

Why Do Social Movements Fail?

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Abstract

The crisis of capitalism, which has led to the deterioration of social, economic, environmental, and political conditions worldwide, has fuelled deep-seated currents of opposition to existing socio-economic problems, injustices, and oppression. This opposition, which manifests in various forms and dimensions, has led to a wave of social movements over the past few decades. While some social movements succeed in achieving their objectives, many others fail to do so. However, the reasons for the failure of social movements, particularly within a socialist context, have not been sufficiently examined. This article seeks to address this gap by providing a socialist perspective on the factors that contribute to the failure of social movements to achieve their objectives. By identifying factors such as unconsciousness as a subset of class struggle, disconnect from the working-class movement, and struggles for political power as causes of failure, this article addresses the knowledge gap. This article offers a framework, tactics, and strategies that activists can use to challenge the capitalist system, transform the world, and respond to the global crises of capitalism.

Keywords: capitalism, social movements, class struggle, subset theory, socialist perspective

1. Introduction

The concept of social movement is a general framework that has been utilised to analyse any form of protest, riots, demonstrations, pickets, strikes, walkouts, insurrections, and other forms of agitation and campaigns across the global space for more than 40 years (Note 1). In recent years, there has been an upsurge in social movements that emerged across the world, ranging from the Zapatista movement in Mexico (1994), anti-globalisation movement in Washington (1999), anti-war movement of 2003, Ukrainian orange revolution of 2004/2005, Iranian election protests of 2009, Students' anti-fee protests in England of 2010, Tahir Square/Egyptian revolution of 2011, Arab Spring protests of 2011, anti-fuel subsidy protest in Nigeria (2013), Fee-Must-Fall protest of South Africa in 2015, Armenia revolution of 2018, Sudanese revolution of 2008/2009, Yellow Vest protest in France (2018), Extinction rebellion protest of London in 2019, #EndSars protest in Nigeria of 2021, Hong Kong protest of 2019/2020, Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, Farmers' protests in Europe of 2023/2024, to farmers' protests in the UK of 2024/2025. Although some social movements achieve a degree of success by winning limited concessions, others are unable to realise any of their intended objectives.

When a social movement fails to achieve its objectives, understanding the reasons for its failure becomes a significant area of academic inquiry. The question of why social movements succeed or fail has attracted considerable attention from scholars over the past several decades, resulting in extensive theoretical and empirical research. The failure of social movements to achieve their objectives has been attributed to the lack of identifiable leadership, a loose and decentralised organisational structure, a lack of clear policy proposals, and an unwillingness to engage in meaningful dialogue, as well as police repression, a lack of financial resources, and mobilisation, among others, by some mainstream commentators and scholars (Note 2). These factors are secondary issues and do not necessarily account for the fundamental problem that is inherent in every social movement. This is because, if those criticisms or factors were true, then the solution would be simple: form a centralised administrative structure, develop a clear policy proposal, maintain autonomy and start engagement with political groups and think tanks.

However, even if all these measures were implemented, there is no guarantee that social movements will be successful in their agitations and campaigns. The primary or fundamental problem with these social movements is the sidestepping of capitalism. By sidestepping the role of capitalism, these social movements failed to attribute and recognise their emergence as a response to the global crisis of capitalism. This paper seeks to address this lacuna by articulating a socialist explanation to analyse why social movements fail to achieve their objectives in the contemporary context. This paper begins by locating the emergence of social movements within the context of the global crisis of capitalism in section two, before discussing the question of why social movements fail in section

three. The paper concludes in section four.

2. Social Movements and the Crisis of Global Capitalism

Locating social movements within the context of capitalism is crucial towards providing a socialist explanation of why social movements fail to achieve their objectives. The global crisis of capitalism is the fundamental factor that triggers the emergence of social movements. When capitalism emerged on the historical stage, it played a progressive role in advancing humanity and making a qualitative leap forward. Sewell and Woods demonstrated this and argued that ‘capitalism in its youth was capable of colossal feats. It developed the productive forces to an unparalleled degree and was, therefore, able to push back the frontiers of human civilisation’ (Note 3). These developments demonstrate that capitalism played a progressive role in history by improving the productive forces of society and granting concessions such as good wages, welfare programmes, free education, free health, free housing and other concessions that capitalism can afford. However, capitalism is no longer capable of playing any progressive role in the contemporary epoch, as ‘the old optimism and faith in progress have been replaced by a profound sense of discontent with the present and of pessimism with regard to the future’ (Note 4).

This ubiquitous feeling of fear, insecurity, and loss of optimism and progress stemmed from the global crisis of capitalism. Since its inception on the historical stage, capitalism has been a system that is always in crisis and contradictions. The global crisis in which capitalism is currently enmeshed can be traced to the fundamental crisis of over-production and under-consumption that ensued from the late 1960s to the early 1980s following the ‘decline in profitability’ (Note 5). This crisis was further exacerbated by declining growth rates, low productivity, and low profitability in the Western economies (Note 6). The loss of economic competitiveness in the West, especially in the US in the late 1970s, was the catalyst that accelerated the emergence of neoliberalism at the beginning of the 1980s. The development of other peripheral capitalist centres in Asia, especially Singapore, China, India, South Korea, and Taiwan, was part of the contradictions that accelerated the economic decline of Western countries. This is because Western economies cannot compete with these peripheral capitalist centres due to the low cost of production. Due to the competitive advantages of these countries, more Western companies relocated to these domains to maintain economic competitiveness, marketisation and high profit. The corporate quest to scramble for cheap inputs, resources and labour accelerated the push to outsource production processes to peripheral regions to reduce worker resistance and minimise wage costs (Note 7).

The onset of the neoliberal phase of capitalism led to the enactment of policies that facilitated market deregulation, privatisation of public utilities and industries, cuts in social and welfare provisions, deregulation of the financial sector, curtailment of Labour union powers, cuts in corporate tax and the regressive tax regime for the rich and high-income earners (Note 8). The advent of neoliberal capitalism, which has been described as the apogee of ‘monopoly-finance capitalism, post-Fordism, finance-driven accumulation regime, financial-market capitalism and high-tech capitalism’ (Note 9), emanated first in the US, and some parts of Europe were later globalised between 1989 and 1998. The rise of neoliberalism was facilitated by the decline of the industrial sector that accelerated the push towards a post-industrial economy (financialisation and a service-based economy), where deregulation of the financial sector led to the proliferation of hedge funds, asset price bubbles, asset speculation, currency trading, forex trading and others.

The financialisation of the US economy was the consequence of de-industrialisation (loss of manufacturing), which weakened the power of the organised labour union (due to downsizing of workers), rupture of wage structure, increasing number of labours casualisation and the emergence of precariat (those who engage in insecure and precarious forms of employment), and accelerated the growing economic inequality between the rich and the poor (Note 10). The declining income, cuts in welfare benefits, and loss in purchasing power are partly offset by access to credit to sustain a basic level of consumption.

The excessive use of credit was the catalyst that triggered the global financial crisis of 2008 due to the failure to offset household debt obligations and mortgage repayments, which eventually led to the collapse of the US housing market. The subprime mortgage crisis was the catalyst that accelerated the brewing crisis of neoliberal capitalism and brought it to the fore. The subprime mortgage crisis, which triggered the bankruptcy of several financial institutions and the collapse of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, was the contagion that threatened the collapse of the global financial system and undermined the global economy, as it spread to the rest of the world. The consequences of the global financial crisis had profound effects on workers and families who lost their jobs, homes, businesses, and savings, and those who suddenly fell into poverty and struggled to recover many years after the crisis occurred (Note 11). The austerity programmes in Greece, Spain and Italy, and the debt and fiscal crisis in Mexico, Argentina, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria demonstrate that capitalism is a chaotic and anarchistic system that is characterised by periodic crises that affect people’s economic livelihood and throw people out of work and cause socio-economic and political instability across the world.

The growing spate of poverty, global problems, climate change, debt crises, economic inequality and wealth disparity, home foreclosures and dispossession, hunger, malnutrition, and war have revealed that the capitalist

system is fraught with fundamental crises, and as such, the system can no longer afford to provide welfare programmes, free education, free health, free housing, etc unlike in the past.

The austerity policies and programmes undertaken by most European countries following the global financial crisis (Note 12) lend credence to this assertion. As the global capitalist economy is recovering from the fallout of the global financial crisis and the austerity programmes, came the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was not the cause of the current social, political and economic crisis that followed; rather, it was the catalyst that triggered the accumulated array of capitalist crises and austerity, which engaged in savage cuts in social spending, welfare programmes and health services. The COVID-19 pandemic plunged the capitalist system into a deeper crisis, as the global stock market plummeted and economic growth declined due to the consequences of the lockdown.

COVID-19, combined with the crash in oil and commodity prices, low consumption arising from lower consumer confidence, and lower industrial output. The introduction of lockdowns in most of the world triggered job losses, leading to increasing unemployment and loss of livelihood for millions of people. With COVID cases falling, many will be looking forward to an end to the nightmare of the pandemic. But instead of relief, a new threat that emerged was the cost-of-living crisis, which reduced the living standards of millions with rapidly rising prices (Note 13). The cost-of-living crisis is a multifaceted problem including rising housing prices, transportation costs, education expenses, and healthcare expenditures. These challenges have profound impacts on the daily lives of people and have facilitated an unprecedented economic crisis for the overwhelming majority of the global population. In the UK, the cost of living rose sharply between 2021 and 2022 following an astronomical rate of inflation that reached 11.1% in October 2022 (Note 14). Even though the inflation rate subsequently eased to 5.1 per cent in January 2024, the consequence of high inflation has led to an increase in the price of goods and commodities, energy bills, council tax, and transportation costs that affect the affordability of goods and services for households (Note 15). The prices of items in the UK rose dramatically, as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflationary projection exceeded the government's two per cent target in May 2021 (Note 16). As Hourston observed, CPI inflation fell to 8.7% in May 2023, but food and non-alcoholic beverage inflation was 18.4%, near its highest rate for 45 years (Note 17). What made the cost of living become a crisis is that individual and household incomes remain static, while the cost-of-living increases (Note 18). Significantly, this depicts that current income cannot cope with or match the concurrently high inflationary pressure.

As the cost-of-living crisis was easing with a fall in inflation to 2.0% in May 2024, the recovery from the crisis of global capitalism was punctuated by the climate emergency, the Russian-Ukraine war, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis in Gaza, and potential instability in the Middle East, and the imposition of tariffs by President Trump on goods from different countries. The tariffs imposed by Trump's administration led to the onset of a trade war that threatens to undermine the global economy with reciprocal retaliation. The impact of trade wars negatively affects consumers by leading to higher prices for goods and reduced availability, particularly for imported products. The increased costs for companies importing goods, due to tariffs, are often passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices. Additionally, trade disruptions can lead to shortages of certain goods, especially if there are no readily available domestic alternatives.

The manifestation of these problems depicts that capitalism is a system that is always in perennial and cyclical crisis and contradictions. This implies that capitalism has lost its mojo in resolving the problems of humanity, unlike in the past. The response to these global capitalist crises has been the pushback from various actors and interests that culminated in the upsurge of social movements in recent epochs. The emergence of the anti-War movement (2003), the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2010, Arab Spring uprising of 2010, Black Lives Matter movement of 2017-2020), Yellow Vest movement of 2019, to London Extinction Rebel protest of 2022, Sri Lanka popular protest on 2022, Bangladeshi Students' protests on 2024, climate change movement and others, have demonstrated a growing vein of peoples' discontents, anger, and revolt against the system of capitalism that has ceased to play a progressive role in the contemporary epoch. The resistance to these crises of capitalism is manifested when people moved out in their millions to challenge the capitalist system that is no longer able to guarantee their livelihood and sustainability. Social movements emerged when people questioned the implications of the crises and contradictions of capitalism on their lives. This questioning translates into tensions and antagonistic relationships when people, or groups of people, challenge the status quo through agitations, protests, riots, violence, and other strategies to express their disgust about the current situation.

Social movements (excluding the workers' movement), therefore, emerged due to the impacts of capitalist contradictions on global society, which has assumed an antagonistic relationship. In traditional Marxist parlance, the resistance to capitalism is usually orchestrated by the working class and their organisations. Social movement is a struggle directed against the structure of capitalism, in which the contested issues are clearly linked and connected. It reflects the brewing tension in society, in which antagonistic relationships and the struggle and tension of the opposing and contending forces are crystallised around a plethora of issues that have dominant

capitalist underpinnings. Since the working class and their organisations are not challenging the effects of capitalist crises unless they are affected (in terms of jobs, pay, and working conditions), they leave a vacuum for actors, activists and groups outside the working-class organisations to fill the space by agitating around these issues and forming movements based on them. The failure of workers' organisations to incorporate these issues as part of the class struggle leads to the emergence of individuals/groups outside the workers' movement, who form movements around these issues—climate change, anti-racism, gender equality, gay rights and others. The activities and agitations of these groups or movements are directed against the structures and forces of capital (capitalist apparatuses) that either created or sustained such problems in society. Thus, it is this gap and the quest to fill it that leads to the emergence of social movements in society.

3. Why Do Social Movements Fail?

The question of why a social movement fails to achieve its objectives is one of the pertinent issues that has not been thoroughly explored in socialist parlance. This is because most of these social movements exist outside the labour movement, and they are not oriented towards the working-class revolution against the capitalist system. In addressing this lacuna in a socialist context, this paper articulates three factors that are responsible for the failure of social movements to achieve their objectives. These factors, which include unconsciousness as a subset of class struggle, lack of connection with the working-class movement, and the challenge for political power, are described in great detail below.

4. Unconsciousness as a Subset of Class Struggle

As a form of resistance against capitalism, social movements are just a subset of class struggle (Note 19) and not class struggle in themselves. Unlike the traditional class struggle where conflicts exist between labour and capital, the activities of these actors and participants in social movements are outside the capital-labour relations. The dialectical process inherent in the emergence of social movements is the unleashing of the grievances and pent-up anger against capitalist crises and contradictions that have reached a critical stage, and as such, resistance becomes inevitable. Therefore, social movements are just part of class struggle because they are outside the capitalist social relations. Even though, activists and participants in social movements do not define their participation as such or may not even be conscious of that, yet their agitations, demonstrations and campaigns in social movements are part of class struggle against capitalism (Note 20). Class struggle in Marxism is embedded in the capital-labour relations, and any struggle outside this relation is not a class struggle. Nevertheless, social movements are part of the class struggle because they emanate from the contradictions of the capitalist system (Note 21).

Why social movements fail is because activists, actors and participants are not conscious that they are fighting against capitalism or capitalist contradictions, and that their agitations and campaigns are just part of the class struggle against capitalism. Activists and participants are not conscious that their participation in social movements is a response to the capitalist crisis; nor do they realise that such participation is just a subset of class struggle. In fighting capitalism, it is not only the class positions of the activists and participants that are important; it is also about the activities that constitute their resistance to the capitalist system. If activists and participants were conscious of the failure of capitalism, their methods and orientations to the struggle would have been different. Engaging in social movements, especially through demonstrations, protests and riots, cannot continue forever, and they usually have a terminal end. What is important in social movements is not just about demonstrating, protesting and rioting, but deploying a method of struggle that can challenge the capitalist system and confront the crises that emanate from it.

Therefore, what sustains the struggle against capitalism is not when demonstrations, protests and riots end, but continuous activities that can sustain the consciousness of the people about the struggle and retain the tempo of the movements by ensuring that agitations and demands of such movements linger in the minds and imaginations of the public and participants for a longer period. What is problematic in social movements is that a few weeks after their termination, most people often forget about the movement, issues raised, and what such social movements represent. The consequence of this is that the capitalist status quo that is responsible for such problems is still intact, while cosmetic concessions and policies are made by governments or states to pacify the aggrieved participants. Hence, the revolving door syndrome ensues, where the pattern of repeated problems that trigger agitations, demonstrations, protests and riots remains due to unmet needs or a lack of effective long-term solutions.

The important task is to expose the superficiality that diverts activists, protesters, and demonstrators in social movements from considering capitalism and class struggle as relevant to the causes they support and the issues they are agitating for, so that the real problem of capitalism is easily recognised by the actors, protesters, and participants. For instance, inequality between 1 and 99 per cent is the issue that led to the Occupy Movement; an increase in fuel prices is what led to the emergence of the Yellow Vest Movement; and global warming and climate emergency are the issues that led to the climate movement. These factors are the superficial issues that are more apparent to activists and participants, but capitalism, which is responsible for the central problem, appears hidden and invisible to activists and participants who participated in these movements. This is the reason why activists

and participants in social movements are agitating and campaigning for cosmetic solutions like tax-the-rich, shift to green energy and net zero, that tend to keep the structure of capitalism intact while the problems persist.

Once the activists, protesters, or participants in social movements are aware of capitalism as the culprit responsible for their plights, then the method of struggle will change from just demonstration, protests and riots to radical organisation of the movement forces and participants as potential political force to sustain the tempo of the movement, and connect their struggles to that of the working-class movement, who is a potent force and alliance that can challenge capitalism and foster radical social change.

5. Lack of Connection With the Working-Class Movement

Social movements often fail in their agitations, campaigns and demands because they engage in isolated struggle. An isolated struggle ensues when a popular movement refuses to align or connect with the labour movement, in which solidarity of the working class is required for the agitation of the movement to be successful in its demands (Note 22). Social movements are entangled in an isolated struggle when they agitate, demonstrate, and campaign on their own without the active support of the workers' movement.

As a force outside the capitalist social relations, social movements are incapable of undermining or challenging the capitalist system because they are not central or strategic to the internal dynamics and workings of the system (Note 23). Activists and participants in social movements do not have sufficient power to bring about the changes they are advocating for. Even though they can agitate, protest, engage in demonstrations, rioting and sometimes violence, and make demands, they are likely to achieve little or no success, or shape public policy in significant ways because they are not central to the capitalist social relation. People may protest or demonstrate in their millions, yet they are not capable of bringing down capitalism and facilitating the social change they demanded because they are not strategic to the capitalist production and distribution system. Whereas workers in their thousands can halt capitalist production through strikes and walk-outs over pay and other working conditions, and they are more likely to achieve some of their objectives than social movements.

Furthermore, social movements lack the organic membership base of the labour unions, and the involvement of workers' organisations in these issues would have had profound political expressions due to their mass membership and strategic position within the capitalist system, and they would have resolved these problems. The political expression given to the class struggle vis-à-vis the collective agitations of their trade unions could have had a significant impact towards facilitating the overthrow of capitalism and bringing progressive social change in society. Social movements will, therefore, require strategic alliance and collaboration with workers' organisations to achieve their objectives.

Therefore, most of the contemporary social movements failed because of the lack of connection with the traditional class struggle of the working class. Connecting with the real class struggle of the working class and their traditional organisations (labour unions) is fundamental for social movements will enable them to provide an organised direction to their struggles and broaden the axis of resistance against the capitalist system. Hence, social movements require a connection and alliance with the workers' movement to achieve the ultimate goal of revolutionary change in society.

However, many activists and social movements may not want to forge an alliance and collaboration because of the betrayal, compromising, and treacherous roles played by the labour union leadership in recent years. There are two instances to support this assertion. First, the Occupy Movement activists and organisers refused to collaborate or forge an alliance with organised labour in the United States because of the fear that the latter might hijack the movement and re-orient it towards providing political support to the Democratic Party (Note 24). Furthermore, when the Yellow Vest Movement started in France in 2018, the leadership of major trade union federations denounced the movement and refused to give it support, but the rank and file of the working class and middle class joined the movement in thousands and put pressure on the leadership of the trade unions. As Jorge Martin noted, "the head of the most powerful and militant trade union, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT)—Philippe Martinez acknowledged the legitimate anger of the movement and its demands but refused to involve his organisation in the movement 'because he does not want to see the CGT march beside the National Front.'" (Note 25) At the same time, however, Philippe Martinez recognises that the extreme right (the National Front) is a "minority" in the movement (in fact, it is marginal as an organised force in general). The initial and central demand of the yellow vests is the cancellation of the increase in fuel taxes, but Philippe Martinez does not support this demand. On the contrary, he has asked the government to revalue the minimum wage, so that workers can – among other things – buy clean vehicles (Note 26). The refusal of the leadership of the CGT to participate in the movement because the organisation does not want to be seen with the National Front, a far-right party, is baseless. The National Front is known for its fascist position on social issues. The National Front was a minority in the movement, and non-participation of the CGT would have strengthened the positions and the presence of the National Front in the movement.

The only antidote to fascism is working-class solidarity irrespective of gender, race, religion and nationality. The refusal of the CGT leadership to be involved in the movement amounts to encouraging fascism to grow its wings and spread its tentacles. Furthermore, the demands of the CGT on minimum wage do not negate the demands of the Yellow Vest movement (which includes an end to austerity policies, repeal of the wealth tax to favour the rich, and a call for an increase in minimum wage and the improved standard of living) that had broader appeal than that of the CGT. Instead of opposing the Yellow Vest movement in totality with the demand for a salary increase, the leadership of the CGT should have adopted the demands and positions of the Yellow Vests, while defending its general programme for increasing purchasing power, including an increase in wages. The reformist nature and opportunistic attitude of the leadership of the CGT inhibited the quest for socialism and radical transformation of society and curtailed the power of the movement to fight against the capitalist establishment. The position of the CGT was inimical to the interests of the working class and people who desire social change but strengthened the grip of the capitalist on society.

The combination of these treacherous acts, sabotage and opportunism of the trade union leadership has weakened the trust of the public in the workers' movement, especially the trade union bureaucracy, and made other movements shun them or sever ties with them. Despite this problematic nature of trade union leadership, the relevance of the workers' movement in the overthrow of capitalism and fostering the desire for radical transformation can never be discarded.

There is always a conflation of trade union bureaucracy with the workers' movement, which is not accurate. The trade union leadership are elected as the representatives of workers to defend their interests against rapacious forces of capitalism. Trade union leadership are elected from the rank and file of workers. Therefore, workers are different from trade union bureaucracy because each worker has their own ideas and interests, which sometimes contrast with the trade union bureaucracy. The workers' movement is a movement of workers as a class, not the movement of the trade union leadership. Workers only elect their leadership, and if such leadership does not represent their class interests, they can either be removed or denied re-election. Since the workers' movement is critical to the survival of the capitalist system, other social movements should focus on winning the working class to their side if the trade union leadership refuses collaboration. The more the workers join these movements in their millions, the more the trade union leadership faces pressure and revolt from within to support the movements.

Therefore, connecting with the workers' movement means appealing to the rank and file of the working class, aligning the movements' interests with the class interest of the working class and winning them in millions over to the side of the struggle or movements. The idea of shunning the workers' movement by other movements because of the attitudes of trade union leadership is faulty and counterproductive. Refusing alliance and collaboration with the workers' movement in its entirety because of the attitudes of trade union leadership does not advance the cause of any social movements. Rather, it limits their appeal towards broadening the coalition and alliances against the rapacious forces of capitalism. Other social movements must realise that their struggles against the forces of capitalism are isolated struggles that cannot be won without the involvement of the workers' movement, which poses a real class struggle to capitalist entrenchments. Connecting with the working class and its movement in fighting against capitalist contradictions in organised and collective ways would foster radical transformations in society rather than the isolated struggles that social movements have embarked upon in recent years.

6. Challenging for Political Power

The final reason why social movements fail is that the agenda of the movement is not geared towards taking political power, and that activists and protesters in the movements do not include the question of political power on their agenda. Social movements must move beyond the realm of agitations and campaigns into the realm of politics, where challenging for political power is part of the programme of action. A political party must be formed to aggregate the agitations, campaigns, and demands of the movements, and become the vehicle for sustaining the tempo of the movement.

Most of the policy demands of social movements cannot be achieved without taking over political power. Therefore, challenging for political power is pertinent to any contemporary movement. To challenge for political power, social movements must have a clear programme of action that contains their ideologies, manifestos and the direction of governance. Some movements do not have a programme of action, like the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam War movement, French student movement of 1968 and environmental movement of the 1970s. The failure to put the question of political power on their agenda has led to infinitesimal concessions from the state and their respective ruling classes. These social movements left the question of political power in the hands of the establishment, and the consequence is that they do not have the power to make changes, make decisions, and implement most of the demands they agitated for, unlike movements that prioritised the question of political power, such as the Bolsheviks during the October 1917 revolution in Russia.

In this era of neoliberal capitalism, the mainstream political parties and their politicians represent the interests of

the capitalist ruling class and rigidly adhere to the beliefs of the capitalist elites. Most of the demands of these movements are at odds with the interests of the capitalist ruling class and political elites, and therefore, they are never going to be implemented. Since these parties are not fundamentally different in terms of the class interests they represent, they can never be trusted to implement the demands and policies of these movements, which are pro-people. These political parties can make promises in the heat of the movement wave and revolutionary situation, but the moment the situation becomes normal and the momentum swings in their favour, they will repudiate all the promises.

Therefore, challenging for political power and taking over the political leadership is fundamental to social movements. The cases of the left-wing reformist movements like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain have demonstrated that people can organise politically, challenge the existing order for political power, defeat them through democratic and peaceful means, and implement policies that address the yearnings and aspirations of the people. In the descriptions of these political parties, Graham Hryce recently observed that most left-wing social democratic parties in Western countries are no longer interested in representing middle-class progressives and the industrial working class but have now become part of the capitalist establishment that represents the interests of the global neoliberal elites (Note 27). For instance, in the United States, the traditional Republican Party has changed its nomenclature from a conservative party into a right-wing populist party that appeals to the traditional working class and the older middle class that have been left behind by the global neoliberal economic regime and abandoned by the Democratic Party (Note 28). In the UK, the Labour Party is dominated by the new breed of capitalist elites and apostles of capitalism, who are termed the Blairites and Centrists (the Centre-Left).

Tony Blair's Labour Party in the UK is a reincarnation of Thatcherism with working-class cleavages, and it is just a Labour Party in name, not in action or ideology. This assertion that the party is "*just a labour party in name, not in action or ideology*" is true of the *leadership* and might not be true of the grassroots of that party. It could be said that some of the grassroots of that party are radical left and have the history and tradition of militancy and socialism, but the leadership of the British Labour Party has been dominated by the right-wing apparatchik and centrist bureaucratic clique that has stripped the party of its militancy and commitment to socialism over the years. In Australia, the Labour Party is a home of big businesses and does not represent the interests of the working class and the middle-class professionals. In France, mainstream conservative parties have been replaced by the new capitalist party (Macron's En Marche) and the far-right party (Le Pen's National Rally), representing remnants of the traditional working class and the old middle class, who have nowhere else to go politically.' (Note 29) Therefore, these existing parties are part of the capitalist establishment, and they are incapable of fostering the fundamental social change and radical transformation that activists and the people desire unless there is a genuine quest to challenge for political power, like the cases of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, with a workable programme of actions to implement when they attain political power.

7. Conclusion

This paper has articulated a socialist perspective to analyse why social movements fail to achieve their objectives. It is argued that social movements emerged as a response to the global crisis of capitalism. As a resistance to capitalist crises, social movements are part of the class struggle. Social movements fail because the activists and participants are not conscious that their agitation, campaigns and demonstrations are subsets of class struggle against capitalism; lack of connection of social movements with the working-class movement; and failure to challenge for political power. Although, there are elements of class struggle against capitalism in every movement, but social movements are unlikely to achieve their objectives without affinity to the class struggle of the working class that is fought through their traditional organisations—trade unions. Activists and participants in social movements can only engage in protest, and at worst engage in riots, but they cannot disrupt or stop the production and distribution processes in which the capitalist system is situated because they are not central or strategic to the internal workings of the capitalist system. The failure of social movements in achieving their objectives revolves around their connection with the real class struggle led by the labour unions and workers' organisations. The lack of deeper understanding of capitalism, together with the failure to develop a clear programme of action, inhibited the ability of social movements to organise effectively and challenge for political power. When there are no programmes of action, then the tactics and strategies of winning the struggle are obscured.

Finally, the articulation of a socialist perspective on why social movements fail has helped to fill the space left by the absence of tactics and strategies for social movements to be successful in mainstream approaches. By prioritising capitalism as the centre of analysis, this paper has further provided a framework and radical ideological orientation that activists can utilise to fight the system and transform the world, and respond to the contemporary crises of capitalism on a global scale.

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Notes

- Note 1. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Heucher et al., 2024.
- Note 2. Makalani, 2017.
- Note 3. Sewell and Woods, 2015, pp. xxxii
- Note 4. Sewell and Woods, 2014, pp. xxxii
- Note 5. Cox and Nilsen, 2014, pp. 142.
- Note 6. Brenner, 2006.
- Note 7. Nugent, 2012.
- Note 8. Roberts, 2012.
- Note 9. Solty, 2013, pp. 85.
- Note 10. Piketty and Saez, 2007; Wolff, 2010; and Kallenberg, 2011.
- Note 11. Foster and Magdoff, 2009; Chowdhury et al., 2013.
- Note 12. McKee et al., 2012; Karanikolos et al., 2013; Macpherson and Smith, 2013; Kohler and Stockhammer, 2022.
- Note 13. Office of National Statistics, 2024; Broadbent et al, 2023; Gupta et al, 2023 and Meadows et al, 2024.
- Note 14. See Harari et. al., 2024.
- Note 15. Office of National Statistics, 2024.
- Note 16. Hourston, 2022.
- Note 17. Hourston, 2022.
- Note 18. Haggard et al, 2023.
- Note 19. Ogunrotifa, 2024.
- Note 20. Ogunrotifa, 2024.
- Note 21. Capitalism is imbued with contradictions such as over production, under consumption, low pay, environmental degradation, poverty, inequality and others. It is this contradiction that fosters class struggle and social movements. Class struggle ensued due to the contradiction in capital-labour relation over the share and distribution of surplus value, while social movements emerged as responses to the contradictions of capitalism. Both class struggle and social movements are the reflections of contradictions that emanated from the capitalist system.
- Note 22. Ogunrotifa, 2025.
- Note 23. Ogunrotifa, 2024.
- Note 24. Rehmann, 2013.
- Note 25. Martin, 2013.
- Note 26. Ibid.
- Note 27. Hryce, 2022.
- Note 28. Hryce, 2022.
- Note 29. Hryce, 2022.

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