

Opinion – A Socialist Case for Supporting Kamala Harris

Written by Ali E. Erol

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ALI E. EROL, JUL 25 2024

Supporting Kamala Harris in her 2024 presidential bid might seem contradictory for those committed to socialist politics. After all, Harris was San Francisco's District Attorney from 2004 to 2011. During that time, she implemented anti-truancy initiatives aimed at reducing school absenteeism, which faced criticism for disproportionately affecting low-income families and people of color. Despite her opposition to the death penalty, her refusal to seek it in the case of a police officer's killer was criticized. Serving as California's Attorney General from 2011 to 2017, Harris oversaw numerous marijuana-related convictions and defended California's three-strikes law, drawing criticism for contributing to mass incarceration. She also faced backlash for her office's stance on prison labor, although she later distanced herself from this position. On the other hand, she played a crucial role in securing a \$25 billion settlement for homeowners affected by the mortgage crisis, refused to defend California's ban on same-sex marriage, and worked to address the backlog of untested rape kits. As a U.S. Senator, she has supported significant criminal justice reforms, including co-sponsoring the Marijuana Justice Act to decriminalize marijuana federally and expunge past convictions.

Supporting Harris from a socialist perspective makes sense as she presents a viable path toward progressive politics. Unlike Joe Biden, who has maintained a centrist approach, further armed Israel, failed to codify Roe v. Wade, and maintained a neoliberal economic stance that neglected working-class needs, Harris has shown progressive inclinations. She can be pushed further left to adopt economic populism and address systemic injustices, which is critical to countering the far-right agenda of Trump.

Socialist groups and individuals taking strategic positions in response to the ebbs and flows of bourgeois electoral politics is not a new phenomenon. These debates have been around since the days of the International Workingmen's Association, where Marx advocated for participating in electoral politics to gain political power and use the state apparatus to implement socialist reforms. In the "Instructions for Delegates to the Geneva Congress" (1866), Marx argued for the need for the working class to engage in political action, including participating in elections. He believed that political engagement was crucial as a means to reduce harm, gain immediate benefits for the working class, and create conditions favorable for future revolutionary change.

Similarly, Rosa Luxemburg, in the introductory paragraph to *Social Reform or Revolution* wrote:

At first view, the title of this work may be found surprising. Can the Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the Social-Democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal – the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labor. Between social reforms and revolution, there exists for the Social Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.

The important thing to note, and Luxemburg especially emphasizes, is the end goal of this kind of organization. In the same work, she writes "that the present State is not "society" representing the "rising working class." It is itself the

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representative of capitalist society. It is a class state. Therefore its reform measures are not an application of “social control,” that is, the control of society working freely in its labor process. They are forms of control applied by the class organization of Capital to the production of Capital. The so-called social reforms are enacted in the interests of Capital.” But as she later notes, these are the tools of bourgeoisie control to be abandoned during the revolutionary struggle—not when the proletariat is still harmed and oppressed by the conditions of the capitalist mode of production. In her words, participating in electoral politics, strategically casting votes, working through the legal structure, and taking opportunities to organize is “the attitude of the proletariat while in the bounds of the capitalist State,” not when they are free of those chains.

Within this framework, we can revisit the Eight Point Brief for LEV (Lesser Evil Voting) written by John Halle and Noam Chomsky, which they wrote for the 2016 election cycle. They argued that those who are concerned with radical social change significantly reduce the potential harm inflicted by far-right policies, thereby protecting vulnerable communities. Moreover, it positions the left to continue organizing and pushing for progressive changes within a less hostile political environment. LEV can thus be seen as a tactical move that aligns with the broader goal of achieving long-term revolutionary objectives by preventing immediate and severe setbacks.

One issue that can immediately address her past record with incarceration as well as with the outstanding harm the prison industrial complex is dealing on communities of color is the federal rescheduling of cannabis under the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). This process involves moving cannabis from its current classification as a Schedule I controlled substance (which indicates a high potential for abuse and no accepted medical use) to a lower schedule (Schedule II, III, IV, or V) that acknowledges its medical uses and reduces regulatory restrictions. With this reform, Harris would also have the chance to pardon sentences related to cannabis use and possession, therefore taking steps towards repairing some of the harm she has caused to communities of color.

Moreover, we can expect Harris to make considerable reforms in the area of reproductive justice – especially in the context of the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* and the increased conservative control of the Supreme Court. Not only has she made repeated commitments to reproductive health but also got significant support from groups who are working to codify reproductive freedoms into law.

Harris’s stance on international politics is more ambiguous – but there are pointers. Harris is less hawkish on Israel than Biden, and her noted absence when Netanyahu addressed the US Congress drew media attention. Moreover, Harris repeated her calls for a cease-fire and signaled a policy shift between her and President Biden. Her more progressive stance, in general, combined with her legal background might also be an indication that she is more amenable to follow ICJ rulings as a compass for US foreign policy.

Supporting Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election is a strategic move that aligns with socialist principles and politics. Despite her past, Harris presents a viable path toward progressive politics, offering opportunities to address systemic injustices and push for economic populism. Her potential to reschedule cannabis under the Controlled Substances Act, advance reproductive justice, and adopt a more humanitarian approach in international relations are areas where she can make substantial progressive changes. Thus, from a socialist perspective, supporting Harris is not a contradiction but a strategic step toward achieving broader revolutionary objectives.

About the author:

Ali E. Erol is an associate professor of the practice in the Department of Communication, teaching courses on intercultural communication, gender & sexuality, fascist rhetoric, consumerism & capitalism, and research methods. His current book project focuses on intercultural communication from a critical perspective. His first book, *LGBTQ Activism in Turkey During 2010s: Queer Talkback* (Palgrave 2021), explores LGBTQ activism amid social and political pressures. He has published in journals such as *Sexualities Journal*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*. He holds a Ph.D. from Howard

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