Barbara’s Epstein’s article “Why the U.S. Left is Weak and What to Do About It” is an important one as we need to understand the current weakness of the left in order to rebuild and expand it. I have lived in Olympia for 22 years and the left in the sense of organized opposition to the economic system, to U.S. wars, to poverty, patriarchy, racism, and with a belief in an alternative to capitalism is very weak right now.

Particularly useful is Barbara Epstein’s definition of the left as necessarily anti-capitalist and her focus on the values she puts forward such as a democratic and egalitarian society where wealth and power are redistributed within and between nations. Also many of her critiques of the 60’s new left have a lot of validity, e.g., contrary to what many believed, revolution was not imminent in the U.S. Although I agree with Barbara Epstein that there was romanticization of third world struggle inside and outside the United States by the U.S. new left, I would give more credit than Barbara does to the importance and value of its support for the Cuban revolution, for the Vietnamese and other struggles against U.S. imperialism, and its support for Black liberation. We must learn better how to do critical support avoiding both the errors of romanticization but also of arrogance by U.S. leftists setting revolutionary standards for others. In terms of lessons for the present, a strong anti-imperialist and anti-racist stand is still a valid lesson for today. For example, with regards to the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I believe we should totally oppose the U.S. involvement and call for total withdrawal without necessarily supporting the Iraqi resistance or the Taliban.

I agree we should make central the values Barbara Epstein puts forward as a unifier and that we create the space, organization for socialists and anarchists and other non-capitalists who share these values to work together. There are organizations such as United Workers of Baltimore that are doing this and are actually growing. Not all of the left is weak but for the most part, I agree with Barbara on our weakness. We should learn more about the growth and rejuvenation of the left in Latin America as the growth of leftward oriented social movements and governments there is exciting. They have important lessons to teach us.

Because a group is more oppressed does not make them automatically more radical or the leading force for revolutionary change. Barbara makes this point. She is not wrong but it seems to me that a far greater problem of much of the U.S. left today is its absence from the lives and consciousness of most of the poor and those who are suffering from the current economic recession/depression. This is a major factor in the limited response to the growing poverty in the United States, to the tens of millions who have lost their jobs, their health insurance and/or their homes. Sadly, we are not seizing this good opportunity to explain and act in large numbers to fight against these losses and towards building a society where poverty and economic insecurity are abolished.

In Olympia, Washington an added cause of the weakness of the left today has been its major emphasis on anti-Iraq war activities over the last seven years. Some of these actions and activities have been very worthwhile, e.g., working with Iraqi and active duty vets. However, in the last year and a half, there has been a major decline in membership and ability to mobilize people, both among the groups focusing on large demonstrations and also those focusing on more militant direct action. Certainly the emphasis on spontaneity and structuralness are important causes of its weaknesses. I think a more important cause of our weakness is that for most of the people who usually participate in these actions,
the Iraq war is winding down; it is no longer a pressing issue to many the way it was four and five years
ago. Also, we have done far less education around the causes, impact and consequences of the major U.S.
escalation in Afghanistan, and related to this, the common belief here that the improvement of women’s
lives in Afghanistan are dependent on U.S. victory there. Only a small number of people are willing to
commit time and resources to organizing against the U.S. war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Somewhat similar to the 1960’s, for many of the younger activists from the period 2004 to 2008,
there was a common belief that to be more militant was always better and a proof of one’s commitment to
radical change. Usually lacking was the question of how strategic was more militance. There was also
little outreach and explaining what we were doing to others not convinced of the validity of these tactics.
Fortunately since May, 2008 there has been some serious reevaluation of whether escalation of tactics is
always appropriate. There has also been a growth of a left culture. The more difficult task of building a
left movement in the sense that Barbara Epstein calls for is still in its infancy.