

“Critical and Informed Thinking Is Dangerous to the Powerful”. Workers Cooperatives and Revolution

An Interview with Dr. Chris Wright

By [Chris Wright](#) and [Mohsen Abdelmoumen](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

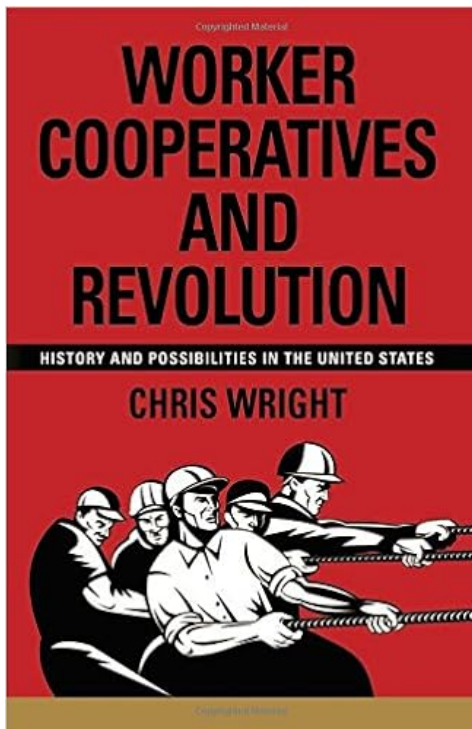
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Mohsen Abdelmoumen: You wrote “[Worker Cooperatives and Revolution](#)” where you talk about workers’ cooperatives. In this fascinating book, we note your optimism about the coming of a new era where the human is at the center. You give the example of the cooperative New Era Windows, in Chicago. In your opinion, are we in a new era where the union of workers in the form of a cooperative will shape the future of the world?

Dr. Chris Wright: I think I may have been a little too optimistic in that book about the potential of worker cooperatives. On the one hand, Marx was right that cooperatives “represent within the old form the first sprouts of the new.” They’re microcosmic socialism, since socialism is just workers’ democratic control of economic activity, which is essentially what cooperatives are. Even in the large [Mondragon](#) firms that have seen some conflicts between workers and the elected management, there is still vastly more democracy (and more equal pay) than in a typical large capitalist enterprise.

Moreover, there’s an expanding movement in the U.S and elsewhere to seed new cooperatives and promote the transformation of existing capitalist firms into co-ops (which, incidentally, are often more productive, profitable, and longer-lasting than conventional businesses). Countless activists are working to spread a cooperative ethos and build a wide range of democratic, anti-capitalist institutions, from businesses to housing to political forms like participatory budgeting. (Websites like [Shareable.net](#) and [Community-Wealth.org](#) provide information on this movement.) This whole emerging “solidarity economy” is really what interested me when I was writing the book, though I focused on worker co-ops. I was struck that the very idea of a socialist society is just the solidarity economy writ large, in that all or the majority of institutions according to both visions are supposed to be communal, cooperative, democratic, and non-exploitative.

It’s true, though, that a new society can’t emerge from grassroots initiative alone. Large-scale political action is necessary, since national governments have such immense power. Unless you can transform state policy so as to facilitate economic democratization, you’re not going to get very far. Cooperatives alone can’t get the job done. You need radical political parties, mass confrontations with capitalist authorities, every variety of disruptive “direct action,” and it will all take a very, very long time. Social revolutions on the global scale we’re talking about take generations, even centuries. It probably won’t take as long as the European transition from feudalism to capitalism, but none of us will see “socialism” in our lifetime.



Marxists like to criticize cooperatives and the solidarity economy for being only interstitial, somewhat apolitical, and not sufficiently confrontational with capitalism, but, as I argue in the book, this criticism is misguided. A socialist transformation of the country and the world will take place on many levels, from the grassroots to the most ambitiously statist. And all the levels will reinforce and supplement each other. As the cooperative sector grows, more resources will be available for “statist” political action; and as national politics becomes more left-wing, state policy will promote worker takeovers of businesses. There’s a role for every type of leftist activism.

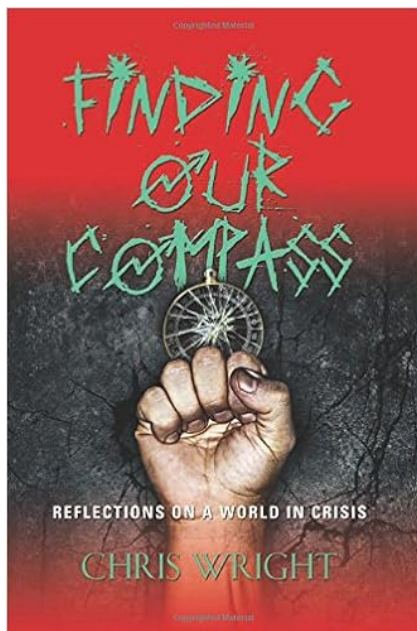
MA: Do you not think that the weakening of the trade union movement in the USA and elsewhere in the world further encourages the voracity of the capitalist oligarchy that dominates the world? Does not the working class throughout the world have a vital need for a great trade union movement?

DCW: The working class desperately needs reinvigorated unions. Without strong unions, you get the most rapacious and misanthropic form of capitalism imaginable, as we’ve seen in the last forty years. Unions, which can be the basis for political parties, have always been workers’ most effective means of defense and even offense. In the U.S., it was only after the Congress of Industrial Organizations had been founded in the late 1930s that a mass middle class, supported by industrial unions with millions of members, could emerge in the postwar era. Unions were important funders and organizers of the American Civil Rights Movement, and they successfully pushed for expansion of the welfare state and workplace safety regulations. They can serve as powerful allies of environmentalists. It’s hard to imagine a livable future if organized labor isn’t resurrected and empowered.

But I don’t think there can be a return of the great postwar paradigm of industry-wide collective bargaining and nationwide social democracy. Capital has become too mobile and globalized; durable class compromises like that aren’t possible anymore. In the coming decades, the most far-reaching role of unions will be more revolutionary: to facilitate worker takeovers of businesses, the formation of left-wing political parties, popular control of industry, mass resistance to the global privatization and austerity agenda, expansion of the

public sphere, construction of international workers' alliances, etc.

Actually, I think that, contrary to old Marxist expectations, it's only in the 21st century that humanity is finally entering the age of the great apocalyptic battles between labor and capital. Marx didn't foresee the welfare state and the Keynesian compromise of the postwar period. Now that those social forms are deteriorating, organized labor can finally take up its revolutionary calling. If it and its allies fail, there's only barbarism ahead.



MA: Your book "[Finding Our Compass: Reflections on a World in Crisis](#)" asks a fundamental question, namely, do we live in a real democracy?

DCW: We certainly don't. None of us do. The U.S. has democratic forms, but substantively it's very undemocratic. Even mainstream political science recognizes this: studies have shown that the large majority of the population has essentially zero impact on policy, because they don't have enough money to influence politicians or hire lobbyists. Practically the only way for them to get their voices heard is to disrupt the smooth functioning of institutions, such as through strikes or civil disobedience. We've seen this with the gilets jaunes protests in France, and we saw it when air traffic controllers [refused to work](#) and thus ended Donald Trump's government shutdown in January 2019. We live in an oligarchy, a global oligarchy, which isn't constrained much by the normal "democratic" process of voting.

But voting can be an important tool of resistance, especially if there are genuine oppositional candidates (like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for example). In that case, society can start to become a little more democratic. So it remains essential for the left to organize electorally, even if it will take a while for there to be a big policy payoff.

MA: Do you not think a new crisis of capitalism is in progress? Does not the capitalist system generate crises?

DCW: I'm not an economist, but anyone can see that capitalism has a deep-rooted tendency to generate crises. There's a long tradition of Marxist scholarship explaining why crises of overproduction and underconsumption (among other causes) repeatedly savage capitalist economies; David Harvey, Robert Brenner, and John Bellamy Foster are some recent

scholars who have done good work on the subject. A lot of it comes down to the fact that “excessive capitalist empowerment,” to quote Harvey, leads to “wage repression” that limits aggregate demand, which constrains growth. For a while the problem doesn’t really appear because people can borrow, and are forced to borrow more and more. But accumulation of debt can’t go on forever if there’s no growth of underlying income. Huge credit bubbles appear as borrowing gets out of control and capitalists invest their colossal wealth in financial speculation, and the bubbles inevitably collapse. Then things like the Great Depression and the Great Recession happen.

As horrible as economic crises are, leftists should recognize, as Marx did, that at least they present major opportunities for organizing. It’s only in the context of long-term crisis and a decline of the middle class that there can be a transition to a new society, because crisis forces people to come together and press for radical solutions. It also destroys huge amounts of wealth, which can thin the ranks of the hyper-elite. And the enormous social discontent that results from crisis can weaken reactionary resistance to reform, as during the 1930s in the U.S. (On the other hand, fascism can also take power in such moments, unless leftists seize the initiative.)

There is no hope without crisis. That’s the paradoxical, “dialectical” lesson of Marxism.

MA: You wrote an article about Obama’s mediocrity. Don’t you think that the current US President Donald Trump is competing with Obama in mediocrity?

DCW: In the competition over who’s most mediocre, few people hold a candle to Trump. He’s just a pathetic non-entity, an almost impossibly stupid, ignorant, narcissistic, self-pitying, cruel, vulgar little embodiment of all that’s wrong with the world. He’s so far beneath contempt that even to talk about him is already to lower oneself. So in that sense, I suppose he’s a suitable ‘leader’ of global capitalism. Obama at least is a good family man, and he’s intelligent. But he’s almost as lacking in moral principles as Trump, and he has no moral courage at all. I don’t know what to say about someone who announced in 2014, as Israel was slaughtering hundreds of children in Gaza, that Israel has a right to defend itself, and went on to approve the shipment of arms to that criminal nation right in the midst of its Gaza massacre. He’s a self-infatuated megalomaniac without morality.

MA: You wrote in one of your articles that the US government considers its citizens as enemies by using generalized surveillance. Does not the real danger come from this system which spies on everyone?

DCW: I think Glenn Greenwald is right that few things are more pernicious than an expansive “national security” state. Surveillance is a key part of it, facilitating the persecution of protesters, dissenters, immigrants, and Muslims. The so-called “law and order” state is a lawless state of extreme disorder, in which power can operate with impunity. It begins to approach fascism.

One danger of the surveillance state is that it might operate like Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon: because people don’t know when they’re being watched or targeted, they monitor and regulate themselves all the time. They avoid stepping out of line, being obedient drudges and consumers. Any misstep might sweep them up in the black hole of the police state’s bureaucracy. So they internalize subservience. Of course, in our society there are many other ways of making people internalize subservience. Surveillance is only one, though a particularly vicious and dangerous one.

Another reason to be concerned is that internet companies' ability to "spy" on users allows them to censor content, whether on their own initiative or from political pressure. Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other such companies are constantly censoring leftists (and some on the right) and deleting their accounts. Critics of Israeli crimes are [especially vulnerable](#), but they're hardly alone. The only real way to solve this problem would be to make internet companies publicly owned, because private entities can do virtually whatever they want with their own property. It's absurd that leftists can connect and coordinate and build movements only subject to the approval of Mark Zuckerberg and other corporate fascists. It's also terrifying that a surveillance alliance can develop between corporate behemoths and governments. That's another feature of fascism.

MA: How do you see the inhuman treatment of Julian Assange and the persecution of him by the British and American administrations?

DCW: As left-wing commentators have said, the persecution of Assange is an assault on journalism itself, and on the very idea of challenging the powerful or holding them to account. In that sense, it's an assault on democracy. But that's pretty much always what power-structures are doing, trying to undermine democracy and expand their own power, so the vicious treatment of Assange is hardly a surprise. But I doubt that the U.S. and Britain will be able to win their war on journalism in the long run. There are just too many good journalists out there, too many activists, too many people of conscience.

MA: This capitalist society is based on consumption but boasts of concepts such as "freedom of expression", "human rights", "democracy", etc. Don't we live rather in a fascist system?

DCW: I wouldn't say the West's political economy is truly fascist. It has fascist tendencies, and it certainly cares nothing for freedom of expression, human rights, or democracy. But civil society is too vibrant and gives too many opportunities for left-wing political organizing to say that we live under fascism. The classical fascism of Italy and Germany was far more extreme than anything we're experiencing now, especially in the U.S. or Western Europe. We don't have brownshirts marching in the streets, concentration camps for radicals, assassinations of political and union leaders, or total annihilation of organized labor. There's still freedom to publish dissenting views.

But major power-structures in the U.S. would love to see fascism of some sort and are working hard to get there. And they have armies of useful idiots to do their bidding. American "libertarians," for example, of whom there are untold millions, are essentially fascist without knowing it: they want to eliminate the welfare state and regulations of business activity so as to unfetter entrepreneurial genius and maximize "liberty." They somehow don't see that in this scenario, corporations, being opposed by no countervailing forces, would completely take over the state and inaugurate the most barbarous and global tyranny in history. The natural environment would be utterly destroyed and most life on Earth would end.

In one sense of fascism, Marxists from the 1920s and 1930s would, as you suggest, say we do live in a rather fascist system. For them, the term denoted [the age of big business](#), or, more precisely, the near-fusion of business with the state. Insofar as society approached a capitalist dictatorship, it was approaching fascism. We don't literally live under that kind of dictatorship, but without determined resistance it could well be our future.

MA: Isn't there a need to reread Karl Marx? How do you explain the disappearance of critical

thinking in Western society?

DCW: I actually think there's a lot of critical thinking in Western society. The rise of "democratic socialism" in the U.S. is evidence of this, as is the popularity of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain. The left is growing internationally — although the right is too. But insofar as society suffers from a dearth of critical thinking, the reasons aren't very obscure. Critical and informed thinking is dangerous to the powerful, so they do all they can to discourage it. Lots of studies have probed the methods of corporate and state indoctrination of the public, and the enormous scale of it. Noam Chomsky is famous for his many investigations of how the powerful "manufacture consent"; one of the lessons of his work is that the primary function of the mass media is to keep people ignorant and distracted. If important information about state crimes is suppressed, as it constantly is, and instead the powerful are continually glorified, well then people will tend to be uninformed and perhaps too supportive of the elite. It's more fun, anyway, to play with phones and apps and video games and watch TV shows.

The mechanisms by which the business class promotes "stupidity" and ignorance are pretty transparent. Just look at any television commercial, or watch CNN or Fox News. It's pure propaganda and infantilization.

As for Karl Marx: there's always a need to read Marx, and to reread him. He and Chomsky are probably the two most incisive political analysts in history. But Marx was such an incredible writer too that he's a sheer joy to read, and endlessly stimulating and inspiring. He rejuvenates you. (His political pamphlets on France, for instance, are stylistic and analytic masterpieces.) Besides, you simply can't understand capitalism or history itself except through the lens of historical materialism, as [I've argued elsewhere](#).

Of course, Marx wasn't right about everything. In particular, his conception and timeline of socialist revolution were wrong. The "revolution," if it happens, will, as I said earlier, be very protracted, since the worldwide replacing of one dominant mode of production by another doesn't happen in a couple of decades. Even just on a national scale, the fact that modern nations exist in an international economy means socialism can't evolve in one country without evolving in many others at the same time.

I can't go into detail on how Marx got revolution wrong (as in his vague but overly statist notion of the "dictatorship of the proletariat"), but in *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution* I devote a couple of chapters to it. It's unfortunate that most contemporary Marxists are so doctrinaire they consider it sacrilege if you try to update or rethink an aspect of historical materialism to make it more appropriate to conditions in the 21st century, which Marx could hardly have foreseen. They're certainly not honoring the Master by thinking in terms of rigid dogma, whether orthodox Marxist or Leninist or Trotskyist.

MA: You are a humanist and the human condition is central in your work. Are you optimistic about the future of humanity?

DCW: Frankly, no, I'm not. The forces of darkness just have too much power. And global warming is too dire a threat, and humanity is doing too little to address it. It's worth reflecting that at the end of the Permian age, 250 million years ago, global warming killed off almost all life. If we don't do something about it very soon, by the end of the century there won't be any organized civilization left to protect.

And then there's the problem of billions of tons of plastic waste polluting the world, and of the extinction of insects "[threatening the collapse of nature](#)," and of dangerous imperialistic conflicts between great powers, and so on. I don't see much reason for optimism.

We know how to address global warming, for example. But the fossil fuel industry and, ironically, environmentalists are acting so as to increase the threat. According to good scientific research, as reported in the new book [A Bright Future](#) (among many others), it's impossible to solve global warming without exponentially expanding the use of nuclear power. (Contrary to popular opinion, nuclear power is generally [very safe, reliable, effective, and environmentally friendly](#).) Renewable energy can't get the job done. The world has spent [over \\$2 trillion](#) on renewables in the last decade, but carbon emissions are still rising! That level of investment in nuclear energy, which is millions of times more concentrated and powerful than diffuse solar and wind energy, could have put us well on the way to solving global warming. Instead, the crisis is getting much worse. Renewables are so intermittent and insufficient that countries are still massively investing in fossil fuels, which are incomparably more destructive than nuclear.

But the left is adamant against nuclear power, and it's very hard even to publish an article favorable to it. Only biased and misinformed articles are published, with [some exceptions](#). So the left is working to exacerbate global warming, just as the right is. Why? Ultimately for ideological reasons: most leftists like the idea of decentralization, dispersed power, community control of energy, and anti-capitalism, and these values seem more compatible with solar and wind energy than nuclear. The nuclear power industry isn't exactly a model of transparency, democracy, or political integrity.

But the Guardian environmental columnist George Monbiot is right: sometimes you have to go with a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater one, in this case the collapse of civilization and probably most life on Earth. Is that a price environmentalists are willing to pay so they can preen themselves on their political virtue? So far, it seems the answer is yes.

We humans have to break free of our tribal ways, our herd-thinking ways. We have to be more willing to think critically, self-critically, and stop being so complacent and conformist. The younger generation, actually, seems to be leading the way, for instance with the Extinction Rebellion and all the exciting forms of activism springing up everywhere. But we still have a terribly long way to go.

I haven't lost hope, but I'm not sanguine. The next twenty or thirty years will be the most decisive in human history.

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