent.

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