

Retro Book Review

Another World is Possible: A Manifesto for 21st Century Socialism by John McDonnell, Labour Representation Committee, London, 2007, 64 pp.

Reviewed by Barbara Panvel

I read John McDonnell's book *Another World is Possible* in 2007, when it was first published. As readers valued and kept their copies, none are currently available online, but his former PA, Donna Drozd, sent me another copy and also 'vetted' [the eponymous website](https://tinyurl.com/y47hwvka) [<https://tinyurl.com/y47hwvka>] set up last year with the sub-title, 'preparing for government'.

In this comprehensive manifesto, Labour's current shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer John McDonnell presents a welcome alternative to the political economy of 'New Labour', with a set of ideas, principles and policies that confront and reject mainstream economic and social policies.

Well ahead of its time some twelve years after publication, it will still be of interest to people campaigning on a wide range of issues, including poverty, the environment, housing, climate change, 'defence' policy, the NHS and corporate-driven globalization.

McDonnell's manifesto deplores the rise of immensely powerful transnational corporations and institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which complicit national governments are unwilling to control. It recounts the serious damage inflicted over time

by Conservative and New Labour governments on the inspiring and universally acclaimed work of the 1945–51 Labour government; both have passed legislation enabling global capitalism to flourish at the expense of British industry and services.

McDonnell points out that, while New Labour claimed that everyone shared in the benefits of globalization, government policies from Thatcher onwards have systematically redistributed wealth from poor to rich. Poverty and inequality have risen, as the richest 1 per cent hold 34 per cent of the national wealth, while the poorest 50 per cent hold only 1 per cent of the wealth. He describes the plight of people 'at the sharp end' as the incidence of stress, alcoholism, ill-health, anxiety and depression rises in a culture of constant cost-cutting, out-sourcing, privatization and redundancies, as jobs are moved to areas of the globe with cheaper labour.

Much of this could indeed have been written in 2019 – always the sign of a great book that transcends time. McDonnell focuses on endless credit and loans, the size of personal debt, the welfare system in crisis, unavailable or unaffordable housing, public services out-sourced, trade unions weakened and a general feeling of insecurity, powerlessness, growing

political disaffection, distrust of politicians and low turn-outs at elections.

The manifesto calls for a modern constitution, developing a democratic framework of civil, social and political rights, democratic control of mass media, holding elected politicians to account, restoring full rights to trade unions and developing democracy in the workplace, enabling workers to put forward alternative, co-operative forms of ownership.

McDonnell also advocates bringing the railways back under public control ‘by taking the rail franchises back as they expire’ and the creation of a transport system that takes freight away from roads on to rail, reducing the demand for air travel.

In the section on international policy, McDonnell accuses New Labour of taking on the role, with the USA, of ‘self-appointed global enforcers of the new world order, or rather disorder’. Far from solving issues like terrorism, their approach has more often than not made them more intractable. He calls for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the establishment of a Ministry of Peace ‘at the heart of government’, the scrapping of the Trident project, unilateral nuclear disarmament, an end to hypocrisy and double standards, and an international conference on the Middle East, which Israel should be compelled to attend ‘or face a trade and sporting boycott’.

At the end of his chapter ‘Plundering the planet for profit’, McDonnell proposes:

- developing an energy system based on local energy production, clean coal technology and, wherever possible, powered by renewable energy sources;
- producing food in this country where possible, instead of importing it from distant countries;
- home-working and video-conferencing instead of commuting long distances and flying abroad;
- using public transport instead of driving;
- reclaiming social ownership and control of our public transport, prioritizing social and environmental goals;

- encouraging manufacturers to produce durable and repairable goods;
- ensuring that every home is energy-efficient and that houses are built to the highest environmental standards, with the ability to generate their own power, or served by local combined heat and power systems;
- regulating industry, housing and planning with environmental concerns central to decision-making; and
- devolving power so that communities can protect their local environment, setting enforceable carbon emissions and environmental targets.

In his final chapter McDonnell asserts that

Existing technology, science and resources have the potential to find answers to the most pressing problems confronting humanity if they are made to serve society rather than profit. To succeed, our new agenda can and must bring together a new, wide ranging united front for change.

This would include community organizations, trade unions, environmental activists, human rights campaigners, the pensioners’ movement, students, young people, peace campaigners and the movements against global poverty and Third World debt.

At the time of writing, John McDonnell’s manifesto appeared almost utopian – but since the election of Jeremy Corbyn, supported by a huge increase in party membership, described by Lesley Docksey as a ‘watershed moment in British history’ – another world is indeed now possible.

Barbara Panvel has a masters from Bradford University’s Department of Peace Studies, researching the use of non-lethal weapons in low-intensity conflict. Working for four years with homeless people and editing over 20 websites, she is politically eclectic – currently a Corbynite Labour Party member, and also supporting the Greens, Mebyon Kernow and the National Health Action Party.